

THE SKEPTICAL *INTELLIGENCER*

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

Edited by Michael Heap

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GUIDELINES FOR AUTHORS

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

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

Authors of contributions to the *Skeptical Intelligencer* should take care to ensure that texts are temperate in tone and free of vituperation. They should also ensure that arguments are either supported by express evidence/arguments or identified as speculative. 'Do not pretend conclusions are certain that are not demonstrated or demonstrable.' (T.H. Huxley).

Before being accepted for publication, submitted texts will be reviewed by the Editor and any appropriate advisors. Where improvements or changes are desirable, the editorial team will work with authors and make constructive suggestions as to amendments.

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

When referring to another work, authors should:

- Cite only the surname, year, and (where appropriate) page number within the main text: e.g. '...according to Hyman (1985: p. 123), the results of this test were not convincing...' or

'...according to Bruton (1886; cited in Ross, 1996)...

- List multiple references in date order: e.g. '...a number of studies have thrown doubt on this claim (Zack, 1986; Al-Issa, 1989; Erikson, 1997)...' In the case of electronic material, give the author and the date the material was accessed on line

- Place Internet addresses URLs in angle brackets: e.g. <<http://www.nothing.org>>

A complete list of references in alphabetical order of authors' surnames should be given at the end of the article. The list should be compiled using the following conventions:

- Articles: Smith, L.J. (1990) An examination of astrology. *Astrological Journal*, 13, 132-196.
- Books: Naranjo, X. (1902) *The End of the Road*. London: University of London.
- Chapters: Griff, P. (1978) Creationism. In D. Greengage (ed.) *Pseudoscience*. Boston: Chapman Publishers.
- Electronic material: Driscoe, E. Another look at Uri Geller. <<http://www.etc.org>>. Accessed 21 April 1997.

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

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

Editor's Announcement

ASKE's *Skeptical Intelligencer* is a quarterly magazine. Paper editions are available on request (see front page). The magazine is widely circulated electronically to skeptical groups and individuals across the globe. Formal and informal articles of interest to skeptics are welcome from people of all disciplines and backgrounds. Would you like to contribute a regular column in your specialty or area of interest – e.g. an 'On the Fringe' feature? Or would you like to take over one of the regular features? Please get in touch with the Editor if you wish to make a contribution to skepticism in this way.

REGULAR FEATURES

FROM THE ASKE CHAIRMAN

Michael Heap

Liverpool CCG to stop funding homeopathy

On 14.6.16 Liverpool NHS Clinical Commissioning Group decided to withdraw funding for homeopathy, reversing a previous decision to allocate £30,000 annually. The decision comes after months of public consultation which showed overwhelming support from Liverpool residents for an end to funding. 'The CCG's report on the consultation, which came about after Good Thinking's legal challenge to the CCG in February 2015, concluded that 64% of Liverpool residents consulted and 73% of overall respondents wanted to stop homeopathy funding immediately.

<http://tinyurl.com/jg69sqr>

Three books for skeptics

Three books have been published this year that will be of considerable interest to skeptics. The first is by Caroline Watt of the University of Edinburgh's Koestler Parapsychology Unit which last year celebrated its 30th anniversary. Caroline gave an account of the work of the Unit at last September's European Skeptics Congress in London and we are pleased to hear that she has now been promoted to the Koestler Chair in Parapsychology. Her book is *Parapsychology: A Beginner's Guide* and was published by Oneworld on May 14 this year (Paperback £9.99). There will be a review of the book in the next issue of the *Intelligencer*. It is a very easy-to-read and balanced introduction to the field of parapsychology.

The second book is by retired surgeon and ASKE member Richard Rawlins and is entitled *Real Secrets of Alternative Medicine* (Placedo Publishing, Dartmouth, Devon, TQ6 0BS). Available through Amazon (£12.99) and as a Kindle eBook

(£5.99). Again there will be a review of the book in the next issue of the *Intelligencer*

The third book is *Tests of Astrology: A Critical Review of Hundreds of Studies* by Geoffrey Dean, Arthur Mather, David Nias and Rudolf Smit. 'Tests of Astrology' systematically surveys the research into astrology that has taken place worldwide since the 1920s. It summarises hundreds of empirical studies in 350,000 words and over 1200 references. Much unpublished work is included. Readers seeking empirical findings will at last have all of them at their fingertips, allowing for the first time a clear understanding of astrology.'

It is a non-profit book and is only available direct from the publisher wout.heukelom@hetnet.nl. The price is 29 euros (about £23 or \$US32). Postage and packing is 5 euros within the Netherlands and 13 euros for air mail to all other countries. Email the publisher for availability and payment details (by PayPal or by ebank; no credit cards).

The authentication of quackery

Two related announcements caught my eye recently. The first concerned a planned workshop at the University of Alberta at which doctors would learn how to bend spoons with their minds. 'After a healthy dose of online ridicule, the workshop was cancelled (see 'Of Interest' in this issue).

The second is a workshop scheduled for June 27 this year at the Royal Society of Medicine (RSM) in London and is titled 'Emotional Freedom Techniques: Tapping into health'. The programme includes 'EFT and the transformation of belief systems'; 'Physical illness and meta-health'; 'Matrix birth reprogramming – tools for transforming your experience

of pre-birth and birth'; and 'Joy beyond grief'. The event is organised by the RSM's Hypnosis & Psychosomatic Medicine Section.

Emotional Freedom Techniques is a form of therapy based on the ancient Chinese philosophy of chi, the 'life force' that flows throughout the body. During treatment, patients focus their minds on a specific problem while tapping with their fingers on 'end points of the body's energy meridians'.

There is no scientific evidence to support the theory behind this treatment and no convincing evidence that its efficacy goes beyond that of placebo. Protests to the RSM concerning this event have come from certain well-respected quarters. At the time of writing the meeting is going ahead but CPD credits have not been allocated.

Donald Trump's wall

'Would building a wall on the Mexico-US border reduce the number of illegal Mexican workers in the US?' This question was raised in the June 2016 issue of *Criminological Highlights*, a publication by the University of Toronto's Centre for Criminological and Sociological Studies (*note 1*) To answer the question, the conclusions of a previously published paper (*note 2*) on the subject are summarised thus:

The massive increase in US Border Control expenditures after 1986 had no effect on the likelihood of taking a first undocumented trip northward or the odds of gaining entry to the US on such a trip, but it did have a strong effect in decreasing the likelihood of returning to Mexico once an entry had been achieved....The combination of increasingly costly and risky trips and the near certainty of getting into the US created a decision-making context in which it still

made economic sense to migrate but not to return home to face the high costs and risks of subsequent entry attempts....Dramatically increased policing of the border, then, had a net effect of *increasing*

the number of undocumented workers in the US.

Notes

1. www.criminology.utoronto.ca

2. Massey, Douglas S., Jorge Durand, and Karen A. Pren (2016). Why Border Enforcement Backfired. *American Journal of Sociology*, 121(5), 1557-1600.

LOGIC AND INTUITION

A family problem

Recall the puzzle in this year's Spring issue: 'Brothers John and Bill married sisters Mary and Joan yet they have no in-laws in common. How can this be?' The answer I gave was that brothers John and Bill have no married siblings and sisters Mary and Joan have no surviving relatives. Here is another solution from Colin Brewer:

'I don't usually do puzzles but your in-law one got my attention and my own solution was that the two sisters were true rather than generic sisters and had the same mother (now dead) but different fathers, who had subsequently re-married.'

Thank you Colin.

In search of the perfect scam (with a digression on the perfect gamble)

I am challenging readers to come up with the perfect money-making scam (or near enough). But before going any further, please consider the following question: Is it possible to come out tops in one of the simplest gambling games possible – betting on the roll of a dice (I am reliably informed that 'dice' can be used as singular as well as plural). What set me thinking about this was reading in Caroline Watt's new book *Parapsychology* (see 'From the ASKE Chairman') that one objection to using dice to investigate psychokinesis (in this case influencing the roll of the dice by one's thoughts) is that most of the common-or-garden dice (I am talking here of the 6-sided sort whose opposite sides all add up to 7) are biased. Think of the type of dice that we normally use when playing a board game like Monopoly. Can you detect one obvious reason from its simple appearance why it is probably biased? I had never

thought of this myself until reading Caroline's book. It suggests to me that knowing how the bias works could provide you with an advantage when gambling on a series of dice throws.

I'll return to this in a moment, but let's go back to devising the most perfect scam. For guidance, below is a possible framework. It is such an obvious scam but I confess never to have come across it before. Perhaps it's one you could try out on young people to see if they can see through it.

In the original version, you inform expectant parents that you have a formula for predicting the sex of their child that is almost 100% accurate. Your fee for making this prediction is, say, £5 and if 'in the highly unlikely event' it proves wrong, the prospective parents get their money back.

Even allowing for the gullibility of many people (myself included) this version of the scam is a bit too simple and nowadays routine scans will reveal the sex of the embryonic child. Maybe readers can devise a less transparent, but still practical, scam.

In one of the more elaborate examples –too elaborate for most people to try - the prediction is whether a certain stock index will rise or fall on a particular day. Having paid their fees, half the punters are told it will rise and half that it will fall. The punters who receive the prediction that turns out to be incorrect have their fee returned and drop out; the others are invited to participate once again, and so it goes on. Eventually there will be one or more very satisfied investors and you yourself are guaranteed a profit. I understand that Mr Derren Brown applied this idea with participants in an accumulator-bet arrangement.

Back to the business of the biased dice. It seems that most dice have the spots scooped out of them. So if you think of two opposing sides, the centre of gravity will be slightly closer to the side with the lower number of spots. This effect will be most pronounced for the opposing sides 1 and 6 (less so if, like some dice, the 1 side has a bigger scoop than each of those on the 6 side). Now, common sense would suggest that this would tend to favour the dice landing 6 side up more than 1 side up, and this is what Caroline points out on page 207 of her book. However, a Google search reveals a more complicated picture. According to one blog (*note 1*), the dice ends its roll more often with the 1 side up than the 6 side:

'The best theory is that rounded edges cause dice to keep rolling longer. Gravity paradoxically favours the heaviest side at the top, since gravity causes dice to stop rolling. Game room logic would dictate that the side with the one is heavier and would therefore be on the bottom more. Unfortunately this is just not true. The 6 is too light to stop the momentum of the dice, the rounded corners cannot prevent the dice from turning due to the weight. In the end 1s are by far the most common result.'

Not everybody accepts this (see the comments and other websites). We would like to hear from any reader who can provide the definitive answer.

Whichever way the bias is, presumably you would double the effect by gambling with two dice. But don't bother with any of this in a casino. Casino dice are tested for bias.

Note

1. <http://tinyurl.com/lfm7uml>

THE EUROPEAN SCENE

European Council for Skeptics Organisations

Editor's note

For readers unfamiliar with the European skeptic scene, there are quite a number of countries with national skeptical organisations, some of which, as in Germany, Sweden, Italy, Belgian and the Netherlands are very substantial. The larger organisations (and ASKE, which is much smaller) are affiliated to ECSO. Contact details for ECSO are:

Address: Arheilger Weg 11, 64380 Roßdorf, Germany

Tel.: +49 6154/695021

Fax: +49 6154/695022

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

The website is currently being updated.

The ESP - European Skeptics Podcast



Building a bridge for skeptics

<http://theesp.eu/>

From András Pintér:

Along with a usual run-through of feedback and events across Europe in the coming week, this episode is dedicated to our interview with Susan Gerbic aka 'The Wikipediatrician', who is the founder and manager of the international project called Guerrilla Skepticism on Wikipedia (GSoW).

Although, Susan is not from Europe, the project she leads, Guerrilla Skepticism on Wikipedia is a very important one, with great potential for the European skeptic movement.

If you could share this among your skeptical friends and members of your organisations, that would be very much appreciated. And even if you don't join GSoW, there is still a lot to do on Wikipedia. Something you're probably already aware of.

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. 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.

Homeopathy

From Wilhelm Betz of the Belgian Skeptics:

Our Dutch friend JW Nienhuys has found and reworked a PhD thesis on homeopathy made in Holland in 1943. The family of the author gave permission to make it public domain.

It is a treasure trove, a very detailed and documented analysis of homeopathy, its origins and history, the later additions, the warring tribes, nutty professors, the fantasies, the lies, nonsense and contradictions.

The general conclusions are still totally valid today. Medicine has changed a lot since the 1950s, not homeopathy.

For those who can resist the urge to immediately start reading this treasure of some 500 pages in Dutch, our friend JW has made an excellent summary in English for you, some 15 pages at:

<http://www.skepsis.nl/blog/2016/04/critical-considerations-on-homeopathy/>

If you do not arrive immediately on the page that shows the complete text, click on the red button 'meer lezen', it means 'read more'.

Swiss Skeptics' discussion paper on critical thinking

From Marco Kovic,

We've just released our first discussion paper – 'A generalized definition of critical thinking'....The discussion paper is in English - feel free to check it out, etc.

<https://www.skeptiker.ch/a-generalized-definition-of-critical-thinking/>

From Sweden

From Pontus Böckman:

The Swedish Skeptics (VoF) conducted a study last year regarding the beliefs and attitude to science and pseudoscience of the Swedish public.

The study looks into topics like faith, conspiracy theories and selected health and pseudoscientific topics. I am happy to let you know that the study has now been translated into English and is freely available (*see below*), under the menu item 'In English'. Feel free to download it and to spread the word to anyone who might be interested.

<http://www.vof.se/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/The-VoF-study.pdf>

Good news from Sweden re Brian Clement (see below). With help from our very own Michael Marshall the venue cancelled his booking in Stockholm after being exposed by a major Swedish newspaper (*Dagens Nyheter*) (mentioning Pontus). The headline read 'Allegedly fraudulent health speaker stopped'.

<http://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/bluff-anklagad-halsoforelasare-stoppas/>

According to the newspaper Brian Clement runs, with his Swedish wife, Hippocrates Health Institute (HHI) a luxurious massage parlor in Florida, for healthy people but also seriously ill patients. He has been severely criticized in the media and various authorities for making unsubstantiated health claims. Last year, he featured in the Canadian media as it emerged that two sick children, one with leukemia, were taken out of conventional care and received treatment with vitamin C injections and raw food at HHI. One of the children has since died.

Dutch Skeptics information brochures

The Dutch Skeptics have produced four brochures with information for the general public on the topics of homeopathy, acupuncture, electromagnetic radiation and chiropractic. They are in a folded A4 (so A5) format. They were intended as handouts for a health conference. If anyone is interested in translating them into another language or just wants to use the format for their own brochures, please get in touch with the Editor.

MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

Colin Brewer

The Medicalisation of Ordinary Human Misery has Increased, is Increasing and Ought to be Diminished

'What used to be regarded as quirks or, in more extreme cases, defects of personality now attract resonant and exculpatory diagnoses.'

Before I started my psychiatric training in 1966, I was briefly a ship's surgeon (as we were grandly called) on a large cruise liner. I thus met many Americans and soon discovered an important difference between British and American psychiatric patients. Even in ordinary social encounters, Americans seemed positively keen to proclaim that they were, or had been, 'in therapy', whereas if Brits had ever visited a psychiatrist or psychotherapist, they tended to keep pretty quiet about it. As I got to know more Americans socially over the years, I also realized that far more of them seemed to be 'in therapy' than my British or Antipodean friends.

How things have changed. If what America does today, Britain tends to do next month or next year, that has become worryingly true in the field of psychiatry. Instead of reticence about psychiatric labels, many Brits now seem increasingly keen to acquire one. Fortunately for them, and for the psychiatrists, psychologists and counsellors (private ones especially) who naturally wish to increase their empires and incomes, this enthusiasm has coincided with a large increase in the number and variety of psychiatric diagnoses on offer. Unsurprisingly, this development has been vigorously encouraged by pharmaceutical companies keen to increase sales of anti-depressants, mood-stabilisers, stimulants and sedatives.

It is not simply a matter of some stiff-lipped Brits belatedly acquiring the openness of many Americans. What also drives this development is that having a psychiatric diagnosis can now be a positive advantage in a welfare state that sometimes perversely

rewards illness and in a diversity culture that sometimes implies that we should celebrate (rather than merely try not to discriminate against) 'differently abled' people. Even in the 1970s, a colleague remarked that 'dyslexic' was what middle-class parents were starting to call their intellectually challenged children. How prescient he was. 'Dyslexia' used to mean a well-defined and rather uncommon condition, often associated with ambidexterity and clumsiness. It is real enough but when the concept is expanded to 'dyslexia spectrum' it easily gets attached to people who just read more slowly than the average or are rather dim. Schools, universities and examination boards then come under pressure to give extra time or chances to these 'me too' dyslexics; doctors come under pressure to provide certificates.

The same goes for that other new epidemic of previously undiscovered illness among children – and, increasingly, adults. 'Hyperactivity' and 'Attention Deficit Disorder' were also recognized in the 1960s. Like dyslexia, the syndrome was reasonably well-defined and among other things, the electroencephalogram (the cerebral equivalent of an electro-cardiogram) had to show abnormal or immature electrical activity. Paradoxically, the abnormality of brain function means that the hyperactivity responds to drugs that normally *increase* activity, i.e. stimulants. I remember treating a 16-year old boy with classic features of the condition who responded very quickly and satisfactorily to a small dose of amphetamine, the pep-pill very widely used by both sides in WW2. (On my cruise liner, every lifeboat contained a large tin of the stuff in case we had to row for our lives.)

As with dyslexia, the definition became progressively broader and 'spectrumised'. Parents of children who were fidgety, disruptive in class and slow to learn sought neurophysiological explanations and excuses for the behaviour of what were

sometimes just badly brought-up boys or, more rarely, girls. 'It's not his fault. He's got ADHD' became the mantra and another form of special pleading to schools and examiners. Celebrity cases encouraged the trend. It was probably true that both dyslexia and ADHD were underdiagnosed in the 1960s and 70s but there are respected voices arguing that the problem now is massive over-diagnosis and the mass medication of large numbers of developing brains and personalities with possibly unfortunate results. There are now numerous children who are still disruptive and slow learners but also psychologically or even physically dependent on their medication.

What happened to young people following the expansion of two relatively new diagnoses has also happened to adults following the similar expansion and spectrumisation of two older ones – depression and manic-depressive illness. During my training, depression was regarded as the common cold of psychiatry and there was certainly a lot of it about but the term only became widely used after the 19th century. For many centuries before that, serious depression had been called 'melancholia' and what we would now think of as its milder forms were categorized as 'neurasthenia', among other more pejorative terms. By the 1960s, depression was commonly divided between 'endogenous' and 'reactive' types. The former had no obvious or sufficient underlying causes such as work, marital or personality problems and was seen as probably reflecting some as yet undiscovered biochemical upset in the brain. That is probably true but despite vast amounts of research involving the latest scanners and lots of pretty coloured pictures of brain areas lighting up like slot machines, we still lack a really convincing biochemical explanation.

Research (much of it British) showed that other than the lack of obvious precipitating factors, there was

often no obvious difference between 'endogenous' and 'reactive' symptoms. That should surprise nobody who has seen someone absolutely devastated by the loss of a partner, a child, a future, or a reputation. The majority of suicides are the result of such personal catastrophes. Naturally, some were less resilient than the large majority who didn't respond by seeking permanent oblivion but there is no *prima facie* reason why we should regard that vulnerability as having mainly biological rather than mainly personal or psychological explanations.

Unfortunately, the ever-expanding definitions of 'depression' contained in successive editions of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* concentrated increasingly on the *symptoms* of depression while largely ignoring possible or even blindingly obvious precipitating causes. The compilers were only with difficulty persuaded not to include ordinary bereavement. This might not matter too much if the antidepressants that use up significant proportions of NHS drug money had large and specific cheering-up effects for the majority of people with depression. Unfortunately, they don't.

In a study published in the *Lancet* in 1969 and therefore often overlooked by later generations of psychiatrists, a Newcastle academic psychiatrist called Kenneth Davison detailed the curious changes in hospital admissions for depression since the introduction of antidepressants a decade earlier. These drugs were supposed to nip many cases of depression in the bud, making it much less likely that patients would need to be admitted to psychiatric hospitals and, very often, given ECT - Electro-Convulsive Therapy. Paradoxically, he noted, the number of admissions for depression had greatly increased. This was not because the recently reformed Mental Health Act made it easier for people to enter hospital without being 'sectioned' (a process which, before 1959, required the patient to be taken before two magistrates) because the increase in admissions involved both mild and

severe cases. Davison did not suggest that antidepressants were useless; only that their usefulness was perhaps over-rated. He was right.

Another statistic that might have caused doctors of all kinds to moderate their growing enthusiasm for antidepressants was the change in the number of suicides during the 1960s. After a low at the end of the war, they rose steadily. Most British suicides used the traditional gas oven but from the mid-1950s, increasing numbers used the sleeping tablets, tranquillisers, analgesics and even, ironically, the antidepressants provided by the new and much-loved NHS. Male and female suicide rates had always risen or fallen in parallel. They rose until 1963, when a sharp, unprecedented and equally parallel fall began. At first, the Samaritans claimed the credit, since they had expanded greatly during the 1960s. Psychiatrists and epidemiologists quickly pointed out two large flaws in that explanation. First, the increase in suicides by overdoses of NHS and over-the-counter medicines continued throughout the 1960s. Secondly, the decline in suicide was accounted for almost entirely by the decline in gas-oven suicides. It seemed unlikely that Samaritan volunteers were discouraging only those planning to use gas but not other methods.

The explanation, of course, was that while gas ovens remained useful for cooking the Sunday roast, they progressively lost their usefulness for committing suicide as North Sea gas spread throughout the realm from 1963 onwards. When coal gas disappeared from mainland Britain in 1975, male and female rates quickly resumed their parallel rise. Our suicide statistics have done some interesting things since then but there is little evidence that the continuing increase in antidepressant prescribing has had any obvious effect on them. I used to tease left-wing friends by noting the decline in female suicide that began when Margaret Thatcher became prime minister but there was another important change around 1980; male and female rates

stopped moving in parallel. Suicide in men continued to rise and after a modest fall, it is rising again. Female rates kept on falling and remain low.

'Depression' can be a very convenient diagnosis for what a character in Alan Bennett's *Habeas Corpus* calls 'the I-can't-help-its'. The stiff upper lip has unstiffened so much that in spite of the growth of antidepressant prescribing and of counselling and psychotherapy, 'depression', together with 'stress' and 'anxiety' (for which antidepressants are often prescribed anyway) is now the third largest reason for being off work and receiving sickness benefits. Only things like backache and minor, short-lived illnesses exceed it, though as any back surgeon soon discovers, chronic backache is quite often a marker for more generalized dissatisfactions with life. 'Serious mental health problems' (mostly manic-depressive illness, severe depression and schizophrenia) account for barely a twentieth as much sickness benefit.

What we once called 'manic-depressive illness' has also expanded and metamorphosed. In the 1960s, it seemed the most obviously 'biochemical' of mental disorders because while being uncharacteristically depressed for weeks or months in response to severe misfortune was common and understandable, being uncharacteristically overactive, euphoric, loud, jocular and spendthrift for weeks at a time and often in the middle of the night as well was neither. A few unfortunates have persistent 48-hour cycles of silent, unmoving and tearful misery alternating with back-slapping joviality, grandiosity and garrulousness. The classic pattern is episodes of depression or mania lasting for weeks or months with variable but often lengthy periods of normality in between. Some have mainly depressive episodes; others mainly manic. Mad King George III almost certainly exemplified the second category. The theory that he had porphyria and was thus not *really* mad has been comprehensively demolished. I don't

know whether the news has reached nice Mr. Bennett.

Manic-depressive illness has now become 'bipolar disorder' and has also acquired a 'bipolar spectrum' catch-all concept. As with the previous conditions, probable under-diagnosis in the 1960s has been succeeded by substantial over-diagnosis in the past two or three decades. It can be a welcome label for people who used to be called moody or mercurial; or, like Lord Lundy, are 'far too freely moved to tears'; or repeatedly take on, and then quickly drop, projects and relationships. What used to be regarded as quirks or, in more extreme cases, defects of personality now attract resonant and exculpatory diagnoses. 'Bipolar 1' still bears a recognizable relationship to classic manic-depressive illness. 'Bipolar 2' is more vague and getting vaguer.

Clearly, I am not opposed to the use of medication in psychiatry, or to the related idea that some of what we call 'mental illness' has a predominantly biological basis. I never succumbed to the sloganising of R D Laing and the mostly left-wing anti-psychiatrists of the 1960s and 70s that mental illness was largely a manifestation of late capitalism and imperfect family structures that would disappear come the revolution and its inevitable socialist utopia. The brain surely cannot be an organ that, uniquely, never malfunctions. However, one thing about medication has become ever clearer since the 1960s - the degree to which the rather modest specific, pharmacological effects of antidepressants are consistently outweighed by their placebo and non-specific effects. Those are the beneficial and surprisingly large effects that even dummy tablets or injections can have on help-seeking patients simply because they have faith in the doctor, want and expect to feel better and also have faith that medication, in general or in particular, will do the job. Good salesmanship (a.k.a. good bedside manner) can make placebo effects a lot bigger; so can paying a lot of money for them.

There are several controlled trials comparing antidepressants with placebos that show no advantage for the real tablet compared with the dummy one. Overall, however, trials mostly show that 'between one half and two-thirds' respond well to the dummy, another 15-20% at most may respond to the antidepressant and the rest don't respond much or at all. Trials funded by drug companies consistently get more positive results than those done by independent and traditionally sceptical academics. *Quelle surprise*. Non-responders may still get ECT, which is very much more impressive than tablets and always done under general anaesthesia. You might therefore expect its placebo and non-specific effects to be correspondingly larger. They certainly are. Although 'real' ECT seems to help more patients to recover, and recover more quickly, than 'sham' ECT (anaesthesia but no electricity) the difference is not large. In the first big double-blind British trial of real vs sham ECT in patients unresponsive to antidepressants, most patients got better but after the study's most seriously and worryingly depressed patient made a complete and rapid recovery, it was found that he had been allocated to the 'sham' group.

Procedures as varied as surgery and psychotherapy also have placebo effects that, as with antidepressants, may greatly exceed their specific effects, if any. Impressive investigations, leisurely consultations and physical examinations augment them. Many courses and textbooks of counselling and psychotherapy don't even mention placebo effects (or the frequency of spontaneous recovery) but whereas all antidepressants seem to have rather similar and modest pharmacological effects, they don't generally work any better if you double the standard doses. In contrast, the best psychotherapists and counsellors may be four times more effective than the worst but the competing theories behind the therapy or counselling employed are much less important than the personality of the therapist, which is a 'non-specific' factor. In other

words, therapists and counsellors are largely walking placebos and some walk more charismatically than others. None of this is to denigrate placebo effects. They are far more powerful than most younger doctors realise because since about 1980, apart from blinded clinical trials with patient consent, doctors are not supposed to use placebos deliberately and without telling the patient.

I don't know how we get out of this expensive mess, if we ever do. It is even possible, as I suggested years ago, that in a mocking version of Parkinson's Law, unhappiness increases so as to occupy the facilities for its relief. (My fellow-shrink Theodore Dalrymple was kind enough to call it 'Brewer's Law'.) Problem families now merit a whole government department but one depressing survey concluded that their 'most striking characteristic...is that they are *families of children*....You could hardly distinguish the adults from the children except for the fact that the former were taller.' (Italics original.) Ignorance, fecklessness and a lifestyle that 'shuts its eyes to the future' are not illnesses; and people are responsible for the consequences of their philosophy as well as of their behaviour.

Short victorious wars with traditional and identifiable enemies are good for morale and always see large falls in suicide and depression but the current fashion for prolonged and distant conflicts with little public support may have opposite effects, not forgetting the costs to the combatants. I can only offer one bit of good news. The earlier antidepressants were very toxic in overdose and almost certainly killed more people who used them for suicide than they prevented from killing themselves by other methods. Modern ones are much safer and thus unsuitable for suicide. That's progress, but many people still try to kill themselves with drugs that are supposed to make them happy and that should make us ask a few questions.

LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

Some Riders on Recent Pieces

El Rabih Makhi

(Mark's Bookshelf, 19:1)

The 'maverick' linguist El Rabih Makhi argues that the origin of human language is to be found in the Hamito-Semitic language family (now more usually called 'Afroasiatic'), which he regards as especially clearly related to the geographically remote Austronesian family. As I stated, his comparative methods are similar to those typical of amateurs; but there is an even more basic problem here. As ERM himself indicates, Hamito-Semitic is actually instantiated only as far back as 3400 BCE (an Egyptian inscription). This is indeed among the greatest known time-depths for language families – but it is far shorter than the proposed time-depth for (spoken) human language as a whole: the most recent date provisionally accepted by any group of mainstream professional linguists is 70,000 years BP, and even the maverick 'lumpers' (those who more readily accept 'genetic' links between language families) suggest 30,000 BP. Linguistic relationships and developments in the last 5,000 years (perhaps with Hamito-Semitic occupying a key ancestral position) – or even the last 10-12,000 (as proposed by scholars who seek to reconstruct rival ancestor languages such as 'Nostratic') – are thus of little relevance to the ultimate origins of language.

In fact, it is not regarded by mainstream linguists as certain that there ever was **one** single 'Proto-World'; humanity may have developed language more than once. It is possible that all known human languages (whether still used or not) descend from one common ancestor, either because humanity did in fact develop language only once and the phenomenon diffused from that one starting-point, or because only one ultimate ancestor language, out of a number which once existed, has left

any surviving descendant languages. On the other hand, it is possible that the known languages descend from multiple ancestors. Either way, we have no means of reconstructing the words or the structural details of any languages used so long ago, and (despite some interesting theorising involving the reduced grammars of pidgin languages, perhaps to be seen as 'regressions' to earlier evolutionary stages) we very probably never will. (In this context, see also my **Irregularities and reconstructions**, in *Language On The Fringe*, 18:4.)

Martin Joos (19:1)

As I remarked last time, Martin Joos' thought was of a very scientific bent; he regarded linguistic phenomena as very largely determinate. Although his position on this point was unusually strong, there are other such linguists; one is Mark Hubey, who treats issues in comparative linguistics as involving precisely stated matters of probability (most other historical linguists might accept that this is desirable but would argue that it is in fact typically infeasible).

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Even linguists who are **not** of this bent (and who would reject Joos' view that it is incoherent to accept linguistics as a scientific discipline but still to eschew determinism) obviously strive to render the discipline as 'science-like' as possible (like, for example, academic history). By definition, linguistics involves the **empirical** and **rational** (and, as far as possible, objective) study of language.

For this very reason, some non-linguists with a passing acquaintance with linguistics, and most especially those whose own interests in language

are focused upon literature, regard linguistics *per se* as **excessively** scientific in character, and indeed often as somewhat unpalatable or even threatening; to them, it seems to dismiss the more 'subjective' aspects of language, notably poetic effects, as unworthy of study and as providing no input to rational discussion, and to undervalue the sensitivities to the subtleties of language which literature scholars develop. Even self-identifying 'literary linguists' are regarded with suspicion by many scholars of literature *per se*.

One notable instance of this involved the poet and literature scholar D.J. Enwright, who was professor of English at the University of Singapore (1960-70). Enwright gained some notoriety after his inaugural lecture, in which he criticised the state of culture in Singapore and thereby challenged the agenda of the increasingly authoritarian government of what was then a newly self-governing nation; he was pressurised into apologising under threat of withdrawal of his work permit. (In 1988, something rather similar happened to the linguist Roy Harris – albeit in a less authoritarian setting – when, without clearance from above, he gave a somewhat inflammatory inaugural lecture at Hong Kong University in which he expressed serious disappointment at the level of English-language proficiency among HKU students. I myself was at this lecture. Harris was right, but his words did not go down well, and he did not stay long in his new job.) More relevantly, Enwright was strongly opposed to the introduction of linguistics into the curriculum of what was becoming an English Language & Literature department; he is quoted as describing the discipline as soulless and scientific, and as proclaiming that it would be accepted 'only over [his] dead body'. In the event, by the time I arrived in 1982 he was long gone, and

the Department of English Language & Literature was flourishing in the newly united National University of Singapore – albeit effectively as two departments sharing only administrative staff.

Scientific (but non-scientific) linguists will, of course, defend their discipline against the hostility of people like Enwright – while in no way denying literary studies their own status. But such issues continually arise. A while back, I discussed my exchanges with the artist Emma Cocker, who has a keen interest in language but again adopts what a linguist would regard as an excessively impressionistic or subjective approach to the task of formulating linguistic theories or interpreting linguistic facts. One is also reminded of Walt Whitman's actual **distaste** for science, as expressed in his poem 'When I heard the learn'd astronomer' (1900); the narrator imagines (reports?) himself as walking out of a technical lecture, 'tired and sick', and 'in the mystical [MN: key word] moist night-air ... look[ing] up in perfect silence at the stars'. But a Carl Sagan or a Brian Cox would ask why on earth coming to a greater understanding of the universe should **diminish** one's sense of awe at its majesty and beauty. And, in the same vein, P.G. Wilson, the author of the old version of *Teach Yourself German Grammar*, provides a fill-the-gap grammatical exercise involving the German text of a traditional story ('The Story of Caliph Stork'; see Andrew Lang's *The Green Fairy Book* (1892); available at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/lfb/gn/gnfb05.htm>) and rebuts an imagined objection to the exercise involving the idea that this 'spoils the tale'. Quite apart from the fact that in this instance the tale is the tool, not the goal, he asks if a musician's enjoyment of a fine piece is 'spoiled' by her awareness of all the technical points.

Predictably, Martin Joos also held (like Noam Chomsky, indeed) that a given token of a linguistic construction admits of only one accurate analysis: where forms seem to invite multiple,

marginal or indeterminate descriptions, this is simply because not enough is yet known (either in general terms or about the specific case in point). Now, in some cases, the very same string of words does have two or more valid grammatical descriptions – but this is because it has two or more meanings. A famous Chomskyan example is *Flying planes can be dangerous*, where the constituent *flying planes* may be either a noun phrase ('planes which are flying', as in *Flying planes are dangerous*) or a non-finite clause ('the act of flying planes', as in *Flying planes is dangerous*). (A more complex case involves expressions such as *My mother made me a good companion*, which is in principle three-ways-ambiguous with three corresponding grammatical analyses; details on request!) Such cases do not threaten Joos' position, because the multiple analyses and the multiple meanings pair off reliably.

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However, in some cases an expression is **unambiguous**, but in context it appears impossible in principle to decide between two or more equally valid analyses (within the same syntactic theory). Forms such as *flying* in the Chomsky example given above may be (a) adjectives, often used to modify nouns as in *Flying planes are dangerous*, (b) non-finite (participial) verbs, often acting as the verb phrases of non-finite clauses as in *Flying planes is dangerous*, or (c) 'gerunds' ('action nouns') as in *The flying of planes is dangerous*. Where such a form in *-ing* is itself modified, it is normally obvious from the nature of the modifiers which analysis, adjective, verb or gerund, applies: thus, in *rapid flying* we have a gerund (with a modifying adjective), in *flying rapidly* we have a verb (with a modifying

adverb). But where such a form stands alone, **unmodified**, it is often impossible to decide on a grammatical analysis. The form *smoking* in a sign reading **SMOKING IS PROHIBITED** might equally be a gerund (as in *the persistent smoking of tobacco*) or a verb (as in *smoking tobacco persistently*). In practice (for instance as a student doing an analysis exercise) one simply chooses, according to some notion of likelihood in context (and if one is sufficiently sophisticated one writes an explanatory note); and this will satisfy linguists who can accept (or may even prefer, on theoretical grounds) a degree of structural indeterminacy. But it is **not** acceptable to a Joos or a Chomsky, who will want to state **which** of these constructions is present **here**.

Szukalski (Grammarless again)

(18:4)

As I said two issues ago, Stanislaw Szukalski propounds an account of a grammarless, pictographically-written *Ursprache* (ultimate ancestor language) to which he gives the name Protong; see his book *Behold!! The Protong* (San Francisco, 2000). A useful (if partisan) book **about** Szukalski is *Stanislaw Szukalski: Song of the Mute Singer* (New York, 1989), edited by Jacaeber Kastor & Carlo McCormick with contributions from four other writers. Szukalski (born Poland, 1893; died USA, 1987) was in fact mainly a visual artist who worked principally in Chicago; among other things, he was a sculptor, and a leader in an art movement taking its inspiration from pre-Christian Polish culture. His 'linguistic' thought was connected with his art and with his seriously non-standard theory called 'Zermatism', which treats all human cultures as descended from that of Easter Island (after a world flood; compare Michael Tsarion's similar theory with Ireland rather than Easter Island as the source) and in addition involves a prolonged struggle between full humans and the offspring of Yeti and humans. Szukalski was thoughtful in his own idiosyncratic way, and also widely read, especially in anthropology

(though apparently not in linguistics); he regarded himself as thereby qualified to ‘correct’ the judgments of professional experts. One of his various admirers is the well-known actor and film producer Leonardo DiCaprio. There have been and remain major exhibitions of his artwork.

In the Kastor & McCormick book, Suzanne Williams explains that Szukalski (relying on the usual amateur method of comparing superficially and unsystematically similar word-forms from a variety of languages normally deemed unrelated) thought it obvious that ‘different languages are composed of similar words with similar meanings’. He somehow came to the conclusion (for which there is no adequate evidence, to say the least) that the syllables of all words represent ancient morphemes (meaningful ‘chunks’ of language), and in 30 volumes of analysis he broke up very many words from many languages into syllables and compared the resulting ‘morphemes’.

Szukalski held that the symbols and quasi-symbols which he identified as constituting written Protong **predated** the language itself. This appears implausible, and, where naturally occurring (as opposed to invented) languages are concerned, such views are otherwise held only by some folk-linguists dealing with special cases such as Chinese script and by various writers with associated religious commitments. Of course, some instances of rock art (petroglyphs) are of such an antiquity that they probably predate all language, but there is no known case where such very early symbols were later adapted into written script. This is hardly surprising, given that all known languages and all surviving scripts emerged as long as they apparently did after the origins of language (see under **El Rabih Makhi** above for the dating).

A number of other writers have also suggested (again without adequate evidence, and indeed very implausibly) that the *Ursprache* was of a specific linguistic type involving only very short words or morphemes, all

monosyllabic or even monophonemic in nature. (There **are** some genuine monophonemic words, such as English /ə/ = *a*, the indefinite article, as in *a book*; but it will be appreciated that the entire vocabulary of a language could not be of this nature. A few largely monosyllabic languages do exist – Chinese is the best known – but require special features in order to have a useably-sized vocabulary.) I discuss several theories of this kind in Chapter 2 of my book *Strange Linguistics* (Lincom-Europa, Munich, 2013).

One such case involves a language/script called Mantong, which I have also mentioned previously in this forum. This case was originated by Richard Shaver, who claimed that he had discovered (by telepathy and then through actual contact with a non-human entity) concepts represented by all the letters of the Roman alphabet in addition to their phonological function. The Mantong script is bound to the English version of the Roman alphabet (which is itself highly suspicious). Five letters (B, C, I, U, Y) are monosyllabic morphemes with the meanings of English words expressing core concepts and homophonous with the contemporary English letter-names (*be, see, I, you, why*). The letter X represents conflict, as its form might suggest, and R refers to horror. Sixteen letters refer to other core concepts expressed in English by words commencing with the letter in question; thus, M has the sense ‘man’ (*man*), W ‘will’ (*will*), etc. The last three letters are especially important: D refers to detrimental forces, T to ‘integration’ and growth, and Z to a state where these two forces neutralise each other (and thus sum numerically to zero). The Mantong saga ran for several years in magazines, with an increasing focus upon alleged mysterious ‘rock art’ supposedly representing Mantong and invoked as supporting Shaver’s stories. This rock art (now promoted in books by Richard Toronto) provides a link with Szukalski’s written Protong symbols. One of the exhibitions on Szukalski was ‘Mantong and Protong’ (at

Pasadena in 2009), dealing with both theories.

A much more mainstream – but now suspect – theory regarding the origins of written language is especially associated with the professional linguist Denise Schmandt-Besserat, who has argued that the ancestor of the cuneiform script used to write Sumerian (the oldest known written language) and other ancient Middle-Eastern languages arose from a pre-linguistic accounting system which initially involved stylised tokens carried inside clay ‘envelopes’. These tokens were then also reproduced on the outsides of these envelopes for ease in identifying the type of token to be found in a given envelope; and these representations eventually altogether replaced the tokens contained in the envelopes, and were marked on flat surfaces, thus beginning the development of genuine writing.

As more evidence accumulated (from archaeological excavation), this theory came into question; it appeared to most scholars that the relationship between the symbols on the envelopes and the tokens inside was looser, and that this system could no longer be invoked as an explanation for the origin of written language. However, Schmandt-Besserat herself has continued to maintain her original position, and has only very sparingly and unconvincingly responded to criticisms based on these new finds. As the iconoclastic linguist Geoffrey Sampson points out, she gives the impression to unwary readers that her now dubious viewpoint represents a mainstream consensus or indeed established truth. This may be an example of the unfortunate (and mercifully fairly rare) situation where a professional scholar – rather like an amateur enthusiast who is altogether ‘wedded’ to his pet non-mainstream theory – refuses to accept that she might be mistaken and continues to uphold a now discredited standpoint without defending it adequately and without even any acknowledgment of its altered status.

REVIEWS AND COMMENTARIES

Strangers Drowning: Voyages to the Brink of Moral Extremity by Larissa MacFarquhar. Penguin Press, 2015. ISBN: 9781846143984, pp336.

Reviewed by Peter Bryant

Have you ever had the feeling you should be doing more with your life, for the greater good? If not, *Stranger's Drowning: Voyages to the Brink of Moral Extremity*, a new book by the New Yorker writer Larissa MacFarquhar, may prompt some deep thoughts about your life. Specifically, how you relate to the world we share with other humans and animals. It may raise questions about how charitable, hospitable or sacrificial you are to complete strangers, people you may never meet and who may be thousands of miles away.

You may have considered, or even practiced modern ethical movements such as the random act of kindness but MacFarquhar delivers tales from individuals who put themselves before anyone else, including their families, for the benefit of mankind. A central philosophical quandary from the book is whether you would save a close member of your family, your mother or spouse from drowning, or a variable number of strangers. The author suspects, as do I, that the majority of people would choose to save family over a small amount of strangers. These individuals, referred to as utilitarians, would deliberately choose to save strangers' children over their own relations. What does this say about us?

The text is easy to read and comprehend, even if the concepts themselves are somewhat challenging. The book examines a range of situations where extreme altruism has been applied, and illustrates these with autobiographical narratives of individuals who have decided to live in moral extremity, putting their lives, wealth and occasionally their happiness on hold for the benefit of others. The narratives themselves are both inspirational and intimidating to

read, often demonstrating the full range of suffering, pain and hardship but also hope, redemption and passion for a better world.

Reading the book aroused a range of emotions for me, from questioning my own values and 'selfishness' to bewilderment that individuals would decide to actively harm themselves in order to benefit a random stranger - usually anonymously without acknowledgement or gratitude. A central theme arose for me from each of the stories; the dichotomy between helping, healing and assisting others and looking after yourself. Most, if not all, of the individuals in this book would say that looking after other people is more important than looking after oneself, although each individual came to realise, at some point, that they could not help others if their own health or psychological wellbeing was at risk.

The central theme of the book can be summarised as:

You should love humans as they are, not as they should or could be. You should embrace human nature, with all its suffering and sin, and accept that it will always be thus. You should accept the role of fate and luck in human life, and the limits of man's ability to alter his lot. To fail to do these things is to become the sort of do-gooder who doesn't love the world as it is, or the imperfect humans in it - only ideas inside his head (p. 274).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the majority of the stories concern individuals who have strong religious perspectives regarding their interactions with people in the world; however, religion is not a central theme of the book. Religion is merely mentioned in passing, to provide additional context, with the main elements being attitudes and

behaviours that religion can promote; charity, universal unconditional compassion and forgiveness.

Towards the end of the book, there is a brief interlude into the moral representations of characters in novels. This diversion feels slightly superficial after stories of death, suffering and loss from previous chapters, but it does adequately represent the landscape of how fiction within western culture mirrors that of life; there are few individuals in real life who are do-gooders and so there are few do-gooders in fiction. There is also a point made that the life of a do-gooder may be considered dull or boring in comparison to an anti-hero or criminal.

Overall, this is a book about individual attempts at human self-actualisation through extreme altruism. It is about individuals who have decided to live their lives as purposely as possible according to their definition as to how they can benefit the world to the fullest extent during their short lifespan. Each individual wishes to enrich the lives of others through their actions and therefore enhance their own life through giving and caring for others. It is the ultimate win-win situation, although the gratification for both parties is by no means guaranteed and can take decades to appear.

In conclusion, MacFarquhar argues that many lives would be enriched if more people decided to adopt these moral perspectives, attitudes and behaviours for the greater good. However, 'if there is a struggle between life and morality, life will win' (p. 295), it is therefore inherently difficult to be a do-gooder, so much so that the world would be fundamentally different, (paradoxically, it is likely to be worse) if everyone adopted these moral sentiments..

Mark's Bookshelf

Brief Reviews by Mark Newbrook

The Mind of Sasquatch – And the Secret to their Success (A Theory) Volumes 1 (2015) and 2 (2016)
by Christopher Noël

In 'Bigfoot Talk: Claims Regarding the 'Language' of Cryptids' (two papers, in *The Skeptical Intelligence* 16:3 and 16:4 (2013)), I discussed the confused and highly dubious claims of Ron Morehead and Scott Nelson regarding the alleged linguistic capabilities of Bigfoot (aka Sasquatch), the 'North American Yeti'. Karen Stollznow has also commented skeptically on this material; see:

<http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/mind-guest-blog/bigfoot-in-mouth-bigfoot-language/>

Now Christopher Noël has published two short volumes on 'the mind of Sasquatch', in which he argues (applying Ockham's Razor) that (a) the proliferation of reported Sasquatch sightings and (b) the contrasting absence of any specimens (dead or alive) are best explained in terms of the species being real (and not 'phenomenal' or 'paranormal') but exceptionally elusive, aided by supreme innate intelligence – but very specifically focused intelligence; he argues that chimpanzees are better than (non-autistic) humans at some mental tasks while lacking the capacity to master syntax. (The contrast between (a) and (b) is crucial in various cryptozoological contexts; why, for instance, has no thylacine been killed on Tasmanian roads in the last 80 years if the species survives? The skeptical explanation is obviously that the species does **not** survive, despite purported sightings which must be explained in other terms. Although roadkill is less relevant to a supposed animal like Sasquatch, the general skeptical conclusion is along the same lines.) For data Noël relies on his own fieldwork in Vermont and Texas, and on the pick of the literature. He is very confident about his own ability to

interpret observed or reported effects which he interprets as Sasquatch behaviour, not always offering any concrete evidence for his interpretations.

For a linguist, the crucial aspects of this material obviously involve Sasquatch communication. Noël asserts that Sasquatch is very good at mimicry of the sounds made by other forest species; but the first specifically Sasquatch communication (?) system discussed here involves 'knocking' (on trees, rocks, etc.). Noël regards this as instinctive behaviour, which was once beneficial as a means of communication at a distance but is now potentially harmful because it attracts the attention of humans (who as far as we know have been in North America for only 35,000 years maximum). He likens instinctive behaviour of this kind to that of autistic humans, citing the important work of Temple Grandin (herself autistic). In addition, Noël identifies Sasquatch 'music' (which he has recorded), accompanying the knocking. He also identifies 'stick and tree structures' as Sasquatch creations (not implausible if the species exists; gorillas build similar structures, though as far as I know no-one has ever reported seeing a Sasquatch actually building one). But in Volume 2, where he turns to behaviour that might actually be described as 'linguistic', he is forced to rely on the highly dubious Morehead/Nelson material (see above). Most of his discussion in the relevant sections involves imprecise analogies with some non-linguistic communication strategies adopted by some autistic humans or by apes.

Skeptics will say that for all that Noël has to offer we still need a specimen (as was said to Peter Scott after his maverick 'naming' of the Loch Ness Monster). And some of Noël's most striking experiences occurred precisely when he was alone (indeed, the presence of his daughter

apparently 'discouraged' events of one type). In any event, nothing persuasive seems to have been added here to the case for Sasquatch language *per se*. And in respect of communication more generally (or indeed the very existence of the species), I for my part have to declare myself still unpersuaded.

Dreamtime Set in Stone - The Truth about Australian Aborigines, as Requested by the Those-Who-Know [sic] (Dreamraisers Trilogy Book 1) (2010) (now available in Kindle edition)

by Vesna Tenodi

I spent 13 years in Australia (1990-2003) and I feel motivated to comment upon controversial ideas involving the 'Big Brown Land'. For older material of this nature, see my piece 'Tales from the Big Brown Land', in *Skeptical Adversaria* 7 (2004).

All matters involving Aboriginality, especially where non-Aboriginal people are involved, have become very sensitive over the last few decades, particularly since the governments of the 1990s accepted public responsibility for Aboriginal wrongs. Even in cases where honest scholarly opinions are being expressed, it is widely held that Aboriginal sensitivities must be respected and that Aboriginal views must not be challenged, especially where spirituality or the history of British colonisation is involved. For example, the historian Keith Windschuttle's challenges to now accepted, 'politically correct' accounts of Aboriginal-settler interaction in Tasmania and on the Australian mainland have been met with exceptionally strongly-worded criticism. (The issues in question here include (a) accounts of 19th-Century massacres or alleged massacres as recounted by other authors and displayed at the National Museum in Canberra, and (b) recent discussion of

the ‘Stolen Generation’ issue involving the 20th-Century resettlement out of their families/communities of disproportionately many Aboriginal children.)

Vesna Tenodi is a Croatian-Australian archaeologist, artist, writer and ‘medium’; she appears to have had an orthodox academic upbringing in Croatia. She came into prominence when she exhibited (notably at her ‘Wellness and Art Centre’ in Katoomba, NSW) some ‘Aboriginal’ artwork; some Aboriginal people claimed that some of this work was ‘faked’ and that some, though genuine, was being published/exhibited without permission. She has also allegedly betrayed the confidences of some Aboriginal people, or has misquoted them as supporting her ideas. All this has led to prolonged legal action involving Tenodi and her allies (such as Ben Osvath) on the one hand and certain Aboriginal groups on the other.

For her part, Tenodi regards herself as an advocate of the right of **all** Australians to make use of Aboriginal material and ideas (a highly controversial stance); but she also identifies as an ally of the Aboriginal people. She holds, however, that most contemporary Aborigines are indifferent to their own genuine traditions, not knowing enough about them to make use of new opportunities to embrace them; instead, they adopt arbitrary interpretations of the traditional material, or even misrepresent it. Instead, she advocates the retention by the various Aboriginal tribes of their own traditions – as she interprets them – and in particular of their ideas involving the ancestral ‘Dreaming’ or ‘Dreamtime’ (which is a spiritual interpretation of a period which the prehistorian Robert Bednarik has suggested actually occurred around 27,000 years ago).

In Tenodi’s investigations she relies heavily upon the ideas of ‘Those Who Know’ (whom one supposedly must not challenge), and she has set up an organisation for promoting the teachings of one such authority, ‘Master Ananda’, allegedly ‘The

Master of the next level’. Some of her ideas about early Aboriginal society involve ‘sacred knowledge’ from sources of this kind, which relates to non-Aboriginal traditions such as Theosophy and Native American lore (Maya, Hopi, etc.), and appears to have little to do with genuine Aboriginal beliefs. She states that Aboriginal people, specifically, have been on Earth for 5,000,000 years (!) and has little time for the ideas of anthropologists and linguists about early Aboriginal history and diversification.

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Tenodi’s style is highly personal, and whatever one’s views about her other ideas it has to be acknowledged that she displays emotional commitment to the Aboriginal people she knows and to their struggle against abuse (including members of the ‘Stolen Generation’; she accepts the current official analysis of this policy as discriminatory and partly genocidal).

Faking History: Essays on Aliens, Atlantis, Monsters, & More
(Albany, 2013)

Unearthing the Truth: An Unauthorized Commentary on America Unearthed Season One
(Albany, 2013)

by Jason Colavito

With these books, the erudite independent author Jason Colavito joins Kenneth Feder and Ronald Fritze as a serious contemporary skeptical commentator on non-mainstream archaeology and history, with especial (but not exclusive) reference to North America. There have been various earlier commentators of this nature (Robert Wauchope, Nigel Davies, Stephen Williams, etc.); but in face of the ongoing promotion of dubious ideas in TV programmes such as Scott Wolter’s ‘documentary’ series *America*

Unearthed it is welcome to see current writers entering the fray. The topics in question mainly involve alleged cultural diffusion to the New World from other continents; the notion is that transatlantic and/or transpacific voyages brought representatives of many cultures to the Americas before the firmly established (but still geographically marginal) Norse settlements of around 1000 CE, and/or that the Norse themselves penetrated further into North America and were still there in medieval times.

The evidence (or ‘evidence’) provided in support of the claims in question here is mainly archaeological, involving ‘out-of-place’ building remains or artefacts; but some of the material features supposed inscriptions in a range of ancient/medieval Old World languages and scripts, thus attracting the attention of a skeptical linguist like myself. The ‘finds’ include the Bat Creek Stone Inscription (Tennessee), the Davenport Tablets (Iowa), the Newark Holy Stones (Ohio), the Newberry Inscription (Michigan), the Kensington Stone (Minnesota), the Yarmouth Stone (Nova Scotia), etc., etc. Believers in the authenticity of these texts identify themselves as ‘epigraphists’; many of them are members of the Epigraphic Society, which has various regional branches in the USA and issues ‘occasional publications’. The most prominent such writer is the late Howard Barraclough (‘Barry’) Fell, a professional marine biologist (and a polyglot, but, like most of the other epigraphists, **not** trained in linguistics). I have mentioned Fell in this forum before, and I discuss this material at length in Chapter 4 of my book *Strange Linguistics* (Lincom-Europa, Munich, 2013). In summary: the evidence offered in these cases is dubious or worse, and the specific linguistic forms (written) which are identified are sometimes so unfamiliar that their provenance is merely speculative. Some alleged inscriptions appear to be in fact not inscriptions at all but rather markings produced by natural processes or by non-linguistic

human activity such as ploughing. There are **no** unequivocally genuine texts of this nature.

Some of the epigraphists go beyond epigraphics and make philological claims, suggesting that Amerindian languages have common ancestors with Old World languages or had significant pre-modern contact with them. This material is not discussed by Colavito. Indeed, he is not a linguist, and cheerfully admits that his knowledge of some of the relevant languages (notably, Ancient Greek) is insufficient for him to hold an independent opinion on linguistic matters. In a number of cases (such as that of Robert Temple's 'Sirius Mystery') he leaves out important linguistic aspects of an issue, presumably for this reason. Although he might have sought to inform himself about a wider range of subjects, failing to cover **all** the ground in such a rich and varied body of content is not wholly to his discredit. As far as linguistics is concerned, many of the specific cases which he discusses have no linguistic (epigraphic) component in any case. And in places Colavito clearly **has** conferred with specialists in the relevant languages, and indeed with experts in other subjects where his own expertise is lacking. He is at times inconsistent, and he makes a number of historical errors – but, as far as I (not myself professionally trained in archaeology or history) can see, few of these are crucial.

And indeed almost all of the archaeological/historical claims which Colavito reviews appear just as weakly based as the specifically linguistic material associated with some of them. For example, there are typically alternative, non-dramatic explanations of allegedly mysterious sites, favoured by Ockham's Razor over the 'hyper-diffusionist' scenarios involving extensive early transoceanic contact promoted by Wolter, Fell and others. One such site is Mystery Hill in New

Hampshire, a favourite of the hyper-diffusionists. And, as Feder points out, **no** unequivocally non-American pre-Norse artefacts have been found in the New World. Given that very many such artefacts have been unearthed in the relevant Old World locations, one is entitled to ask: 'Where has all the stuff gone?'

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Certainly some ancient Old World civilisations were **capable** of long voyages of this nature (the Phoenicians, in the pay of an Egyptian pharaoh, managed to sail all around Africa); but we are, of course, concerned here not with what **might** have happened but with what (probably) **did** happen.

Scott Wolter himself is trained in geology (**not** in archaeology or history); his own involvement in this 'scene' began in 2000 with some work on the Kensington Stone with its supposedly 14th-Century Norse inscription ('found' in 1898). He then became involved in claims regarding the Knights Templar and the Holy Grail in North America in medieval times, and moved on from there to develop the TV series *America Unearthed*, which was (significantly) launched at the time of the supposed 'Maya Apocalypse' in late 2012. In the series, Wolter argues repeatedly not only that the non-mainstream theories he presents are preferable to 'academic orthodoxy' but also that this fact is suppressed by a conspiracy of scientists and historians, who are afraid of 'the truth' and are themselves essentially liars. This view is fairly

typical of the fringe, but Colavito understandably holds that is disgraceful to present it as simple truth, and in the 'Conclusion' to *Unearthing the Truth* he reports an online exchange he and Wolter had in 2013, in which Wolter himself is exposed as adopting an absurdly self-indulgent attitude to the interpretation of the available facts.

Colavito's first book, to which he refers here at intervals, was *The Cult of Alien Gods: H.P. Lovecraft and Extraterrestrial Pop Culture* (2005); in this and in his subsequent books he argues that much non-mainstream thought about the past, and in particular the 'ancient-astronaut' theory most notably promoted by Erich von Däniken, is attributable to the writings of the American 'dark fantasy' writer H. P. Lovecraft (1890-1937). While there are obvious connections between Lovecraft's ideas and some aspects of the theories of von Däniken and of his predecessors Louis Pauwels & Jacques Bergier (*The Morning of The Magicians*, 1960), I am not alone in concluding that Colavito overstates the importance of these links. But that does not impugn his criticism of non-mainstream thinkers such as Wolter, or indeed his accounts of their sources more generally.

As will be apparent from one of his book titles, Colavito considers that at least some of the non-mainstream writers in question are not merely ignorant/confused but have so little respect for the truth that they promote ideas which they actually know or believe to be false, or at best have no good reason to regard as correct. Whether this be the case or not, readers who are not themselves expert in such matters would in general be on much more secure ground following Colavito than following the thinkers he criticises here.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

OF INTEREST

SKEPTICISM, SCIENCE AND RATIONALITY (GENERAL)

Sense About Science

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

See other entries throughout 'Of Interest' and under 'Meetings'.

Good Thinking Society

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

<http://tinyurl.com/jp6au72>

To make a donation go to:

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

Science and the media

John Oliver discusses how and why media outlets so often report untrue or incomplete information as science.

<https://www.facebook.com/LastWeekTonight/videos/896755337120143/>

Science research

'A US senator has ridiculed a selection of 'wasteful' studies. But this latest attack on research spending won't make scientists engage with the tax-paying public.'

<http://tinyurl.com/hwkyroa>

Future science

'Level Up Human' is 'a new comedy science podcast about human evolution and what the future might hold. We'll soon be able to edit the human genome with 'molecular scissors', create driver-less transport and companion robots - there has never been a better time to write a to-do list for the human race.....'

<http://leveluphuman.com/>

Anti-skepticism

'Skeptical activists have taken it upon themselves to debunk and control information via Wikipedia on a variety of topics including vaccine safety, alternative medicine, natural health, homeopathy, cancer treatments, the paranormal, astrology and psychic mediums.'

<http://tinyurl.com/h4xq6kq>

SCIENTIFIC TOPICS

Evolution

'Play with evolution using Richard Dawkins' original programs from the 1980s.'

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

Genetics

'Genetic Superheroes', 'Hitting the genetic lottery', '13 Incredibly lucky people', 'Bulletproof genomes'.

'That's just a few of the ways people have described the results from a recent analysis of the genomes of over half a million people which found that 13 lucky people have disease causing mutations, but don't exhibit any symptoms.....But did the study really identify a few lucky winners of the genome lottery? What's the real story here?'

<http://tinyurl.com/zufqzny>

Genetically modified organisms

Demise of the Anti-GMO Movement?

<http://theness.com/neurologicablog/index.php/gmos-have-we-turned-a-corner/>

Climate change

'In Minnesota, an administrative hearing resulted in a judicial recommendation that will have impacts across the country. It was a case argued mainly between environmental groups (such as Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy, and their clients Fresh Energy and the Sierra Club) and energy producers (such as the now-bankrupt coal company Peabody Energy) regarding what a reasonable social cost of carbon should be.' 'Peabody Energy brought contrarians Spencer, Happer, and Lindzen to testify on their behalf, but the judge wasn't convinced by their case.'

<http://tinyurl.com/jq9omr4>

MEDICINE

The Nightingale Collaboration

Please visit the Nightingale Collaboration website for information

on latest activities. If you do not already do so, why not sign up for free delivery of their electronic newsletter?

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

Integrative medicine

The Harm of Integrative Medicine: A Patient's Perspective. 'Integrative medicine preys on a patient's desire for hope and control.' Lengthy but interesting article.

<http://tinyurl.com/z5d4v71>

Naturopathic medicine

'When I started the "Naturopaths are not Doctors" petition it was on the heels of the annual naturopathic medicine lobbying event where naturopaths "storm" the U.S. Capitol to advocate for their alternative system of medicine. I thought my petition would be an easy way to voice opposition to their political agenda, which includes getting NDs licensed in all 50 states by 2025 and their inclusion in Medicare with a pilot program as soon as possible. My petition against naturopathic medicine was an experiment. It turned out I scared the crap out of naturopaths.'

<http://tinyurl.com/hnu2n3y>

Cancer and sunscreen

There's no good evidence to support the claim that chemicals in sunscreen may cause cancer.

<http://tinyurl.com/jdxs6lc>

Cancer quackery

'Noel Edmonds in Twitter row after claims that electronic box "tackles cancer".'

<http://tinyurl.com/zrettom>

Charities promoting quackery

'An investigation by the clinical scientist Les Rose highlighted a number of charities that discourage vaccination, encourage the use of homeopathic remedies for serious conditions and promote energy healing. These charities — including the

Vaccination Awareness Network, the Maun Homeopathy Project, Gentle Touch Healing and the Keys College of Radionics — do not operate to benefit the public and should have their charitable status revoked. Not only do such organisations represent a waste of donations, they encourage vulnerable people to take treatments that are not efficacious and can cause harm if used in place of effective remedies.’

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/comment/letters-and-email-hskhjm5cm> (by subscription)

Zika virus

‘Websites like Natural News accuse the Centers for Disease Control of orchestrating a global conspiracy around the Zika virus. Specifically, they claim that the illnesses and birth defects that people are seeing have nothing to do with the virus, but instead have something to do with “chemicals” and vaccines. But Natural News still wants you to buy their bug repellent.’

<http://tinyurl.com/zsy34a3>

Raising the dead

‘An international research team is looking for patients for an extraordinary experiment: reversing brain death. But who is this mysterious Indian doctor Himanshu Bansal, who wants to conduct the experiment?’

<http://tinyurl.com/zaa9yk>

Acupuncture and autism

‘An acupuncture clinic in Bexleyheath, where staff claim to be able to “cure” autism, has been labelled “cruel” by a disability campaigner and mum-of-six.’

<http://tinyurl.com/gq74fxv>

Homeopathy

For latest figures on NHS use of homeopathy:

<http://tinyurl.com/hklfj5s>

For ‘Liverpool CCG to stop funding homeopathy’ see ‘From the ASKE Chairman’ or go direct to:

<http://tinyurl.com/jg69sqr>

‘NHS Wirral Clinical Commissioning Group has now re-started its public consultation as part of a wider review on the future funding of the

Homeopathy and Iscador treatments, currently provided by the Liverpool Medical Homeopathy Service. The 12 week period of consultation will be engaging with patients, carers and stakeholders to hear what people think about whether Homeopathy and Iscador treatment should continue to be funded for some patients from NHS money. To help us decide whether we should continue to fund services in the future we are asking for your views.’

<https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/5GP78LJ>

A grieving father is suing homeopath ‘who said his son’s cancer could be cured with vitamins’. Julián Rodríguez says his son was persuaded away from conventional medicine in favour of “alternative” treatments’:

<http://tinyurl.com/hzfqj3>

Listen to Radio 4’s ‘Why I Changed My Mind’ (about homeopathy) featuring Prof Edzard Ernst.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0787dz1>

Prince Charles: ‘I use homeopathy in animals to cut antibiotic use’.

<http://tinyurl.com/j3wz73h>

NHS health checks

‘The NHS “MOT” health check to spot signs of illness only has marginal benefits, a Department of Health-funded study has found. Experts found the programme only prevented the equivalent of one heart attack or stroke for every 4,762 people who attend a health check in a year. The scheme, which sees people aged 40 to 74 invited for a check with their GP every five years, is reported to cost around £300m per year’.

<http://tinyurl.com/jcnty5a>

Medical research

‘A group of publishers today (17.5.16) announced a development that will allow clinical trials to be easily linked to related publications, such as the study protocol, statistical analysis plan, and articles reporting trial results. The system will link items using clinical trial numbers (CTNs) and digital object identifiers (DOIs). Publishers will also be able to highlight key information such as funding sources and

retractions. The initiative is the culmination of three years’ collaboration between publishers, led by the open access publisher BioMed Central, and Crossref, a not-for-profit membership organisation for scholarly publishing working to make content easy to find, link, cite, and assess.’

<http://tinyurl.com/j8mc4ao>

‘The results of around half of all clinical trials have never been published. Failing to publish results means the people who make decisions about medicines don’t have full information about the benefits and risks of treatments we use every day. Use *The Economist’s* publication bias simulator to run clinical trials yourself, decide which trials to publish, and see how much your decision to withhold results skews the medical evidence.’

<http://www.alltrials.net/news/the-economist-publication-bias/>

Over the course of 18 months 25 published research papers in obesity, nutrition, and energetics were found examples were found in which there were ‘substantial or invalidating’, including ‘one randomized control trial on massage therapy in which the participants—all adults—grew by almost two-and-a-half inches over eight weeks’.

<http://www.stats.org/to-err-is-human/>

Flouridation of the water supply

Is fluoride actually good for cities? ‘Newcastle adds fluoride to drinking water. Hull does not. More than 50 years since it became a default health intervention, why does the debate rage more fiercely than ever?’

<http://tinyurl.com/zgokrpy>

Anti-vaccination

‘The East End Film Festival have withdrawn ‘Man Made Epidemic’ from their festival. I would like to thank them for their prompt and decisive action.’

<http://tinyurl.com/z7k42pn>

‘In a nearly empty theater, I watched in horror as the filmmakers used crap science to link autism with vaccines.’

<http://tinyurl.com/jvy7aeh>

PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHIATRY

EU Referendum

‘British voters are succumbing to impulsive gut feelings and irrational reflexes in the Brexit campaign with little regard for the enormous consequences down the road, the world’s most influential psychologist has warned. Daniel Kahneman, the Israeli Nobel laureate and father of behavioural economics, said the referendum debate is being driven by a destructive psychological process, one that could lead to a grave misjudgement and a downward spiral for British society.’

<http://tinyurl.com/z9jsxdc>

Research on the experience of ‘presence’

‘We are currently conducting a research study on the links between well-being, the experience of presence, and spiritual / religious practice and belief. We would like to invite members of your group to participate. Participation involves anonymously completing some online questionnaires that take approximately 30 minutes... The study is being conducted by Joseph Barnby and Dr Vaughan Bell at University College London, UK.’ It can be accessed at the following web address:

<https://opinio.ucl.ac.uk/s?s=43647>

False memories

Listen to Radio 4’s ‘Past Imperfect’, a programme exploring false memories with contributions from Kim Wade, Giuliana Mazzoni, Elizabeth Loftus, and Chris French.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/programmes/schedules/fm/2016/05/03>

The psychology of magic

A profile of Goldsmith College’s Dr Gustav Kuhn in *Nautilus* magazine:

<http://nautil.us/blog/this-man-wants-magic-to-be-a-branch-of-psychology>

Children’s mental health

A skeptical look at claims of ‘an explosion’ in child mental health problems.

<https://mindhacks.com/2016/05/10/is-there-a-child-mental-health-crisis/>

Antidepressants in children

A meta-analysis in the *Lancet*, 8.6.16, concerning the efficacy and adverse effects of antidepressants used with children concluded: ‘When considering the risk–benefit profile of antidepressants in the acute treatment of major depressive disorder, these drugs do not seem to offer a clear advantage for children and adolescents. Fluoxetine is probably the best option to consider when a pharmacological treatment is indicated.’

<http://tinyurl.com/jgp5194>

Near-death experiences

The States of Consciousness Research Team at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine is conducting an anonymous online survey of Near Death Experiences (NDEs), Out of Body Experiences (OBEs) or other non-ordinary experiences that fundamentally altered beliefs or understanding about death and dying. If you have ever had such an experience, they would greatly appreciate it if you would take their survey. If you know of others who have had such an experience please send them the link and encourage them to participate. This includes people who had such an experience long ago.

<http://www.deathanddyingurvey.org/home.html>

Mindfulness

‘Ellen Langer has been dubbed “mother of mindfulness” and “mother of positive psychology.” She can now also claim to be a genius and has a Liberty Science Center Genius Award to prove it.’ Read blog by James C. Coyne at:

<https://jcoynester.wordpress.com/2016/05/06/ellen-langer-genius-or-quack/>

Sleep paralysis

Article on sleep paralysis by Ashley Welch on the CBS News web site featuring comments from Chris French and Brian Sharpless and a link to Carla MacKinnon’s short film:

<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-real-life-nightmare-of-sleep-paralysis/>

‘From ancient demons to alien abductions, paranormal tales reveal

that “sleep paralysis” may be as old as sleep itself.’

<http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2016/05/sleep-paralysis/484490/>

EDUCATION

Critical thinking in schools

Ask for Evidence requires feedback from teachers about its Lesson Plan:

‘This lesson gives students aged 13–16 an opportunity to explore if the claims that they see, read, and hear are true, using evidence as the gold standard to evaluate those claims. Through the lesson we encourage them to ask for evidence. The lesson will help teenagers develop their critical thinking and questioning skills. It could work in science, citizenship, PSHE, media or critical thinking lessons, and is adaptable.’

<http://tinyurl.com/haeoovb>

RELIGION

Science and religion

‘When Pakistani students open a physics or biology textbook, it is sometimes unclear whether they are actually learning science or, instead, theology. The reason: every science textbook, published by a government-run textbook board in Pakistan, by law must contain in its first chapter how Allah made our world, as well as how Muslims and Pakistanis have created science.’

<https://richarddawkins.net/2016/05/is-it-science-or-theology/>

Scientology

‘Anyone in East Grinstead hoping their home might one day shed its reputation as Britain’s strangest town must be feeling glum today. It’s just been reported that Tom Cruise is moving into nearby Saint Hill Manor, the UK headquarters of the Church of Scientology.’

<http://tinyurl.com/j95zat3>

Christopher Hitchens

‘The Guardian slams Larry Alex Taunton’s book on Hitchens’s “conversion”.’

<http://tinyurl.com/zqwgz5g>

Evolution and religion

‘Lewis Black’s ranty comedic style isn’t always to my taste, but in these two clips about evolution, religion, and creationism, he’s funny and on the money.’

<http://tinyurl.com/gt33rot>

‘A packed auditorium of almost 1,000 people attended the Darwin Day Lecture 2016 in London on 12 February, which was presented by Professor Jerry Coyne, author of *Why Evolution is True* and *Faith vs Fact*. The lecture explored whether comprehension of evolution was inimical to religious belief. It was chaired by British Humanist Association Patrons Professor Steve Jones and Professor Alice Roberts.’

<http://tinyurl.com/hkbyeux>

POLITICS AND PUBLIC POLICY

Government research

‘Following a spate of media stories about government withholding publication of its commissioned research, allegedly because the findings were politically awkward, last year Sense about Science asked Sir Stephen Sedley, a former judge in the Court of Appeal and a new trustee of Sense about Science, to undertake an inquiry into the scale and significance of such non-publication. The report from that inquiry, *Missing Evidence*, is published today and you can download it here:

<https://researchinquiry.org/>

‘The inquiry found that government spends around £2.5bn a year on policy research but does not know how many

studies it has commissioned or which of them have been published. A review of cases submitted to the inquiry revealed that publication of research has been manipulated to fit with political concerns, but poor records conceal the extent of this behaviour. Sir Stephen’s central recommendation is for a single, publicly searchable database of all government-commissioned research. This is something that Sense about Science is taking up and we hope many of you will support our call to government to set up this register.’

<http://www.senseaboutscience.org/news.php/478/missing-evidence>

Publicly funded research

Read Ben Goldacre on why a ban on researchers speaking to politicians and policymakers fails the taxpayers who fund them.

<http://tinyurl.com/gtwjxsh>

From Sense about Science:

‘The government (*has*) suspended implementation of the ‘anti lobbying’ clause, which would have had a serious chilling effect on publicly funded researchers speaking out about policy. We are very pleased that the government has realised an exemption is not a solution. We described the reasons why in our blog (*see link below*).’

<http://tinyurl.com/zwtfnwe>

MISCELLANEOUS UNUSUAL CLAIMS

Spoon-bending

‘After a healthy dose of online ridicule, the University of Alberta has cancelled

a workshop at which doctors were supposed to learn to bend spoons. With their minds...’

<http://tinyurl.com/hrngfmb>

Alien abduction

Why alien abductions are down dramatically:

<http://tinyurl.com/z5d4v7l>

Bomb detector scam

A British businessman serving a 10-year jail term for making bogus bomb detectors has been ordered to forfeit cash and assets worth nearly £8m. James McCormick, from Langport, Somerset, made a fortune selling his fake detectors to Iraq and other countries.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-36540816>

Human resources

‘Quackery and pseudoscience can be very dangerous. Not only in medicine but also in human resources. Alarmed by the nonsensical ideas of Transactional Analysis, Patrick Vermeren set out on a mission to reveal the truth about the many HR theories, models and questionnaires. The academic literature revealed that most HR practices (in recruitment, assessment, development, coaching...) are very problematic and some even dangerous. In this Talk valid alternatives are presented.’

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0C5UQbWzwg8&feature=youtu.be>

UPCOMING EVENTS

QED

Question, Explore, Discover.

QED is an annual science and skepticism convention and this year is being held at the Mercure Piccadilly Hotel in Manchester from the 14th-16th October 2016. 'Fantastic speakers from the worlds of science and entertainment will be joining us for a weekend celebration of science, reason and critical thinking.'

<https://qedcon.org/>

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

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

What if Everyone was on Benefits?

Mon July 11, 7:30 pm - 9:00 pm

Presented by Conway Hall Ethical Society. 'What exactly is the appeal of giving out free money to everyone with no strings attached? Join us with a panel of experts to debate whether we should all be on benefits.' Tickets: £5 - £10.

London Thinks – Is Addiction a Disease?

Wed July 13, 7:30 pm - 9:00 pm

Presented by Conway Hall Ethical Society. 'Prof Marc Lewis and journalist Johann Hari present the stories of addiction and the war on drugs, along with neuroscientific explanations to

explain why, despite what we are so often told, addiction is not a disease.'

Tickets: £5 - £10

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/>

SENSE ABOUT SCIENCE

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

Pre-conference workshops: 24-25
Sept 2016

*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.'

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

The request for submissions is here:

<http://tinyurl.com/hrlhosn>

About ASKE

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

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

m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk

email: aske1@talktalk.net;

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