

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 CHAIR

Michael Heap

Skepticism in Europe

Since the last issue there have been exciting developments at the European level. No, I am not referring to Brexit. The website of the European Council for Skeptical Organisations has now been revamped, due in large part to the efforts of Gábor Hráskó, of the Hungarian Skeptics and Chair of ECSO. Be sure to read the regular feature, The European Scene, in this issue and visit the ECSO website for up-to-date news on skeptical developments throughout Europe.

Ask for Evidence meeting at the House of Commons

This is a really exciting announcement from Max Goldman of Sense About Science and will be welcomed by all skeptics. Please lend your support:

‘We need your help! We are making a case to parliamentarians, ministers and officials that evidence matters to the public, and that we expect politicians and civil servants to discuss it openly. We think this is urgent in the face of a new wisdom setting in that the public aren’t interested in evidence in our ‘post truth’ society. I’m glad to say that the Speaker has agreed to give us his rooms in parliament to do this, at 12.30 on 1st November.....

‘We need more of the voices of the thousands of people we have worked with to take to parliament We will have a compilation of views from many walks of life, with a large group of people reading theirs out in person.

‘We expect government to use evidence when making policy

‘We expect ministers to explain their reasoning

‘We expect parliament to seek and to scrutinise reasoning behind policies

‘You can make this possible by taking just a few minutes to tell us why evidence matters to you. Please, please, please fill in this form:

<http://tinyurl.com/gl23vgz>

‘It’s short! Specific examples are particularly valuable.’

‘The room is large but we are inviting many people from government and parliament to hear this so we need to get organised quickly.’

‘Let us know if you can come at hello@senseaboutscience.org so we can add you to the list as space is going to be very tight.’

Wirral CCG to stop funding homeopathy

Last June, Liverpool NHS Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) decided to withdraw funding for homeopathy, reversing a previous decision to allocate £30,000 annually. Now it’s the

turn of Wirral CCG, who earlier this year conducted a public consultation which found a 95% majority in favour of ending funding for homeopathy (currently £16,506 per year). Also 20 out of 22 GPs surveyed wanted the NHS to stop paying for this and another form of alternative medicine called Iscador (extract of mistletoe). At a meeting on 4.10.16 the CCG’s governing body approved the decision to end funding for both. Both the Liverpool and the Wirral decisions are the outcome of a campaign by the Good Thinking Society, notably their project manager Michael Marshall, which is also campaigning for homeopathy to be put on the NHS blacklist of treatments GPs in England are banned from prescribing. Indeed in November 2015 it was announced that Ministers were considering whether homeopathy should be put on the list of treatments GPs are banned from prescribing.

It now appears that in NHS England only Bristol and some London CCGs fund homeopathic treatment.

WELL FANCY THAT!

From the *Skeptical Adversaria*, 2006 (4): *I predict that Mr Derren Brown will sooner or later venture into the self-improvement industry, with articles and books on how to boost your personal effectiveness and self-confidence, overcome self-doubt, banish your fears, control your habits, win lots of friends, influence others, etc., etc.*

From the *Guardian* (online), 23.9.16: *‘You’re only sad if you tell yourself you’re sad’. After the breakup of a long relationship, the magician found himself pondering how to be happy – and he’s found that it’s simply a trick of the mind’. Derren Brown has written a book on happiness....*

LOGIC AND INTUITION

Puzzles in real life

Are you like me in occasionally finding that, confronted with a real-life problem involving arithmetic, you can't think how to work out the answer, though you ought to know how? At such times my mind goes blank, my frustration mounts, and I feel completely useless.

This happened the other week when my wife asked me a simple question. She keeps two accounts, A and B, each with its own reserve of postage stamps. There were too many first-class stamps in account A and too many second-class stamps in account B. She wanted to know how many first-class stamps (at 64p each) from account A and how

many second-class stamps (55p) from account B should be swapped over so neither account made a loss on the transaction. That's when my mind went blank and I spent the next quarter of an hour trying to work it out with a pen and paper. Even though nearly 50 years have elapsed since I passed my A-level in pure and applied maths, surely the answer should have come to me straight away? (See below)

The football paradox

This is a variation of an old paradox. Suppose you throw a football in the air and as it is coming down you kick it straight up again. When the ball hits your foot it changes direction, so for a moment it must have come to a

standstill – i.e. it is travelling at 0 mph. However, at that point it must be in contact with your foot, and your foot is moving upwards. How can this be?

I'm sure a reader out there can make a better job of explaining this than I can. Any offers?

Answer to 'Puzzles in real life'

Exchange 55 first-class stamps from account A with 64 second-class stamps from account B. D'oh!

(Mathematicians may wish it to be noted that fewer stamps would need to be exchanged if the numbers 55 and 64 had a common denominator.)

THE EUROPEAN SCENE

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Website:

<http://www.ecso.org/> (which has an email contact facility)

Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/skeptics.eu/>

Google+:

<https://plus.google.com/communities/101709060849458123574>

YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC8OVbjA4fkH0dsG9saSMFFg>

Twitter:

https://twitter.com/skeptics_eu

Since the last issue of the *Intelligencer* the website has been transformed, thanks to the hard work of Gábor Hráskó, the Chair of ECSO. A prominent feature is the regular appearance of news items of interest from skeptical groups throughout Europe. Another is a comprehensive calendar of meetings. Articles on

skeptical topics are also featured. So make a point of regularly visiting the website to keep in touch with the European scene.

17th European Skeptics Congress

This congress, organised by the Polish and Czech Skeptics will be held in Wrocław, Poland from September September 22nd - 24th 2017.

Website:

<http://eurosepticscon.org/>

Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/eurosepticscon/>

The ESP - European Skeptics Podcast



Building a bridge for skeptics

<http://theesp.eu/>

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 in Europe

More on the situation of homeopathy in **Switzerland** at:

<http://tinyurl.com/zogbfu9>

And in **Germany**: 'It may not be as ancient as acupuncture, but homeopathy is the closest thing Germany has to a native alternative-medicine tradition. Practitioners line the high street. Upper-class Germans swear by it. Unusually, Germany gives homeopathy a privileged legal status. Whereas other medicines must meet scientific criteria, homeopathic remedies need not, and health insurers are explicitly allowed to reimburse for their use. This bothers sceptics such as Norbert Schmacke, a professor of medicine and the author of a book explaining why homeopathy is nonsense. "If you believe that water has memory," as homeopaths do, you "might as well also believe in unicorns", he says.'

<http://tinyurl.com/gmmxuxh>

MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

Colin Brewer

Homoeopathy's fundamental error

I forget which British politician said that 'Once you get a doctrine, that's the end of you' but whoever he had in mind, the comment applies in spades to Samuel Hahnemann, the founder and (as he never failed to remind his readers) Onlie Begetter of homoeopathy. Adherence to an ideology commonly makes its committed adherents ignore evidence, especially when the ideology is ancient and text-based. Among the varieties of CAM (Complementary and Alternative Medicine) homoeopathy is one of the most venerable in the West. It is also the only one that has ever had a politically significant foothold in the NHS, though never a clinically significant one, modern homoeopaths being noticeably reluctant to treat life-threatening illnesses with their nostrums. Most modern critics of CAM focus, quite reasonably, on the Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) that have shown some of its treatments and even some of its practitioners to have important placebo and non-specific effects but nothing more. The negative RCTs comparing homoeopathy with appropriate placebo procedures have been quite widely publicised. Here, my focus is on what I believe was a fundamental error that Hahnemann made during his 'discovery' of homoeopathy. It seems to have received hardly any discussion; but before that, I want to say a bit about his personality and arrogance.

This is no crude *ad hominem* attack (bad person, therefore his theories must be bad) because in this context, I really don't care whether or not Hahnemann was cruel to animals, unfaithful to his wife or revolting in his personal habits. What I do care about is whether he knew just how easy it is to be misled about the true effectiveness of treatment and the crucial importance and power of placebo and non-specific effects. And whether he was in the

habit of making unjustified claims about homoeopathy's effectiveness.

Most of the following examples of Hahnemann's Hubris are drawn from a relatively recent translation (*note 1*) of the sixth and final 1842 edition of his magnum opus 'Organon of Medicine'. The translators themselves begin on a note of dogmatic euphoria. The book 'clearly and completely states, for the first time in history, the *true nature of health and disease*'. [my emphasis] but Hahnemann, whose final years of a long life were apparently troubled by asthma that was evidently unresponsive to homoeopathy, could not possibly have understood the 'true nature of health and disease'. He was born well before most of the important discoveries about the microscopic structure and biochemical function of our organs and of the bacterial and viral infections and other processes that often damage or destroy them.

Hahnemann's therapeutic arrogance and grandiosity are clear from his claim that homoeopathy can 'almost without exception bring about perfect cures'

Hahnemann's therapeutic arrogance and grandiosity are clear from his claim that homoeopathy can 'almost without exception bring about perfect cures' ... 'There could not possibly be any true, best way of curing [non-surgical] diseases other than pure homoeopathy, just as one could not possibly draw more than one straight line between two given points' ... 'there are but few cases of disease left for which a relatively suitable homoeopathic remedy cannot be found from among the medicines so far proved. Such a remedy restores health easily, surely, mildly and permanently'. As the politician Arthur Balfour warned: 'Considering that enthusiasm moves the world, it is a

pity that so few enthusiasts can be trusted to tell the truth'.

The best-known homoeopathic notion is the idea that 'like cures like'; that symptoms of particular illnesses can be cured by small doses of drugs which, in 'normal' doses, produce those very same symptoms. Rendered into Latin as '*similia similibus curentur*', it has the same impressive, comforting ring that fine old Latin phrases can have in other contexts, especially religious ones like Absolution or the Latin Mass. However, I have long had a theory about the eureka moment that apparently caused Hahnemann to conceive this fundamental theory of homoeopathic treatment. As is well documented, he took an extract of cinchona bark as an experiment and became feverish. We know now that the therapeutically active ingredient of cinchona bark is quinine but Hahnemann couldn't have known that at the time, since quinine wasn't isolated until later.

It is possible that in Hahnemann's case, the fever and the administration of quinine were coincidental rather than causally related, though he apparently repeated the experiment more than once with similar results. However, an alternative explanation that has hardly ever been discussed is that Hahnemann had an allergy or hypersensitivity to quinine, or to some other constituent of cinchona bark. (A problem with all herbal medicines is that you never know which of the many compounds in a plant extract is the crucial and supposedly therapeutic one.) Hahnemann might have had a common, genetically determined deficiency of the enzyme glucose-6-phosphate dehydrogenase (G6PD), a deficiency known to be associated with toxic reactions (including feverish ones) to various common drugs, *including quinine*, and also to some foods, notably broad beans. I cannot find a mention of this possibility in Medline but a single undated internet

article by one Dr W.E. Thomas (*note 2*) makes the same suggestion. Whichever explanation is correct, Hahnemann was wrong to conclude that quinine can *cause* fever in healthy people, otherwise many of us would feel feverish after a gin and tonic. Furthermore, people with G6PD deficiency are, by definition, not physiologically and biochemically normal and may become unhealthy because of their abnormality. This

error evidently led him to construct a whole ‘grand theory’ to which everything subsequently had to become subservient, as happened with Christianity, Islam and Communism. The ‘holy books’ cannot now be fundamentally questioned by homoeopaths without loss of face and authority. Belatedly, RCTs have now seriously undermined homoeopathy’s status but by the beginning of the 20th century, anybody who made such

grandiose claims of universal effectiveness should have been laughed out of court. It seems that another court – the one containing the Royal Family – helped to keep homoeopathy going.

Notes

1. By Kunzli, Naude and Pendleton, London. Orion. 2003.

2. <http://www.angelfire.com/mb2/quinine/allergy.html> Accessed 1 Sept 2011.

LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

Script came first!

As readers may recall, Stanislaw Szukalski (see *Skeptical Intelligencer* 18:4, 19:2) implausibly held that the symbols and quasi-symbols which he identified as constituting written Protong **predated** the (purported) spoken language itself. Another recent writer with similar ideas (and without any other special axe to grind) is Laird Scranton, whose claims involve links between Egyptian, African and Indian/Buddhist thought. Scranton’s dramatic non-mainstream views include the bizarre notion (not adequately explained or justified!) that written Egyptian somehow existed prior to spoken Egyptian (a genuine language, of course) – although he does not suggest that spoken Egyptian was invented like Esperanto etc. (as opposed to originating ‘normally’ out of earlier languages), which would clearly be false but, if true, **would** make such a claim plausible.

Scranton also displays confusion as to mainstream historical linguistic opinion and practice in this area; for instance, he seems to believe, quite wrongly, that historical linguists regard the **spoken** forms of words as unimportant, simply because they themselves must refer directly to **written** forms in studying ancient languages. In fact, linguists see the written forms mainly as guides, albeit imperfect, to the inevitably lost spoken

forms; these latter are their chief concern.

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Leonardi on video!

More on Egyptian! In 19:1 I referred to some new activity on the part of the fringe Egyptologist/ Hebraicist/ historical-linguist David Leonardi, whose seriously non-mainstream books I had previously reviewed in this forum. Leonardi has now produced the first of his promised series of videos (*note 1*). The video is 39 minutes long, is titled *Secrets of the Egyptian Hieroglyphics*, and is attributed to Leonardi and Adam Alonzi.

The main thrust of the video is once again Leonardi’s notion that Ancient Egyptian and Biblical Hebrew were much more closely related than is held by mainstream scholars, who in his view have been misled by unjustified assumptions – and in the case of Hebrew by reliance on the medieval ‘Masoretic’ spelling reformers – into missing/ignoring strong evidence which supports his own position. The arguments are again tendentious, involving speculative claims about Egyptian and Hebrew words and Egyptian hieroglyphs; their force is at the very least exaggerated. See for

instance some claims regarding ‘acrophony’ and other issues around 22:00 in.

As I remarked in my earlier critique of Leonardi (see my review of his book *Egyptian Hieroglyphic Decipherment Revealed* in 17:2), he has a history of making damaging errors regarding New Testament Greek, a language with which he is essentially unfamiliar. Leonardi sometimes analyses Greek as if it were much closer to the unrelated Hebrew in structural terms than it is; he apparently believes – quite wrongly, and obviously so – that when a text is translated or adapted from Language A into Language B it is likely to retain the basic grammatical patterns of Language A. Elsewhere, Leonardi talks as if Greek were an obscure language with many features not yet understood and awaiting authoritative interpretation (by such as him!); this is again quite wrong, as Greek is of course extremely familiar to the scholarly world.

In this video there is further tendentious misinterpretation of Greek. For example: around 8:30, Leonardi presents a Greek inscriptional text and specifically focuses upon a syllable *-to-* which appears following Greek personal names such as *Philopator*. He identifies this *-to-* as a suffix attached to these names, and relates this suffix to an Egyptian morpheme represented hieroglyphically. (Confusingly, he apparently proposes two very different

pronunciations for this Egyptian character, one a Latin-based reading as /o/ involving an entire sequence of hieroglyphs interpreted into Latin and associated with his maverick view that Latin exerted much influence on the basic structures of Late Egyptian, and the other a native Egyptian reading as /b/. As usual, Leonardi's presentation is obscure here.) But in fact this Greek sequence -to- is not a suffix at all; in each case, it is the first or only syllable of the following word (this is not obvious to non-Hellenists, as in such inscriptions word-boundaries are not shown). There is no such nominal suffix in Greek, as any competent Hellenist could have told Leonardi.

Leonardi speculates that the Egyptians may have had powerful telescopes giving them access to such information!

Other oddities include Leonardi's idea that the Egyptians knew that the Sun is (slightly) oblate; this is based on the fact that the relevant hieroglyph resembles an ellipse, with its longer dimension horizontal (27:30). Leonardi speculates that the Egyptians may have had powerful telescopes giving them access to such information!

Obviously, anyone viewing Leonardi's video, especially anyone lacking independent knowledge of the relevant languages, should regard the material as highly suspect.

It's A Voice!

I recently attended (very much by design) a fascinating exhibition called 'It's A Voice' at the medically-oriented Wellcome Institute in London (diagonally opposite Euston Station). As the Wellcome staff acknowledged, the focus was **not** specifically core-linguistic, or even linguistic-phonetic; but a linguist, especially a skeptical linguist, could hardly avoid finding grist to his mill in such a context.

The displays, designed as an 'acoustic journey', covered many (mainly but not exclusively articulatory) aspects of phonation and speech: pre-scientific work from a

range of countries, including language/script invention by scholars such as John Wilkins; some speculative ideas about the evolution of speech; the physiology and pathology of speech; the theory and practice of singing; intonation; voice-training (for various purposes); speech and cultural/ gender/ personal identity (including socio-linguistically controversial training methods of a 'elocutionary' nature explicitly aimed at the 'removal' of a stigmatised accent [in fact, the **replacement** of such an accent with a socially more favoured, often more geographically-neutral accent; **everyone** has an accent of **some** kind!]); voice-disguise (also sometimes relevant in the context of identity); forensic phonetics (ditto); speech-centred aspects of the upbringing of children, and psychological ramifications; speech therapy and work with the deaf (notably a section on Helen Keller); a carefully uncommitted section on 'channelling' and 'hearing voices' (obviously of especial interest to skeptics); a concluding section on artificial speech (machine-generated); etc.

Some of the work displayed was that of artists (some of them have serious non-artistic goals as well) who have developed their own notions regarding language for essentially aesthetic or at least (partly) non-scientific purposes. They are often very successful in that respect, and in places they also introduce refreshingly novel, if typically untested, perspectives on our subject-matter, from which linguists might profit. But at times they appear to be, in the process, attempting to 're-invent the wheel' – naturally idiosyncratically, displaying only superficial knowledge of linguistics if any, and with varying but typically limited degrees of success, factual accuracy or theoretical persuasion. In addition, they do not seem to invite criticism on these latter fronts (because they see themselves as artists?). Some of this work is reminiscent of that of people like Emma Cocker, whom I have discussed here. Like Leonardi on Greek (see above), thinkers of this kind

often proceed in apparent ignorance of the 230 years of relevant (naturally always corrigible and extendable) mainstream scholarship, working and talking as if phonetics were an obscure, inchoate discipline with many basic matters not yet understood or even explored but (in the assumed absence of authoritative scholarship) ready to be explicated by neophytes.

Some of the work displayed was that of artists ... who have developed their own notions regarding language for essentially aesthetic or at least (partly) non-scientific purposes.

It is indeed rare to find in such a context an artist/creator who **is** in fact aware to a worthwhile degree of mainstream linguistic thought but either (a) ignores it (perhaps covertly) by way of an artistic exercise (rather like the exercises given to 1st Year students who are precisely being trained at that point to 're-invent the wheel' in ignorance of the tradition) or (b) simply disagrees openly with the mainstream. The closest to either of these in this particular exhibition was the work of Emma Smith, who has invented a 'language' called '5HZ' (*note 2*). Here there is (naturally in context) a heavy focus upon phonetics/phonology and vocabulary rather than grammar; as I have said in various contexts, this is (understandably) the norm where non-linguists undertake such projects. Smith's work in inventing this system was informed by a 'longstanding' theory (whose?) that human voices originally evolved for the purpose of song. (This notion is of course undemonstrated, and perhaps indemonstrable. Given the huge time-depth involved – at least 70,000 years, it seems – how could one be sure? For other such theories – especially those associated with Anthony Gordon, Hazrat Inayat Khan and Paul Newham – see Chapters 3 and 9 of my 2013 book *Strange Linguistics*.) With this in

mind, 5HZ is intended to be sung rather than spoken.

Smith's project involved collaborative research with scholars in psychology (including the psychology of language) and liturgical music, and also 'language evolution' workshops (*evolution* is **not** in fact the best term here) involving 'an alternative evolution of voice that prioritises social bonding over information transferal'. One can see both pros and cons here, and of course it is not as if existing languages do not already function in both ways! More strikingly, Smith's own linguistics includes some errors and some strange features. For instance, she deliberately incorporated only 'voiced' sounds (almost all vowel sounds, and those consonant sounds involving vibration of the glottis, such as /z/ as opposed to its 'voiceless' equivalent /s/) on the ground that this automatically confers pitch for use in singing. But it is obviously perfectly possible to sing words containing voiceless sounds, and to enunciate voiced sounds **without** actually singing! Another oddity involves Smith's small inventory of idiosyncratic phonetic symbols, which are divided into three sets: (a) an 'alphabet' where each symbol represents one phone or phoneme (this is orthodox in itself), (b) a 'syllabary' (but not all of these symbols represent syllables; some represent single phonemes and in fact these confusingly feature in the 'alphabet' as well, with the same phonetic values), (c) 'glides', where the phonetic values assigned to the symbols are in fact clearly diphthongs rather than glides (thus, Smith is diverging here from the mainstream terminology, either by way of simple error or because of a difference of approach which remains obscure).

Smith clearly knows more linguistics than most of the people whose work appeared at Wellcome, and given the nature of her specific project she **needed** to know more linguistics. But she might have benefited from serious contact with core-linguists, even if she had ended up

by disagreeing with them on key points.

As I write, the exhibition catalogue remains available online (*note 3*). There is also a book *This is a Voice* by voice-trainers Jeremy Fisher & Gillyanne Kayes, consisting of 99 exercises relating to the displays; it is available from Wellcome (*note 4*).

Smith clearly knows more linguistics than most of the people whose work appeared at Wellcome....But she might have benefited from serious contact with core-linguists.

For another recent unusual account of spoken/sung language, see Shane Butler's *The Ancient Phonograph*, reviewed in this issue. Note also Cathrine Sadolin's material, reviewed in 19:1.

Spoken Word Workshop

On 27/6/16, another language-related event presented by a non-linguist occurred at the Portico Library in Manchester (an amazing place near the Manchester Art Gallery).

Rebecca Tantony, an acclaimed spoken word poet and workshop facilitator, offered the opportunity for participants aged 14-18 to explore language 'in a fun, accessible and dynamic way', looking at the origins of the spoken word and being exposed to and trained in performance poetry. The event was promoted by The Portico Sadie Massey Awards for Reading and Writing, which 'aim[s] to promote a love of literature among young people'. The specifically linguistic element here was minor, but the perceived relevance of the discipline was made clear. Again, though, awareness of relevance does not **inevitably** spawn accuracy. It is a pity that basic linguistics is not better known in the world of literature.

Confusion of tongues: Art and language revisited

Another language-related event presented by non-linguists (again artists) was staged at the Courtauld

Gallery (Somerset House, London) in mid-2016. Entitled *Confusion of Tongues*, it was linked with the rolling exhibitions celebrating the 500th anniversary of the publication of Thomas More's *Utopia*, which among other things featured the language and script of Utopia as invented by More. Various sets of works and ideas were exhibited, with accompanying one-day events. Gabrielle Schwarz & Samuel Glanville, referring to More and to George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, foregrounded the dystopic character of many supposedly 'utopian'/'eutopian' scenarios and proposals, but offered the hope that the multiplicity of languages and the 'ambiguities' within each language might provide scope for the open-minded sharing of rival perspectives. Kristin Brisbois & Emily Riddle examined the challenges posed for readers by unfamiliar typefaces and (sometimes minimal) punctuation conventions. Mathilde Le Coz & Claire Mead discussed the speech of two very different British 'sub-cultures' (the London gay community and the working-class Midlands/North) in somewhat idiosyncratic but perceptive sociolinguistic terms. Lydia Rachel Figes & India Lewis highlighted the theatrical aspect of some linguistic performances, associating them with art forms of various kinds. Etc. The small exhibition catalogue may still be available on request from the gallery shop.

The by-line to the exhibition title was 'Art and the limits of language'. In such contexts it has become common for artists to 'claim the high ground', adopting the view that art can reveal and examine features of existence which, contrary to what more 'language-minded' people might believe, **cannot** readily be expressed linguistically. Of course, this is true in **some** respects. But some such commentators adopt extreme views on this issue. For example, the art-theoretician John Latham, in his works promoting his 'Time-Base Theorem', argues (unconvincingly) that language – supposedly 'object-based' – cannot

adequately describe **any** significant aspects of reality, which is itself 'event-based'. And it could be said that in turn language can express aspects of reality which art cannot. This applies especially to the **precise** expression of the properties of entities and the relationships between them, as in science; see further below.

It was once claimed that the Soviet Union would never develop nuclear weapons independently because the Russian language was not capable of expressing the novel scientific complexities involved!

Although they resemble language in this last respect, formal logic and especially mathematics obviously are, like art, capable of expressing some (quite different) key aspects of reality which again are not readily rendered in natural language; but it must be remembered that they themselves, as learned and expressed, are, **unlike** art, in large part 'parasitic' upon natural language (for instance, the basic notion of 'plus' is grounded in a range of language-specific prepositions and the associated cross-linguistic semantic and logical relations).

An associated issue involves the question of whether some **specific** languages are better equipped for the precise expression of propositions than are others. A young Malaysian linguist once suggested to me that analytical philosophy had failed to flourish in that region of the world in part because the grammars of the local languages, notably Chinese and Malay, were 'not very good at saying things precisely'. How far this might really be the case is uncertain. There is some (rather weak) evidence in its support, for instance some involving tense in conditional clauses (counterfactuals, etc.). However, in general terms all languages are of approximately (not absolutely) **equal** complexity, and although some may be more complex and flexible than others in any given respect there are few cases where such

differences appear to be associated with differences in general precision of thought. And there are also **cultural** reasons for the relative unpopularity of analytical philosophy in South-East Asia.

Some other such claims are evidently nonsensical. It was once claimed that the Soviet Union would never develop nuclear weapons independently because the Russian language was not capable of expressing the novel scientific complexities involved!

More seriously, some non-mainstream writers have proclaimed the special status of specific languages and their ensuing suitability for use in logic, computing, etc. or indeed their especial effectiveness in life generally. Predictably, the language identified is often one favoured by the author, typically his/her own language or its ancestor (where have we heard this before?). One writer who endorses Greek in this context is Joseph Yahuda, supported by Konstantinos Georganas and others. The profound intellectual achievements of ancient Greek civilization encourage this view. Greek is said here to be the only language in which there is an 'aetiological' (natural) relationship between words and the things to which they refer; in all other languages, such relationships are largely arbitrary (as in fact they are in Greek too). Other such claims are made on behalf of some non-Indo-European languages. Notable here are a repeated claim that Aymara (Peru) is especially suited to the requirements of computing and similar claims made for Hopi in the context of modern physics.

Of course, each language is (or has become) especially well-suited to dealing with some specific matters relevant to the culture in which it has developed. But this observation does not support these more extreme claims. As I noted in this column a long time ago, all languages are special in small ways; no known language is special in big ways!

More fun on Skeptical Humanities

See **Fun on Skeptical Humanities** in my column in 18:2. 'J R Fibonacci' continues to amuse with his forthright, often inaccurate pronouncements about language. On 31/5/16, attempting to support his idiosyncratic psychological notions, he proclaimed: 'The word stress is related to the word stretch (as well as to stretched / strict / string / strong/ structure/ straighten/ strained/ rigid etc...). So, when I stress a particular syllable while speaking, I may stretch out the syllable (or how long that I voice that vowel sound) for a notably long time.' Actually, stress and length are separate (though not unconnected) features in speech. But, more specifically, the words *stress* and *stretch*, and the other words cited, are in fact etymologically unrelated; any connection is at best folk-linguistic or psychological. JRF goes on to link *stress* and *distress*, where there **is** a genuine link. But he then misinterprets the prefix *di-/dis-* in *distress* as meaning 'outward'; its Latin and French forebears at first meant 'apart' and later came to have a general negative sense. And there is no link between *distress* and *destroy*, as he suggests.

The words stress and stretch, and the other words cited, are in fact etymologically unrelated; any connection is at best folk-linguistic or psychological.

JRF is not alone in inventing convenient false etymologies. And if he sought to defend himself by **denying** that his equations were etymological, he would again have (dubious) company. Laird Scranton (see above), without actually being aware (it seems) of the objections that a linguist would raise to his own cross-linguistic equations but perhaps concerned about this aspect of his case, tries to cover himself by saying that when he proclaims an equation between (say) a Dogon and an

Egyptian word for (allegedly) related concepts he is not necessarily referring to 'a strict linguistic lineage for the words'. But it is not at all obvious what **other** (valid) kind of relationship there might be, or how any such link might be demonstrated.

Admittedly, some people are so worried by linguistic taboos of this kind that they will not say such words even when quoting others!

Another oddity in JRF's material involves his failure (at least in his writing) to separate the philosophically familiar concepts of **using** an expression and **mentioning** (citing) it. Thus, on 3/7/16 he finds a false anomaly in someone saying 'I am a good person, therefore, when I say that good people never say the word *shit*, that is not what I said'. (Unless JRF merely means here that such a speaker

might simply **deny** having earlier used the word; clarity on such matters is not one of his strong points!) Admittedly, some people **are** so worried by linguistic taboos of this kind that they will not say such words even when quoting others!

King James only!

There is a movement promoting the 1611 King James English version of the Bible as the only authoritative text. I recently encountered some adherents, running a market-place stall in Whitehaven. The theological position in question is that this text is 'self-authenticating' and not subject to challenge (either in linguistic or in doctrinal terms); but the men present in Whitehaven were quite unable to explain to me how any translation could be regarded as more authoritative than the best surviving ancient versions of the original texts (whatever the shortcomings of these versions, of which they make much). They did not appear to know Hebrew or Greek, but I was able to direct their attention to

errors in KJV; the best-known is *Thou shalt not kill* in the Ten Commandments (*Exodus* 20:1-17), instead of *Thou shalt not murder* (the latter is found in the Hebrew and in the pre-Christian Greek translation, the Septuagint). However, they were so confident in their view that this information did not unsettle them! Did God re-inspire the 1611 translators, superseding the ancient texts? Why? How could one know this? What of versions in **other** modern languages? One book proclaiming this stance is Alan O'Reilly's '*O Biblios*' *The Book* (Covenant Books, no date).

Notes

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S7UA-CKXU9w>
2. <http://www.emma-smith.com/site/work/5hz-2/>
3. <http://tinyurl.com/htxjjgp>
4. See also their material at <http://vocalprocess.co.uk/>.

REVIEWS AND COMMENTARIES

Parapsychology: A Beginner's Guide by Caroline Watt. London: Oneworld Publications, 2016. ISBN 978-1-78074-887-0; eISBN 978-1-78074-888-7, pp226 (pbk).

Reviewed by Hayley Stevens

I once took part in a psychic experiment at a conference I was speaking at. There were parts which each tested whether participants demonstrated ESP, PK or PSI abilities. Turns out that I'm not psychic but I knew they were going to say that. The experience made me appreciate the research into such abilities though. And so too did *Parapsychology: A Beginner's Guide* written by Dr Caroline Watt.

Watt is a founder member of the Koestler Parapsychology Unit at the University of Edinburgh. The unit has examined the existence of psychic ability, anomalous experiences, belief, deception and more for over 30 years.

With *Parapsychology* Watt wants people to understand that parapsychology isn't a sham science. This description may turn some sceptics off but I would implore you to not judge a book by its cover and to dive on in.

Everyone seems certain that they know what the deal is with parapsychology. Non-believers say it's pseudo-scientific and dismiss the research a priori. But believers will have a favourite piece of data that they think backs up what they believe in.

The latter was the case recently when a friend of mine performed a mind-reading show. He demonstrates to the audience the tricks used to make it appear one has psychic abilities.

After the show he takes audience questions. One chap assured my friend that there's more to psychic abilities than sceptics think. 'Read Dean Radin!' he proclaimed. He was sure that what he had read would show the sceptics how wrong they had been all along.

Watt suggests that it isn't this simple at all. She believes there is 'sufficient evidence to justify further work but not enough to conclude that paranormal abilities exist'. It's an admirably honest and level-headed position to take on a topic that so divides people.

Some researchers say the Radin study that the man in the audience so loved has methodological issues. Did

his participants show precognitive ability or was it just their expectations? The book has interesting analysis of historic and modern research throughout. Presented in an unbiased and informative manner it's quite eye-opening.

There is a role for self-deception too, which shows that parapsychology can teach us a lot about our perception beyond a paranormal context.

Parapsychology opens by exploring the rise of interest in psychical research and parapsychology. 'For centuries paranormal phenomena were discussed and debated, but rarely subjected to systematic investigation' Watt writes. Then came the Fox sisters and the rest is history.

Beyond the introduction there are three main sections to the book. First we learn how parapsychologists actually test psychic claimants, the challenges this includes, and how these are overcome. The second section talks about studying anomalous experiences such as seeing apparitions and

experiencing out of body experiences, hauntings. The final section moves to laboratory research studying telepathy, precognition, micro-PK, clairvoyance and more. This, Watt suggests, is where the strongest evidence for PSI might be.

I found most interesting the explanations of how parapsychologists work to test controversial claims. And how they account for deception while doing so. There is a role for self-deception too, which shows that parapsychology can teach us a lot about our perception beyond a paranormal context.

The concluding chapter considers parapsychology's value and its role in society. What does the future hold for parapsychology? With various polls suggesting that as much as half of the population believes in the paranormal, Watt suggests it is the data that should guide future research.

The book has an appendix which guides the reader on how to test their own psychic abilities. There is a list of recommended reading but no references. This is unusual for such a complex subject. In hindsight I don't think that's a negative. *Parapsychology*

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The Ancient Phonograph by Shane Butler. New York: Zone Books, 2015. ISBN 978-1-935408-72-7, pp278.

Reviewed by Mark Newbrook

Shane Butler is a scholar of classical (chiefly Latin) literature from antiquity to the Renaissance; he is on the faculty at John Hopkins University in Baltimore. His book is part of a growing tradition of 'unusual' accounts of spoken language produced by non-linguists, some of them qualified in more or less unrelated disciplines or in none but some (such as Butler) very well qualified in 'adjacent' subjects such as literature. (See my 'Language On The Fringe' in this issue for some more such cases.) Before the mid-late 20th Century 'explosion' of mainstream linguistics, there were many works of this kind, most of which now read as very dated – see for instance R. Paget's

Human Speech (London, 1930) – but the recent works are obviously informed (to varying degrees) by late-20th-Century and 21st-Century scholarship (linguistic and other).

In adopting his title and expanding upon it in his text, Butler is one of a group of authors who have drawn comparisons between key innovations in communication occurring at widely separated times. (Another such comparison involves telegrams and the internet.) Indeed, in the 19th Century alphabetic writing (as in Greek, English, etc.) was often called *phonographic* ('writing sounds') – even though syllabaries too represent sounds rather than words – and letters

is a fully-rounded introduction to the topic. It doesn't fuss or over-complicate.

It's good to see this complex subject laid out with such clarity and without bias.

Most importantly there's no agenda here. Having read a number of books on this subject this is a refreshing and welcomed change. It's good to see this complex subject laid out with such clarity and without bias. Watt isn't trying to get you to see the world from her point of view.

Watt wants people to see that parapsychology has an important role to play. Some would argue that it has to be through inter-disciplinary research. Others would argue that there need to be fewer scientific controls in place, but whatever your opinion this book lays out the groundwork for what parapsychology actually is and how it came to be.

were sometimes called *phonograms* or *phonographs*.

The background 'story' in this particular case is that as the Greeks became literate (for a second time) in the pre-classical period the Phoenician abjad (one symbol per phoneme, but with only consonants represented) was converted into a full essentially phonemic alphabet in which the vowels too were represented (by re-assigning consonant symbols not needed for Greek). Some classical scholars have suggested that this occurred 'all at once', for instance at the hands of the legendary poet Homer or his successors for the purpose of writing down hitherto purely oral epics such as

the *Iliad*; but Butler (p. 16) points out that this view does not seem to hold up. The process was probably more gradual and piecemeal. The Roman alphabet later developed out of transplanted western versions of the Greek, modified to suit Latin and related languages. See below on the alleged significance of alphabetic writing.

Many of his specific claims seem to depend too heavily upon his personal judgments on such fronts (even if some of these should prove to be quite widely shared among classicists).

Butler's book has been positively reviewed by a number of his fellow classicists, though it has received little attention from linguists (who might be more critical). His erudition in his own field is certainly most apparent. His own proposal (argued in detail throughout the book) is that classical literature has survived as well as it has in large part because it represents particularly well the 'voice' of the speakers of Greek and Latin understood as an entity in itself; there is supposedly an especially close link between the written and spoken forms of these languages. Indeed, 'voice' may be responsible for various apparently unrelated aspects of classical literature, such as the non-linguistic characteristics of Greek tragedy (p. 134).

Now Butler himself obviously has an outstanding 'feel' for the sentence-level structures and cadences of the languages; but his concept of 'voice' with its far-reaching significance and its close links with alphabetic writing remains doubtful in empirical terms, and might even be judged 'mystical'. Many of his specific claims seem to depend too heavily upon his personal judgments on such fronts (even if some of these should prove to be quite widely shared among classicists).

Butler does **not** suggest that, once true alphabetic writing became

established, such effects were confined to Greek and Latin. In fact, in the course of his argumentation he instantiates heavily from post-classical manifestations of speech in a range of European languages. But one might ask why the same claims could not reasonably be made of still other languages and their literatures, even those not written alphabetically and those with no pre-modern contact with the classical/European world. It is easy to attribute special status to linguistic and cultural forms to which one is oneself committed and with which one is particularly familiar. And if the effects associated with 'voice' are indeed more general, or even universal, the special significance of alphabetic writing disappears.

Butler is especially concerned with **sung** language (including recent rock-music lyrics and such). Like Emma Smith as discussed in my 'Language On The Fringe' in this issue, and other authors mentioned there, he attributes to song a crucial role in the development of spoken language, at least in Europe (see e.g. p. 100). Because of this, he 'reads' western musical history as a 'long struggle to free song from speech'. All this, of course, involves a considerable degree of speculation, even though some important genres in pre-classical Greek (epic and other poetry) were usually sung rather than spoken.

Before the development of musical notation, and the more generally significant invention of recording devices much later, writing (of all kinds) was indeed the main means of preserving the hitherto ephemeral sounds of human language (sung or merely spoken) and of communicating them beyond the immediate audience. The advent of **alphabetic** writing, specifically, is often seen as especially significant; see three of my reviews in 'Mark's Bookshelf' in *The Skeptical Intelligencer* 18:4. Alphabets represent speech sounds more specifically than do writing systems of any other type, including syllabaries; and in early Greece, a cluster of small independent states, it was usual to represent the

associated dialect differences in writing, thus 'tying' the two modes of language even more closely together. If close representation of speech sounds is deemed a crucial advantage, alphabets **are** clearly preferable.

Alphabets represent speech sounds more specifically than do writing systems of any other type, including syllabaries.

However, it is important to note that (as any classicist will realise at once on reflection) the vowel-letters of Greek (as indeed of the Roman alphabet as used to write Latin) represent only very imperfectly the vowel-system of any given spoken dialect, including Homeric, Attic, etc. For example, the spelling distinguishes only some pairs of otherwise similar long and short vowel phonemes, not all. Some specially designed scripts, notably the International Phonetic Association Alphabet used by linguists, are far more accurate in this respect, and are also able to represent far more detail where this is required, than the Greek or Roman alphabets or indeed **any** alphabet in everyday use. Butler, as a non-linguist and an apologist for two specific 'everyday' alphabets, does not make this point.

Two of the books I reviewed in 18:4 take a pro-alphabet view of writing, and indeed display what might be called *alphabetism*: the view that alphabetic writing (especially if strictly phonemic) is **in all respects** superior to writing systems of any other type. However, there **are** other points of view: the third book reviewed in 18:4 adopts a **hostile** stance towards alphabets, and even some of the more judicious and better-informed sources (e.g. those written by linguists) draw attention to the **disadvantages** of such systems, especially for certain languages. For discussion of the issues, see my 'Reforming English Spelling' in *The Skeptical Intelligencer* 15 (2012).

Butler himself has little to say about non-alphabetic systems; his own

position is obviously pro-alphabet, for Greek and more generally (but is relatively sober). Indeed, on p. 12 he identifies **all** writing (even logographic, as in Chinese) as ‘phonographic’ to a degree, because it represents spoken words. While odd, this decision generates little confusion.

On pp. 14-15, 37, etc. Butler indulges in rather hurried speculation about the ultimate origins of writing, which does not relate closely to his main theme. And on pp. 17-21, 39-42,

80-81 etc. he discusses (critically) the ‘linguistic’ thought of Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva and other postmodernist thinkers who (among other oddities) have sought to restore the early-modern focus upon writing as opposed to speech. In the English-speaking world, and especially among mainstream linguists, these ideas have (reasonably) had only very limited impact.

Butler’s use of music-related terms for parts of his text (‘liner notes’,

‘track’, specific music-derived chapter-names) might be deemed unnecessary and pretentious.

Overall, this is a very worthwhile and interesting book. Butler does gloss his classical examples, but inevitably the work will be of more interest to those versed in the classics, who will also feel more confident in assessing his claims.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

OF INTEREST

SKEPTICISM, SCIENCE AND RATIONALITY (GENERAL)

Sense About Science

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

See other entries throughout ‘Of Interest’.

Good Thinking Society

The Good Thinking Society has been engaged in a number of worthy projects recently, notably relating to veterinary homeopathy; the promotion of alternative medicine by the BBC; the charitable status of organisations that promote ineffective medicine, and the funding of homeopathy by NHS Wirral CCG (see ‘From the Chair’).

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

<http://tinyurl.com/jp6au72>

Psychology of the paranormal

‘Chris French (*for it is he*) introduces the field of anomalistic psychology, which aims to provide non-paranormal, scientific explanations of the seemingly unexplainable.’

<http://tinyurl.com/j9yudpz>

Modern science

‘Science, pride of modernity, our one source of objective knowledge, is in deep trouble. Stoked by fifty years of growing public investments, scientists are more productive than ever, pouring

out millions of articles in thousands of journals covering an ever-expanding array of fields and phenomena. But much of this supposed knowledge is turning out to be contestable, unreliable, unusable, or flat-out wrong.’

<http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/saving-science>

Peer review

‘Algorithm-generated nonsense reviews fool actual human peer reviewers one in four times.’

<http://tinyurl.com/zyfaza3>

Also: A psychology journal is launching a trial during which some reviewers will not see the results, discussion and conclusion sections of manuscripts before deciding whether or not to accept them for publication. The journal hopes that this will encourage reviewers to judge the research on its premise and methods rather than its outcomes.

<http://tinyurl.com/hqjggys>

Film ‘Principles of Curiosity’

By Brian Dunning of Skeptoid Media. ‘We want you to help produce it. We want you to get your own copy. We even want you to be in it. Release is set for the first quarter of 2017. Please support this important & awesome new film.’

<https://www.gofundme.com/254kd5kw>

SCIENTIFIC TOPICS

Genetics

A-level subject choice is strongly influenced by genes. ‘Up to 80% of subject choice could be down to genetic influence, making the argument for a more personalised approach to education, say scientists.’

<http://tinyurl.com/hm7celu>

Fracking

Friends of the Earth (FOE) misled the public in a leaflet which claimed fracking can cause cancer, UK’s advertising watchdog the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) has said.

<http://tinyurl.com/hpxa4c7>

The Antikythera mechanism

‘Ancient Device Too Advanced to Be Real Gives Up Its Secrets at Last.’ ‘Though it seemed to be just a corroded lump of some sort when it was found in a shipwreck off the coast of Greece near Antikythera in 1900, in 1902 archaeologist Valerios Stais, looking at the gear embedded in it, guessed that what we now call the “Antikythera mechanism” was some kind of astronomy-based clock. He was in the minority—most agreed that something so sophisticated must have entered the wreck long after its other 2,000-year-old artifacts. Nothing like it was believed to have existed until 1,500 years later...’

<http://tinyurl.com/hd6pz2z>

MEDICINE

The Nightingale Collaboration

For a recent victory by the Nightingale Collaborations see section on Homeopathy.

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/>

Homeopathy

‘NHS has spent more than £1.75m on homeopathy, despite admitting there is ‘no good-quality evidence it works.’

<http://tinyurl.com/joedey6>

NHS Homeopathy in Scotland shows similar long-term decline to that in England.

<http://tinyurl.com/hh3rbnp>

Thanks to the efforts of the Nightingale Collaboration, the Advertising Standards Agency has made the following announcement:

‘This week, our sister organisation, the Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP) Compliance team has written to homeopaths across the UK to remind them of the rules that govern what they can and can’t say in their marketing materials, including on their websites.....’

<http://tinyurl.com/gwyt8qb>

Veterinary homeopathy

Should vets use homeopathy on animals? More than 2,300 people have signed a petition calling for homeopathy for animals to be banned.

<http://tinyurl.com/zkkfq6a>

Chiropractic

‘Chiropractors treating babies with ‘dangerous’ procedure they falsely claim treats colic. Experts warn the practice risks injuring spinal cords and could leave youngsters brain damaged.’

<http://tinyurl.com/hhx2bft>

Vitamin supplements

‘What if I told you that a drug manufacturer was trying to get the public to use more of their drug, arguing it was necessary when the evidence shows that it isn’t? One trick

that they use is to conduct studies in developing countries with a sicker population, and then apply that data to the developed world. Even in the face of a thorough expert review of the published evidence, that concludes that the public is overusing their product and wasting money, the drug company argues that people still need their drug “just in case”.’

<http://tinyurl.com/zm6y822>

Cancer quackery

‘Another cancer quack dies...of cancer.’

<http://tinyurl.com/jfcpmpt>

And: ‘Brazilian “healer” John of God leads cancer patients by the nose’. ‘John, who has all of two years of schooling, claims he is only an instrument in God’s divine hands and that during a healing session, his body is taken over by the spirits of long-dead physicians who guide his actions. John, however, does not solely rely on departed physicians for advice, King Solomon can also be called upon when needed. The spiritual connections also allow John to diagnose a patient with just a glance....’

<http://tinyurl.com/jhjx2ag>

Children’s heart surgery

From Sense About Science,

‘Our latest public engagement project launches today: an innovative website which explains how to interpret children’s heart surgery data. We have been working with researchers, patients’ families and medical charities over the past year to co-develop the site, Understanding Children’s Heart Surgery Outcomes, through a unique, collaborative process. Please do share widely with your networks.

‘The website shows decision makers and parents that because hospitals treat different patients, they should not be ranked by their survival rates — high performing hospitals can have lower survival rates simply because they are taking on the most complex cases. An individual hospital’s actual survival rate should only be compared to its own predicted range, which is determined by the complexity of the procedures it

undertakes, among other factors. The website also sets out why if a hospital’s survival rate is below its predicted range, it need not indicate alarm, but rather serves as a trigger for further investigation.’

<http://childrenshearturgery.info/home>

Alternative medicine: general

‘When will pharmacists stop selling bogus medicines?.....The ethical codes of pharmacists make it perfectly clear that the sale of unproven or disproven products masquerading as medicines is not ethical.’

<http://tinyurl.com/hgnsngw>

Also: ‘The publisher recently sent me a review copy of *Quackery: The 20 Million Dollar Duck*, by Tony Robertson. My first thought was “Do we really need another book on this subject? Don’t I know all this stuff already?” I was very pleasantly surprised. Robertson has ferreted out an impressive array of facts and details that I wasn’t aware of; and yes, we need as many good books on the subject as we can get’.... (Review by Harriet Hall).

<https://www.sciencebasedmedicine.org/quackery-the-20-million-dollar-duck/>

The American Society of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (A SCAM) came out with their list of the top 10 achievements in medical history. The list differs significantly from other lists with things like vaccines, anesthesia, hand hygiene, etc. conspicuously absent from the list.

<http://tinyurl.com/hxv2pc4>

Chinese herbal medicine

A recent Cochran review ‘found insufficient evidence that Chinese herbal medicines were any more or less effective than placebo or HT for the relief of vasomotor symptoms. Effects on safety were inconclusive. The quality of the evidence ranged from very low to moderate; there is a need for well-designed randomised controlled studies’ (*Why? – Ed.*).

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26976671>

Health research

‘Understanding Health Research is a tool designed to help people understand and review published health research to decide how dependable and relevant a piece of research is. The tool guides users through a series of questions to ask about specific types of health research, and helps users to understand what the answers to those questions say about the quality of the research they are reading.’

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

Cupping

‘Can “Cupping” treatments raise anything but welts for Phelps or other Olympians? Some say ancient suction therapy soothes muscle pain; research can’t rule out placebo effect.’

<http://tinyurl.com/gonfta6>

And: ‘There are so many ridiculous alternative medicine treatments being “integrated” via “integrative” medicine into medicine, no matter how ridiculous they are, that it’s not only hard to believe, but it’s hard to keep track....Among the silliest of alternative medicine therapies is something called cupping....’

<http://tinyurl.com/jp7ztwh>

Iridology

‘Prince Charles may like it, but the evidence shows it’s bogus.’

<http://tinyurl.com/zr93rfo>

Vaccination

NICE is developing priorities to help ensure millions of unvaccinated children across the country get the protection they need.

<https://www.nice.org.uk/news/article/V8lxtVnC9g8.twitter>

‘Anti-vaxx mom abandons the movement after all three of her kids nearly die from rotavirus.’

<http://tinyurl.com/zv53cac>

Electronic healing

The Advertising Standards Agency (ASA) has welcomed the outcome of legal action taken against Electronic Healing – a provider of complementary and alternative therapies and devices – by trading standards officers from the

London Borough of Camden on behalf of National Trading Standards.

<http://tinyurl.com/je2a6sc>

PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHIATRY

fMRI scanning

Interpretation of functional MRI data called into question:

‘The use of fMRI is a common method for scanning the brain in neuroscience and psychology experiments. To make sense of the data produced, researchers sometimes use a technique called spatial autocorrelation to identify areas of the brain that appear to “light up” during particular tasks or experiences. But some software flaws in the popular fMRI data analysis packages SPM, FSL and AFNI meant this technique routinely produced false positives, resulting in errors 50 per cent of the time or more.’

‘Anders Eklund and Hans Knutsson at Linköping University in Sweden and Thomas Nichols at the University of Warwick, UK, calculated this by analysing brain data from a collaborative open fMRI project called 1000 Functional Connectomes. Most fMRI statistical methods have been developed using simulated data, but in this case the team was able to use real brain information to validate the techniques for identifying significant patterns of activity in fMRI scans.’

‘This work enabled the researchers to confirm that a statistical software flaw they first identified in 2012 truly does produce false positives at an alarmingly high rate. Four years ago, they were not taken very seriously because their work at that time was based on data from a single person.’

<http://tinyurl.com/gte4guu>

Psychology research

‘Psychology has a meta-analysis problem. And that’s contributing to its reproducibility problem. Meta-analyses are wallpapering over many research weaknesses, instead of being used to systematically pinpoint them.’

<http://tinyurl.com/zv37c6e>

Unreliable memories

How well can we remember someone’s life after they die?

<http://tinyurl.com/jfcpmpt>

And: ‘The act of remembering something requires a mix of conscious and unconscious processes so complex that it’s a near-miracle we’ve been able to glean the tiniest insights into it, and so automatic that we often take it for granted. That process is also woefully easy to screw up—a point that criminal psychologist Julia Shaw elegantly demonstrates in her new popular book, *The Memory Illusion: Remembering, Forgetting and the Science of False Memory*’..... (review by Ed Cara).

<http://tinyurl.com/hw655fb>

Also: ‘Just because you’re absolutely confident you remember something accurately doesn’t mean it’s true’. With comments from experts.’

<http://tinyurl.com/go97rlb>

And view:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=72dhjGWB0gg>

‘Truth drug’ experiment claim

‘Dozens of people who were child patients at a psychiatric hospital in the 1960s and 70s claim they were experimented on with a so-called truth serum. It has left them with disturbing memories and troubling questions.’

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07kpydn>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-36803067>

Coincidence

‘Coincidences and the Meaning of Life: The surprising chances of our lives can seem like they’re hinting at hidden truths, but they’re really revealing the human mind at work.’

<http://tinyurl.com/h6wj33b>

Superstitious rituals

‘Do superstitious rituals help performance? With the Olympics brings a great deal of attention to sports and sporting culture, including the latest fads that are sweeping athletes. It is well known that athletes, for example, are very superstitious, and

it's fun to talk about their crazy personal rituals.'

<http://tinyurl.com/hdp95mx>

CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Hear Rob Brotherton talking about his work on the psychology of belief in conspiracies on the Monster Talk podcast:

<http://tinyurl.com/zhxbv68>

Also: Short programme on conspiracies in the 'The Why Factor' series featuring Rob Brotherton:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07kpy3x>

MAGIC

Psychology of magic

Short programme in the 'The Why Factor' series:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07krdvp>

RELIGION

Sharia Law in the UK

'In an Open Letter to Theresa May, hundreds of women's human rights organisations and campaigners warn against a further slide towards privatised justice and parallel legal systems.'

<http://tinyurl.com/j92dudt>

View video footage of a 30 April conference on Sharia Law, Legal Pluralism and Access to Justice with author Elham Manea and other women's rights campaigners at:

<http://www.secularconference.com/videos-2016/>

Join the crowdfunding campaign to get a copy of Elham Manea's book: "Women And Sharia Law: The Impact of Legal Pluralism In The UK" into the hands of every Minister, MP and Peer at:

<http://tinyurl.com/za5tgsh>

Faith schools

'Faith Schoolers Anonymous (FSA)' is 'a platform allowing anyone who has encountered a problem at a "faith" school to share their experience. So whether you're a former pupil or a current one, a parent or a carer or a teacher, or simply someone with information that you feel should be

shared, this site is for you. These are issues that need attention and your stories need to be told.'

<https://faithschoolersanonymous.uk/about-us/>

POLITICS AND PUBLIC POLICY

Sense About Science

Please see 'From the Chair' on page 1 of this issue about the recent announcement by Sense About Science of a meeting on 'evidence matters' at the House of Commons on 1.11.16.

Crime

Crime increased after a £1m project (the 180 Degrees Scheme) to cut reoffending.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-norfolk-37372132>

Fake bomb detector

Video from The Guardian on Facebook about the British businessman who earned huge profits by selling fake bomb detectors to security forces:

<https://www.facebook.com/theguardian/videos/533630110158090/>

Iraq finally bans fake bomb detectors:

<http://tinyurl.com/hfjqyol>

Experts

'Politicians including Michael Gove and Donald Trump have repeatedly asserted that people have "had enough" of experts. This troubles me deeply; the sentiment is contributing to major shifts in our political landscape. But it also leads me to ask why people don't trust experts. Better yet, why do people trust some experts but reject others? Why do many people on the one hand seek medical experts for medical issues, but distrust climate experts for climate issues, or economic experts for economic issues?'

<http://tinyurl.com/zqu7opp>

CLIMATE CHANGE

By now, a celebrated demolition by Brian Cox of Australian senator-elect and climate-change denier Malcolm Roberts on Australian TV.

<http://tinyurl.com/gpaa3cv>

MISCELLANEOUS UNUSUAL CLAIMS

Ghosts

'Professor Caroline Watt - who holds Edinburgh University's Koestler Chair of Parapsychology - feels fear of paranormal activity can be "socially contagious" as hysteria builds up around a certain house.'

<http://tinyurl.com/gsokxt6>

Extra-terrestrial intelligence

'Rick and Michael travel back to the outer expanses of the universe. This time, they're not after black holes but ET, as depicted in Ridley Scott's sci-fi classic "Alien". Are we alone? What will "it" look like? And are "they" already amongst us?'

<https://www.radiowolfgang.com/scienceish>

Witchcraft

The mother of modern witchcraft, Doreen Valiente's work is being celebrated at a new exhibition in Brighton:

<http://tinyurl.com/hhe9hc7>

UFOs

A viral photo showing a UFO over Australia turned out to be a lamp shade in Wyoming.

<http://wafflesatnoon.com/australian-ufo-wyoming/>

The afterlife

The Unhappy Medium: A Supernatural Comedy by T. J. Brown: 'Arch skeptic and poster boy for the age of reason, Dr Newton Barlow thought he knew everything. Now he knows better. Turns out that there is not only an afterlife, it's his only available career path. Up against the very worst of human nature, Barlow is going to have to forget everything he ever believed in if he's going to save this world - and the next...'

<http://tinyurl.com/joygkxb>

Exorcism

'"Emergency" need for exorcists after surge in people dabbling in Satanism and black magic.'

<http://tinyurl.com/zsem7jv>

Same-sex marriage

Chibuihem Amalaha, an award winning student at the University of Lagos, is claiming that he's "disproved" gay marriage through science — and he used the power of magnets to do so. His

"groundbreaking" work is backed by the university. 'Amalaha says his experiments show that the north and south poles of magnets are attracted to each other — but same poles repel each other. Astoundingly, this "means that man cannot attract another man

because they are the same, and a woman should not attract a woman because they are the same. That is how I used physics to prove gay marriage wrong."

<http://tinyurl.com/jf42928>

UPCOMING EVENTS

THE ANOMALISTIC PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCH UNIT AT GOLDSMITH'S COLLEGE LONDON

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

or

<http://www.skeptic.org.uk/events/goldsmiths>

Chris French has recently announced an exciting programme of seminars for this academic year. These 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>

Conway Memorial Lecture 2016:
Hidden realities: The greatest story ever told... so far

Speaker Lawrence Krauss; Chair A.C. Grayling.

Date: Friday 16th December, 7:00 pm - 9:00 pm (Free)

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/>

HEALTHWATCH

The charity HealthWatch is holding its 28th Annual General Meeting on the evening of Thursday 20th October 2016 at the Medical Society of London, 11 Chandos Street, Cavendish Square, London W1G 9EB. The AGM is preceded by two events:

14:30-17:00 'Whither HealthWatch?': An optional afternoon strategy workshop for members and friends of HealthWatch.

17:30-18:00 A celebration of the life of John Garrow.

18:00 Welcome reception for the HealthWatch AGM (this and following events are open to all; no pre-registration required).

18:30 Annual General Meeting of HealthWatch. Note that only members of HealthWatch may vote.

18:50 Presentation of awards to winners of the Student Prize competition

19:00 Presentation of the 2016 HealthWatch Award to Peter Göttsche.

20:00 Dinner - this is optional, cost £45.00 per person

<http://tinyurl.com/jcrrmzu>

GOLDSMITHS COLLEGE 'SHOWOFF' EVENT

From Chris French:

'Goldsmiths is putting on another Showoff event at the Amersham Arms on 3.11.16 on the theme of "Strange Days". As it appears we may well be living through the End Times, why not come along for a laugh and a drink? I'll be talking about Satanic messages (appropriately enough) but you can also learn about loads of other stuff including the algorithms of online dating, cats and class war (to mention but a few).

'Full details and a link to book tickets here':

<http://www.gold.ac.uk/calendar/?id=10096>

BRITISH HUMANIST ASSOCIATION

'Since we announced the Darwin Day Lecture 2017 with Professor Lawrence Krauss on "Cosmic natural selection" a week ago, tickets have flown off the shelf, selling out within a few days ...

'Due to the phenomenal response to the event so far, we're now announcing a second chance to catch Krauss's Darwin Day Lecture, with Richard Dawkins again acting as chair, on Saturday 11 February at 13:30 in central London. As with the Friday night, we expect tickets to sell out quickly, so don't delay in buying yours.'

<https://humanism.org.uk/events/darwin-day2017/>

THE ASSOCIATION FOR SKEPTICAL ENQUIRY (ASKE)

- ASKE is committed to the application of rational, objective and scientific methods to the investigation and understanding of ideas, claims, and practices, especially those of an extraordinary and paranormal nature.
- ASKE is committed to challenging the uncritical promotion of beliefs and claims which are unsupported or contradicted by existing objective and scientific knowledge.
- ASKE opposes the misinterpretation and misrepresentation of science for purposes which deceive the public.
- ASKE supports the objective evaluation of all medical or psychological techniques offered to the public and opposes the uncritical promotion of techniques which are unsupported or contradicted by existing scientific knowledge.
- ASKE supports all efforts to promote the public awareness of the rational and scientific understanding of extraordinary and paranormal claims.
- ASKE is committed to a rational understanding of the reasons and motives which underlie the promotion and acceptance of irrational and paranormal claims and beliefs.
- ASKE accepts the rights of individuals to choose for themselves their beliefs about the world.

About ASKE

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

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

m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk

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