

# *THE SKEPTICAL* *INTELLIGENCER*

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

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***Edited by Michael Heap***

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# GUIDELINES FOR AUTHORS

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

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

Authors of contributions to the *Skeptical Intelligencer* should 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 'skeptical' (and their derivatives) according to their preference.

For further information contact the Editor Michael Heap at [m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto: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

##### **If walls could talk**

In 'Mark's Bookshelf' in this issue, Mark examines the 'stone tap theory' of Richard Felix. Felix explains that ghostly phenomena are 'recordings' of people 'captured by the physical environment in which they moved in life – especially the built environment, where stone is often plentiful'. I was immediately reminded of an item on one of Radio 4's news programmes many years ago. Two men claimed that sounds in a room might be recorded on the material of the walls in a similar way to recordings on magnetic tape. Somehow, so they claimed, they could play back these recordings. They gave an example of such a recording extracted from the walls of a house or inn that was about 200 to 300 years old. The recording sounded like one or more crazy men repeating something unintelligible over and over again. Some days later on the same programme the presenter read a message from a woman who said that as soon as the sounds were played on her radio her cats seemed to freak out. She wondered who these people could have been and what they were saying. I assumed it was serious at the time, but maybe it was a hoax.

##### **Why do so many things turn out to be untrue?**

Related to the above, I have been ruminating on how so many interesting and potentially useful ideas and claims that we hear and read about turn out to be substantially wrong. How I have arrived at this pessimistic outlook is understandable: the material that I gather for the 'Of Interest' section of this publication is very often to do with some belief or claim that has been shown to be unfounded or untrue. Indeed skeptics are often portrayed as compulsive debunkers and naysayers.

What triggered this was an announcement in the *Times* on 25.1.16 concerning 'scared straight' tactics that have been employed for several decades to dissuade children from offending. Typically young offenders are taken into a prison or gang members visit schools to talk about the harsh realities of the criminal life. However, the College of Policing has now advised that not only does this have no impact on likelihood of offending, it might make things worse.

Another recent announcement is that, contrary to accepted opinion, a study has found that birth order, IQ and personality are only minutely related (see 'Of Interest').

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##### ***NICE has now announced that it no longer recommends acupuncture for back pain.***

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Of course, announcements of the ineffectiveness of popular alternative therapies come as no surprise. NICE has now announced that it no longer recommends acupuncture for back pain (see notes 1 & 2). Not only that, ultrasound, transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation, the routine use of opioids and spinal injections for low back pain are also ruled out. And paracetamol is no longer the first recommended option. This comes hard on the heels of another study suggesting that 'Paracetamol is next to useless at alleviating arthritic pain' (see note 3); also see 'Medicine on the Fringe', Winter 2014, and 'Of Interest', Winter 2015). Meanwhile, it has been announced that seasonal affective disorder' (SAD) doesn't exist (see note 4) and that, contrary to previous recommendations, the consumption of vitamin D during

pregnancy may not help in improving bone density of babies (see note 5).

There is worse to come. 'Billions are lavished on flawed medical research' announced the *Times* on 4.1.16. In response, on the same day *PLOS Biology* launched a new Meta-Research Section devoted to 'research on research'. 'Widespread failure to reproduce research results has triggered a crisis of confidence in research findings, eroding public trust in scientific methodology....Billions of dollars are wasted every year on research that cannot be reproduced'. (see note 6; readers may already be aware of the replication crisis in psychological research – see 'Of Interest', Winter 2015).

There's a lot more (*you're running out of space - Ed.*). So why is it that so much information and advice and so many claims and practices turn out to be overvalued or just plain wrong? Of course, all the announcements and claims cited above could themselves suffer the same fate. But one theory I have is that in our society so many of us owe our livelihood and status to our ability to provide others with information, advice, services and solutions. That we are perceived as having plenty of this on offer may be more important for fulfilling our roles than whether what we are saying and doing is actually valid and effective.

##### **Notes**

1. <http://tinyurl.com/grglmj4>
2. <http://tinyurl.com/jxpkrdl>
3. <http://tinyurl.com/hurql9b>
4. <http://tinyurl.com/hkpgec5>
5. <http://tinyurl.com/jyhd4sb>
6. <http://tinyurl.com/zf7av75>

## LOGIC AND INTUITION

### Up, down or sideways?

Before Christmas, one of the presenters on Radio 4's 'Today' programme urged listeners to think about Tim Peake 'looking down on us' from the International Space Station orbiting our planet. Not long afterwards a former astronaut gave a radio interview about Mr Peake's 'walk' and he expressed the hope that he would take a few moments out from concentrating on the work he was doing to look down at the beautiful sight of planet Earth.

This got me thinking. Wherever we are on our planet we would always say we are looking *up* at Mr Peake (except perhaps when the ISS is on the horizon and we are on a flat plain, in which case we are looking straight ahead at him), but does this mean we must assume that he is always looking *down* at us?

Just a thought.

### A family problem

I came across the following in a book of puzzles recently.

'John and his brother Bill married Mary and Joan who are both sisters. However John and Bill have different in-laws. How can this be?'

I was a bit disappointed with the answer given in the book as it was different to my answer, which I thought was better. But, being a pedant about the use of English I might have known what was the intended solution. So I have rephrased the puzzle with an extra twist and I think this makes it more interesting.

'Brothers John and Bill married sisters Mary and Joan yet John and Bill have no in-laws in common. How can this be?'

Answers on page 18.

### The weight of an hourglass

Remember the puzzle in the Winter 2014 issue of the *Intelligencer*? 'A glass of water rests on some weighing scales. You carefully lower your finger into the water without spilling any and without touching the sides or bottom of the glass. What happens to the reading on the scale?'' Here's a variation on the theme.

'An egg timer or hourglass rests on some weighing scales with all the sand in the lower chamber. Does it make any difference to the weight of the timer if you turn it over and the sand is in free fall?'



Answer on page 18.

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## THE EUROPEAN SCENE

### European Council for Skeptics Organisations

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

Address: Arheilger Weg 11, 64380 Roßdorf, Germany

Tel.: +49 6154/695021

Fax: +49 6154/695022

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

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

### The 17<sup>th</sup> European Skeptics Congress

The 17<sup>th</sup> 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 be used for the new congress.

The website is still operating (<http://euroscepticscon.org/>) and new congress information will appear in due course.

### ESP - European Skeptics Podcast



From András Pintér,

As a recent initiative in European Skepticism, three of us skeptics from different countries started a podcast together with the title European Skeptics Podcast (ESP) and the goal of facilitating communication among skeptical groups and organisations across the continent.

The motto of our podcast is: 'Building a bridge for skeptics' and

how we try to achieve that is through managing a public calendar of skeptical Events in Europe, filled mostly with information sent in by listeners living in different countries. We also discuss news and topics, and release interviews with prominent skeptics who represent different projects or organisations. It started out as a fortnightly show back in November 2015, but soon developed into a weekly programme.

How can you help the ESP spread the word around Europe?

1. First, please give it a listen! You can find all the episodes on the website and if you like it, you can use the links there to subscribe.
2. Please, send feedback, information on events and recent news from your country that you think others in other countries might be interested in. You can use the contact form, send an email to

info@theesp.eu or tweet at us @espodcast\_eu.

3. If you check out TheESP - European Skeptics Podcast Facebook Page, please share and like the posts you find interesting.
4. If you could write a review on your blog, website or iTunes and let us know by sending us a message about it, that would be very much appreciated.

We really look forward to hearing from you.

### **Spanish university masters course in homeopathy scrapped**

A controversial master's degree in homeopathic medicine at one of Spain's top universities has been scrapped, because of its 'lack of scientific basis'. A university spokesman confirmed the course was being scrapped because of: doubts that exists in

the scientific community; opposition from people within the university - professors and students across different faculties; and withdrawal of approval by Spain's Health Ministry, Health Ministry, which in a 2011 report said that 'homeopathy has not proved its effectiveness in any specific clinical situation'.

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## **MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE**

### **Colin Brewer**

#### **The 'Katyn Massacre' syndrome** *How mutually antagonistic alternative medicine practitioners (and clerics) band together to defend the indefensible*

Scientific, evidence-based medicine, like science in general, constantly reviews, questions and re-evaluates its own practices and theories. When it has time and funds, it may do the same for the practices and theories of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM). Proper scientists have to do this work because unfortunately, the practitioners of CAM often don't get round either to doing it or even to recognising the need for doing it. Furthermore, research done by CAM practitioners tends to be low on quality and credibility, as judged by the criteria applied to orthodox medical research. I don't think that all CAM practitioners are charlatans (i.e. doing and/or promoting for essentially commercial reasons something they know to be without specific effect). This surely means that among their number, there are practitioners with serious reservations about some of the mainstream treatments practised inside the very broad church of CAM.

However, it is rare for any of the few CAM practitioners engaged in this kind of research to voice fundamental criticism of particular CAM treatments, theories or other practitioners. One likely reason is that by drawing attention to the lack of evidence for the

validity of one particular underlying theory or the specific effectiveness of one particular treatment, there is a risk that the shortage of good evidence for other CAM theories and treatments will be highlighted. Demolishing a theory is even more damaging to CAM than criticising the lack of evidence for its application to one specific disease, since a valid theory might possibly be useful in some other condition. CAM practitioners may have strong views about which CAM procedures are most appropriate for particular disorders but while they naturally tend to recommend their own favourite nostrum (on the principle that if your only tool is a hammer, all your problems look like nails) they rarely criticise their competitors in public or in journals. CAM practitioners have enough sense to realise that if they don't hang together, at least in public, they may hang separately. Unlike real medicine, it is almost unheard of for a CAM therapy to be withdrawn by its practitioners on the grounds of ineffectiveness or adverse effects, or superseded on the grounds that something better now exists.

In the 1990s, Dr Robert Park attended a press conference called by the predecessor of what is now the US National Institutes of Health's Office of Alternative Medicine. (The organisation was set up after pressure from, in particular, a US senator who claimed that he had been cured of his allergies by bee pollen. The senatorial

pollen was supplied, as it happened, by a man who insisted, among other things, that 'the risen Jesus Christ when he came back to earth, consumed bee pollen').

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'Perhaps the strangest part of the press conference' Park reported 'consisted of brief statements by individual members of the editorial review board of what they saw as the most important issues. ...One insisted that the number-one health problem in the United States is magnesium deficiency; another was convinced that the expanded use of acupuncture could revolutionise medicine; and so it went around the table. ...There was no sense of conflict or rivalry. As each spoke the other would nod in agreement. The purpose...I began to realise, was to demonstrate that these disparate therapies all work. It was my first glimpse of what it is that holds alternative medicine together: there is no internal dissent in a community that feels itself besieged from the outside' (note 1). Barker Bausell, who cites the report in *Snake Oil Science* (note 2), says that he observed this type of behaviour 'numerous times during

[his] own involvement' in an NIH-funded centre for CAM research.

In recent years, we have seen a religious version of this sort of alliance of the besieged. For long periods of European history, Islam and Christianity were quite literally at each other's throats. The first time I visited Vienna, my hosts thought it important to take me to the hill that was the nearest the Ottoman Turks had got to the city walls during the Great Siege of 1683 (itself a re-run of the Turks' previous effort in 1529). Like Blücher and the Prussians at Waterloo, King John Sobieski and his Polish legions turned up at the last moment to ensure the Sultan's defeat. A few years later, the Treaty of Carlowitz marked the beginning of the end for Turkey's attempt to conquer Europe for Islam. In the south, Iberian Islam got as far as Tours in 732 before being defeated and permanently sent back beyond the Pyrenees. As for Judaism, the history of Christian anti-Semitism (for until the rise of Zionism, it hardly existed in non-Christian countries) is long and murderous.

Yet we now see leading Christian, Islamic and Jewish clerics getting into the same bed to protest against the arguments of wicked unbelievers who reject the central, fundamental idea of a god, because that threatens all of them, however much they still believe that the other creeds are mistaken. Officially, Roman Catholicism believes that even the Archbishop of Canterbury will not get to heaven (or will, at most, only be admitted to seats with a Restricted View). Islam officially believes that Jesus did not die on the cross and denies that he was the son of God, a denial shared by the Chief Rabbi. In the House of Lords, the 26 bishops of the Church of England who still have guaranteed seats and votes in our second chamber actively seek the support of Catholic, Jewish and Muslim peers to block legislation that they believe to be against the will of god. Genetic manipulation to prevent lethal mitochondrial diseases and allowing sick patients to choose the time and manner of their deaths are

among recent proposals that have aroused their displeasure.

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History provides several examples of relatively nice guys having to work with and support some very nasty guys in the interests of mutual survival. The principle that 'my enemy's enemy is my friend' is often justified in the short term, however ghastly the new friend, but it may end in tears. As is now quite widely known, thanks to a 2007 film, the release of some (though not all) of the relevant Soviet documents and the tragic crash of an airliner carrying several dozen prominent Poles to a commemoration of the event, the Katyn massacre almost caused a serious rift between the Western Allies and the Soviet Union when it was revealed in 1943. In that year, Nazi troops uncovered mass graves in Katyn containing the bodies of thousands of Polish officers and other leading citizens. It was clear from evidence at the site that the men had been killed in 1940. Katyn was in the area of Eastern Poland that the Soviets had annexed after the Nazi-Soviet pact of August 1939, well before the Nazis invaded Russia in mid-1941. Naturally, Goebbels made the most of it. An international body of forensic experts, including several from neutral countries, backed up the Nazi claim.

Had the Polish bodies been discovered before Hitler invaded Russia and when the Soviet Union was still officially an ally of the Nazis, Churchill would presumably have denounced it as yet another example of Soviet barbarity, to go with the Show Trials and Ukrainian famine of the 1930s. Few non-communists in the West believed the hurried and unconvincing Soviet denials but Russia was now our gallant (and strategically vital) ally, so we had to go along with the Soviet version (backed up with hastily forged evidence) that the killing had taken place after mid-1941. At the

Nuremberg war-crime trials in 1946, the USSR even had the cheek to try to get the Katyn massacre included in the charges against the Nazis. Subsequent attempts to erect a Katyn memorial in London were strongly discouraged for many years by British governments anxious not to upset Moscow more than necessary; and by a few MPs and citizens who had once been – and sometimes still were – great admirers of the USSR and cuddly Uncle Joe Stalin. Only after the USSR imploded was the truth gradually admitted by the post-Soviet authorities, or unearthed by the new breed of Russian historians, once they had some access to the KGB archives.

This is an instructive example of the way in which ideology and vested interests obstruct attempts to get at the truth. *Of course* most members of the wartime Allied governments didn't believe the Soviet denials but they had to keep their disbelief out of the public domain. Over 90% of all the German military dead in the last two years of the war were killed by Russians, not by the Western allies. These days, leading Christian, Islamic and Jewish clerics in Western countries do not often publicly criticise the fundamental tenets of each other's religions because in secular societies, two can play at that game and the post-colonial religious playing field is more level than it used to be in its Imperial and Christian heyday. In much the same way, the equivalent factions in CAM are reluctant to criticise, expose or even mention what many of them feel are untruths because to do so would threaten the greater good of defending CAM against its critics. My enemy's enemy is my friend. Damn the truth. And damn our patients.

**Notes**

1. Park, R. (2000) *Voodoo Science: The Road from Foolishness to Fraud*. New York. OUP. (Cited by Barker Bausell, *Snake Oil Science*, below.)
2. Barker Bausell, R. (2007) *Snake Oil Science: The Truth About Complementary and Alternative Medicine*. Oxford University Press.

## LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

### Complexity revisited

A little while ago I discussed the possibility that, by way of genuine evolutionary change, languages might differ significantly in respect of overall complexity. It might be the case that languages at a slightly earlier stage of linguistic evolution could display either (a) **lesser** degrees of **useful** complexity or (b) more irregular and **unnecessarily** complex structures which have been replaced in other languages by more ‘cost-effective’, regular systems. And of course, such patterns of differentiation might also arise, albeit on a smaller scale, in ‘normal’, non-evolutionary linguistic change. Last time I pointed out that, while both Sanskrit and Ancient Greek have highly rich morphologies, 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. The general assumption that complex or chaotic-looking ‘morpho-phonological’ patterns are probably derived from more systematic patterns led to predictions about sets of forms in earlier Greek which more closely resembled the regular patterns of Sanskrit (some of these predictions were confirmed by later epigraphic discoveries).

On the other hand, it is also possible that linguistic forms will become **more regular** over time, or that complex patterns will be **simplified**. This applies especially to features of grammar where phonological structures (which are more covert for ordinary speakers of a language) are not centrally relevant. Thus, the Romance languages have lost the ‘case’-system which was a major feature of Latin nouns and adjectives (as indeed in other older Indo-European languages). The classical language displays six cases, each used in a range of characteristic grammatical functions: a noun with a ‘nominative’

case form (grammatical subject, dictionary citation form, etc.) such as *amicus* (‘friend’) appeared in the ‘accusative’ case (grammatical object, etc.) as *amicum*, in the ‘dative’ (indirect object) as *amico*, etc. Even in classical times, however, everyday spoken (‘Vulgar’) Latin worked with a reduced system: Cicero remarked that one used six cases in the Senate but two or three in the market. By the end of the ancient world there were only two cases (‘nominative’ and ‘oblique’), and eventually the descendant languages (French, Italian, Spanish etc.) lost even this contrast; modern Romance languages distinguish case only in the pronouns (like English with *he/him*, etc.) and mark grammatical function by other means (word order, etc.).

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Latin nouns were grouped into five ‘declensions’, each displaying a partly different set of endings. It is not always obvious from its nominative form which declension a noun is in: thus, most nouns ending in *-us*, such as *dominus* (‘master’), take ‘Second Declension’ case (and number) endings (genitive *domini*, etc.), but some are ‘Third Declension’ (*tempus-temporis*, ‘time’) and some ‘Fourth Declension’ (*portus-portūs*, ‘harbour’). The loss of the case system reduced this redundant diversity to a matter of singular versus plural (itself increasingly straightforward); the appearance of irregularity and the problems for learners arising from the division into declensions were thus largely eliminated along with the complexity.

In marking plurality, the various Romance languages preserved **different** parts of the Latin paradigm;

thus, Italian plurals are based on Latin nominative plurals ending in vowels (*amico-amici*; Italian favours word-final vowels more generally), whereas Spanish plurals are based on accusative plurals in *-s* (*amigo-amigos*).

Another example involves English plurals; during Middle English times (the ‘Middle Ages’), English nouns came increasingly to have plurals in *-s*, which is now the only ‘productive’ formation (except in very special cases, any newly-invented noun will have a plural in *-s*; even *mouse* as in computers often takes *mouses* as its plural). The once numerous plurals with *-en*, with internal vowel alternation, etc. (which are still thriving in German) have dwindled away and are now represented only by small groups of well-known, blatantly irregular forms such as *oxen* and *geese*.

One must be careful to note, however, that simplification on one front sometimes must be balanced by increasing complexity on another. Modern English verb forms display considerably less morphological complexity (3<sup>rd</sup>-person singular *-s*, past tense *-ed*, etc.) than those of Old English; but some of the distinctions in question here are **not** redundant, and the expressive power of the language had to be preserved somehow, in this case by means of ‘auxiliary’ verbs (also a factor in Romance). Newly-salient contrasts of meaning also came to be signalled in this way. Partly in consequence of all this, the **syntax** of the English verb phrase is much **more** complex nowadays (see below on ‘54321’).

### Descriptivism and determinism

Martin Joos (1907-78) was a professor of linguistics and German who spent most of his career at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. He was expert in many fields and had a great deal of influence on younger scholars. One of his outstanding achievements was the elaboration of the ‘54321’ system for

analysing the unusually lengthy and complex structure of the English verb phrase (finite or non-finite). However many or few of them are present in any given verb phrase, the five main components of such phrases occur in a fixed order starting with the modal verb at position 5 (if one is present) and ending in the main verb itself at position 1 – which, uniquely, is **always** present (unless it has been ‘ellipted’); thus the minimum 54321 sequence is just 1. The 54321 pattern is fully exemplified in phrases such as *may have been being hidden*. Each numbered component triggers a specific form of the immediately-following component, regardless of the number assigned to the latter. Thus, a verb form in position 3, which will always itself be a form of the verb BE, is always followed by the *-ing* participle form, regardless of whether the word in question is in position 2 (if present; *is being hidden*) or position 1 (*is hiding*). The (few) additional complications over and above the 54321 pattern are of great interest but do not impugn the analysis. As a young lecturer I learned 54321 from John Pellowe, who himself had learned the system from Joos’ associates, and later I taught it to others.

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***The 54321 pattern is fully exemplified in phrases such as ‘may have been being hidden’.***

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The (near-)algorithmic nature of 54321 is typical of Joos’ thought; he was of a scientific bent and was inclined to regard linguistic phenomena as very largely determinate. Thus his account of stylistic differences in *The Five Clocks* analyses style (very formal to very informal) in terms of five discrete categories. For any given sentence-meaning Joos typically presents just five sentences, from ‘frozen’ (*Those present should remain seated*) to very casual (*Sit tight!*); and he suggests that all the members of any set of synonymous sentences can be reliably assigned to one ‘clock’ or another. But,

while not unhelpful, this method ignores the variability and subjectivity of perceptions of style on the part of participants in discourse and the inevitably indeterminate boundaries between supposedly distinct styles.

Other linguists too have tendentiously exaggerated stylistic and other such contrasts and treated them as sharper than they are. One paper comparing English as used by educated Thais with the international standard target forms contrasts a Thai’s *Dick suggest we give her a present* with *It was suggested by Dick that we give her a present* (passive) rather than with the informal active voice form *Dick suggested we give her a present* which differs from the ‘Thai English’ form only in respect of the past tense *-ed* suffix and is much more normal in speech than the passive version. Similarly, the pioneering 19<sup>th</sup>-Century English dialectologist Joseph Wright ‘translated’ broad Yorkshire *them men at ta sah in’t rood* as *those men whom thou sawest in the road*, obviously unnecessarily formal and archaic.

Joos, however, clearly believed that the patterns of grammatical form and meaning in a given language, if analysed closely enough, really **are** totally invariant (and indeed admitting of only one accurate analysis). Where there appears to be scope for choice on the part of a speaker, or statistical variation, or where forms seem to invite marginal or indeterminate descriptions, this is simply because not enough is yet known (shades of similar views in, for example, 19<sup>th</sup>-Century physics). In discussion of his account of 54321 and associated matters, he states that (unless he has made a mistake) there is no more to be said; the description is complete and accounts for all usage. The most he will concede is that in another dialect (say, British English) the principles might be slightly different (but still invariant); or that a given individual might never yet have found occasion to use the full range of forms and contrasts available. Joos held, in fact, that the only legitimate way to avoid his deterministic position was to reject

descriptive linguistics altogether, and he accepted that some thoughtful people might therefore do this. But (rather like C.S. Lewis when he denied that atheists had a coherent place in the relevant intellectual spectrum and reserved legitimacy for pagans and monotheists) Joos would **not** grant any status or credibility to those who accepted linguistics as a scientific discipline but still eschewed his determinism; for him, they were trying to have their cake and eat it.

Of course, historical linguists, sociolinguists and such, while accepting 54321 etc. *per se*, would ask how the systems in question could come about in the first place, or change later, if no variation were possible. (Even those sociolinguists such as the late Charles-James Bailey who argue that variation can normally be explained away if enough information is available acknowledge that some variation, even if of a highly ‘regimented’ nature, must occur when a form or its meaning are actually changing.) They would also point to the many known linguistic phenomena which do seem to exhibit irreducible ‘inherent variation’.

Joos’ ideas are now seriously out of fashion; nowadays, not even a hard-line Chomskyan is **that** deterministic! But being unfashionable is not **necessarily** being wrong! And, whether or not his ideas could be defended against the criticisms of sociolinguists, this should not detract from his achievements as a descriptive linguist – such as 54321.

**Yet more struggles with grammar and meaning**

A little while ago, when discussing problems involving the learning of grammar, I remarked that some students find it very difficult to distinguish matters of grammar from matters of meaning or pragmatics. Another problem of the same general kind involves confusion over the distinction between matters of definition and matters of description (of contingent properties). For example, some students seek to define the word *circle* in such terms as ‘the



shape of the face of the Moon'. Some of these students are unaware of the fact that the face of the Moon is not perfectly circular, because (a) the Moon is slightly oblate and (b) mountains and valleys appear on the rim; but, even if it **were** perfectly circular, this would only be contingently the case, because (for instance) the Moon might have small parts dislodged through a collision with another body and might thus display an altered shape, but would still be the Moon. In consequence of such errors, some students wrongly regard sentences such as *The face of the Moon is circular* not merely as true but as **analytically** true (true by definition). In a similar way, some students regard *The Sun rises in the East* as analytically true, whereas it is only contingently true on Earth and is in fact false on Venus. (One of my students wrote that it was true only in Australia!)

Some specific students are even more at sea! One of my third-year Singaporean students was pounced upon and asked for help by a first-year who was desperately struggling with the introductory Structure of English lecture series: 'I don't even know what he is talking about! What on earth is a phrase?!' 'A connected series of words.' 'How can words be connected?'

### Seriously prescriptive

One writer whose hostility to linguistics is squarely focused upon the anti-prescriptivist approach is the journalist Mark Halpern. Halpern's views are partly grounded in a belief which he knows is shared by very few indeed, at least among those who think seriously about language, but which he nevertheless regards as clearly correct: namely, the belief that most linguistic change is deliberate and a matter of choice, because linguistic features (he believes) depend on the conscious

minds of speakers or writers, especially when they are actually changing. He contrasts this view with a diametrically opposed 'straw man' view which he mistakenly attributes to mainstream linguists, the idea that grammatical and other structures 'have a life of their own' and do not depend at all upon the minds of language users. Halpern apparently fails to discern the actual viewpoint (intermediate between these two extremes) adopted by (most) mainstream linguists, according to which linguistic features are indeed epiphenomena of human minds rather than independent entities but are mostly **not** accessed by the conscious minds of native speakers of the language in question in the absence of explicit study – and which are liable to systematic change without conscious decisions being made and indeed without there necessarily being any awareness of a given change while it is in progress. This mainstream viewpoint, of course, is well supported from evidence and argumentation.

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**'What on earth is a phrase?!'  
'A connected series of words.'  
'How can words be connected?'**

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Halpern exemplifies mainly with vocabulary changes, the study of which requires much less understanding of linguistic theory or descriptive techniques than that of changes at more heavily structured linguistic levels such as grammar. As I have previously noted, it is true that **some** vocabulary changes **are** deliberate or semi-deliberate, or at least readily accessible to the conscious minds of language users without study. In these respects, linguists will disagree with Halpern less than he suggests they would. But he is mistaken in extending this observation (albeit implicitly and without exemplification) to

grammatical and other structural changes.

Furthermore, Halpern regards many of the vocabulary changes which he cites as very unwelcome and as constituting degradation of the language in question (in this case English). He berates linguists for refusing to accept this prescriptivist stance (which of course is very widely shared as a folk-linguistic view).

See for example Mark Halpern, 'No Greater Misfortune: Debating with American Academics', available at:

<http://www.vocubula.com/FreeArticles/VROct00Halpern.asp>

also, Halpern's other contributions to *The Vocubula Review*.

### More fun things

Another word beloved of P.N. Oak (he who thought that the word *Christianity* could not be connected with the name *Christ*) is English *widower*. The 'derivational' ending *-er* usually creates an animate noun referring to a person (etc.) who performs the action of the verb from which it is derived; thus, *bake-baker*. Oak suggests that on this basis a widower should be someone who creates a widow, as in the adjective *widowed*; that is, someone who kills a woman's husband! He therefore advances a new etymology for *widower* with its genuine meaning, naturally in terms of Sanskrit (where there is, in fact, a convenient word which is cognate with *widow* through Indo-European).

A while ago, a Croatian man was taking the Canadian citizenship test, using his nephew as an interpreter. When the (non-Croatian-speaking) interviewer asked the question 'What is the capital city of Canada?', the nephew relayed the question as 'U kojem gradu živi tetka Ana?' ('In what city does Auntie Ana live?') – to which the applicant confidently and correctly replied 'Ottawa'!

## CONTRIBUTED ARTICLES

### NUMEROLOGY: A NOTE ON AN UNUSUAL CLAIM

In the previous *Intelligencer* ('Of Interest', page 17, headed 'Numerology') there was a note received by ASKE from Terje Donvold from Norway alerting readers to 'Stringotype: The neural basis for a particular brain (dis-)order. Empirical evidence for numerology bridging mind and brain' See:

[www.stringotype.com](http://www.stringotype.com)

On his website Donvold describes a number of possible applications of Benford's Law (First Digit Law). Benford's Law states that the digit 1 is the most frequently observed first or only digit in many naturally occurring data sets, while the frequencies of the other digits (2-9) fall exponentially. According to Wikipedia it has been shown to apply in a wide variety of contexts, 'including electricity bills, street addresses, stock prices, population numbers, death rates, lengths of rivers, physical and mathematical constants, and processes described by power laws (which are very common in nature)'.

Donvold's describes his demonstrations of stringotype as 'shakes' (Shake 1, Shake 2, etc.) from the description 'An anomaly that can shake one's skepticism to the core'.

The fifth of his 'shakes' concerns language, so what better person to give an opinion on this than our own skeptical linguist, Mark Newbrook.

#### From Mark Newbrook

In 'Shake 5: LANGUAGE', Donvold claims, more specifically, that numerological analyses of names and other linguistic forms support this notion. Numerology involves the idea that integers or numerical digits possess inherent relationships with alphabetic letters and with linguistic or other meanings. Most relevant here are versions of numerology where the direction of interpretation is from letters of the alphabet to numbers

(single- or double-digit) and where the numbers are then combined and re-combined by way of repeated addition of digits so as to yield a single-digit number for each name or other word; these numbers are then linked with meanings. Thus, if the letters of the Roman alphabet as used to write English are paired with the integers 1-26, the name *Eve* obtains a 'score' of  $5 + 22 + 5 = 32 = 3+2 = 5$ . It is then held that people with the name *Eve* will be likely to display whatever characteristics are ascribed to the number 5. Donvold's own version of numerology is not explicitly explained, but all of the Roman letters are assigned a digit in the range 1-8 (none to the digit 9; this is made explicit but is not explained).

Donvold wrongly calls the Roman alphabet 'Hindu-Arab' (this term actually applies to **numeral** symbols such as 1 or 5) and treats it as derived from the 'Abjad writing system' of 2000 BCE (in fact, *abjad* is the name of a **type** of writing system, not of any one such system).

On his webpage at

<http://www.stringotype.com/#!shake-5-/-c1vo5>

Donvold displays a bar-chart of frequencies of the integer numerals 1-8 for the English language. According to Donvold, those whose names, numerologically analysed, are favoured in terms of Benford's Law (i.e., those which emerge with smaller integers, especially 1) are more talented and successful (for instance, this applies to the 150 richest persons in the world). In his bar-chart he discerns an overall falling trend from 1 to 8, although this is not actually very obvious. There is a 'spike' at 5 which is in fact higher than the spike at 1; this is caused by the frequency in English of the letter E. Donvold states that 'this letter has the most and easiest formants, which have

a central role in speech', and indicates that groups associated with linguistic excellence, such as that of all persons awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, account for the spike at 5.

My response has been posted on the Skeptical Humanities web-site, under <http://skepticalhumanities.com/2012/12/24/reversals-such-1-non-historical-fringe-linguistics-20/>

(near foot; dated 4/12/15). My gist is that this material contains various errors and misconceptions regarding language. The main points other than the above are:

(1) Donvold seems to assume, quite wrongly, that the **current** ordering of the letters of the Roman alphabet as used for **English** is especially important. Other languages in various periods including the present (and even English in other periods) display different orderings of letters and indeed different numbers of letters.

(2) A formant is an acoustic feature of a phoneme, **not** of a letter. In English the letter E represents /e/ as in *Gerald*, /i/ as in *Peter*, etc.; any statement regarding formants will be true only for one of these phonemes. But no numbers can reasonably be assigned to phonemes as numerology assigns numbers to letters; thus, even if numerology were itself valid, no numerological analysis involving formants or any other aspect of phonemes would be possible.

(3) Furthermore, the phonemes used in specific words may differ in different accents. This would generate different results even if a numerological analysis involving phonemes **were** possible.

Given all this, I suggest that any conclusions arrived at are invalid, because they are based on an entire series of basic errors and conceptual confusions.

## REVIEWS AND COMMENTARIES

**The Confidence Game - The Psychology of the Con and Why We Fall for it Every Time** by Maria Konnikova. Canongate 2012 (digital), Canongate Books Ltd, UK, 2016), Viking / Penguin Random House NY, USA, 2016. ISBN 978 1 78211 390 4.

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### Reviewed by Steve Dulson

This book is an easy read and is aimed at the general reader rather than academia, although there are plenty of references for those who wish to explore the issues raised in more detail. Maria Konnikova takes you through the basic concepts behind the essential aspects of the most successful confidence tricks, whether they be those perpetrated against individual 'marks' or on society as a whole. The author rightly points out that she has no way of knowing if she has ever been conned or not – that is the beauty of a well-executed con after all. Most of us would probably admit that we know we have fallen for at least one small con in our lifetimes (and they do range from fairly minor tricks all the way up to major, life-ruining schemes). Some of us will have fallen for the same ruse more than once. This book tries to explain the psychological reasons behind our susceptibility.

The chapter headings define the step-by-step approach followed by the real masters of the confidence game and could be interpreted as a 'How to...' guide by a less scrupulous reader. 'The Grifter and the Mark' defines the confidence artist and victim respectively, while 'The Put-Up' considers how the mark is selected based on an assessment of their vulnerability, motivation and desires. 'The Play' focuses on the emotional foundations of empathy and rapport required to create a basis for trust and then logic and persuasion is utilised ('The Rope') so that the scheme ('The Tale') can be explained by 'The Convincer'. 'The Breakdown' describes the ways in which the duped struggle to understand what is happening and invest even more in the deception until they are completely

fleece through 'The Send and The Touch'. 'The Blow-off and the Fix' then represents the con artist making their getaway with the money and the fact that most people are unlikely to want to admit having been taken for a ride due to embarrassment or the damage to professional integrity involved. Most practitioners will have a Plan B all ready to be wheeled out if damage limitation is required as the mark turns on them or kicks up a fuss (the 'Fix').

Whilst the confidence trick can be seen as the oldest game in the book, the internet has afforded the con artist an ideal tool that can be exploited for such purposes. Large scale cons tend to flourish in times of transition or upheaval and the technological revolution has proved a case in point. The central truth as to why we fall for cons is that we want to feel that we are special: we do deserve that stroke of amazing luck, it is our turn to be specially selected for good fortune or that ideal opportunity. Our dreams can come true.

Something that struck me whilst reading through the methods employed by the tricksters was just how similar they seem to be to well-known marketing techniques. Food for thought...

The book describes a large number of real-life cons drawn from examples from across the world in order to illustrate each concept. This approach is quite effective although I did find that some of the stories were not fully concluded or explained. Reports into experimental results from various academic studies are also used to introduce and highlight socio-psychological phenomena, which throw up a few surprises. One of the

most interesting reports concerns our natural propensity to accept a hoax even after the reveal has been made. If we have invested time, reputation or money (for example) in belief in a hoax then people often cling on to it after the event, even claiming that there must have been a cover up or some other kind of conspiracy theory responsible even for the claim that it was a hoax at all.

The author discusses the concepts of cognitive dissonance and confirmation bias as well as other ways in which our brains assist the deceiver in any deception played on us as we continue to refuse to believe that we could have been wrong all along – until, of course, it is too late. The book briefly explores possible evolutionary reasons for the fact that humans lie, cheat, steal and deceive and this warrants further research. As does the idea that religion is the ultimate con; a subject which is of the upmost interest to myself. There is a full chapter concerning this, with interesting examples of cult infiltrators and the methods that they used in order to remain unassimilated.

The book ends with a nice summary of why all successful cons succeed by co-opting persuasive assistance from the marks themselves: 'Ultimately what a confidence artist sells is hope. Hope that you'll be happier, healthier, richer, loved, accepted, better looking, younger, smarter, a deeper, more fulfilled human being - hope that the you that will emerge on the other side will be somehow superior to the you that came in.' Self-deception is, after all, the most effective deception of all.

## Mark's Bookshelf

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### Brief Reviews by Mark Newbrook

#### Cathrine Sadolin

I thank Maddy Prior for making me aware of Sadolin, and Dominic Watt (University of York) for his expert help in the preparation of my comments.

Complete Vocal Technique (CVT) is a singing method developed by Danish singer, vocal coach and vocal researcher Cathrine Sadolin, and forms the basis for teaching at her 'school'. Since the 1980s she has been researching 'all the sounds the human voice is able to produce'. She came up with a new terminology and visual representation for her findings, which can be found in the book *Complete Vocal Technique* (revised edition 2012). The technique 'covers all the sounds the human voice can produce'. Sadolin states that the method is not to be regarded as complete in the sense that there is always room for improvement; research is still going on and techniques are updated regularly.

Basic CVT principles (See:

[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Complete\\_Vocal\\_Technique](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Complete_Vocal_Technique))

- CVT is based on anatomy and physiology instead of myths. Its goal is to use the voice in a healthy and unharmed manner.
- CVT can be used in all musical genres.
- The applied technique must work at once. If not, the singer is doing something wrong.
- Singing is not difficult: anyone can learn how to sing.
- Singing should always feel comfortable and never hurt: trust your own sensation.
- All sounds can be made in a healthy way.
- In teaching: separate taste and technique. The singer makes the artistic choices, not the teacher.
- Sounds which sound hazardous, like grunting or screaming, are perfectly healthy to the voice as long as they are performed correctly.

Sadolin is in contact with mainstream academics and especially with medical professionals. Her colleague Eddy Bøgh Brixen, whom she cites, is known for having given expert evidence in the forensic phonetic context. However, because he comes from an audio-engineering rather than a phonetics background there has been some doubt in Denmark and beyond about his competence to talk about speech production as such. On the other hand, Sadolin has obviously worked to good effect with some professional phoneticians, notably Adrian Fourcin.

There appears no reason to doubt that Sadolin's own vocal training techniques are generally effective. The feedback which she reports suggests that most learners find them very useful. In fact, the techniques appear quite conventional in many respects, not especially innovative (this may not be immediately obvious, because terminology varies from writer to writer, especially among non-linguists).

Sadolin's 'theory' (the 'four modes', etc.) is more novel, and this would have to be assessed carefully by phoneticians (not yet attempted). But proposals of this kind often work well in practice even if the associated theory is obscure or not yet demonstrated.

In this context: some of Sadolin's specific phonetic assumptions do not appear very sound. For example, she suggests that rounding one's lips perturbs what the vocal folds are simultaneously doing. It is not clear how this would happen.

Sadolin's intermittent bombastic-sounding statements ('The technique covers all the sounds the human voice can produce', 'The applied technique must work at once. If not, the singer is doing something wrong', etc.) may have discouraged some professional phoneticians or linguists from looking further at her material. This is not the

usual tone in academic writing. If these statements were re-phrased as claims or hypotheses (and defended), more linguists would be inclined to set out to test them, and if such strong statements really proved to be justified they would be most impressed and interested.

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*Sadolin's intermittent bombastic-sounding statements ...may have discouraged some professional phoneticians or linguists from looking further at her material.*

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The main problem with Sadolin's ideas is that they can be read as **excluding** some accents from use in singing as not meeting her criteria. (This kind of issue has arisen in the context of some earlier proposals by non-linguists regarding speaking and/or singing, for example those of the French author Alfred Tomatis.) Sadolin's stance suggests that she is 'prioritising' standard varieties of languages. Her comment 'Different languages and dialects can trick you into thinking that you are using the correct vowel. This is why, in the beginning, you must spend time familiarising yourself with the exact vowel sounds' could well serve to make speakers of non-standard varieties feel that they will never master vocal techniques unless they first adopt the 'correct' vowels of RP ('BBC English') and so forth. This type of 'normative' discourse is actually common in dialect/accent training literature (except where actors/singers are being trained to use a specific non-standard or regional accent which is not their own). The community of (socio-)linguists may need to engage more with the entertainment community to explain what we think we have learned over the decades about variation in speech. Of course, many non-linguists might

still disagree with our views on such matters even after hearing what we have to say. But if Sadolin really is saying that it is impossible to sing well in some accents, we would call upon her to defend this view against our objections. And, if she is **not** saying this, we would welcome a clearer statement of what she does think about this issue.

In this context: Sadolin has little to say about the less usual airstream mechanisms, for example the ‘velaric ingressive’ mechanism (involving the velum/soft palate, referred to by Sadolin as the ‘palate’) which is used when producing certain consonants in the ‘click’ languages of Southern Africa and does not require ‘pulmonic’ air coming from the lungs – although her comment ‘The technique covers all the sounds the human voice can produce’ would imply that her approach does cover such sounds and other special categories such as ‘implosives’.

In addition, Sadolin’s book contains some errors of detail (for example, in the use of phonetic symbols) and also some inconsistencies involving which specific accents are envisaged (for example, some of the transcriptions assume an accent where /-r/ occurs before a consonant or before silence at the end of a word, such as General American or Scots, while others assume an accent where /-r/ does NOT occur in such cases, such as RP and indeed most accents in England; but almost all accents are internally consistent in this respect, and it is therefore difficult to imagine an accent where all these transcriptions were simultaneously correct).

In the context of the theory: using ‘popular’, non-specific terms like *twang* in an otherwise technical context rather detracts from the scientific gloss.

### **El Rabih Makhi**

El Rabih Makhi, whose work appears in volume-series used by professional linguists (see:

<http://tinyurl.com/hyxq386>)

argues that the origin of human language is to be found in the Hamito-

Semitic language family (which includes his own first language!). He states:

‘Since the 19th century, there have been repeated attempts to establish connections among languages previously unknown to be related. More recent attempts aim at establishing distant linguistic relationships such as the Nostratic family. All such attempts have been considered by the majority of linguists as *premature* and *poorly established*. Moreover, practicing historical and comparative linguists consider it impossible at the present state of our knowledge to establish new language families and broader linguistic relationships. The Hamito-Semitic language family is historically and linguistically the most important of all language families since it possesses the longest recorded history of any language family, extending from 3400 B.C. to the present time. Accordingly, if the origin of language is not found in this family, it will never be found anywhere. Fortunately, it is found and is as clear as sunshine. Specifically, Hamito-Semitic is related to Austronesian.’

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***El Rabih Makhi ...  
argues that the origin of human  
language is to be found in the  
Hamito-Semitic language  
family.***

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As one would expect, the approach adopted here is more sophisticated than those used by amateurs proposing that languages dear to them are ancestral to humanity or have special statuses in some other way; but, like most such amateurs, the author proceeds in large part by equating unsystematically and superficially similar words (often very short words, which makes chance similarity especially likely) and (also very short) word-parts (morphemes or putative morphemes, syllables, etc.) from the language families in question, which are normally considered not to be ‘genetically’ related (except perhaps in ‘deep’ pre-history) and to have had

no influential contact with each other. In arriving at his equations, he also invokes contentious theories involving ‘surface’ and ‘deep’ structures. The ‘findings’ presented here invite close skeptical scrutiny.

### **Richard Felix**

I allow myself here a mini-review of a non-linguistic book. In 2014 I went on a ‘ghost tour’ of Derby conducted by the author, who remained very affable and helpful despite becoming aware that I was a skeptic! I am grateful to David Taylor for his expert advice in the preparation of my comments. I refer readers to his article ‘The Stone Tape Theory: An examination of the historical origins’, in *Folklore Frontiers* No. 68, December 2011.

In his 2009 book *What Is A Ghost?* (Felix Films, Derbyshire), Richard Felix – a ghost-hunter, tour guide, local historian, and staunch advocate of his home city of Derby - presents his version of the ‘Stone Tape’/‘Water Tape’ theory as to the nature of the reported apparitions generally known under the term *ghost*. This theory is based on the 1972 TV drama *The Stone Tape* written by Nigel Kneale and on earlier works, with similar themes, by Kneale and his predecessors. It is also linked with more loosely related proposals for explaining ghosts and other psychic phenomena, made by psychic researchers and theoreticians, going back as far as the late nineteenth century and often involving the now discredited notion of the universe-pervading ‘ether’ (seen as a possible medium of transference for thoughts and emotions).

Felix argues that ghosts are not surviving non-physical aspects of deceased persons as is often held, but rather ‘recordings’ of those individuals captured by the physical environment in which they moved in life – especially the built environment, where stone is often plentiful. (Alleged out-of-doors phenomena of this kind involve additional complexities; on these, see Paul Lee’s work as cited below.) These recordings are perceptible to at least some living persons, and some are ‘replayed’ over

and over. Felix seeks to render this theory intellectually ‘respectable’ by informing it with the notions of contemporary science. For him, the key relevant aspects of the environment involve the alleged ‘holographic’ physical properties of silica, the principal component of stone. (Felix thinks that this explains the alleged absence of ghosts, in his sense, from wooden buildings; see p. 61.)

On Felix’s view, ghosts are thus quite different from genuine spirits of the deceased, if these latter exist. Felix claims, in fact, that 50% of ghostly apparitions are of **living** persons (p. 76). On the other hand, he refers to the dead ‘choosing’ to remain in the physical world (p. 62), a viewpoint which appears to fit in better with the idea that ghosts **are** the spirits of deceased persons – unless they are indeed separate, non-aware entities which are somehow emanated or caused by spirits – or else suggests that spirits themselves can also haunt buildings (as is implied on p. 61).

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***Felix identifies himself as a sceptic, on the ground that he believes that ‘eight out of ten ghostly occurrences can be explained [without invoking the ‘paranormal’].’***

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Felix’s book is openly ‘popular’ in style, and it would be unreasonable to assess it as if it were an academic text. Nevertheless, some aspects of Felix’s thinking do seem to require more careful exposition. And it might well be held that his tone is **too** ‘casual’ in places, especially in respect of the argumentation, which sometimes appears rather loose and unlikely to impress a serious reader who was not already committed to some broadly similar theory.

After his introductory material, Felix outlines his thesis (pp. 42-47, 50-53) and in later sections he goes into more detail. He points out that silica

(silicon dioxide) is widely found in nature and the built environment as sandstone and quartz (the latter is also a component of granite), and suggests that it can record information in a manner analogous to a silicon computer chip. He goes on to liken such an effect to the use of silica and iron oxide in cassette tapes. His main evidence for this property as it relates to iron oxide is the retention by fired bricks of their original magnetic orientation; he also introduces an analogy involving positive and negative charges in the atoms of quartz crystals as used in watches. On p. 53 he announces that these considerations suggest the validity of the Stone Tape Theory.

Unfortunately, Felix’s discussion of these matters incorporates various scientifically dubious or at least severely disputed notions, introduced as if matters of proven fact: ‘Kirlian photography’ of human ‘energy fields’ (pp. 44-45), a mystical material known as ‘maban’ which figures in some Australian Aboriginal thought (p. 45), extreme claims regarding crystals (pp. 45-47), the work of the discredited Jacques Benveniste and of other advocates of homoeopathy (p. 48), the thought of Tom Lethbridge with his ‘Water Memory’ version of the theory (pp. 48-50), and the alleged hidden energies and powers of human beings (pp. 50-53).

More generally and more crucially: as Paul Lee points out (*Note 1*), the alleged effects of the ‘Stone Tape’ are manifested **only** in the minds of those who witness ghostly phenomena. There is nothing present that can be recorded or analysed with any available equipment. Various attempts have been made in the past to record effects of this kind, but in no such case do any alleged positive findings carry any conviction. Furthermore, even in the apparently most favourable environment provided by a stone building there is no **specific** theory which could plausibly explain such a mechanism (Felix’s analogies are no

more than analogies); and without anything to actually test any such ‘theory’ remains only an idea in the minds of Felix and other such thinkers.

Another issue here involves Felix’s use of the term *sceptic* (often spelled *skeptic* in skeptical literature). On p. 29 (echoing Edd Felix as quoted two pages earlier), Felix identifies himself as a sceptic, on the ground that he believes that ‘eight out of ten ghostly occurrences can be explained [without invoking the ‘paranormal’]’. This is a comment frequently made by upholders of the reality of some instances of allegedly paranormal phenomena; it is used to present them (by no means **always** misleadingly) as judicious, not gullible, not prejudiced in favour of explanations in terms of the paranormal, etc. However, on p. 34 Felix rehearses a commonly-made claim to the effect that ‘to a sceptic no proof [of the reality of a paranormal event/entity] is possible’ – and **this** comment refers to the attitudes of self-identifying sceptics/skeptics considered here as anti-paranormalist ‘debunkers’ who allegedly could not be persuaded to accept such things by any evidence whatsoever. In my view such comments are unfair to most skeptics; but in any event a reader could well be confused by this shifting between the two uses of this word.

Given all the above, the verdict must be that much is left to be desired if Felix’s thought on these matters is to be taken seriously.

**Note**

1. Lee, Paul: ‘Science, Not Superstition: The Nature Of Ghosts. A Review Of The Evidence’ Available at: [http://www.paullee.com/ghosts/sns\\_new.html](http://www.paullee.com/ghosts/sns_new.html)

# ANNOUNCEMENTS

## OF INTEREST

### SKEPTICISM, SCIENCE AND RATIONALITY (GENERAL)

#### Sense About Science

<http://www.senseaboutscience.org/>  
See other entries throughout 'Of Interest' and under 'Meetings'.

#### A Year of Asking for Evidence

'We reviewed every single one of the 521 public evidence requests sent through AskforEvidence.org in 2015 and identified the best and the worst ways that companies, politicians and organisations responded.'

<http://askforevidence.org/articles/askin-g-for-evidence-in-2015>

#### Health claims about sleep

'Ask for Evidence campaign is focussing on the often confusing and contradictory health claims about sleep.' For this and other claims see:

<http://askforevidence.org/index>

#### Voice of Young Science cuts through the fog

'Last week our network of early career researchers, Voice of Young Science (VoYS), launched an online weather quiz on BuzzFeed. Frustrated and concerned by misuse of weather terms in the media and public discussion, VoYS members put together a quiz that takes a look at some wild and wonderful meteorology terms. More than 3,000 people have already taken the quiz - test your knowledge today'.

<http://www.buzzfeed.com/senseaboutscience/havent-the-foggiest-qgrx>

#### 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/>

#### Skeptical cartoon book

As announced in the previous issue, 'Polyp' is a professional cartoonist and is launching a kickstarter crowdfunding bid for a book of skeptics' cartoons. Here is the latest from Polyp:

'Just thought you might want to know the kickstarter project for this collection of confrontational toons is now live. We've definitely experienced a 'not wanting to offend the fundies' casual censorship for this book- I've even had a printer refuse to handle it, despite them printing my previous graphic novel..! Bidding going well, but any help you can give getting the word out through the network would be massively appreciated.'

<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/678551473/think-a-book-of-incendiary-cartoon-skepticism>

#### Scientists and pseudo-science

'Should scientists dive in and engage head-on, appearing face-to-face with those they believe do science a disservice? Should they shun such engagement and redress bad science after the fact in other forums? Or should they disengage entirely and let the story run its course?'

<https://theconversation.com/should-scientists-engage-with-pseudo-science-or-anti-science-54953>

#### Celebrity opinions

'Opinion vs facts: why do celebrities so often get it wrong? Celebrities often make wildly inaccurate claims and comments to millions of people. But the workings of our minds mean we're all prone to such behaviour.'

<http://tinyurl.com/j4w53bj>

## MEDICINE

#### Medical trials

'Outcome switching in clinical trials is a serious problem. We are systematically checking every trial published in the top five medical journals, to see if they have

misreported their findings. First, we compare each clinical trial report against its registry entry. Some trials report their outcomes perfectly. For the others, we count how many of the outcomes specified in the registry were never reported. And we count how many outcomes were silently added. Second, whenever we detect unreported or added outcomes, we write a letter to the journal pointing them out, so that readers are aware of the problems. We are tracking which journals have published our letters after 4 weeks - and which haven't. .... Our project is ongoing since October 2015'

Reading the disturbing findings so far at:

<http://compare-trials.org/>

A study published in the *British Journal of Medicine* has found poor levels of clinical trial reporting from 51 leading academic medical centres in the USA. The study looked at 4,347 studies that were completed between October 2007 and September 2010, and identified trials with missing results two years after the trial completion. For the 51 institutions, the proportion of trials published ranged from 10.8% to 40.3%, and the proportion of results reported on ClinicalTrials.gov ranged from 1.6% to 40.7%.

<http://www.bmj.com/content/352/bmj.i637>

'How often are outcomes switched in clinical trials? And why does it matter?'

<http://compare-trials.org/blog/are-your-results-unusual-or-how-often-are-outcomes-switched/#more-291>

A study published in *JAMA Oncology* has revealed that 'positive' cancer clinical trial results have a much higher scientific impact than 'negative' results. 'A total of 94 patient studies were looked at, containing data from 46,424 trial participants. Out of these, only 28% of trials showed positive

results. However, these trials were far more likely to be published in high impact journals than negative trials...’  
<http://www.alltrials.net/news/favourable-results-have-more-scientific-impact-than-unfavourable-results/>

### **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 ‘Saatchi Bill’**

From Sense About Science:

‘In quiet news last week, the ‘Saatchi Bill’ was given Royal Assent on Wednesday 23rd March. It’s the Saatchi Act 2016 now. Except that it isn’t. This is not the legislation Lord Saatchi originally said he wanted. Everything has been stripped out of it except the provision for a database....’

<http://www.senseaboutscience.org/blog.php/137/the-strange-end-of-the-saatchi-bill#sthash.huDUtSGJ.dpuf>  
and

<http://www.stophesaatchibill.co.uk/>

### **Acupuncture**

‘A website for Help to Stop UK ([www.helptostop.co.uk](http://www.helptostop.co.uk)), an organisation which offered help in stopping drinking and drug use ... made various claims about the service. A section headed “Substance Frequency” stated “Our treatment works by using a specific frequency on the acupuncture points on the wrist to cancel and neutralise the effects of any substance (alcohol, cocaine, opiates, pharma drugs etc.) so it’s much easier to: stop drinking - stop cocaine use - stop drug use - stop prescribed meds - the only contact required is via two wristbands. Dorset County Council contacted the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) challenging whether the efficacy claims for the technique and the claim ‘Our treatment outcomes are significantly better than any other treatment method’ were misleading and could be substantiated. As a result, the ASA ruled that ‘The ad must not appear again in its current form. We

told Help to Stop UK to ensure they held adequate evidence for efficacy claims; adequate comparative evidence for comparative claims; and to ensure their ads did not discourage essential treatment for conditions for which medical supervision should be sought’.

<http://tinyurl.com/h76sf3h>

### **Homeopathy**

Jo Brodie blogs, ‘I’ve started a collection of activities undertaken by people skeptical of homeopathy and the successes they’ve had in taking homeopathy to task for its misleading claims. For fairness there’s also a segment on failures which I’ll update too - we can learn from things going wrong. I’ll also add a section for individual successes (e.g. NHS Lothian’s decision to shelve funding for homeopathy was recently challenged legally by a homeopathy enthusiast but this challenge failed) but it’s mostly overarching categories at the moment. It feels like there are a few more categories to be added but it’s late...’

<http://brodiesnotes.blogspot.co.uk/2015/08/skeptic-successes-in-homeopathy.html>

A leading scientist has declared homeopathy a ‘therapeutic dead-end’ after a systematic review concluded the controversial treatment was no more effective than placebo drugs. Professor Paul Glasziou was the chair of a working party by the National Health and Medical Research Council which reviewed the evidence of 176 trials of homeopathy to establish if the treatment is valid. See his blog in the *British Journal of Medicine* below.

<http://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2016/02/16/paul-glasziou-still-no-evidence-for-homeopathy/>

‘Rubbing salts into the wounds of homeopathy’. Homeopathy has suffered many body blows recently. A new decision by the medicines regulator rubs salt into its wounds.

<http://tinyurl.com/z5smvxl>

### **Homeopathy and childbirth**

Depressing account of the consequences of a midwife’s belief in the efficacy of homeopathy.

<http://acsh.org/news/2016/03/24/midwife-and-homeopathy-faulted-in-home-birth-death/>

### **Homeopathy online survey**

‘I am an undergraduate Sociology student at the University of York, currently completing my final year dissertation on the topic of homeopathy. This project aims to investigate attitudes towards homeopathy in the general population. This research will form the basis of my final year dissertation.

[https://york.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_8hUmq89SAMKFpPf](https://york.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8hUmq89SAMKFpPf)

### **Homeopathy on the NHS**

From The Good Thinking Society:

Have your say on NHS

Homeopathy funding in the Wirral:

<http://goodthinkingsociety.org/have-your-say-on-nhs-homeopathy-funding-in-the-wirral/>

### **Veterinary homeopathy**

From The Good Thinking Society:

‘If you agree that pets should not be subjected to pseudoscientific treatments when they are ill, you can join 1800 others and sign the petition now. If you’re a pet owner, we’d also like you to write to your vet using the template letter below as a guide, to ask them to add their name to the petition. So far, over 700 vets have signed on – will your vet join them?’

<http://goodthinkingsociety.org/category/projects/veterinary-quackery/>

### **Herbal medicine**

A baby died of meningitis after the parents tried to treat him with herbal remedies. The couple allegedly only sought medical help after their child stopped breathing.

<http://tinyurl.com/gv3wzbu>

### **Anti-vaccination**

‘The University of Wollongong has been slammed for accepting a PhD thesis by an anti-vaccination activist. The thesis by Dr Judy Wilyman claims the World Health Organisation and the pharmaceutical industry have been involved in a conspiracy to push immunisation. Several medical researchers and public health advocates have criticised the thesis, with calls for



it to be sent to UOW's academic board for review.'

<http://www.illawarramercury.com.au/story/3666031/uproar-over-uows-anti-vax-thesis/>

Read Australian anti-vaccination campaigner Rixta Francis's thoughts on parents grieving over the death of their baby from whooping cough: 'A dead baby obviously suited their need for constant sympathy and attention. If the baby had lived they would have used him in another way'.

<http://tinyurl.com/zwllyux>

'Robert De Niro has made a U-turn and withdrawn Vaxxed, the controversial film about the MMR vaccine from his Tribeca Film Festival. The 72-year-old actor had apparently consulted the "scientific community" and said: "We do not believe it contributes to or furthers the discussion I had hoped for."'

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/03/27/robert-de-niro-pulls-vaxxed-from-tribeca-film-festival/>

### Weight loss product

'Man given two weeks to live after taking popular weight-loss product purchased online.'

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-02-14/man-faced-death-after-taking-popular-weight-loss-product/7162378>

### Organic produce

A recent meta-analysis reported in the British Journal of Nutrition concluded that both organic meat and milk provide more omega-3 fatty acids and organic meat has slightly lower concentrations of two saturated fats that are linked to greater risk of cardiovascular disease. Also organic milk contains 40% more linoleic acid, and carries slightly higher concentrations of iron, vitamin E and some carotenoids. These results were reported widely in the press, but on further inspection the apparent benefits are minimal and there are also some nutritional disadvantages to the organic products.

<http://tinyurl.com/zaxu4j4>

and

<http://tinyurl.com/j4mtdr3>

## PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHIATRY

### Birth order, IQ and personality

Contrary to previous research, the relationship, although statistically significant, is minute.

'We tested birth order associations with personality traits and intelligence using Project Talent, a representative sample (N = 377,000) of U.S. high school students. Using a between-family design and several background factors (i.e., age, sex, sibship size, parental socio-economic status, and family structure), we were able to control for potential confounds, and estimate the links between birth order and outcomes across several different social categories. In addition to differences between firstborns and laterborns across the entire sample, we also tested birth rank trends in a sub-sample of targets from sibships of three, raised by two parents. Overall, the average absolute association between birth order and personality traits was .02, whereas the one between birth order and intelligence was .04.'

<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0092656615000525>

### False memories

Yet another disturbing case described by Ed Cara, showing how difficult it can be to distinguish real from false memories in historical abuse cases:

<http://tinyurl.com/hnlly26>

'Social recall: factors that can affect false memory'. Guardian column by Chris French.

<http://tinyurl.com/z9fcxk3>

### A.R. Hopwood's 'False Memory Archive: An Anthology'

The APRU's very own artist-in-residence, Alasdair Hopwood, has published the above as a fascinating e-book. The book is available here for £5.99:

<http://tinyurl.com/jdy5ovw>

A feature by the *Independent* is here:

<http://tinyurl.com/zw42agb>

### Mindfulness

'Is mindfulness a science-based approach to health and wellbeing or a philosophy about how we should live?

If the former, what does the good science actually say about the benefits? If the latter, does it matter what the science says, and what, then, is its place in an (allegedly) evidence-based health care system? And, perhaps most challenging, can it be both?'

<http://policyoptions.irpp.org/issues/is-it-the-best-of-times-or-the-worst/caulfield/>

## EDUCATION

### Magic in the classroom

'Teaching: Just Like Performing Magic: One half of the entertainment duo Penn & Teller explains how performance and discomfort make education come alive.'

<http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/01/what-classrooms-can-learn-from-magic/425100/>

### Ask for Evidence lesson plan

From Sense About Science:

'Our Ask for Evidence lesson plan has been going down a storm but we want to make it even better. To do that we need teachers to tell us what we can improve, add or remove.'

'Every teacher who uses our lesson plan and lets us know how they get on will get free "I love evidence" badges for their whole class!'

Free download at:

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

or

<http://askforevidence.org/articles/brand-new-ask-for-evidence-lesson-plan>

## RELIGION

### Free speech

'The Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain (CEMB) has published a case study on the Islamic Societies at Trinity College Dublin, Warwick University and Goldsmiths University where attempts were made to restrict or bar our spokesperson Maryam Namazie from speaking in 2015.'

<http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/01/what-classrooms-can-learn-from-magic/425100/>

You can read the case study here:

<http://ex-muslim.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Islamism-Case-Study-FINAL.pdf>

‘It is important to note that apostasy and blasphemy are not abstract theological debates but a matter of life and death for many across the globe’:

<http://ex-muslim.org.uk/2016/01/apostasy-and-blasphemy-are-basic-human-rights/>

‘The Presidents of Warwick and Goldsmiths Universities Atheists Societies who fought hard for free expression were speakers at our end-year event in December 2015 as was Philosopher AC Grayling, Centre for Secular Space’s Gita Sahgal and Kurdish Women’s Rights Campaigner Houzan Mahmoud amongst others. The fantastic event is now online’:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z2Tw0dcXBpE>

‘CEMB is organising or has speaking engagements at a number of upcoming events, including at the European parliament in Brussels, Oxford Union and Reason rally in Washington DC as well as at various universities across the country. You can see the listing of events here’:

<http://ex-muslim.org.uk/category/events/>

‘We are also organising an ex-Muslim “flash mob” to celebrate freedom of expression, blasphemy and apostasy with music and dance for our 9th anniversary in June. If you’re interested in participating in the #ExMuslimBecause flash mob, please contact us. The flash mob will help to further build on the successful #ExMuslimBecause, which saw over 120,000 tweets describing the many reasons for leaving Islam.

‘CEMB fights on numerous fronts to challenge Islamism and apostasy laws and support those who face persecution or intimidation as a result of leaving Islam as well as opposing bigotry against Muslims and defending universal rights and secularism. Unlike Islamist organisations with huge amounts of state and other backing, we must rely on our friends to support our work. A special thanks to all those who donated to our organisation in 2015.

‘Please continue to support our work if you can by sending a cheque made payable to CEMB or making a donation via Paypal. No amount is too small and all support is hugely appreciated and needed. You can find out more about donating here’:

<http://ex-muslim.org.uk/donate/>

### **Faith healer may face further sentence**

From Sachdev Virdee, Asian Rationalist Society Britain:

‘Here is news update regarding the case of Mohammad Ashrafi (fraudulent faith healer) who was sentenced to 9 years in Leicestershire Crown Court on 19 Feb 2015. After his conviction he did not co-operate with the Court to declare his hidden cash in the three hearings he had and the Court has given him six months to declare assets or face 5 more years on the top of 9 years already given. This may be first case of its kind here where a faith healer faced a 4-week trial and was convicted. What a good example to remember that those who claim to have special powers to tell the future of others failed to tell their own and faced sentence. .... It is information worth knowing about how the situation of vulnerability in the Asian Community is being cashed in by such conmen that needed to be tackled.’

<http://tinyurl.com/nzz28lb>

### **Religious education**

‘Schools must teach pupils that Britain is a mainly Christian country and have “no obligation” to teach atheism, the Education Secretary has said. Seeking to clarify a High Court ruling last month, which found the Government had unlawfully excluded non-religious views from the curriculum, Nicky Morgan said schools are still free to prioritise religious teachings. New guidance from the Department for Education insists that non-religious beliefs need not be given “equal parity” with religious belief and that non-faith schools should reflect the fact that British religious traditions “are, in the main, Christian”. A recent case, brought by the British Humanist Association (BHA), sought to ensure

that alternative world views were put before pupils in secondary schools.’

<http://tinyurl.com/hbu4bfd>

### **Religion and politics**

‘Meet the atheist who quizzes presidential candidates about their faith’:

<http://tinyurl.com/h2fcrg4>

## **POLITICS AND PUBLIC POLICY**

### **Sedley Inquiry into Suppression of Government Research**

For further information see:

<https://researchinquiry.org/>

### **Anti-Lobbying Bill**

From Sense About Science:

‘A proposed change to the wording of government grants would have a serious chilling effect on researchers and others speaking out. From 1 May, the Cabinet Office has proposed that all government grants include a clause to prevent public money supporting “activity intended to influence or attempt to influence parliament, government or political parties”’

Find out more about this (including details of the petition on the Parliament UK website) at:

<http://tinyurl.com/jnt732a>

and

<http://tinyurl.com/zbwjjj7>

### **Evidence Transparency Framework**

‘Sense About Science, in partnership with Institute for Government and the Alliance for Useful Evidence, will be running an initial benchmarking exercise in 2016 to see how government is faring on evidence transparency. This working group has established a framework that offers a rapid assessment tool to rate government departments on how transparent they are in the use of evidence in policy decisions. The idea is that government should default to evidence-led decisions and the new framework promotes this in a simple and straightforward way. We welcome your feedback.’

<http://www.senseaboutscience.org/news.php/469/measuring-government-transparency>

## MISCELLANEOUS UNUSUAL CLAIMS

### ESP

‘This paper describes various examples of blatant attempts to suppress and censor parapsychology research and those who are doing it.’ The examples include raising false accusations, barring access to journals, suppressing papers and data, and ostracizing and persecuting scientists interested in the topic.’

In Cardeña, E. (2015) ‘The unbearable fear of psi: On scientific suppression in the 21<sup>st</sup> century’. *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 29 (4), 601–620.

<http://tinyurl.com/hzux3oy>

### Demonic possession

A NHS psychiatrist advised a patient to get help from a 24-hour church TV

channel based in Nigeria because she might be possessed by demonic ‘special forces’.

<http://tinyurl.com/zck3wgg>

### UFO sighting

‘In their latest bizarre sighting, alien hunters claim to have spotted a UFO being followed by military aircraft in Bulgaria. Images circulating on conspiracy forums show a ‘saucer-shaped UFO’ circulating high above the fighter jets.

<http://tinyurl.com/j4q57r5>

### Ritual satanic abuse

A very informative article on this topic by Nick Harding.

<http://tinyurl.com/jsvwlga>

### Peter Popoff

From the Good Thinking Society:

‘Our investigation into Peter Popoff involved complaints about the

broadcasting of TV slots in which Popoff advertises his “miracle water”, broadcast via a TV channel based in Iceland. Recently, Iceland’s Ministry of the Interior’s Media Committee upheld our complaint.’ Further details: <http://goodthinkingsociety.org/category/projects/peter-popoff-investigation/>

### Conspiracy theories

‘How the Illuminati Stole the Mind, Soul, and Body of Hip-Hop: The true story of how an 18th-century secret society came to dominate today’s music industry (allegedly).’

<http://tinyurl.com/zupzvq9>

## UPCOMING EVENTS

### THE ANOMALISTIC PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCH UNIT AT GOLDSMITH’S COLLEGE LONDON

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

or

<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/>

or

<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-muslim.org.uk/category/events/>

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

### GREG FOOT ON STAGE

Ever wondered why your fingers go wrinkly in the bath? What explosions in space really look like? Or why beans make you fart?! Well wonder no more. Fresh from Blue Peter and BBC's Factomania join TV & YouTube Science Guy Greg Foot for a show of curious questions and explosive answers. With over 5million views on YouTube, Greg will stop at nothing to

answer YOUR questions LIVE, even if he has to use a giant flamethrower, make a rainbow indoors or launch a space rocket!

Throughout May 2016 Greg will be appearing on stage in many venues in England and Wales. For dates, times and tickets go to:

<http://gregfoot.com/onstage/goggles/>

### SENSE ABOUT SCIENCE

**The What Works Global Summit  
2016, London, 26-28 Sept 2016**

**Pre-conference workshops: 24-25**

**Sept**

*Putting evidence to work for better  
policies, programmes and practice*

'We're organising the 2016 What Works Summit alongside the Campbell

Collaboration, 3ie and the What Works Research Centre (Queen's University Belfast). The summit aims to promote quality evidence and ways of producing and communicating evidence to improve uptake into policy and practice. The deadline for submissions for sessions is Monday, 25th April 2016. Please do share with colleagues you think might be interested.'

<http://www.campbellcollaboration.org/WWGS/index.php>

The request for submissions is here:

<http://tinyurl.com/hrlh0sn>

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## LOGIC AND INTUITION: ANSWER

### A family problem

The answer to the first version of the problem is that Mary and Joan are sisters but not to each other. The giveaway seems to be this word 'both'. If they were sisters to each other this would be redundant (and at the very least misleading).

The answer to the second version is that brothers John and Bill have no married siblings and sisters Mary and Joan have no surviving relatives.

### The weight of an hourglass

The back-of-the-book answer is that the weight of the hourglass does not change because, although the grains of

sand in free fall will be weightless, this will be compensated by the impact of each grain landing in the lower chamber. But 'there may be some slight fluctuation at the beginning and the end'. Stop reading this now if you want to think about what might be causing these slight fluctuations.

Intrigued, I did a Google search and it appears that the slight fluctuations are due to the delay in both the initial and final grains of sand leaving the upper chamber and coming to rest in the lower chamber. See:

<http://tinyurl.com/jvf77a4>

I tried another site and .... oh dear! It is rather complicated to say the least.

'In 1985 Shen and Scott showed that the centre of mass of the sand is not moving down at constant speed, but is decelerating during the steady operation of an hourglass. That causes a subtle gain of its weight on a balance. With an ingeniously constructed hourglass they even managed to confirm the presence of excess weight.' But this is not the end of it and I refer you to the link below for a fuller exposition.

<http://tinyurl.com/h6zk8tr>

## About ASKE

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

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

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

email: [aske1@talktalk.net](mailto:aske1@talktalk.net);

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