

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

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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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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

Scientists should be skeptical about science

Recently there was much interest shown by the media in an investigation reported in *Nature* which concluded that ‘intrinsic risk factors contribute only modestly (less than ~10–30% of lifetime risk) to cancer development’. That is, most cases of cancer result from avoidable factors such as toxic chemicals and radiation (*note 1*).

One reason for the attention given to this research was that earlier this year a cancer study was widely reported that concluded, ‘Only a third of the variation in cancer risk among tissues is attributable to environmental factors or inherited predispositions. The majority is due to “bad luck,” that is, random mutations arising during DNA replication in normal, noncancerous stem cells’ (*note 2*).

Any research that involves human beings is particularly liable to a confusion of evidence.

The results of the two studies appear to be contradictory. Perhaps in the fullness of time this contradiction will be resolved but for the moment the lay public will once again be asking, ‘What are we supposed to believe?’ and bemoaning the fact that hardly a week passes when the media announce that scientists have made a discovery that contradicts previous research findings (which may also have contradicted research findings prior to these). Inevitably people ask, ‘Can we really trust science?’

Any research that involves human beings is particularly liable to a confusion of evidence. This is not just the case for the social sciences but also biological sciences (human physiology,

biochemistry, genetics, medicine, etc.). Perhaps the main reason is that human beings are so complex. But in fact an attitude of skepticism to the announcement of *any* new scientific finding or discovery is in itself good scientific practice. This is certainly the case with any observations or conclusions that are not immediately predictable from current scientific knowledge.

The rules of science are simple in theory but deceptively difficult in practice because so much else intrudes into the thought process – notably cognitive biases of various kinds. The major rule is that the preferred explanation is the one that is most consistent with all available knowledge. So if someone claims that once, during the night, they were visited by strange beings, raised out of their bed and onto some kind of aircraft, were subjected to a surgical operation, etc. and then returned to their bed, then we stick with explanations that fit best with what we already know about the world. One such explanation in this case is that the person was dreaming or experiencing sleep paralysis rather than being temporarily abducted by extraterrestrials.

Our adopting the most likely explanation is not the same as saying that the unusual explanation is wrong, and it may be that by applying this rule rigidly scientists may be missing something very important – alien beings *might* be visiting planet Earth. But there is a very good reason for applying this rule. If we adopt the unusual explanation we are left with many more things to explain than if we go for the most likely one. In the present case we have to account for how the extraterrestrials managed to make a journey of trillions of miles; why their craft was not spotted by

radar defences; why the neighbours didn’t hear what was happening; how the surgical operation was accomplished with no evidence of scarring; etc., etc.

So the rule is if, based on our existing knowledge of the world, there is *at least* one explanation more likely than the one being offered, don’t accept the latter. So suppose you tell me that you have just done an experiment on remote viewing and obtained highly significant results. I ask you, ‘Was there ever a time when you left the participants alone in the room with the test materials?’ ‘Well, er ... yes’, you reply, ‘but none of them would cheat – they’re not like that!’. I then say, ‘Sorry. I can’t accept that your results demonstrate ESP’.

If we adopt the unusual explanation we are left with many more things to explain than if we go for the most likely one.

There is a subtle point to be made here that may clarify what is *good* scientific thinking. In the above case I do not say, ‘The positive results were due to cheating by the participants’. This is a serious allegation and I should provide evidence to support this (other than the positive experimental results). I simply say that so long as there is at least one more likely explanation, one that is more consistent with existing knowledge of the world, I will not accept the paranormal explanation. The onus is then on the experimenter to eliminate this ‘more likely’ explanation - and others - by further research.

This rule holds not just for the case where a paranormal explanation is being considered; it applies throughout science (and in other scholarly

disciplines such as history and indeed in everyday life) when new findings or discoveries require an unusual or far-reaching explanation. For example, I was thrilled to hear that in October 2015 a researcher at the California Institute of Technology, Ranga-Ram Chary, reported that while mapping the cosmic background radiation he detected an unusual glow in one area (note 3). Chary believes that this could be evidence of the existence of other universes (the multiverse hypothesis). He suggests that this radiation could be ‘due to the collision of our Universe with an alternate Universe whose baryon to photon ratio is a factor of around 65 larger than ours’. However, theoretical astrophysicist David Spergel, from Princeton University, thinks it is worth looking into explanations that do not involve other universes, such as dust. “The dust properties are more complicated than we have been assuming, and I think that this is a more plausible explanation” he says’ (note 4). So for the time being it is good science *not* to accept the multiverse explanation.

In this way science reflects on itself skeptically. And in another way. When there are observations or discoveries that, if correct, have significant consequences for our understanding of the world, the reaction should be to wait until the results have been replicated a sufficient number of times,

maybe with adjustments to eliminate competing explanations (note 5).

The public need not perceive a lengthy timeline of contradictory scientific findings as evidence that there is something at fault with the scientific method.

So the public need not perceive a lengthy timeline of contradictory scientific findings as evidence that there is something at fault with the scientific method (though scientists themselves are certainly fallible). It is the nature of scientific enquiry that this must be so. We do our best to construct the material world accurately through our senses, but to arrive at real, reliable truths about that world is more difficult than we imagine. We see through a glass darkly, as St Paul said. And science, skeptically applied, is the best means we have of penetrating this darkness.

Notes

1. Wu S., Powers S., Zhu W. & Hannun Y.A. (2015) ‘Substantial contribution of extrinsic risk factors to cancer development’, *Nature* doi:10.1038/nature16166. At: http://www.nature.com/articles/nature16166.epdf?referrer_access_token=cTN7nQdlbJcbCYeHeUkehDRgN0jAjWel9

[jnR3ZoTv0OnFVRjoZ3NRIKe6Hv8umhhQuYoOX8 1iK2AU8uhH4FcEns58rMJmmXKk-5uOKB0oazdiW7ICIF7QBepvooFBvuU4rGLMRXnoW4h10HSttoiOuuGDEl7NridqJPtfiOuZ0vDLmNOznPhtnbzG-89Yz2LYmOkgwHmI8OsdnaA2AgGUFMq7403fumNn6mxWKTAGd6JzvuXrY9rMMuw-XranW&tracking_referrer=www.theguardian.com](http://www.nature.com/articles/nature16166.epdf?referrer_access_token=cTN7nQdlbJcbCYeHeUkehDRgN0jAjWel9)

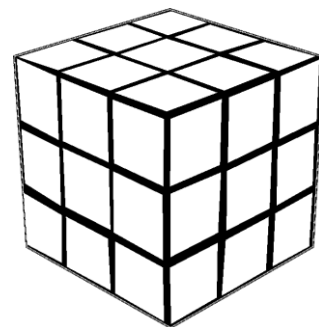
2. Tomasetti C. & Vogelstein, B (2015) Variation in cancer risk among tissues can be explained by the number of stem cell divisions. *Science*, **347**, 78-81. At: <http://www.uvm.edu/~cdanfort/csc-reading-group/tomasetti-science-2015.pdf>
3. R. Chary (2015) ‘Spectral variations of the sky: Constraints on alternate universes’. At: <http://arxiv.org/pdf/1510.00126v1.pdf>
4. <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/evidence-multiverse-we-might-have-just-bumped-into-another-universe-1526526>
5. For this reason, amongst others, accounts of one-off observations such as UFO sightings, ghosts and strange coincidences are not usually good material for scientific investigation.

LOGIC AND INTUITION

Before presenting this issue’s puzzle I must mention a premonition-come-true. Recently I read or heard someone seriously (I think) calling for an official enquiry into whether official enquiries are any use. This was a hypothetical scenario for a question I posed in this feature several years ago. I don’t think I need explain to you the logical difficulty behind the suggestion.

Cutting cubes

And now for something completely different. You may not have liked geometry at school but this little puzzle is more an exercise in logic. If you want to saw a cube (see the drawing) into 27 equal cubes, the most efficient way seems to require 6 cuts. But can you do it with fewer cuts? If not, why not? (Answer on page 19.)



THE EUROPEAN SCENE

Things have been hotting up at the European level since the 16th European Congress in London in September, organised by ASKE and APRU (the Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit at Goldsmiths College). There are quite a number of countries with national skeptical organisations, some of which, as in Germany, Sweden, Italy, Belgium and the Netherlands are very substantial. The larger organisations (and ASKE, which is much smaller) are affiliated to ECSO. Contact details for ECSO are:

Address: Arheilger Weg 11, 64380 Roßdorf, Germany

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

The website is rather out of date now but this is about to be remedied and you can still access articles, news, and commentary on a range of topics of interest to sceptics.

In December representatives of skeptical organisations affiliated to ECSO held an online meeting to plan future activities.

European Skeptics Congress

The 17th European Skeptics Congress is planned for September 2017 in Wrocław, Poland and is to be jointly organised by the Polish and Czech Skeptical Societies. The existing congress website will probably be used for the new congress.

The website is still operating (<http://eurosepticcon.org/>) and post-congress information will appear as well as details of the next congress.

You are reminded that some audio recordings of talks will be online soon and Klaus Schmeih has a video of his talk on parascientific codes on YouTube at:

https://youtu.be/jS56Pe_nfsE.

Photographs of the congress may be viewed at:

<https://flic.kr/p/yq4rw4>

And a short video prepared by Mark Williams can be watched at:

<https://youtu.be/o1Rx-2QkEw>.

A video recording of the debate on skepticism and medicine is at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A4erJFq1Ds0>

and

<https://youtu.be/xyiuzE5fueo>.

Don't forget also the podcasts of interviews of 16th European Congress speakers by Michael Marshall, which can be accessed on the Good Thinking Society website at:

<http://goodthinkingsociety.org/projects/2015-european-skeptics-congress-podcast/>.

The European Skeptics Podcast

One exciting development that came out of the European Congress is the European Skeptics Podcast (ESP). This is the initiative of András Pintér of Hungary, Jelena Levin of Latvia (now in the UK) and Pontus Bäckman of Sweden. They are interviewing well-known figures in skepticism and at the time of writing have released three of these podcasts Gabor Hrasko (Hungarian Skeptics and ECSO Chair), Catherine de Jong (Dutch Skeptics) and Michael Marshall (Good Thinking Society). But there (*is*) more to ESP, as András Pintér explains here:

'We would like to build a hub (we like to call it a bridge) for skeptics across Europe by covering news from European countries with a relevance to all other skeptics and promoting events as well as reporting on them afterwards. In order for this to work, we would like to ask everyone on this list, to help us. We would like to hear from you and ask you to provide us with some information about skeptical activities in your countries.

'What we really need are the following:

- Actual projects that are carried out by your organisation
- Latest achievements of your organisation and/or the skeptical movement in your country
- Hot topics, well covered in national media that might interest skeptics from other countries as well

- Information on certain quacks and superstars of woo, who are widely known in your country, but probably not elsewhere
- Any kind of statistical data available regarding popular beliefs and how well they're supported among the people of your country
- People from your organisation whom we should approach with a request for an interview on the show

'The gathering of all this information might prove very useful for future ECSO activities and collaborations as well; thus I really hope you'll all find this very important, too and we'll get a fair amount of response to our request.'

Email: info@theesp.eu
Webpage: <http://theesp.eu>
Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/theesp/>
Twitter: @espcast_eu
RSS: <http://feeds.feedburner.com/TheEuropeanSkepticsPodcast>
iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/european-skeptics-podcast/id1059890360>
Stitcher: <http://www.stitcher.com/podcast/the-european-skeptics-podcast?refid=stpr>
SoundCloud: <https://soundcloud.com/usher-721155342>

Homeopathy in Sweden and Hungary

Members of the Section of Medical Sciences of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences have voted unanimously in favour of supporting the earlier proposal of the Royal Swedish Academy that homeopathic remedies should go through the same efficacy trials as normal drugs. See (for example):

<http://ghrasko.tumblr.com/post/132925467836/hungarian-academy-of-sciences-statement-proposing>

and

<http://edzardernst.com/category/homeopathy/page/2/>.

MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

Colin Brewer

The secretary of the Islamic Medical Association (UK) says that an angel decides the sex of the foetus when it is six weeks old. And the Prophet says that when circumcising women, don't cut too deeply.

'Islamophobia' is a very fashionable accusation these days but I'm pretty sure that I don't suffer from it. Islamorejection and even Islamohilarity I will cheerfully admit to but only as part of a simple rationalist dismissal of all supernatural religions. Our holy-book-waving enemies – and Islam, in particular treats atheists and even deists as extremely dangerous heretics – are not exactly extinct but in most of the world, they have been in retreat or confusion ever since superstition and biblical literalism started to acknowledge science, however grudgingly. The main exceptions have been those religions that didn't have much contact with science and the modern world until quite recently - like Islam, after its rather promising mediaeval start.

My own Muslim friends are mostly fellow-physicians. Like other British doctors, they are not much given to religious fundamentalism (*ubi tres physici, ibi duo athei*, as they used to say) and I know there are many more Muslims like them. Maybe some Islamic Luther is even now finishing a list of complaints and looking for a mosque door to pin it to, though I think Islam – at least in Britain - also needs its own Bradlaugh to stand at Speakers' Corner and repeatedly challenge Allah to strike him dead within five minutes.

It was with this mildly hopeful attitude that I found myself walking past the East London mosque in Whitechapel. Next to the main entrance is an Islamic bookshop and one of the volumes in the window was called 'Guidelines and fataawa [rulings] related to sickness and medical practice'. The cover design

looked quite modern, depicting a state-of-the-art stethoscope, a syringe, assorted pills and capsules and a fever chart. Hoping that the sentiments between the covers might be equally up to date, I bought it.

Our holy-book-waving enemies – and Islam, in particular treats atheists and even deists as extremely dangerous heretics – are not exactly extinct...

Published in Britain in 2004 as part of a series called 'Invitation to Islam', its compiler, Dr Ali Ar-Rumaikaan aims to present to 'the English reader' a translation of an Arabic book which is 'a collection of rulings and legal verdicts concerning many...medical issues'. The Koran features prominently but most of the ecclesiastical rulings are quite recent. Some concern ethical issues largely restricted to Muslims, such as a 1986 ruling on assisted fertility that allows a wife's ovum to be fertilised externally by her husband's sperm and replaced in her own womb but not in the womb of one of the husband's other wives.

Many chapters focus on sexual or reproductive matters. Abortion, according to a 1975 Committee of Eminent Scholars in Riyadh, is allowed for serious medical conditions affecting the mother and also for serious foetal abnormalities but not for social or psychological reasons except for 'certain types of lunacy, such as schizophrenia'. This point is made even more strongly in the section on contraception, which is generally a no-no but '...completely forbidden...if the motive behind it is a fear of poverty since that involves harbouring evil thoughts towards Allah'. Who, in case you hadn't noticed, always ensures that there is enough of everything to go round. Indeed, the growth and defence of Islam require a pro-natalist policy.

According to the Muslim World League; 'Provision is with Allah and is taken care of; natural resources are many in Muslim countries; the fields of work are wide, and the places for resettling people extensive'. Of course, as with Catholicism, many Muslims (including Muslim governments) ignore these 'rulings'. There may even be some thoroughly modern mullahs (one tries to imagine a sort of Islamic Hans Kung or Justin Welby) but if so, Dr Ar-Rumaikaan isn't letting on.

Some rulings will strike a sympathetic chord in those of other faiths. For example, what do you do if you are a preacher whose sermons and prayers are interrupted by frequent emissions of – er - wind? Interestingly, the Prophet himself had something to say about this delicate problem. The Imam should keep preaching 'until he hears a sound or smells an odour'. On this issue at least, Dr Ar-Rumaikaan is evidently a modernist who thinks we may legitimately look beyond sounds and odours to context. You can continue to be an Imam, he advises, 'if you are better than the rest at recitation, so long as the impurity is not a continuous one but comes [only] at certain times'. Other Muslims apparently want to know what to do next if their wife is possessed by a Jinni [evil spirit] which does not respond to beatings. Can they burn her in order to drive it out? Absolutely not, for: '...only Allah has the authority to punish with fire'.

The most worrying rulings relate to circumcision. For chaps, it's best to get it over with early because 'A baby is born with numbness in all of its body and cannot feel pain for seven days'. That's not true. I performed a few circumcisions myself (without anaesthetic) when I did some GP locums in Australia long ago and while I don't think any of the newly-delivered sprogs will remember it or hold it against me, they certainly weren't numb. For female

circumcision, we are given – unusually for this book – three divergent views. ‘Some scholars...hold that it is *obligatory*. ... The majority...hold that it is prescribed for women and is *recommended*. ... Others hold that it is not prescribed for them. *And this is a weak opinion.*’ (My italics.) So, not very divergent after all. Still, though Dr Ar-Rumaikaan evidently thinks that female circumcision is a Good Thing, he warns against the truly dreadful Pharaonic method still widely used in Egypt and Sudan. This often blocks off most of the vaginal opening with dense scar-tissue that must be ruptured by the bridegroom on the wedding night. I was once consulted by a Sudanese gynaecologist, only too aware of what was involved and worried that he would fail this ultimate test of *machismo*. The Prophet himself, as Dr Ar-Rumaikaan reminds us, ‘said to a woman who used to circumcise women “When you circumcise, do not cut severely”.’ So that’s all right then, even though girls are circumcised much later than boys. And without the benefit of that reassuring ‘numbness’.

Should we laugh or cry at this bizarre anthology, openly displayed for the enlightenment of passing ‘English readers’ like me? Even if the intended readers are mainly English Muslims, it is still pretty depressing, while as a public relations exercise, it suggests a complete failure to understand that virtually all non-Muslims in Europe regard female circumcision as barbaric, as surely many Muslims do. And that even male circumcision (which, interestingly, is evidently a useful factor in reducing HIV infection in southern Africa) has a lot of critics and is now rather rare in Britain outside Muslim and Jewish circles. A free press means that a bookshop sharing a building with a leading British mosque has a perfect right to put such a volume on its shelves. No Islamic country

would permit its atheist equivalent to be displayed. However, to put it prominently in the window indicates – assuming someone at least glanced at it beforehand - either a disturbing level of arrogance in the shopowners and the clergy of the mosque or a worrying lack of awareness and understanding of the society in which many of its worshippers have ‘resetled’

The Prophet himself, as Dr Ar-Rumaikaan reminds us, ‘said to a woman who used to circumcise women “When you circumcise, do not cut severely”’.

Soon after I bought that book, I had some correspondence with a practising Islamic doctor, who is also the secretary of the Islamic Medical Association (UK), though I suspect that he is or was the chairman, president, treasurer and possibly the office cleaner as well. He assured me that the sex of the foetus is not determined when sperm and ovum unite, as you and I were taught at school, but that: ‘When 42 nights (6 weeks) have passed over the Nutfa (fertilised egg), ALLAH (THE GOD) sends an angel to it who shapes it and makes its hearing (ears), vision (eyes), skin, muscles (flesh) and bones, then he says: O Lord is it male or female? and your Lord decides what He wishes and the angel records it’. (Capitals as in his original email to me.)

When I included this hilarious claim in a letter (“‘Moderate” religious faith is still a problem”) that was published in the British Medical Journal following an article on religious extremism, the letters editor excised it but the uncensored remnant of the letter was enough to provoke the following response from another Muslim doctor:

‘Colin Brewer’s spurious arguments must be rebutted. He attempts to demote Islam (and thereby other organised religion) based on distorted logic and to promote atheism without presenting its fundamental flaw. This flaw is that atheism has no moral code, founding principles or guiding ethics upon which to mould one’s life. It is therefore in no position to disparage organised religion which fundamentally spread morals considered universally to be virtuous’. He continued with the usual canards about Stalin and Hitler. I’m glad to say that his letter, in turn, was rebutted by a doctor from an Indian background, pointing out that ‘Atheism is not a new idea born in the middle of the 20th century. Atheism has been an accepted philosophy in India from several thousand years ago. At least four major Indian philosophies, namely Buddhism, Jainism, Ajivika, and Charvakian philosophy were either agnostic or atheist. The followers of these philosophies were no less moral than the Hindus of India.’

I know there are many Muslim health professionals who absolutely reject this sort of mediaeval Islamic nonsense and the mediaeval attitudes to women that go with it. I was talking with one at the recent European Skeptics Congress in London. Unfortunately, he confirmed that most of them are reluctant to say so publicly because they fear not only upsetting their more traditionalist friends and relations but physical violence as well. British unbelievers stopped having to worry about that sort of thing two or three centuries ago, thanks partly to a few brave souls who were prepared to suffer and even die for their unbelief. It is a tragedy that British Muslims have to fight this battle again.

LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

Invented tongues misdescribed

Last year in this column I discussed the many errors and misconceptualisations of science-fiction and fantasy writers regarding the languages or parts of languages which they invent (and language matters more generally). The main exceptions are those few such writers who have been trained in linguistics, such as J.R.R. Tolkien, Suzette Haden Elgin (inventor of Láadan), Marc Okrand (inventor of Klingon), Paul Frommer (inventor of Na'vi, used in the 2009 movie *Avatar*), and David J. Peterson (inventor of Dothraki, used in the fantasy series *Game of Thrones*). It must be noted, however, that even the linguistically-trained may make errors in this context, and in particular that not all of those who publish works of **comment** and **analysis** regarding invented languages are adequately trained. For instance: while the treatment of Tolkien's languages as published in Appendices E and F to *The Lord of the Rings* (both usually bound with Vol. 3, *The Return of the King* in three-volume editions) is obviously sound, two of the three well-known books on this theme by other hands are less than reliable. Jim Allan (*An Introduction to Elvish*, Frome (Somerset), 1978) and especially Ruth S. Noel (*The Languages of Tolkien's Middle-Earth*, 2nd edn, Boston, 1980) both make a conspicuous number of descriptive/theoretical errors; Noel, in particular, plainly does not understand basic matters such as the quasi-Celtic 'mutation' of initial consonants which Tolkien's Elvish languages display. The most recent such writer, David Salo (*A Gateway to Sindarin*, Salt Lake City, 2004) is much more linguistically aware; his book includes critiques of Allan and Noel as well as his own more accurate/sophisticated treatment of the structures in question. He can be seen discussing Tolkien's languages on the accompanying DVD to Peter Jackson's 2003 movie *The Return of*

the King. Salo himself does, however, make **occasional** errors, for example where he defines the grammatical notions Subject and Object in semantic terms. (I myself have to take some responsibility for this, since – along with a colleague – I advised the press on this book ahead of publication!)

Precisely non-standard

Last time I remarked that in some cases dialect usage permits **more** precision of expression than does standard. An obvious example is the three-way contrast, commonly found in rural dialects, between *this* (near me), *that* (near you, or at a short distance) and *yon* (at a great distance), which is obviously more precise than the two-way contrast between *this* and *that* found in Standard English. Another is the African-American Vernacular English use of *been* as an auxiliary verb specifically marking remote past, as in *I been know your name* ('I've known your name for a long time') in contrast with plain *I know your name*.

There are other such cases in second-language or creolised varieties of English, involving features transferred from other languages. I have mentioned some such features in earlier instalments. Examples: *mipela* (and other such forms; 'exclusive we' = 'my associates and I, not including you') versus *yumi* (ditto; 'inclusive we' = 'you and I [and maybe others]'); *I need to buy one bag* ('a specific bag') versus *I need to buy bag* ('any suitable bag'), both expressed in standard native-speaker usage as *I need to buy a bag*.

And there are also additional contrasts which are available in special styles used in particular domains, as in *iff* ('if and only if'), helpfully used in contrast with plain *if* in philosophical discourse – though one might consider that a more clearly distinctive word might have been chosen, given that *iff* and *if* are homophones; the contrast is made only in writing!

Irregularities and reconstructions

Here and there in recent instalments, I have contrasted two of the oldest known Indo-European languages, Sanskrit and Ancient Greek, in terms of their morphology: the range of grammatical forms assumed by each noun, verb, etc. Both languages have highly complex morphologies: thus, each adjective has over a dozen potentially different inflected forms displaying agreement with the relevant head nouns for 'case' (subject versus object, possessive, etc.), number (including dual as well as singular and plural) and grammatical gender; each verb has a much larger set of inflected forms marked for person, number, tense, voice (active versus passive; in Greek, also 'middle') and mood (indicative versus subjunctive versus imperative, etc.). But they **differ** in that the forms of Sanskrit nouns and verbs are largely systematic, transparent and predictable ('regular'), while those found in Greek (especially the verbs) are anything but.

Beginners in Greek, who have typically already studied Latin and have had to learn four rather different 'conjugations' of verbs plus many irregular verbs, are initially pleased when they now must learn the forms of only **one** 'regular' Greek verb (usually *luō*, 'I release'); but they quickly discover that very few other verbs actually follow *luō* all that closely! This verb is in fact unusual in that its stem (*lu-*) terminates in a vowel which does not merge confusingly with initial vowel phonemes in the various possible inflectional suffixes; most stem-final vowels do merge in this way, and stem-final consonants clash with suffix-initial consonants. There are also **prefixes** terminating in vowels, such as the past tense marker *e-*, which merge with stem-initial vowels. And so forth: consonant and vowel alternations, additional 'infix'

consonants sometimes appearing **inside** stems, etc., etc.!

In Sanskrit, stems and affixes are more clearly bounded and morphemes more readily identified. The equivalent merger effects (known as *sandhi*) and alternations are highly systematic and predictable, rather as in ‘agglutinating’ languages such as Finnish.

In addition, there are many wholly irregular Greek verbs, often featuring multiple separate stems, whose forms make (some) sense only if one has a good knowledge of the history of the language – which beginners, and even some of their teachers at secondary level, obviously lack. Thus the common verb *pherō* (‘I carry’) has a future tense form *oisō* and a past tense form *ēnengkon*; and *blōskō* (‘I come’) has a past tense form *emolon* (these two forms do actually share a stem, but after major changes this is far from obvious!). Such gross irregularities are rare in Sanskrit.

As noted, many of these Greek forms can actually be explained, but only because we know the history of Greek quite well. Indeed, in some cases earlier, more regular Greek forms can be reconstructed on the basis of later irregular forms and comparison with other early Indo-European languages such as Sanskrit (also in places Latin, etc.) which display more regular patterning. Thus: Classical Greek *tis* (‘who?’) has initial /t-/, whereas all the other interrogative ‘pro-forms’ have /p-/: *pou* (‘where?’), *pote* (‘when?’), etc. (It has been noted that if *tis* had ‘fallen into line’ with the other forms we would have had **pis* and *pou*!) But in early Latin, for example, **all** the equivalent forms displayed *qu-*. On the basis of (a) a general assumption that complex or chaotic-looking patterns are probably derived from more systematic patterns and (b) comparison with Latin *qu-* as found in all these words and with similarly-patterning equivalents in Sanskrit etc., nineteenth-century philologists surmised that the Greek words (like some other words showing similar alternations) had ‘split’, with a single ancestor phoneme corresponding

with Latin *qu-* and equivalents in Sanskrit etc. becoming /t-/ before fronted/unrounded vowels and /p-/ before backed/rounded vowels.

And in fact this reconstruction was proven correct by the decipherment of the Linear B syllabic script as archaic Greek (2nd Millennium BCE) by Michael Ventris and John Chadwick in the early 1950s. Ventris, a talented amateur who knew Greek but not philology, showed Chadwick his decipherments of words which he took to mean ‘who’ and ‘where’ but which alarmed him by displaying the **same** initial consonant. Chadwick nearly fell out of his chair! ‘This is **exactly** what we have been predicting would be found if very early Greek texts were ever discovered!’ The decipherment gained much in credibility from such cases.

It will be noted that earlier forms are typically reconstructed as more regular than later, attested forms (see a) above). Indeed, this is **inevitable**. It is **impossible** to reconstruct an irregular set of forms which is altogether vanished and has genuinely left no trace in any ‘daughter’ language. This has the consequence that reconstructed languages tend to look considerably more regular than their known offspring. Among these latter, only languages which are themselves **unusually** regular, such as Sanskrit, will approach this level of systematicity. And this very fact encourages the (now non-mainstream) perception of Sanskrit as especially close to the vanished but partly reconstructed Proto-Indo-European ‘mother’ language of the ‘family’.

It is, however, quite possible that Proto-Indo-European itself, and other reconstructed ancestor languages, were in fact considerably **less** regular and systematic than our reconstructions of them. But if these irregularities really have left no traces in Proto-Indo-European’s ‘daughter’ languages (and if we are correct in believing that PIE was never written – or at least that no written records of it survive), we will never know what they were. Those who examine such languages as

reconstructed – and most of all those who seek to extrapolate into still deeper time and to reconstruct more remote cross-‘family’ ancestor languages such as ‘Nostratic’ – must obviously bear this in mind!

Grammarless again!

Another language said to lack grammar altogether, this time one **not** known to linguists, is Protong. Stanislaw Szukalski propounds an account of an *Ursprache* (ultimate ancestor language) to which he gives this name; the word is derived from ‘Proto-Tongue’. Protong was supposedly expressed pictographically; he interprets many ancient symbols and quasi-symbols from around the world as representing Protong words. Szukalski holds that Protong was ‘grammarless’ and was at one stage named ‘Celtic’ (eh?), later ‘Sarmatian’ and ‘Lach’; its forms are now best represented in (guess!) his native Polish (surprise, surprise!). See (maybe not **buy**!) his book *Behold!! The Protong* (San Francisco, 2000).

Beware of upcoming Leonardi convention!

David Leonardi, whose seriously non-mainstream books I have reviewed in this forum, is proposing to set up a ‘more sophisticated social networking site for [his online] Historical Linguistics group’. He is also hoping to stage a ‘Historical Linguistics convention’ at a hotel in Las Vegas, where he lives. Leonardi regards himself as more knowledgeable about historical linguistics than he actually appears to be. As I remarked earlier, his group is misleadingly called simply Historical Linguistics; so far from possessing any genuine intellectual authority in this area, or even presenting well-established notions, the group in fact promotes Leonardi’s own idiosyncratic ideas on decipherment and historical morphology, without adequate acknowledgment of their doubtful status. Anyone (especially anyone not well versed in the discipline) who is tempted to attend this convention, as and when it is organised, should bear this in mind. If Leonardi’s basic ‘factual’ and

methodological framework is substantially right, then mainstream historical linguistics is substantially wrong – and this would appear unlikely.

More fun things

A spoof definition of the word *thesaurus* (as in Roget): ‘extinct dictionary’ (thanks to Gary Goldberg for the reference). Jane Rayner (thanks again) passed on a rival definition: ‘dinosaur with extensive vocabulary’!

A website dealing with rail travel proclaimed that the company in question ‘are the copy write owner of all graphical and text content’. (This is a grosser but less ‘convenient’ error than my brother’s idea that if a document was described as copyright this meant that one had the right to copy it!)

In ‘Hong Kong English’ (which is nobody’s first language), those few tertiary students who insist on having a lively social life and thereby infringe the ‘nose to the grindstone’ study-ethic espoused by their classmates are described as *fussy* (‘excessively demanding’); they are perceived as frivolous. The word *fussy* has thus come to **mean** ‘frivolous’ in this context. A poster advertising upcoming ‘fussy games’ mystified expatriate lecturers but was immediately intelligible to the student body. In a similar vein, a poster at the National University of Singapore urging readers to ‘Join Miss Arts!’ perplexed expatriates (Who is Miss Arts? Where are we supposed to join her, and for what purpose?). The meaning was in fact: ‘Enter the Miss Arts [Faculty] beauty/talent contest!’; Singaporeans ‘join’ parties, tour groups and competitions (and this does not necessarily involve arriving or starting later than others).

I was once teaching a course on ‘English Around The World’ in Australia. Part of this course involved increasing students’ awareness of words or senses of words which are very ‘normal’ in Australia but not necessarily familiar elsewhere. An associated exercise included the sentence *They’d retrenched my dad*

and my mum was crook = ‘My dad had been made redundant and my mum was unwell’ (although in other contexts the stereotypically Australian adjective *crook* can instead mean ‘angry’). I was caught out by the presence in the large class of a few recently-arrived Singaporean and Malaysian students, who were familiar with *retrench* (interestingly, this word is used in the same way in Southeast Asia) but knew the word *crook* only as the **noun** with its completely unrelated internationally-known meaning; one of them accordingly developed a novel interpretation of the sentence in which the imaginary speaker’s mother was a criminal!

Elton John sings in a pseudo-American accent but talks like the Londoner he is.

In 1988 the engaging and talented Tanita Tikaram (then aged 19) had a UK hit with the song ‘Good Tradition’. On the sleeve she published a short diatribe urging care and precision in the use of language – and attacking the very prominent American sociolinguist William Labov for allegedly saying, in so many words, ‘Stop making sense’! Here she was apparently in agreement with widespread folk-linguistic prescriptivist ideas about such matters, and indeed with John Honey’s claims (discussed a while ago in this forum) to the effect that Labov and his academic followers exaggerate the coherence of some texts which are delivered in non-standard usage (and are thus liable to be regarded as **incoherent**, in Labov’s view unfairly) – and the contrasting **lack** of coherence in some passages couched in more standard language.

I suggested at the time that Tikaram’s comment could be seen as a case of ‘pop strikes back’, in face of the (descriptive, not critical) work of my former PhD supervisor Peter Trudgill – the most prominent British emulator of Labov – on the pronunciation of lyrics by pop musicians (though I had no reason to think that Tikaram had ever seen this

material). In a paper published in various fora around 1980 and titled ‘I’m So Bored With The USA’, Trudgill reported on his analysis of the pseudo-American phonology used by British pop performers from the young Cliff Richard in the late 1950s to Supertramp in the late 1970s, and, in contrast, the then recent upsurge of Cockney or pseudo-Cockney pronunciations adopted by punk musicians, whether or not they were themselves from London. (One punk group of the day, The Rotters, actually hailed from Los Angeles, and sang songs such as ‘Sit On My Face, Stevie Nicks’ – referring to a member of the very prominent band Fleetwood Mac – in a mercifully incomprehensible attempt at Cockney!) Of course, singers’ everyday **spoken** usage is often completely different; for example, Elton John sings in a pseudo-American accent but talks like the Londoner he is. (Trudgill also sought to **explain** these patterns of usage in sociolinguistic terms.)

During World War I, an ‘urban myth’ circulated to the effect that Russian soldiers were passing through Great Britain from north to south, heading for the Western Front. Some even reported seeing the snow of Russia still clinging to their boots! One incident which may have contributed to this story involved some Highlander soldiers who were overheard speaking in Gaelic on a station platform. One of them was asked where he was from. ‘Ross-shire’, he replied, referring to the Highland county. This was interpreted as ‘Russia’! One cannot expect monoglot English speakers to know just which unintelligible language they are listening to.

PS: Leonardi is now producing ‘documentaries in linguistics to further promote work in this field’. Even more alarmingly, he is hoping to ‘get to a point where [he] can hire students to work in linguistics’. Anyone thinking of working under him in this capacity should obviously be made aware of the status of his ideas.

More next time!

REVIEWS AND COMMENTARIES

Mark's Bookshelf

This is the first instalment of a new feature which will consist each time of a small number of 'mini-reviews' of short books – or of linguistically-relevant or otherwise especially relevant sections of books with wider scope. I am not abandoning full-scale reviews and will continue to offer them for publication as appropriate.

New Light on Phaistos Disc by Roberta Rio. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2011, pp. xiii + 136.

Mysterious Ritual Enclosed in the Phaistos Disc and the Kernos Stone by Roberta Rio. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2012, pp. 39.

Long-term readers may remember my comments in this forum back in 2008-2009 on the Phaistos Disk (a conference on the Disk was staged in London at that time), and in the last issue I reviewed Robert Lewis' proposed interpretation of the Disk. To recap: the Phaistos Disk is flat, made of baked clay, and sixteen centimetres in diameter; it was presented to the learned world in 1908 by French and Italian archaeologists excavating the Minoan palace complex at Phaistos in South-Central Crete (built about 1700 BCE). It is inscribed on each side with a text apparently running from right to left (anti-clockwise) and spiralling in from the rim to the centre (though some read it in other ways; Roberta Rio, as discussed here, reads it clockwise). There are some 240 character-tokens in all, representing 45 distinct types, some pictorial and some apparently abstract; they are divided into 61 groups by broken radial lines. Very remarkably given the early date, the signs were impressed into the clay when it was soft by means of a set of cut punches. Neither the Disk itself nor the characters resemble any other items yet discovered in the Aegean (including the undeciphered Linear A), and both the intended use of the artefact and the interpretation of the text remain mysterious. Many (mostly unqualified) authors have advanced and continue to advance 'decipherments' and 'translations' of the Disk, sometimes in non-linguistic terms (calendars etc.) but more usually finding novel writing systems – and

often languages or locales favoured by themselves for extraneous reasons. None of these proposals presents an overall reading which has persuaded professional scholars; and naturally they all contradict each other. Others regard the Disk as a modern forgery. For more, see my 2013 book *Strange Linguistics*, pp. 133-135.

In these two books, Roberta Rio advances yet another novel interpretation of the Disk. Rio has a mainstream academic background; principally, she studied undergraduate History and postgraduate Archiving, Palaeography and Diplomatics (to PhD level) at the University of Trieste. However, like the similarly educated Susan B. Martinez (whose wildly non-mainstream book *The Lost History of the Little People* I reviewed here in 2014), Rio has shifted away from mainstream thought. She reports that her subsequent life experiences have 'made aspects of existence less rational and much deeper known' to her, and have shown her that 'man [sic] ... can go much further than the limits of rational understanding'. This approach to learning is precisely exemplified in these two books. The details are given mainly in the larger, earlier book, although even here there is no linguistic as opposed to epigraphic detail (see below).

As might be expected given her announcements as quoted above, Rio's approach to decipherment is essentially intuitive; she simply proclaims her 'findings' without presenting rational evidence or argumentation. This

means, of course, that (unless decisive counter-evidence appears) there can be no reasoned debate as to the likelihood of her being correct; her thesis is not a legitimately empirical one. She berates the mainstream archaeological and historical world as cognitively stagnant but offers nothing in its place beyond reliance upon subjective intuitions about items from long-extinct cultures (citing in her support the historian Johan Huizinga, who would surely have regarded her as taking his ideas to an unjustifiable extreme).

At least Rio is 'upfront' about her methods, unlike Martinez and other qualified but 'maverick' authors such as György Busztin (whose book I reviewed here earlier this year), who simply ignore the established principles of the discipline without any explicit comment.

Without giving any actual evidence, Rio proclaims that the Disk was created on the island of Anafi in the Cyclades, not in Crete, and was later used in rituals in Crete (which she describes in detail) along with the circular, decorated Kernos Stone, which is now within the archaeological site at Malia; her discourse is 'New Age' in character. She does not seem to regard the Disk text as genuinely linguistic and does not identify any particular language as represented, still less any specific phonological words. (In this respect Rio's decipherment resembles that of Jean-Louis Pagé in his 2002 book *Atlantis' Messages*, where no language is identified on the Disk and no phonological forms are

proposed.) Indeed, Rio seems to regard the characters on the Disk as ideograms (not members of a true script) expressing concepts (most scholarly analysts instead hold that the system probably is a true script, more specifically a syllabary), classifies them into sets (as referring to

‘energies’, ‘body parts’, etc.) and ascribes specific (language-neutral) meanings to them. She also offers an interpretation of the text into sentences, but the grammar of these sentences has inevitably been added by her and is not itself directly represented – as occurs in some interpretations of linguistic

material allegedly emanating from extraterrestrials, as described earlier in this forum.

Rio’s approach is unscientific and her proposals cannot be taken seriously.

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In The Light of Science: Our Ancient Quest for Knowledge and the Measure of Modern Physics by Demetris Nicolaides. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2014, pp. 266.

Demetris Nicolaides is a professor of physics at Bloomfield College in New Jersey. In this book, published by the world’s leading skeptical press, he examines anew the major shift in thinking exhibited in the works of the pre-Socratic philosophers of the seventh, sixth and fifth centuries BCE (Thales of Miletus, etc.). These thinkers turned from the mythological ideas of their day and began to seek rational accounts of the natural world.

Nicolaides argues that the conceptual breakthroughs of the pre-Socratics actually anticipated much of later science, and indeed that much of the work of contemporary scientists involves the same fundamental problems. The perception of the dramatically novel ideas of these early thinkers as ground-breaking (and as the precursors of theoretical science) is wholly mainstream (and very familiar to scholars of ancient philosophy); but these stronger interpretations arguably involve a degree of special pleading. Nicolaides is himself obviously of Greek ethnicity, and where one’s own group identity is involved it is all too easy to over-interpret works written long ago in radically different cultural and intellectual contexts (and in markedly different varieties of the language in question, with no surviving native speakers) – especially where, as in this case, the material is known only from fragmentary quotations by later authors. One is reminded of attempts by some Muslim thinkers to interpret various passages in the *Qur’an* (typically vague, or expressed in terms of the very different concepts of the day) as importing the insights of modern science.

In the publisher’s ‘blurb’, it is suggested that Nicolaides also ‘makes a convincing case that ... the power of the Greek language ... played a large role [in this intellectual revolution]’. This specific aspect of his position invites skeptical-linguistic attention.

Over the decades, various non-mainstream writers have proclaimed the special status of specific languages and their ensuing suitability for use in various domains or especial effectiveness in life generally. The cases made for such claims are typically weak, to say the least. Predictably, the language identified is often one favoured by the author, typically his/her own language or its ancestor. Because of its long history and respected status, and the admittedly profound intellectual achievements of ancient Greek civilisation, Greek is a major focus for non-mainstream claims of this (as of other) kinds. So too is Classical Latin; the importance of a knowledge of Latin for the understanding of the grammars of other languages and/or of logic has at times been grossly exaggerated. All such claims require close scrutiny.

As a matter of fact, Nicolaides’ treatment of language in this context is quite brief: the main discussion of Greek *per se* occupies only six pages (pp. 80-81, 85-88). He begins by highlighting the Greek writing system: as the Greeks became literate again in pre-Classical times, the Phoenician abjad (one symbol per phoneme, but with only consonants represented) was converted into a full essentially phonemic alphabet in which the vowels too were represented (by re-assigning consonant symbols not needed for

Greek). Nicolaides proclaims that this made Greek ‘the first easily read and written language of the world’; but this view seems to arise out of a pro-alphabetic bias rather than from any empirical evidence (in his support he also quotes Bertrand Russell, who was many things but was **not** a linguist). It should be noted here that Leonard Shlain (see below) has argued that the adoption of alphabetic writing had a **damaging** effect on culture. More seriously, it appears that all known alphabets and abjads are descended from a single ancestor script, suggesting that the very idea may have occurred to would-be codifiers of language only **once**. And, as I have stated in this forum, some prominent linguists hold that **strictly** phonemic alphabetic writing is in fact psychologically **unnatural**.

When he resumes his discussion of Greek specifically (p. 85), Nicolaides admits his ignorance of the linguistics of Greek but endorses as ‘generally accepted’ the partisan notion that Greek displays ‘extraordinary richness’, ‘a plentiful vocabulary’, ‘thorough and rigorous grammar’ (it is not clear what these two adjectives mean in context; the grammar of ancient Greek was in fact rather chaotic), ‘diverse phonology’ (not explained in detail; in fact, Greek had only an average-sized inventory of phonemes), and in consequence ‘a highly expressive and communicative nature’. But, even if this were all true, it would **not** follow that Greek was especially suited to empirical science. It might even be argued that **some** specific features of the language (such as the ready expression of abstract

notions in constructions such as ‘the good’ or ‘the unbounded’) encourage the development of metaphysics and the **philosophy** of mathematics rather than empirical science or mathematics as actually used in science. In any case, instead of attempting to justify these claims, Nicolaides at once resumes his

discussion of the (unrelated) issues involving the alphabet; and when he returns to the language itself (pp. 86-88) his treatment is vague and unconvincing. He also weakens his case where he suggests in a blatantly folk-linguistic manner that some (unidentified) languages (in contrast

with Greek) can be described as ‘poor’ and indeed are obstructive of clear thinking and communication.

Whatever the strengths of Nicolaides’ other ideas, these specifically linguistic aspects of his thesis cannot at present be taken seriously.

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The Alphabet Effect by Robert K. Logan. New York: William Morrow & Co., 1986, pp. 272.

The Alphabet versus the Goddess: The Conflict between Word and Image by Leonard Shlain. New York, London, Ringwood, VIC, Toronto, Auckland and New Delhi: Viking/Penguin, 1998, pp. 496.

Demitris Nicolaides’ theory regarding the profound significance of alphabetic spelling brings to mind earlier works along similar lines. Robert Logan, again a physicist, came to an interesting but arguably ‘maverick’ view of language through collaboration with Marshall McLuhan, and in his book he argued that various key features of Western civilisation – notably the development of (a) logic, (b) science and even (c) monotheistic religion – are due to the adoption of ‘linear’ alphabetic writing (initially by the Greeks). The otherwise astute Chinese, supposedly handicapped by their (also ‘linear’!) logographic script (which is in fact very well suited to their language), were unable to think abstractly and thus never developed an independent ‘systematic science’. Logan had less to say about non-Western cultures which – perhaps inconveniently for him – did/do use alphabetic (or abjad) spelling, such as India. And, while broad-brush differences between civilisations do clearly exist, Logan’s case for his **explanation** of these effects is more rhetorical than truly persuasive.

Leonard Shlain, a surgeon who also strayed into this set of issues, came instead to a strongly **negative** view of alphabetic writing. He argues that the development of literacy and in particular the adoption of alphabetic scripts in ancient times (at the expense of logographic scripts such as Chinese script) reinforced the brain’s ‘masculine’ left hemisphere at the expense of the ‘feminine’ right, upset the socio-psychological balance

between the sexes and triggered massive, unwelcome changes in apparently unconnected areas of human thought and society. These chiefly involved shifts in the direction of ‘linear’, non-holistic thinking, an excessive concern with logic and science, and the growth of patriarchal systems in which women and their ideas have been suppressed and undervalued. Many of the major cultural patterns and changes of the last few thousand years are, Shlain maintains, to be explained in these terms.

Much of Shlain’s discussion of language and writing is badly confused, and some is simply wrong. Given that linguistics is central to his thesis, the major problems which he has in this area are crucial. He does not systematically distinguish adequately between languages (in their spoken forms or considered generally) and the writing systems used to represent them (a common problem for non-linguists). One very obvious instance of this is provided by his very strange discussion of the mutual non-intelligibility of pairs of modern European languages; Shlain blames alphabetic writing for this, but such languages are, naturally, mutually unintelligible in speech and equally naturally remain so in writing (in any language-specific script). In addition, Shlain does not distinguish adequately between alphabets and writing systems more generally; some of the negative consequences which he sees as arising from the use of alphabets would, if he were correct, come about even if non-alphabetic

writing systems were used. He largely ignores the important phonological but non-alphabetic category of syllabary; and he mistakenly describes Chinese characters as ideograms (they are, of course, language-specific logograms) and Chinese itself as lacking in the grammatical category ‘word’. At an even more basic level, Shlain confuses the notions of phoneme and phone (‘speech-sound’) and his definition of the very word *alphabet* is utterly wrong; he naïvely defines an alphabet as ‘any form of writing that contains fewer than thirty signs’.

Furthermore, Shlain’s accounts of the origin and early development of language and society are highly speculative, inadequately referenced and at times overtly partisan, relying excessively on traditional beliefs and endorsing (rather uncritically) the currently popular but ideologically-charged theories of early matriarchal paradises which were later overthrown by literate males. His claims about links between writing systems (or other aspects of language) and cultural patterns are often implausible and/or inadequately defended. For instance, he suggests that the Phoenicians’ use of their abjad – as noted, the ancestor of the Greek alphabet (and thus of the Roman alphabet) – was somehow associated with the alleged barbarity and uncultured character of their civilisation. Overall, Shlain cannot be taken seriously.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

OF INTEREST

SCEPTICISM, SCIENCE AND RATIONALITY (GENERAL)

Sense About Science

Sense About Science Annual Lecture 2015: Tracey Brown, director of Sense About Science delivered the 10th annual lecture, 'The Ugly Truth', on 28.9.15 at the British Library.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RyNRxLt_OOA

'Instead of fearing what people will make of tentative knowledge and uncertainty, our role – our challenge – must be to give them the tools to make sense of it. We have to be honest. There are so many answers that research doesn't have, and even where there is evidence, it often cannot suffice. Some decisions will have to be taken on the basis of uncertain, incomplete and conflicting evidence. That's the ugly truth.'. See also:

<http://www.theguardian.com/science/audio/2015/oct/02/sense-sensibility-untrustworthy-nature-ugly-truth-tracey-brown-podcast>

and

<http://www.theguardian.com/science/political-science/2015/sep/28/can-you-handle-the-truth-some-ugly-facts-in-science-and-sensibility>

The winners of the 2015 John Maddox Prize for standing up for science are Edzard Ernst, Emeritus Professor at Peninsula Medical School, and Susan Jebb, Professor of Diet and Population Health at the University of Oxford.

<http://www.senseaboutscience.org/pages/maddox-prize-2015.html>

From the *Times* 7.11.15: 'A British charity (*Sense About Science*) set up to promote evidence-based science received more than £20,000 from Coca-Cola and then questioned research that was critical of sugary drinks.'

But see the rejoinder from Sense About Science at:

<http://www.senseaboutscience.org/blog.php/130/the-times-10th-october-2015>

Ask for Evidence

'Our Ask for Evidence campaign has been working with young people to help them develop the skills they need to critically assess claims online and prevent the spread of unquestioned information. I'm delighted to say that today we're launching a lesson plan and resources to give 13-16 year olds the opportunity to explore if what they see, read, and hear is true, using evidence as the gold standard to evaluate claims. It's free to download at

<https://www.tes.com/teaching-resource/-ask-for-evidence-lesson-plan-11106634>.

'Could you share this email with schools, science teachers, or parents? Please email below with any queries and let us know how you use it.'

vmurphy@senseaboutscience.org

All trials

Remember to donate to the All Trials campaign at:

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

Sense About Science USA

Are you aware of Sense About Science's sister organisation in the USA? See:

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

Good Thinking Society

Make sure that you are on the Newsletter email list of the Good Thinking Society by signing up at:

<http://goodthinkingsociety.us11.list-manage1.com/subscribe?u=1bf89c6f4a53022db2659f074&id=82f6c41d44>

For donations to the Good Thinking Society go to:

<http://goodthinkingsociety.org/donate/>

Glen Carrigan

Some really sad news. Glen Carrigan died suddenly on 30th September 2015, aged 29 years. Glen was 'a neuropsychology researcher at the University of Central Lancashire, as

well as ex-military, a qualified fitness instructor, communications specialist, youth mentor, humanist, science presenter and model who advocates social and political activism in equality and education' - see his article at:

<http://humanistlife.org.uk/2014/07/07/moral-religious-psychopathic-or-just-human/>.

He was a welcomed speaker at humanist and skeptical meetings. There are several online obituaries, including one at:

<http://www.gspellchecker.com/2015/10/goodbye-glen-carrigan/>

Skeptical cartoon book

<http://thinkthebook.org/index.html>

From Geoff Whelan:

One of our active Manchester members, Paul, is a professional cartoonist ('Polyp') who's about to launch a kickstarter crowdfunding bid for a book of skeptics' cartoons... The bid is going live on 15th Jan to 23rd Feb. He's after help publicizing the project before and during the bid. Namely-

- Posting a link to the project 'holding' website on FB/websites etc., and/or posting a link to the actual kickstarter once it's live next year. (The website holding page is for people to submit their emails asking to be contacted when the kickstarter is up and going.)
- Retweeting posts from the thINK page @thinkthebook
- Publicizing / liking / joining the thINK fb page- Think the book: <https://www.facebook.com/Think-the-book-1558464631083311/?fref=ts>

Paul also does an excellent skeptics talk 'Drawing the line' about the history of controversial cartooning, and is up for presenting it to groups anytime from Dec to mid Feb. Or, if your group is within reasonable distance of Manchester, he'd be up for making a quick 10 minute illustrated

plug for the project, with plenty of sample cartoons, just at the start of a meeting. (He did this for skepticamp at QED this year and it went down really well-particularly the cartoon of you-know-who...) He'd pay his travel etc, natch!

Open access to research

'In October 2005 the Wellcome Trust became the first research funder to introduce a mandatory Open Access policy – requiring that all research outputs which arise from its funding must be made open access as soon as possible and in any event within six months of publication. To celebrate 10 years of open access at the Trust, Robert Kiley, Head of Digital Services at the Wellcome Library – who has been instrumental in the implementation of this policy over the last decade – provides his personal assessment of key developments in 10 numbers'

<http://blog.wellcome.ac.uk/2015/10/22/10-years-of-open-access-at-the-wellcome-trust-in-10-numbers/>

Five facts about chemistry

'These chemistry facts are so elementary and fundamental to science that the anti-scientists' positions can only be described as wilful ignorance, and these arguments once again demonstrate that despite all of the claims of being "informed free-thinkers," anti-scientists are nothing more than uninformed (or misinformed) science deniers. Therefore, in this post I am going to explain five rudimentary facts about chemistry that you must grasp before you are even remotely qualified to make an informed decision about medicines, vaccines, food, etc.'

<http://thelogicofscience.com/2015/05/27/5-simple-chemistry-facts-that-everyone-should-understand-before-talking-about-science/>

Participants for research

'Do you experience strange events during sleep like becoming aware you're in a dream, or waking up paralysed in the night? We are conducting research into strange sleep experiences and are interested in

people who do and don't have them. We'd be grateful if you would consider taking part in an online survey, which will ask you some questions about your sleep, daydreaming, and wellbeing. It should take around 30-40 minutes (but you don't have to complete it in one session). To take the survey go to this link: bit.ly/SleepExperiences or:

https://sheffieldpsychology.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6D98ddbZO1fB56B

MEDICINE

The Nightingale Collaboration

Please visit the Nightingale Collaboration website for information on latest activities. If you do not already do so, why not sign up for free delivery of their electronic newsletter?

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

The Medical Innovations Bill

'In its support for the Saatchi bill, opposed by the majority of the medical establishment, the Department of Health is playing with patient safety.'

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/uk/david-hills/dangerous-game-saatchi-bill-returns>

also

<http://www.stopthesaatchibill.co.uk/call-to-action/>

Mammography

'Catch it early, save a life and save a breast': this misleading mantra of mammography...'

<http://jrs.sagepub.com/content/108/9/338.full>

'Mammography screening is harmful and should be abandoned'

<http://jrs.sagepub.com/content/108/9/341.full>

Nurofen pain relief

An Australian court has ordered the removal of Nurofen pain relief products off shelves. The court said the UK-based manufacturers Reckitt Benckiser had misled consumers. The court said that products marketed to treat specific pains - Nurofen Back Pain, Nurofen Period Pain, Nurofen Migraine Pain and Nurofen Tension Headache - were identical.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-35096810>

Paracetamol for flu

'Regular paracetamol had no effect on viral shedding, temperature or clinical symptoms in patients with PCR-confirmed influenza. There remains an insufficient evidence base for paracetamol use in influenza infection.'

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/resp.12685/abstract>

Homeopathy

Well, where do we start?

From Michael Marshall,

'I am writing to you with news of a major victory in the Good Thinking Society's campaign against the provision of homeopathy on the UK's National Health Service. Over the last year we've been working with a legal team to construct arguments we've put to the Department of Health to argue that homeopathic products should be added to the Schedule 1 'Blacklist', which would completely prevent any UK GPs prescribing homeopathy. After much back and forth, including our very genuine threat take the government to Judicial Review over the unlawfulness of dismissing our proposals, the Department of Health have agreed to hold a consultation with a view to blacklisting homeopathy, and they'll be working with us on that consultation.

'Details of the work we've done on this are here':

<http://goodthinkingsociety.org/should-homeopathic-remedies-be-blacklisted-on-the->

[nhs/?utm_source=Good+Thinking+Society+Newsletter+2015+1212+1+2015&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_82f6c41d44-7159c3243a-57804877](https://www.goodthinkingsociety.org/news/?utm_source=Good+Thinking+Society+Newsletter+2015+1212+1+2015&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_82f6c41d44-7159c3243a-57804877)

'The news hit the media on Friday in quite a big way, with coverage in the Guardian, Times, Independent, Telegraph, Daily Mail, Mirror and BuzzFeed, plus extensive coverage on the BBC. The full list of coverage can be found at:

<http://goodthinkingsociety.org/about/good-thinking-media-coverage/>

'We hope this coverage, along with the pressure we'll continue to put on the Department of Health, will help ensure the consultation (which is

happening in the New Year) is taken seriously and the outcomes are fair.’

‘Homeopathy on Rip Off Britain’:

<http://www.healthydoseofskepticism.com/healthy-dose-of-skepticism/2015/Day/Month/discussing-homeopathy-on-rip-off-britain-1>

and

https://www.google.co.uk/?gws_rd=ssl#q=homeopathy&tbm=nws

and

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eAgM_1MFpCM

(From Alan Henness: ‘Dr Peter Fisher has already been challenged on his (mis?)use of the Robertson Center for Biostatistics: one of the authors of the Mathie et al. study was at the Centre, but it’s not one of their studies; it was done by Robert Mathie of the British Homeopathic Association.)

and

<http://badreason99.blogspot.co.uk/2015/11/homeopathy-can-we-believe-what-we-hear.html#comment-form>

and

<http://goodthinkingsociety.org/good-thinking-society-welcomes-department-of-health-consultation-on-blacklisting-homeopathic-treatments/>

‘Placebos can work magic. But that’s no argument for the health service to privilege a form of mock medicine that defies science and common sense.’

http://www.theguardian.com/commentifree/2015/nov/15/the-guardian-view-on-homeopathy-the-nhs-shouldnt-pay?CMP=tw_t a-science b-gdnscience

From ASKE member Peter Lucey: ‘I had 30 seconds with (*Health Secretary*) Jeremy Hunt at a political supper last Friday. Congratulated him on removing woo from publicly funded NHS. Usual smile and thx but every little helps!’

CVS brand homeopathic constipation relief, labeled ‘safe and non-habit forming’; contains 20% ethanol, enough to be considered hard liquor.’

[http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/medical_examiner/2015/10/homeopathy_contains_alcohol_and_ca](http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/medical_examiner/2015/10/homeopathy_contains_alcohol_and_can_be_sold_to_minors.2.html)
[n_be_sold_to_minors.2.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/medical_examiner/2015/10/homeopathy_contains_alcohol_and_ca_n_be_sold_to_minors.2.html)

What actually happens in a homeopathy manufacturing plant?

https://www.reddit.com/r/skeptic/comments/2hwbgx/question_does_anyone_know_if_companies_which_make/

A group of California residents are suing a homeopathic manufacturer for false and deceptive advertising of its products.

<http://legalnewsline.com/stories/510641872-calif-residents-sue-homeopathic-manufacturer-claim-products-do-not-work-as-advertised>

There’s more on the demise of homeopathy at:

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

See ‘The European Scene’ in this issue for developments in Sweden and Hungary.

Veterinary homeopathy

From ASKE member Niall Taylor

‘Veterinary homeopaths are under fire from the UK veterinary profession (including me!) and calls are being made to the UK veterinary governing body, the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS), to come off the fence and declare its position on the ethics of homeopathy. Coincidentally two campaigns have been launched at the same time, each with a petition to sign to indicate the strength of feeling on the subject. One petition is open to everyone and calls for a ban on UK veterinary surgeons being able to practice homeopathy - please sign by clicking this link:

<https://www.change.org/p/the-royal-college-of-veterinary-surgeons-a-call-to-ban-veterinary-surgeons-from-prescribing-homeopathy-as-a-treatment-for-animals>

‘The second is the Campaign for Rational Veterinary Medicine (CRVM); full details can be found at:

<http://www.vettimes.co.uk/news/homeopathy-prescribing-petition-gathers-pace/>

‘The CRVM calls for a position statement from RCVS declaring the use of homeopathy as unethical when used as a first-line treatment.

‘Unfortunately a well-intentioned news report in the veterinary press (see above link) decided to run a straw poll of its own on the subject, allowing a yes (for homeopathy to be blacklisted)

or no. This has nothing to do with either campaign, I’m sure the paper thought it was going to be just a bit of fun, but it’s this one which is now being spammed around the globe by pro-hom/anti-science types who are bombarding the poll with ‘no’ votes. So could I urge you please also to go to this article and click ‘yes’ for blacklisting. The homs are winning big-time I’m afraid. They can sure raise a good hue and cry when they put their minds to it.

Please help support these campaigns and help us speak up for animals as patients who have no say in whatever treatment their caregivers decide to inflict on them.’

Homeopathic vet fined

A vet given an MBE for services to animal welfare left a dog with a broken back in severe pain for ten days after trying to cure it through homeopathy’

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3350467/Homeopathic-vet-left-dog-broken-agony-ten-days-Pensioner-fined-4-500-RSPCA-animal-paralysed-surgery-complaint-public.html#ixzz3vEb5nJTM>

Sugar and health

‘A new study has claimed that obese children could find rapid health improvement by small sugar reductions, without caloric restrictions. ... But as we shall see, the science in the study is about as good as it is for other fad diets.’

<http://www.stats.org/glar-ing-flaws-in-sugar-toxicity-study/>

Alternative medicine

‘Acupuncture’ is Lecture 4 in a series of 10 YouTube lectures by Dr Harriet Hall. See:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=892oljTjaJE&sns=tw>

Cancer quackery

Tom Hanks lashes out at cancer ‘quacks’ after his wife’s battle with breast cancer.

<http://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/health/health-problems/tom-hanks-lashes-out-at-cancer-quacks-after-his-wifes-battle-with-breast-cancer/news-story/a426b94212775ed5f3d5478fafddfe52>

Still on this theme, back in 2012 the *Daily Mirror* carried a story about the ‘miracle’ recovery of a 4-year-old girl in this country who had an inoperable brain tumour. Her parents raise £200,000 in just 12 weeks to send her to the controversial Burzynski Clinic in Houston Texas. When she returned home she was able to start attending school with her friends. See:

<http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/cancer-girl-given-three-weeks-1332440>

Very sadly her tumour progressed and she died 4 months later. ASKE member Peter Lucey has made repeated attempts to have the online *Mirror* story updated so that other desperate parents are fully informed of the real facts of this tragic story. But to no avail. (Peter’s thread of correspondence with the *Mirror* is available from the Editor). A detailed study of this case, amongst many other victims of the egregious practices of the Burzynski Clinic, can be found at the Skeptics for the Protection of Cancer Patients website at:

<https://theotherburzynskipatientgroup.wordpress.com/2015/08/19/burzynski-patient-amelia-s-s-story-3/>

In November 2015, the Texas Medical Board took Burzynski to court, accusing him of ‘bait-and-switch’ tactics, improperly charging patients, not informing patients that he owns the pharmacy they are required to use to fill their medications, and prescribing drugs ‘off-label’. Burzynski’s former attorney Richard Jaffe has also filed suit claiming unpaid legal fees of over \$250,000.

<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2015/11/19/controversial-texas-doctor-stanislaw-burzynski-goes-before-disciplinary-board/76006572/>

Fraudulent medicines

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration recently began alerting consumers ‘to companies fraudulently marketing products for the treatment or prevention of serious disease’. Each of these companies sells products regulated by the FDA and each has a received a warning letter that their products are illegally being marketed

‘to treat, cure, mitigate, or prevent diseases’. If, after 30 days the company fails to correct its marketing practices, it is placed on a list publicly available on the FDA’s website. Four companies selling dietary supplements have been the first to be on the FDA’s list.

http://sfsbm.org/index.php?option=com_easyblog&view=entry&id=807&Itemid=649

The FDA’s list is at:

<http://www.fda.gov/ICECI/EnforcementActions/AdvisoryLetters/default.htm>

Frank VanderSloot and Melaleuca Inc.

‘A judge in Idaho has ruled in our favor on all claims in a defamation case filed by a major Republican donor, Frank VanderSloot, and his company, Melaleuca Inc. In a decision issued Tuesday, the court found that *Mother Jones* did not defame VanderSloot or Melaleuca because “all of the statements at issue are non-actionable truth or substantial truth.” The court also found that the statements were protected as fair comment under the First Amendment.’

<http://www.motherjones.com/media/2015/10/mother-jones-vandersloot-melaleuca-lawsuit>

According to Mother Jones’s original article Melaleuca Inc. is ‘an Idaho-based company that peddles dietary supplements, “green” cleaning products, and other items via “independent marketing executives.”’

<http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/02/mitt-romney-melaleuca-frank-vandersloot>

Chiropractic and osteopathy

‘Having your spine popped like bubblewrap might feel beneficial but the evidence that spinal manipulation is effective is less satisfactory.’

<http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/oct/18/osteopaths-chiropractors-back-pain-whose-spine-is-it-anyway>

From The Good Thinking Society,

Many osteopaths claim to treat colic with cranial osteopathy – a therapy with no evidence of effectiveness. Following our recent investigation into similar claims made

by chiropractors, we decided to find out what an osteopath would tell a distressed parent seeking advice.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TW8kLdYLofc>

Healthy food stories

According to the Daily Express headline on 20.10.15, RHUBARB CAN SAVE YOUR LIFE. The newspaper asserted that an ingredient in rhubarb called parietin, ‘contains an ingredient that speedily kills cancer’. In just two days the substance, ‘had killed half the leukaemia cells in a culture’.

Er...or maybe not. See Jon Danzig’s article at:

<http://jondanzig.blogspot.co.uk/2015/10/more-rhubarb-from-daily-express.html>

Three days later it was BANANAS CAN FIGHT FLU (and almost anything else).

Or maybe not. See Jon Danzig’s article at:

<http://jondanzig.blogspot.co.uk/2015/10/daily-express-goes-bananas.html>

Unhealthy food stories

A well-informed article on the link between cancer and eating processed meat.

<http://scienceblog.cancerresearchuk.org/2015/10/26/processed-meat-and-cancer-what-you-need-to-know/>

‘Allergies’

‘Allergies are frustrating, restrictive and sometimes frightening conditions and they seem to be rising at an astonishing rate in developed countries. But there is concern that allergy has also become a catch-all diagnosis for unexplained symptoms, and this rise has been accompanied by a lot of non-medical diagnosis and treatment.’

<http://www.senseaboutscience.org/resources.php/189/making-sense-of-allergies>

PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHIATRY

Research in psychology

‘Psychology has recently been viewed as facing a replication crisis because efforts to replicate past study findings

frequently do not show the same result. Often, the first study showed a statistically significant result but the replication does not. Questions then arise about whether the first study results were false positives, and whether the replication study correctly indicates that there is truly no effect after all. This article suggests these so-called failures to replicate may not be failures at all, but rather are the result of low statistical power in single replication studies, and the result of failure to appreciate the need for multiple replications in order to have enough power to identify true effects. We provide examples of these power problems and suggest some solutions using Bayesian statistics and meta-analysis. Although the need for multiple replication studies may frustrate those who would prefer quick answers to psychology's alleged crisis, the large sample sizes typically needed to provide firm evidence will almost always require concerted efforts from multiple investigators. As a result, it remains to be seen how many of the recently claimed failures to replicate will be supported or instead may turn out to be artifacts of inadequate sample sizes and single study replications.'

From Maxwell, E., Lau, M.Y. & Howard, G.S. (2015) Is psychology suffering from a replication crisis? What does "failure to replicate" really mean? *American Psychologist*, **70** (6), 487-498. At:

<http://psycnet.apa.org/journals/amp/70/6/487/>

'Badly Specified Theories are Not Responsible for the Replication Crisis in Social Psychology: Comment on Klein (2014)'

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/284625607_Badly_specified_theories_are_not_responsible_for_the_replication_crisis_in_social_psychology

'The 10 most controversial psychology studies ever published.'

<http://digest.bps.org.uk/2014/09/the-10-most-controversial-psychology.html>

Positive Psychology

'An important new study was greeted with a resounding silence from the positive psychology community, and

notably on the Friends of Positive Psychology listserv. Results of the largest ever evaluation of a school-based positive psychology program, the UK resilience project are now available at Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology. The results are, uh, not impressive.'

<http://blogs.plos.org/mindthebrain/2013/11/25/positive-psychology-in-the-schools-the-uk-resilience-project/>

'Brain training'

'A new trial shows the benefits of online "brain training" exercises including improvements in everyday tasks, such as shopping, cooking and managing home finances.'

<https://theconversation.com/at-last-a-gold-standard-study-on-brain-training-50210>

Mass hysteria

'Why DID 40 pupils collapse after Ripon school's Armistice Day service?'

<http://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/news/main-topics/education/why-did-40-pupils-collapse-after-ripon-school-s-armistice-day-service-1-7566809#ixzz3uIaFd1PD>

Predicting male sexual orientation

'Gay or straight? Saliva test can predict male sexual orientation'. Or can it?

<https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn28307-gay-or-straight-saliva-test-can-predict-male-sexual-orientation/>

Cognitive biases

'20 cognitive biases that screw up your decisions.'

<http://imgur.com/9fGn1PX>

Sleep paralysis

Nice article by colleague Dan Denis on sleep paralysis in 'The Conversation':

<http://theconversation.com/understanding-sleep-paralysis-a-terrifying-but-unique-state-of-consciousness-48509>

Autism

'There has been a video circulating over the last few days. This video contains a mother of an autistic boy showing flashcards about how hard his autism is on HER and how VACCINES caused his autism. The whole time she's sitting very sadly

staring at the camera as if he's been diagnosed with terminal cancer. And what is this DAMAGED child doing the entire time his mother is mourning the loss of her poor autistic child? He's playing with dirt, smiling, and stimming his beautiful little heart out. I really doubt this child is broke, lost, or damaged.....'

<http://kitteninautismland.tumblr.com/post/128830919049/that-one-av-mom>

'Kent police became involved after being told that a mother planned to give her teenage son a product sold as MMS, which in different instances stands for Miracle Mineral Solution or Master Miracle Solution. The product is sold by a US-based church as a supposed cure for autism, as well as for cancer, HIV and other conditions. However, trading standards tests on the liquid found it was a 28% solution of sodium chlorite, equivalent to industrial-strength bleach.'

<http://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/dec/21/kent-police-receive-complaint-over-bogus-bleach-based-autism-cure>

and

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-33079776>

Recovered and false memories

'Justice For Carol – The True Story of Carol Felstead: The Creation of a Satanic Myth in the United Kingdom'

'On the 30th September 2015, the full re-inquest into Carol's death took place at the Royal Courts of Justice in the Strand London. The verdict at the conclusion of the inquest was an open verdict, which means that the actual cause of Carol's death could not be determined.'

'The Justice For Carol book - telling the extraordinary story of Carol's life and death - has recently been published.'

For further details go to the Justice for Carol website at:

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

Also have a look at the following article:

<https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg22830424-400-why-resurgence-of-therapy-that-unearts-lost-memories-is-risky/>

And another disturbing account, by Ed Cara, on ‘recovered memories’:

<http://www.psmag.com/health-and-behavior/dangerous-idea-mental-health-93325>

Chris French has a feature on false memories in *The Conversation*:

<https://theconversation.com/explainer-what-are-false-memories-49454>

Numerology

From Terje Donvold (Norway),

Empirical Evidence for Numerology: the mind-brain relationship as a mathematical, psychological and neuro-biological problem may now be solved. Stringotype - The neural basis for a particular brain (dis-)order. Empirical evidence for numerology bridging mind and brain. This also gives possible real-life experiments for string theory.

‘An anomaly that can shake one’s skepticism to the core’.

Any comments?

www.stringotype.com

GREEN ISSUES

Climate change

‘The Price of Denialism’ by Lee McIntyre (essay on science and climate change denial).

<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/11/07/the-rules-of-denialism/?action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=opinion-c-col-left-region®ion=opinion-c-col-left-region&WT.nav=opinion-c-col-left-region&r=2>

POLITICS AND PUBLIC POLICY

Government research

From Sense About Science:

‘Today we have opened a call for evidence in our inquiry into the scale and causes of the delayed publication or withholding of government research. You can read the details at:

<https://researchinquiry.org/>.

‘This call for evidence was shaped by conversations we’ve already had with many of you in research, policymaking and professional bodies. Thank you for your interest and

support so far. ‘Please get in touch now if you can tell us about your experience of commissioning, conducting, publishing or gaining access to government research. We’re especially interested in submissions on: the contracts and rules that cover government-commissioned research; expectations around the timing and nature of publication; and potential improvements, building on good examples of difficult research being handled well. We would like to hear from individuals in the research community, professional bodies, parliament, the civil service, charities, the media and other interested parties. Please send your submissions by **31st January 2016**. We plan to publish the inquiry’s final report in May 2016.’

Sugar consumption

‘Sitting on the desk of Jeremy Hunt is a detailed and impartial review of the international evidence on measures which could reduce our consumption of sugar. But the Secretary of State for Health is refusing to publish this study.....’

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/health/news/11925833/Jeremy-Hunt-should-practise-what-he-preaches.html>

But see: ‘Revealed: “Sugar tax report” which was suppressed by Government. The review, which was originally due to be published last July, warns that Britain’s sweet tooth is fuelling its obesity crisis”.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/health/news/11947892/Revealed-Sugar-tax-report-which-was-suppressed-by-Government.html>

Evidence-based policy decisions

From Sense About Science:

‘This week, in partnership with the Alliance for Useful Evidence (see below) and the Institute for Government, we’ve released an assessment tool to rate government departments on their use of evidence in policy decisions. Anyone can use the tool to rate policy documents on how transparent they have been in the use of evidence. It is intended to assist those responsible for, or interested in, holding policymakers to account. We are going to use it with a sample of

documents to compare and rank departments and agencies in 2016. We’re also going to turn it into an online tool for anyone to rate an individual policy document. Right now, we’d especially welcome your feedback about how easy it is to understand.’ At:

<http://askforevidence.org/articles/show-your-working>

Find out more about the Alliance for Useful Evidence at:

http://www.nesta.org.uk/project/alliance-useful-evidence?gclid=COfpst7178kCFSHm_wgodjy4F7A

Kids’ Company

What happens when millions of pounds are handed over to people who ‘work with children’.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-34676281>

RELIGION

Maryam Namazie

From Chris French:

‘Some members of Goldsmiths Islamic Society and their associates attempted to disrupt an invited talk by Maryam Namazie using the most unacceptable bully-boy tactics. If you have not yet seen the video footage of their behaviour, you can see it here:

<http://www.gspellchecker.com/2015/12/video-of-isoc-islamists-disrupting-intimidating-at-university-talk/>

‘I strongly condemn their behaviour and I hope you do too. Bizarrely, Goldsmiths Feminist Society and LGBT Societies both expressed their support for the ISoc bullies. I feel very strongly that universities should be bastions of free thought and free speech (obviously excluding direct incitement to hatred of other groups). If you agree, I would ask you to consider signing the following petition initiated by Goldsmiths University Atheist, Secularist and Humanist Society.’

https://www.change.org/p/call-on-nus-to-reform-free-speech-suppressing-safe-space-policies?recruiter=6924968&fb_ref=Default

Christianity and Islam

The seventh volume of the famous Jesus & Mo comic, 'Wrong again, God boy' by Mohammed Jones contains 170 strips stretching from September 2012 to November 2015 can be ordered' at:

<http://www.lulu.com/shop/mohammed-jones/jesus-and-mo-wrong-again-god-boy/paperback/product-22459868.html>

Religion in schools

'The Education Secretary made "an error of law" in leaving "non-religious world views" out of the new religious studies GCSE, the High Court has ruled.'

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-34921857>

Debating atheism and religion

'There are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of faiths and gods. Yet each religion believes theirs is the true account. Is this because belief in the divine is a fantasy humans have evolved to hold? Or does it indicate something essential about the character of the world?' Video of panel debate: with Stephen Law, John Milbank and Madawi Al-Rasheed.

<http://iai.tv/video/belief-and-the-gods>

Watch this slanging match on Egyptian television between a presenter and an interviewee who was defending atheism.

<http://www.memri.org/clip/en/0/0/0/0/0/5153.htm>

Religion and science

'Is your brain wired for science, or for bunk?' by Maarten Boudry.

http://www.3quarksdaily.com/3quarksdaily/2015/11/is-your-brain-wired-for-science-or-for-bunk.html#disqus_thread

Religious offence

People have no right 'not to be offended' over matters of religion, and those who kill others or themselves 'are not martyrs' (Equality and Human Rights Commission).

<http://www.solicitorsjournal.com/news/public/administrative-and-constitutional/24277/public-has-no-right-%E2%80%98not-be-offended%E2%80%99-over-relig>

MISCELLANEOUS UNUSUAL CLAIMS

Aliens from outer space

The October 2015 issue of the Psychologist includes a number of articles on aliens and space travel:

<http://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-28/october-2015/out-world>

including one by Chris French on alien contact and abduction claims:

<https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-28/october-2015/close-encounters-psychological-kind>

Peter Popoff

YouTube exposé by Michael Marshall of the Good Thinking Society of 'spiritual healer' Peter Popoff in the UK, previously discredited by James Randi. See also the Good Thinking website (earlier) for media links to this.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=278&v=6rffe5DxPr&utm_source=Good+Thinking+Supporters&utm_campaign=aa35ef3ebf-

[Newsletter 2015 1010 9 2015&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_82f6c41d44-aa35ef3ebf-57804877](http://www.goodthinking.org.uk/newsletter/2015/10/10/9-2015&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_82f6c41d44-aa35ef3ebf-57804877)

'Ghosts, orbs and ouija'

'With Halloween drawing close, reports of spooky goings are on the increase. It always happens at this time of year as we all start searching for something paranormal to excite us into the witching hour. But while many believe in scary goings on, others claim most have scientific explanations and argue that in the instances where there are gaps in scientific understanding, the supernatural should not automatically be accepted. Here, Chris French explains why there need not be a paranormal explanation for things many people consider spooky.'

<http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/weird-news/halloween-horrors-ghosts-orbs-ouija-6729663>

Fake bomb detectors

'As British and Egyptian authorities continue to assure tourists trapped in Sharm el-Sheikh that all possible measures are being taken to ensure their safety, bomb detectors being used by some hotel staff have been exposed as fake. Security guards at hotels in the

Red Sea resort have been seen using gadgets believed to be based on those sold around the world by jailed British conmen and women.'

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/egypt-plane-crash-fake-bomb-detectors-being-used-by-hotel-security-guards-searching-for-explosives-a6728066.html>

Remote viewing

'Meet the Former Pentagon Scientist Who Says Psychics Can Help American Spies'.

<http://www.newsweek.com/2015/11/20/meet-former-pentagon-scientist-who-says-psychics-can-help-american-spies-393004.html>

Conspiracy theories

Guardian Science Weekly podcast: Why are conspiracy theories so attractive? With Chris French and Rob Brotherton:

<http://www.theguardian.com/science/audiod/2015/nov/13/conspiracy-theories-david-icke>

Rob's book, *Suspicious Minds* is now out:

<http://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/suspicious-minds-9781472915641/>

Psychics

'The wife of a motorcyclist who died after skidding off the A330 in Warfield last June told an inquest into his death today, 'Somebody killed my husband and I'm not stopping until I find them'. Joanne Girling said four separate psychic mediums found on Facebook who 'knew things nobody else knew' told her a black car forced her husband Simon off the road last June and caused his tragic death. Berkshire Coroner Peter Bedford said it was the first time he had been asked to 'consider evidence from the other side' and he had to accept only the 'credible' evidence before him as none of the four mediums - one of whom sat next to Mrs Girling throughout the inquest - had witnessed the incident.

<http://www.bracknellnews.co.uk/news/14131714.Inquest-into-death-of-motorcyclist-hears-evidence-from-the-other-side/>

**YOU COULDN'T
MAKE IT UP**

Masturbation

'Christian anti-masturbation's mascot "Fappy" arrested for public masturbation while swimming naked with the dolphins at Sea World in San Diego'

<http://cbsnews.com.co/christian-anti-masturbations-mascot-arrested/>

Equine homosexuality

From Saudi Arabia: A famous racehorse with an estimated value of more than 12 million American dollars is to be euthanized after it was allegedly caught having sexual intercourse with another stallion. 'Homosexuality is a disease about

which science knows very little', said the President of the Committee for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, Sheikh Abdulrahman Al Alsanad.

<http://worldnewsdailyreport.com/saudi-arabia-famous-racehorse-to-be-executed-for-being-homosexual/>

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>

SKEPTICS IN THE PUB

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

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

<https://twitter.com/SITP?refsrc=email>

**CONWAY HALL LECTURES
LONDON**

25 Red Lion Square, London
WC1R 4RL

The upcoming programme features a number of events of great interest to skeptics. For details visit:

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

CENTRE FOR INQUIRY UK

For details of upcoming events:

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

LONDON FORTEAN SOCIETY

For details of meetings:

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

**LONDON SHORT FILM
FESTIVAL 2016**

Rich Pickings presents:

'Life after Life': short films and discussion on the theme of near-death experiences. At the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London.

'This event explores near death experiences and how they affect people's lives. We explore the experiences of those who have been on, and beyond, the edge of death and lived to tell the tale. The event includes a programme of short poetic films about life, death and what may or may not lie beyond, as well discussion with

speakers including Christopher French...' Full details at:

<https://www.ica.org.uk/whats-on/lsff-special-event-rich-pickings-discussion>

**INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY
FOR HISTORIANS OF
ATHEISM, SECULARISM,
AND HUMANISM**

Inaugural Conference: Exploring
the State of the Field

<https://atheismsecularismhumanism.wordpress.com/conference/>

June 4-5, 2016, Conway Hall, London.

**RATIONALIST
INTERNATIONAL
CONFERENCE**

<https://atheismsecularismhumanism.wordpress.com/conference/>

April 23, 2016, Tallinn, Estonia.

**COUNCIL OF EX-MUSLIMS
OF GREAT BRITAIN**

[http://ex-](http://ex-muslim.org.uk/category/events/)

[muslim.org.uk/category/events/](http://ex-muslim.org.uk/category/events/)

See the above website for upcoming events in many parts of the UK and elsewhere.

Answer to 'Logic and Intuition' Puzzle

You can't do it with fewer than 6 cuts. Think of the middle cube. It has 6 sides so must require 6 cuts to separate it from its neighbours.

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>>