

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

November 1st Ask for Evidence meeting at the House of Commons

A couple of events occurred recently in the UK Parliament that will be of interest to skeptics. One of these is noted in this issue's 'Medicine on the Fringe'. Here is the other one.

'We need to seize this opportunity and make sure that all parliamentarians know how much evidence matters to their constituents and to their colleagues.'

On Nov 1st 2016 over 100 people from all walks of life went to the House of Commons to show parliamentarians, ministers and officials that evidence matters to the public (*note 1*). The meeting – 'Evidence Matters' was organised by Sense About Science who had put out a call for stories illustrating the importance of evidence, and presented them in booklet (*note 2*) that was handed out at the event. Some of the vignettes included in the booklet were presented by their authors - fifteen members of the public who included a teacher, a cycling campaigner, a housing officer, a football supporter, and the mother of a child with a rare heart condition. Sense About Science has prepared a short video of extracts from the meeting (*note 3*).

From Sense About Science: 'We need to seize this opportunity and make sure that all parliamentarians know how much evidence matters to their constituents and to their colleagues. Please help us get the message out. We have a big voice but we are a small charity -- any help you can give makes all the difference. Donate now (*note 4*).'

Three new books

The following books have recently been released and will be of great interest to skeptics.

Aliens: Science asks is there anyone out there? by Jim Al-Khalili (Ed.), London: Profile Books (*note 5*). 'Featuring twenty pieces by top scientists and experts in the field including Martin Rees, Ian Stewart and Adam Rutherford, Aliens covers every aspect of the subject, from alien consciousness to the neuroscience behind alien abductions. And along the way he'll cover science fiction, the probability of us finding extra-terrestrial life, and whether recently-discovered exoplanets might support life.' This book will be reviewed in a forthcoming issue of the *Skeptical Intelligencer*.

Parapsychology: The Science of Unusual Experience (2nd ed.) by David Groome & Ronald Roberts (Eds.) New York/ Abingdon: Routledge (*note 6*). 'This book does justice to some important areas for scientific investigation. It addresses the scientific nature of beliefs and even takes a swipe at the influence of global neo-liberalism on science. This book is a winner on so many levels and a must read for not only students and researchers, but anyone with the remotest interest in Parapsychology' (Bryan Bonaparte, University of Westminster, UK).

Unusual and Rare Psychological Disorders: A Handbook for Clinical Practice and Research by Brian A. Sharpless (Ed) Oxford University Press (*notes 7 & 8*). Chapters are grouped into sleep, psychotic, sexual, culture-bound, and miscellaneous syndromes.

Research volunteers wanted

Georgia Matthew, Admin Assistant, Smooth Operations (Productions) Ltd. (an independent radio company) is

'currently in the pitching process' with BBC Radio 3 about a documentary programme on Sleep Paralysis. She is 'looking for people who have had very vivid and intense sleep paralysis episodes. Although they do not necessarily have to still have sleep paralysis, the memory of their episode(s) must still be strongly held in their mind - enough to explain and describe characteristics of the experience and hallucinations'. If you are interested in being involved please email a description of your sleep paralysis experience(s) to:

georgia@smoothoperations.com

'Independent television production company SUGAR FILMS is looking to speak to people who have suffered from sleep paralysis, particularly featuring paranormal sexual encounters. We are interested in speaking to anyone who has experienced this phenomenon as we develop a documentary. This would be confidential and for research purposes only at this stage, with no obligation to take part in the programme. Please do contact us on 07590311220 or katie@sugarfilms.co.uk'

Also see the request for accounts of experiences with ghosts in the 'Of Interests' section (under 'Miscellaneous unusual claims').

Notes

1. <http://tinyurl.com/jkxuy5g>
2. <http://tinyurl.com/jtrmyx5>
3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XDLHL1RnryE>
4. <https://www.justgiving.com/senseaboutsscience>
5. <http://tinyurl.com/gwp9ypr>
6. <http://tinyurl.com/h416ftb>
7. <http://tinyurl.com/gmgfbad>
8. <http://tinyurl.com/gmgfbad>

LOGIC AND INTUITION

The football paradox

Recall the puzzle in the Autumn 2016 issue, namely: 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?

My understanding, in a nutshell, is that the ball is compressed when it hits the foot, so there is no moment when the whole ball comes to a standstill; different parts of the ball are moving at different speeds and directions. (We ignore the slight equivalent effect for the foot.)

Two puzzles for mathematicians

If you are accomplished at maths, you might enjoy the challenge of solving this little puzzle. I heard it from Simon

Singh when he gave a talk at Sheffield Skeptics in the Pub back in 2014. No doubt the solution is somewhere on the Internet.

During question time Simon was asked what was his favourite number. Quick as a flash he replied '26', adding that it is a unique number. So the first question is, 'In what way is it unique?' The answer only requires knowledge of very basic maths - it is the proof itself that requires more mathematical ability. So before reading on, you might stop **here** and ponder a while about why this unpromising-looking number is so special.

Now here's a big hint. What comes before and after this number? Don't proceed further until you have given it your best shot.

Continued on page 16

Now here's a little mental exercise anyone can do as a distraction, say while having some medical or dental treatment that is unpleasant or painful. Pick any number. If that number is even, divide it by 2. If it's odd, multiply it by 3 and add 1. Now repeat the process with your new number. If you keep going, you'll eventually end up at 1. Every time.

This is known as the Collatz Conjecture, amongst other names, and as expected is discussed at length on the internet. Try to prove it if you wish, but my understanding is that a proof has yet to be forthcoming.

THE EUROPEAN SCENE

European Council for Skeptics Organisations (ECSO)

There have been a number of important and interesting announcements from European skeptical societies on the ECSO website (<http://www.ecso.org>). Importantly, the Russian-speaking Skeptic Society held its 3rd Skepticon in Moscow on November 26–27 with 350 people attending. The society was established in March 2013 'to spread critical thinking, popularise science, educate the general public, promote and teach critical and skeptical thinking skills and create a platform for science and skepticism communication' See:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skeptic_Society.

Sadly, there is recent a post from our French colleagues announcing that several dozen anti-GM activists destroyed two rapeseed fields near Dijon on Nov. 27th, considering these

plants to be genetically modified organisms (GMOs) (see report at <http://tinyurl.com/hqtkac>). 'Anti GMO activists now widen the definition of the enemy into such a scale that would practically include all plants and animals – including us.' On the ECSO website there is also a recent statement by the Hungarian Skeptics, outlining its position on GMOs in response to some ill-informed criticism.

Finally in *Veterinary Review*, December 12, scientists from the University of Kassel in Germany published a study of 52 clinical trials of veterinary homeopathy between 1981 to 2014 involving the treatment of cattle, pigs and poultry. They found that all the studies examined were conducted under very specific conditions and no trial was repeated in a comparable manner. There was also a risk of bias or selective reporting in a high number of cases. The research team concluded that while homeopathy

is widely used in livestock, especially in order to reduce the use of antibiotics, there is insufficient evidence to support this.

17th European Skeptics Congress

It is time to book your tickets for the 17th European Skeptics Congress organised by the Polish Skeptics' Club in cooperation with the Czech Skeptics' Club Sisyfos. The congress is from September 22nd – 24th, 2017 in Wroclaw, Poland. Topics that will be covered during this congress are:

Science & Religion
Skeptical Psychology
GMOs
Science, Pseudoscience & Media
Paranormal Investigation
Exorcisms & Science

Congress website:

<http://euroscepticscon.org/>

Facebook:

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

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 us 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.

European Council for Skeptics Organisations

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/> (with 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

MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

Good Thinking attacked in Parliament!

Yes indeed. It is surely a sign that you are making your mark on the world when you are subject to a verbal assault in the House of Commons from someone of the likes of the Conservative MP for Bosworth, Mr David Tredinnick (*note 1*).

‘Some of those attacks have been from an organisation called the Good Thinking Society, which really consists of one man and a dog.’

It was reported in the *Intelligencer* three years ago that Mr Tredinnick, along with Prince Charles, was runner-up for Good Thinking’s annual Golden Duck award in recognition for his support for those who ‘practise pseudoscience in the most ludicrous, dangerous, irrational or irresponsible manner’. Later, in 2014, as a member of the House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee and the Health Select Committee, Mr Tredinnick called for astrological forecasting to be used in medical practice. A year later he called for a homeopathic flu vaccine to be given to people at risk that winter. He also

informed surgeons that they must not operate during a full moon (because blood won’t clot then) and told GPs to use patients’ horoscopes when they come for consultations. So it must be an honour indeed to have Mr Tredinnick loudly declaiming you in the mother of parliaments for your efforts to stop the NHS wasting money on ineffective medicines, in this case homeopathy. ‘There have been a lot of attacks in the past few years on homeopathy’, he proclaims, ‘which is an honourable and well-served practice of medicine with its own doctors, regulated in this country and used in 41 of 42 European countries. Some of those attacks have been from an organisation called the Good Thinking Society, which really consists of one man and a dog. It spends £100,000 a year, £20,000 of which comes from the taxpayer through its charitable status; I think that that is an absolute scandal. I urge my hon. Friend the Minister not to listen to the siren voices of that small, badly represented group. We need to use the discipline of homeopathy...’ (*Can we stop here? – Ed.*)

Actually, I myself have been verbally attacked in the House of Commons. This was in 1994 and concerned a statement to the police that I had given following the unexplained

death in her sleep of a young woman some hours after participating in a stage hypnosis show. The pathologist wanted to know if the process of hypnotising someone involves medical changes that could have been responsible for this person’s death and I said no.

Mr Colin Pickthall, the family’s MP, more or less said in Parliament that I didn’t know what I was talking about.

Mr Colin Pickthall, the family’s MP, more or less said in Parliament that I didn’t know what I was talking about and warned that because of the popularity of stage hypnosis at that time, the National Health Service (NHS) would struggle to cope with the flood of casualties that participating in this activity would precipitate. With reference to the case in question he said that the pathologist felt that it was hard not to make a link between stage hypnosis and the woman’s death. The pathologist felt obliged to appear on BBC Radio 4 news the next day reiterating his opinion that hypnosis was not involved. As a result of Mr Pickthall’s intervention a committee of enquiry into the safety of stage hypnosis was set up and eventually

brought out a report affirming its general safety and recommending a number of simple guidelines. Hardly anyone takes any notice of these or is even aware of them and the great stage hypnosis health scare eventually blew itself out.

Too much medicine

The prescription of ineffective and even harmful remedies in the NHS is not confined to the use of alternative medicine. Indeed, the latter is only a tiny sample of what, with the increasing emphasis on evidence-based medicine, is now recognised as common practice. In previous issues of the *Intelligence* reference has been made to The British Medical Journal's 'Too Much Medicine' initiative which 'aims to highlight the threat to human health posed by overdiagnosis and the waste of resources on unnecessary care'. In July 2016 the journal joined forces with the overdiagnosis standing group of the UK's Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP), whose campaign is 'Better Medicine: Shared Decisions, Best Evidence' (note 2)

A very pressing example of this, which is not confined to the UK, is the over-prescription of antibiotics. Concern has also been mounting about the inappropriate use of painkillers. It was recently announced (Notes 3 & 4) that 'NICE (*the National Institute for Care and Clinical Excellence*) is going ahead with a drastic curb on drug options available to GPs for managing low back pain, advising GPs instead to focus on exercise and psychological therapies. NICE has confirmed in its final clinical guidelines, "Low back pain and sciatica in over 16s: Assessment and management" that GPs should not offer paracetamol alone and should "consider" prescribing oral NSAIDs - such as ibuprofen or aspirin - for low back pain only at the "lowest

effective dose and for the shortest possible time"..... The final guidance also rejects therapies including acupuncture and a range of electrotherapies such as ultrasound and PENS (percutaneous electrical nerve stimulation), as well as invasive treatments such as spinal injections - advising GPs to only consider referrals for the assessment for radiofrequency denervation when non-surgical treatment has not worked.'

It is both instructive and heartening that the movement to eliminate wasteful testing and prescribing comes from within mainstream medicine itself.

Another recent revelation (note 5) in a study published in the online journal *BMJ Open* is that many claims made by UK fertility clinics about the benefits of treatments that are offered in addition to standard IVF procedures are not backed up by evidence. The findings were featured in a *Panorama* undercover investigation broadcast on 28.11.16 on BBC 1 television. And on the day of penning this column an audit report (note 6) has been published revealing that one in eight men with localised prostate cancer is at risk of overtreatment despite studies showing that a 'watch and wait' approach is the most beneficial for this group.

It is both instructive and heartening that the movement to eliminate wasteful testing and prescribing comes from within mainstream medicine itself. Can you imagine announcements such as the above coming from the alternative medicine industry ('We have advised that treatment X for condition Y should be withdrawn as there is no evidence to support its

efficacy')? In fact the opposite is the case. Typically, the range of disorders that are claimed to respond to any of the multitude of treatments offered by the industry is boundless.

A recent article on the website 'Genetic Literacy Project' (note 7), the aim of which is 'to promote public awareness and constructive discussion of genetics, biotechnology, evolution and science literacy' reports that 'Alternative practitioners are now forging highly profitable businesses based on patients coming to them with raw genetic data provided by testing companies ... and walking away with hundreds if not thousands of dollars in nutritional supplements. But scientific and medical experts recommend against blindly screening for genetic variant. They warn that these tests carry problems of false results, overdiagnosis and meaningless information ... Patients are being permanently branded with a bogus genetic problem and having to buy supplements from naturopaths and other integrative practitioners who are knowingly practicing against the recommendations of experts in medical genetics'.

I recommend you put the 'Genetic Literacy Project' website in your Favourites folder.

Notes

1. <http://tinyurl.com/gtf7zku>
2. <http://www.bmj.com/too-much-medicine>
3. <http://tinyurl.com/jht79ou>
4. <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng59>
5. <http://tinyurl.com/zsjpg5o>
6. <http://www.npca.org.uk/>
7. <http://tinyurl.com/jd86o6r>

LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

Of Jews and Germans

It is well known that German as spoken by Jewish people in medieval and early modern times was heavily modified under the influence of Hebrew and came to be regarded as a separate language, Yiddish. But in 1981 Terry Blodgett, a Utah-based lecturer on German and Hebrew, earned a PhD for a thesis arguing that in antiquity Hebrew had exerted much more general and more major influence on the Germanic languages, through the dispersion of the ‘lost’ (scattered) tribes of Israel into central Europe (an event the reality of which is itself disputed, to say the least). Predictably, Blodgett displays some knowledge of historical linguistics (although the thesis contains several errors which are quite damaging). But his case for this revision of linguistic history – though much more sober than the cases advanced by more extreme Hebraicists such as David Leonardi, Bruria Bergman and Isaac Mozeson for their own ‘weird’ theories – is simply not strong enough. Blodgett repeatedly exaggerates the force of the unsystematic and inexact (often merely ‘typological’) parallelisms between Hebrew and Germanic which he identifies, thus overstating the case for a genuine link.

The college-trained linguist Shon Edwards (also apparently an ‘evolution denier’, etc.) recently came upon the above comments in an online version of my 2007 article ‘Old-time religion, old-time language’ (*Skeptical Inquirer* 31:2). Surprisingly given his training, he felt that the Germanic words pointed out by Blodgett as being clearly non-Indo-European ‘fit almost like a key in a lock to the Hebrew words’ (no reference to the much more crucial grammatical features). He suggested that I reject this evidence because I ‘seem to have something against all religious ideas’.

Although I am openly an atheist, I have tried hard **not** to let this influence

my judgments regarding linguistic matters. And in fact there is a measure of irony here: there is an arguably dubious association between Blodgett’s ideas and the views of extreme groups with **religious** stances such as ‘Brit-Am’, who hold that ‘the descendants of the Lost Tribes are now to be found amongst Western Peoples’. See <http://britam.org/tongues.html>, where Blodgett’s ideas are endorsed (mainly on the strength of a few unsystematically similar pairs of forms). This text also endorses Karl Rodosi’s worse-than-suspect older work along similar lines. This work presents an entire series of unsystematically similar word-pairs (and some of the words in question already have very well established etymologies); and in addition it contains other gross errors (such as the claim that the English word *apple* is pronounced with two [p] sounds).

Edwards, who also believes that orthodox scholars accept any so-far uncontested theory as a new ‘fact’ (eh?), has not yet responded to my rejoinder to his own claims!

Despite numerous skeptical critiques, Bigfoot/Sasquatch and especially its alleged mental abilities are still ‘flavour of the month’ in the cryptozoological world.

Sasquatch speaks again!

Despite numerous skeptical critiques, Bigfoot/Sasquatch and especially its alleged mental abilities are still ‘flavour of the month’ in the cryptozoological world. In 2013, in this forum, I reviewed Morehead and Nelson’s claims regarding Sasquatch communication (‘Bigfoot Talk: Claims Regarding the ‘Language’ of Cryptids’ [in two parts]); earlier this year I commented in ‘Mark’s Bookshelf’ on Christopher Noël’s two-volume work

The Mind of Sasquatch – And the Secret to their Success.

Now Nick Guerchio has joined the movement. In comment on a short version of my critique of Morehead and Nelson which I posted on Skeptical Humanities, he offered his own interpretations of some of the Morehead material. Guerchio uses Nelson’s imitated spellings with idiosyncratic symbols (rather than the standard IPAA) and without listening to the recording one cannot be really confident as to the sounds ‘heard’; but more importantly he goes beyond Nelson in maintaining (amazingly) that this and other such sequences are not in a hitherto unknown Sasquatch language but instead are in **English** as spoken by Sasquatches! One of the transcriptions in question reads WAM VO HÛ KHÖ KHU, and according to Guerchio this particular sequence represents the English sentences *The way is over here; don’t do that.* Guerchio maintains that the messages in question fit the contexts well, although he (naïvely) asked Morehead about the surrounding events **before** listening to the recordings and thus may then have ‘heard’ what he already expected or hoped to hear.

As I said in response, the notion that Sasquatches are speaking English appears thoroughly implausible. But if one starts off with such an assumption/guess it is often possible to misperceive utterances as being in the favoured language, even where non-human vocalising is in question. (John Lilly eventually came to believe that dolphins were speaking to him in English.) In fact, the transcriptions given here do not appear impressively similar to English words/syllables (as will be noted!).

Guerchio responded to my first set of comments but has not so far replied to my further rejoinder (which included an offer of help with the linguistics).

By way of background, Guerchio refers to Nelson’s associate Nancy

Logan (not apparently qualified in linguistics as such) and to a serious research paper from as long ago as 1980 (but this paper does not wholeheartedly support the idea that the sounds discussed were made by non-human primates). He wants to start a new Bigfoot research organization, based in Northern California but including people from all over the world; it is to be called BROSEF ('Bigfoot Research Organization Using Science of Every Field').

A further commentator reasonably asked **where** and **how** Sasquatches could have learned English!

Black or not?

In an episode of the BBC TV series *Secret Britain*, Yorkshire Museums scholar Natalie McCaul stated (without any hedging) that the Roman emperor Septimius Severus (who died in York in 211 CE) was black. Now Severus was born in what is now Tunisia; and under 'Afrocentrist' influence it has become fashionable, not to say 'politically correct', to identify as black all ancient people born in North Africa, from Egypt to Morocco. Rowan Williams, writing in *New Humanist* earlier this year, in passing identified Augustine as black. Lubaina Himid, a Tanzanian artist and the Professor of Contemporary Art at the University of Central Lancashire, painted a picture of 'Hannibal's Sister', exhibited in the Harris Museum & Art Gallery in Preston and portraying the lady as black; it is displayed with a caption making this explicit, again without hedging, and suggesting that this information has been suppressed or ignored. Himid fancifully proposes 'an alternative black history where Hannibal's sister could also be a war hero' (<http://tinyurl.com/haeuccs>). The Afrocentrist literature is indeed replete with such claims; on Egypt, see for instance Yosef ben-Jochannan's book *Black Man of the Nile*.

Not that it should actually matter what 'race' these individuals were – but as a matter of fact there is no reason to suppose that any of these people would be regarded as black if they were walking today on the streets

of Tunis or Cairo or London. In the former two cities they would probably resemble the contemporary locals rather than black Africans (or white Europeans). Even the African-American Carl F. Ellis, in his book *Free at Last? The Gospel in the African-American Experience*, admits that Augustine, Tertullian and Origen were 'brown North Africans' (but nevertheless tendentiously states that in the USA they would be considered black). And Hannibal and his fellow Carthaginians were descended from settlers from Phoenicia in what is now the Lebanon, not any part of Africa. Cleopatra and her fellow ruling-class 'Egyptians' were ethnically very largely Greek (as was their culture).

I sought to take this point up with McCaul; she was said to be away doing research, and months later she has still not responded. If I do hear from her I will report.

Meanwhile, I have had some correspondence regarding my Amazon review of Saki Mafundikwa's partly Afrocentrist book *Afrikan Alphabets: The Story of Writing in Africa*, in which I argued that Mafundikwa tendentiously exaggerates the degree to which pre-colonial African societies were literate in the sense of possessing alphabets or other scripts-proper (language-specific) as opposed to semiotic symbol-systems. The title of the book is thus, to a degree, misleading. (Echoes here of claims by Ayele Bekerie and others to the effect that traditional Ethiopian thought about the world counts as 'philosophy'!) A commentator on my review (which, overall, was far from scathing; I actually gave the book three stars out of five!) suggested that my statement was 'a manifestation of racism and white supremacy'. I naturally disputed this.

Then another commentator ('Celeste') repeated the accusation, alleging that white supremacists have spread many lies about early history. She stated that Mafundikwa's title was **not** misleading (I myself clearly did not understand linguistics!) and that the Ethiopic script in particular really is an

alphabet but 'just not one of Western orientation' (whatever that means). Now the Ethiopic script (ingeniously devised at an early date either in Ethiopia itself or more probably in Arabia) is indeed a script-proper, but it is **not** an alphabet but rather an 'abugida': each symbol represents not a phoneme but a syllable, typically one consisting of two phonemes, with one identifiable part of the symbol representing the vowel phoneme and one the consonant phoneme. And my objection to Mafundikwa's title did not principally involve Ethiopia in any case but illiterate and barely literate societies further south/west in Africa. I responded, trying to clarify the issues. If there is bias at work here, it is not on my part! So far, no further comment (is this becoming familiar?). Again, I will report if there is!

From a 'modernist' standpoint, it is a great pity that historical questions of this kind cannot now be discussed without these imputations of racism and the like.

From a 'modernist' standpoint, it is a great pity that historical questions of this kind cannot now be discussed without these imputations of racism and the like. My friend Mary Lefkowitz (Wellesley College, Boston) suffered horrendously (opprobrium, bad health, etc.) for standing up for the truth on such issues. Suitably-trained skeptics have a clear responsibility here to continue to seek to quell such nonsense with appeals to reasoning and empirical evidence.

Foibles on the fringe

David Oates (the 'discoverer' of Reverse Speech), Cathrine Sadolin (author of *Complete Vocal Technique* as reviewed by me here) and many other proponents of non-mainstream ideas about language (or other topic-areas) often state that they are open-minded and have not arrived at final versions of their theories. But it emerges that they are open-minded only in the sense that they see

themselves as learning more and more **within** their own framework of ideas, which they accept as given. They are typically **not** especially interested in being open-minded in the more obvious sense of taking on board professional critiques of their thought and considering whether they themselves might not simply be mistaken after all. In fact, this attitude is also characteristic of some especially dogmatic **mainstream** thinkers, such as Chomskyan linguists, many of whom, as I have noted, are uninterested in alternative theories and often write as if no such theories exist; most of their work involves the very extensive development of their own theories with no acknowledgment of the objections to their basic notions which have been raised by non-Chomskyan linguists. In both contexts, this approach is surely very limiting (and unhelpful to readers).

Another 'foible' of the fringe involves obtuse, tendentious and damaging ignorance of specific languages.

Another 'foible' of the fringe involves obtuse, tendentious and damaging ignorance of specific languages, as illustrated by David Leonardi's persistent near-deliberate ignorance about Greek (as documented in this forum). He is not alone here. For instance, Polat Kaya, an advocate of Turkish as the ancestral language of humanity who apparently knows little of Greek, adopts wrong and naïve alternative interpretations of the structures of Greek and even of the Greek alphabet where it suits his case to do so. By way of an example: he claims (ludicrously) that, in those cases

where Greek letters are similar in form to Roman letters but obviously represent different sounds (such as lower-case $\nu = \text{Nu} = /n/$), they were in fact **not** pronounced as is normally understood but instead were pronounced as the Roman letters are pronounced in Turkish (thus Greek ν was pronounced [v], as also in English). (In fact, lower-case letters had not even been invented yet in classical times!)

The worth of dead (or living) poets

In the 1989 movie *The Dead Poets Society*, the iconoclastic teacher John Keating, played by Robin Williams, instructs his pupils to tear out certain introductory pages in their poetry books (after initially pretending to endorse them). These pages inform students that the worth of a poem may be calculated by multiplying the significance of its intended message by the poet's degree of success in communicating this message, and displaying the result as a rectangle. Too algorithmic, of course. But a linguist might note (as Keating fails to do) that the problem here lies **not** in the basic proposal involving multiplication (which itself actually appears sound) but in the fact that neither dimension of such a rectangle can be **reliably** quantified (because of varying impressions as to significance, varying and largely subjective literary tastes, sheer complexity, etc.). A discussion of these points would have made the scene (and the movie?) considerably more interesting.

Some fun things

I talked last time about linguistic taboos. There are some groups of people who are so worried about giving offence that they avoid non-

taboo words in one language which they think sound similar to taboo words in **another** language which is being used around them. Thus Thai students in the USA often avoid the word *khan* ('crush') when speaking Thai in the presence of (uncomprehending) Americans because they hear it as closely similar to a certain taboo English word (as **they** would pronounce it in their Thai accent)!

More on taboo: the 'maverick' Sumerologist Peter Linaker developed a theory involving the existence of covert, highly coherent systems of cuneiform characters as used to write Sumerian. Many of these involve alleged 'double-entendres', often with references to sexual matters, which Linaker bizarrely appears to believe would naturally be taboo in **any** culture and could never be expressed openly.

An English lady was once told that a missionary in Nigeria was translating the New Testament into Yoruba. She remarked: 'Why? Wasn't English good enough for St Paul?' (Shades of 'King James Only', discussed last time!)

Some words have decidedly strange etymologies. Probably few of those who play Subbuteo (a group of table-top games simulating team sports such as soccer and cricket) know that this strange name is derived from the Latinate scientific name *Falco subbuteo* ('hobby-hawk'). The inventor (one Peter Adolph) decided on this name after the patent office denied him the use of his preferred name, Hobby! (Of course, the pun with *hobby* works only in English! I thank Mark Woodward for this example.)

REVIEWS AND COMMENTARIES

Tests of Astrology: A Critical Review of Hundreds of Studies by Geoffrey Dean and others. Amsterdam: AinO Publishing, 2016, pp 484. ISBN: 9789082492903. Available from the publishers (wout.heukelom@hetnet.nl). Price 29 euros plus postage (pbk).

Reviewed by Ray Ward

Geoffrey Dean was the first-named author of *Recent Advances in Natal Astrology* (1977), perhaps the most frequently referred-to critical work on astrology, and I took the trouble to see it while preparing this review. I was able to contact Dean, and I am grateful for his comments and information. A planned revised edition never materialised; however, as Dean told me, it is now out of date and this book constitutes the most comprehensive summary of the subject.

Both books give examples of astrologers who gave what they, and their clients, thought were wonderfully accurate readings - then found they had the wrong charts.

It is rather surprising that *Recent Advances* was published under the aegis of the Astrological Association and supported by other astrological bodies, in view of what it says, including: 'The astrological literature is filled largely with demonstrations of belief. What it is not filled with is demonstrations of truth'; astrology was founded on concepts whose application involves systems, most of them disagreeing on fundamental issues, and all of them supported by anecdotal evidence of the most unreliable kind; it 'starts with fantasy and then proceeds entirely logically'; new features are conveniently considered when they reinforce the case and ignored otherwise; 'most astrologers are pitifully credulous about "results" that appear to support astrology'; and astrology 'can be largely explained by intuition, gullibility and universal validity'. This book supports and

strengthens those assertions. It includes personal stories of astrologers and believers who changed their minds; the discovery of astrology; the evolution of tests and why they are needed; a whole section on the Gauquelin work; hundreds of empirical studies over 1927-2015; test overviews; artifacts (including a good general discussion of why people see what they expect to see); the future of astrology; the case for and against; a glossary; and name, subject and book indexes.

Despite its claims to a long and continuous history, astrology almost disappeared for a very long time. Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* (1755) said it was 'now generally exploded, as without reason', and the first edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1758) said it 'has long ago become a just subject of contempt and ridicule'. Its revival is sometimes traced to the birth of Princess Margaret in 1930, when a Sunday paper, short of things to say about the Thursday-born royal baby, had her horoscope done.

Both books give examples of astrologers who gave what they, and their clients, thought were wonderfully accurate readings - then found they had the wrong charts, and of the vast majority of recipients of horoscopes proclaiming their accuracy even when they were all given identical ones, or the charts of notorious murderers. Journalists have admitted being given the job of writing horoscopes and simply making them up, with no astrological knowledge whatsoever, and old columns were recycled and published on the wrong day, but readers still thought them accurate. The 'impel, not compel' excuse comes up, and the contradictions between Western and Eastern astrology.

Astrologers were unaware of Uranus, Neptune and Pluto before they became known to astronomers, but now claim they have influence. Why, therefore, were they not aware of their influence, and therefore their existence, before they were discovered?

The charts of people who die more or less simultaneously, as in plane crashes, or on 9/11, might be expected to cluster together, but they don't.

The charts of people who die more or less simultaneously, as in plane crashes, or on 9/11, might be expected to cluster together, but they don't. And, as the book says, 'predicting events after they happen never fails'. One astrologer, comparing the charts of Prince Charles and Lady Diana before their wedding, found rapport, compatibility, a strong bond, ability to work together, etc.; after their separation, another astrologer saw in the same charts trauma, anger, rebellion and disaster. And yet another's predictions for Charles were a classic mix of things that didn't happen and failure to see significant events that did occur.

The cover of *Prediction* magazine for June 1939 read: 'Ten years' peace! World to disarm...', and astrologers denied Hitler was a warlike man, predicted his fall, and poured scorn on the idea of any threat from Germany.

Astrologers can't lose. If someone's chart supposedly shows aggression and they appear aggressive, astrology is valid; if they seem meek and mild, they are aware of their aggression and have suppressed it: heads I win, tails you lose!

Nothing in astrology is concrete. With regard to houses, there is disagreement on everything: number, sequence, position of peak strength, method of division, interpretation and validity. And houses, of course, like constellations themselves, have no real physical existence. Then there's the 'dawning of the Age of Aquarius', which, depending on who you believe, could be any of nearly 100 dates from 1457 to 3550! And, while some astrologers say astrology involves psychic ability, others insist it does not.

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Much attention is inevitably paid to the Gauquelins. Michel Gauquelin always automatically assumed the registered time of birth was accurate. There are in fact doubts about this due to tendencies to avoid giving midnight because of the need to give a definite date, to avoid the first hour after midnight, and to favour even hours against odd ones; doubts about the reliability of different social classes; fathers being responsible for registration but excluded from the delivery room, hence likely to record too late; and the general unreliability of clocks in the past. Also, some Americans misreported their birth date to coincide with significant days, for tax advantages, or to avoid the 13th. And what is the time of birth anyway - emergence of head, full expulsion, cord cutting, first breath, first cry...? What if premature, or induced? Again, astrologers differ - while claiming high

success whichever criterion is favoured! The moment of conception, rather than birth, is surely more significant, being when the individual comes into being, but it, of course, cannot be established. The Gauquelins' work, ending in sadness and tragedy (they parted, and Michel committed suicide), must now be considered invalid.

The claimed significance of the work of John Nelson on forecasting shortwave propagation quality based on the positions of the planets in relation to the Sun, long claimed as the best scientific support for astrology, is also discussed, and the revelation that he was using an invalid method which rendered his results meaningless - but, 15 years later, they were still being quoted as proof of astrology. There is, however, no reference to the excellent discussion of Nelson's work in *Astrology: Science or Superstition* by Hans Eysenck and David Nias (1982) - somewhat surprisingly, since Nias is one of the authors of this book.

Eysenck, with the astrologer Jeff Mayo, tested whether people display the characteristics associated with their sun signs - rather oddly, perhaps, since we are often told that 'proper' astrologers take little notice of sun signs and only do personal readings based on the exact time and place of birth. They found that people did indeed appear to show the associated characteristics, and this was, of course, trumpeted as evidence for astrology, but, as I heard Eysenck himself say when I heard him speak, less than a year before he died, it was found that the effect disappeared with people unfamiliar with sun signs; the explanation for the apparent success was self-attribution: respondents

adjusting their answers to what they thought matched their signs.

One of the best books on the subject, *The Gemini Syndrome* by R.B. Culver and P.A. Ianna (1979) is discussed, with its revelation of the techniques of vague wording, shrewd guesses, inside knowledge, and repeated predictions in the hope they will eventually come true - keeping quiet when they don't, trumpeting them when they do!

Christopher Hitchens: 'What can be asserted without proof can be dismissed without proof'

The book ends with a summary (prefixed by a quotation from Christopher Hitchens: 'What can be asserted without proof can be dismissed without proof'): there is no physical way astrology could work; hundreds of tests have shown it does not deliver useful factual truth; the claimed *as above, so below* links do not exist; charts are meaningful even when wrong; outcomes are explained by hidden persuaders; and claimed experience is unfounded because it is never tested under controlled conditions. Hits are chosen, misses ignored, failures explained away, and unwelcome test results dismissed because, it is said, astrology cannot be tested. In the words of a Chinese proverb quoted in this book: 'If a thousand people believe a foolish thing, it is still a foolish thing'. Many thousands, indeed millions, believe in astrology, alas, but, as the book shows, it is indeed a foolish thing.

Star Ships: A Prehistory of the Spirits by Gordon White. Scarlet Imprint, 2016. ISBN 978-0-9931200-9-1, pp xvi + 294.

Reviewed by Mark Newbrook

Gordon White is a formidably well-informed and intelligent writer who produces books and other works upholding non-mainstream ideas about the past. In this instance he argues that knowledge, myths and motifs found shared around the world (often in cultures which apparently had no pre-modern contact once established) arise from the journey of *Homo sapiens* out of Africa from around about 70,000 years BP. There is a small linguistic aspect of this thesis which arises at points and which is naturally of special interest to me; I comment below on this area. But most of the argument involves other disciplines: archaeology, palaeoanthropology, mythology, cultural history, etc.

In his preface (p. xii) White likens the diffusion and transfer of ideas between ancient cultures to the historically recent spread of Christianity in the Third World, where the relevant notions are embedded into local traditions within which they would appear anomalous to a scholar who was unaware of the history (for instance, if several generations had passed, or if the material were available only in writing, much later). He suggests that many complex assemblies of cultural ‘memes’ can be explained in these terms; early diffusion from common, now ‘lost’ source cultures and mutual influence through further, still ancient contact are much more important than mainstream scholars might suppose. The role of genetically-coded ‘archetypes’ or universal mental properties (less challenging to the partly anti-diffusionist mainstream?) is, he holds, much less significant; on p. xvi he suggests that the distribution of similar specific cultural entities is too non-random for factors of this kind to be the main explanation for similarities.

This general ‘hyper-diffusionist’ stance is, of course, familiar to students of ‘fringe’ history; but White’s work is

at an altogether more sophisticated level than most such material, and must be taken seriously as an (incipient) answer to the question ‘Where did we come from?’. As one reviewer notes, it seeks to resolve the established opposition between ‘fundamentalists insisting their myths are history and materialists insisting that only history has value’ (although of course modernists of a more sophisticated bent, including most skeptics, would adopt a considerably less ‘one-eyed’ version of the latter stance).

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White himself is an ‘occultist’, actively interested in the ‘occult revival’ (which he believes is restoring a more accurate and indeed healthier perspective on the world); but (with accuracy in mind) he does seek to deal in empirical facts, including some facts which have allegedly been ‘suppressed for reasons of politics, religion, and individual ambition’ (a familiar theme in such literature).

It is not possible to review such a book adequately in brief, but I will try to issue some useful general comments. Earlier reviews of the book have generally been very positive (see for instance *note 1*), although (not unexpectedly) many of them have been written by non-mainstream thinkers, some of whom are themselves ‘practitioners of magic’ and the like. These reviewers have identified few if any factual errors in the book, and indeed I do not think there are many.

On the other hand, White certainly displays his own biases, for instance in his selective analysis of mainstream scientific and academic-historical

practice and its alleged status as a ‘metanarrative of power’ (pp. 1-2). And, rather like the admittedly less disciplined hyper-diffusionist author Cyclone Covey, he also writes at times in a metaphor-laden and indeed a rhetorical and overly forthright style, using disputed descriptions without acknowledging their status and giving the impression that his own contentious interpretations of fact are clearly correct; this commences as early as the preface.

But White is usually judicious and is in places effectively eclectic. Although the thrust of the work is **against** the academic (modernist) mainstream and its popular offshoots, there are places where he aligns himself **with** particular modernist scholars, for instance in his invoking of Wendy Doniger (p. xiv) against the postmodernist diminution of the informative value of comparisons between myths (despite the fact that he objects to attempts to **explain** myths in historical, scientific or other such terms) and his heavy use of the work of the mainstream prehistorian Michael Witzel (*passim*; but he also **disagrees** with Witzel on some key points; see below). (See Witzel’s 2013 book *The Origins of the World’s Mythologies*.)

In his search for evidence of the shared origins of culture, White ranges widely in his survey of key early archaeological sites: Göbekli Tepe in Turkey, Easter Island, the Giza monuments, Nabta Playa in Nubia, Gunung Padang in Java, etc. Göbekli Tepe in particular is the location of what appears to be the oldest known religious building, dated c 9000 BCE and thus apparently earlier than farming and most technology. (Some extreme claims have been made about this site, but these are not in question here.) White interprets this ‘temple’ as associated with the worship of stars, with the origins of traditional cosmologies, and with highly

developed ‘star lore’ which he finds used at surprisingly early dates for hunting, navigation at sea, etc.

But his most major focus (*passim*) is upon Sundaland, the maritime part of South-East Asia, much of which was submerged at the end of the last Ice Age. White shares with Stephen Oppenheimer and others the ‘Out of Sundaland’ theory, with Sundaland forming the cradle of Asian and perhaps world civilisation. However, while there are major disagreements among mainstream scholars on specific points, and the field is constantly developing, this view is an extreme minority view among professional archaeologists, linguists, and geneticists. The modern-day Austronesian populations of the region are instead believed to have migrated southward, from the East Asia mainland via Taiwan. White’s challenges to this view appear provocative but not decisive.

Although White identifies on the basis of his data some large leaps in technology and thought at points in early history, he finds explanations of these events in terms of ‘ancient aliens’ unnecessary and not supported by the evidence (some otherwise supportive reviewers disagree). His interpretation of Göbekli Tepe and other sites leads him instead to a well-argued model of ancient innovation involving ‘spirits’, which he regards as genuine entities and as influential upon early humanity.

Obviously, White is unlike virtually all mainstream thinkers on such matters (especially skeptics) in holding that spirits genuinely exist. And it is conceivable that our own views on such matters hinder us from assessing White’s ideas fairly, or even from fully understanding them. One reviewer suggests in this context that ‘human history has been done a disservice by historians and scientists studying things in which they don’t believe’. However, I would suggest that skeptics or ‘materialists’ with the relevant expertise (history and archaeology of religion, etc.) **are** in fact at least as well equipped to consider such claims as are White’s fellow-believers (**all**

commentators have their axes to grind!). And, after all, the question of whether or not spirits actually exist is very largely independent of the question of whether or not **belief** in spirits lay at the heart of much of the thought of very ancient peoples and crucially influenced their activities (as seems more than likely).

White also takes UFOs (ancient and modern) seriously, aligning himself with Jacques Vallée’s interpretations and suggesting that some contact with aliens may have occurred in early times (pp. 237, etc.); he also refers frequently to Robert Temple’s works, including *The Sirius Mystery*, a book which in fact appears much less persuasive now than it did to many on its first publication in 1976 (see pp. 247-249, 268-269). Another ‘fringe’ thinker whom White endorses (against mainstream criticism) is Julian Jaynes, who proposes very major, abrupt changes to human psychology in the late 2nd Millennium BCE (pp 267-268).

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Where ancient history is concerned, White has a few specific ‘bees in his bonnet’, often involving South Asia – notably his total rejection of the ‘Aryan Invasion’ account (even in its ‘mild’ forms) of the apparent arrival in northern South Asia of Indo-European-speakers in the 2nd Millennium BCE; he discusses this matter *passim*, commencing on pp. 2-3. He mentions but then ignores the key linguistic facts: a) unequivocally Indo-European texts are not found in South Asia before the mid-2nd Millennium, but **are** found further west (so these languages, notably the ancestor of Sanskrit, presumably came into the sub-continent from **somewhere** further west) and b) those features of Indic (South Asian Indo-European) which

are shared with South Asian languages of longer standing (chiefly Dravidian) are **not** found in Indo-European languages used further west. He also skates over the current impasse regarding the language (if language it be) represented by the ‘Indus Valley Script’ associated with the civilisation represented by the ruins at Harappa and Mohenjodaro, which remains mysterious and therefore cannot as yet be invoked in support of **any** hypothesis involving groups identified by language. (As White points out, genetic evidence, often usefully invoked these days, does not support the theory of an invasion in this case; but invading or settling groups are often assimilated genetically over time despite retaining their exotic languages; the Hungarians furnish a strong example.) White proceeds to poke fun at cautious mainstream accounts of these matters in which the dearth of decisive non-linguistic evidence is cheerfully admitted, attributing the mainstream position (or at least its origins) to racism. Later (p. 131) he demands concrete evidence for Witzel’s admittedly tentative placing of the immediate pre-South-Asian location of Indic in Bactria – not entirely unreasonably, but perhaps unrealistically.

In this context, it must be noted that White not only regards Dravidian culture as having been denied its ‘true scope and antiquity’ (by Indo-Europeanists) (p. 2) but also presents as established what are in fact highly contentious connections between the Dravidian languages on the one hand and languages in South-East Asia and even in western Asia and Africa on the other (pp. 129-131). In the same chapter (pp. 140-142) he cites with approval Asko Parpola’s much-disputed identification of IVS as Dravidian; but on p. 132, while admitting that IVS is undeciphered and the language unidentified, he declares dogmatically that it ‘has nothing to do with ... Dravidian’ (or with Indic). How can he be sure? Then, on pp. 147-148, he sets up mainstream ‘straw men’, accusing Sumerologists of

'refus[ing] to close the Sumerian story's gaping holes' (in fact, they are simply unwilling to engage in too much speculation) and proclaiming Irving Finkel's inconsistency in acknowledging that the Sumerian language has no known origins or affinity but confidently describing the language and interpreting texts (but it has been deciphered; there is **no** inconsistency here). White also over-interprets Finkel's understandably cautious statements about the fraught notion of 'cultural memory'. One might ask: who is the more dogmatic on these matters, White or the mainstream?

White does note that some reasonable hypotheses are disfavoured in some countries for apparently non-academic reasons, often nationalistic in

character. Thus some good evidence that rice-cultivation arose in Taiwan (and Sundaland) earlier than in China itself is fiercely rejected by many commentators based in China (p. 2). One is reminded of the clearly nationalistic arguments between Indian and Bangladeshi commentators regarding historical changes to the courses of the great rivers of that area; each side asserts confidently that 'everybody [in their country] knows' that their own version of events is true. But this kind of thing appears (mercifully) rare in genuine academic contexts.

On pp. 73-75 White undertakes a more general discussion of historical-linguistic aspects of these issues, issuing some rather over-stated criticisms of the mainstream discipline

as it has developed over its 230 years and relying mainly on Johanna Nichols, who is certainly mainstream but might be regarded by some of her peers as something of a maverick (non-linguists often 'home in' on mavericks rather than fully mainstream work) and whom White misrepresents (without overt comment) as contradicting herself. Linguistics is assuredly not White's strongest point, and he might to his advantage have sought authoritative comment more zealously (**without** assuming mainstream bias).

Despite these criticisms, the book is obviously of great importance and should be read with an open mind by those with an interest in early humanity.

Note

1. <http://tinyurl.com/hlcwf51>)

ANNOUNCEMENTS

OF INTEREST

SKEPTICISM, SCIENCE AND RATIONALITY (GENERAL)

Sense About Science

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

See 'From the ASKE Chair' and other entries throughout 'Of Interest'.

Good Thinking Society

<http://goodthinkingsociety.org/>

At the October 2016 QED meeting in Manchester Good Thinking were presented with an Ockham's award for Best Skeptical Campaign/Event, for their work challenging the provision of homeopathy on the NHS.

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

<http://tinyurl.com/jp6au72>

Society for Psychical Research

Comprehensive abstracts from the 40th annual Society for Psychical Research conference (University of Leeds, September 2-4, 2016) are on the website below.

<http://tinyurl.com/jqc729s>

Merseyside Skeptics Society

One of the most active of UK's many local skeptics societies, with a regular podcast. Worth putting in your Favourites folder.

<http://www.merseysideskeptics.org.uk/>

Psychology of the Paranormal

Chris French is on Reddit Science talking and answering questions about the psychology of the paranormal.

<http://tinyurl.com/jhpoj3>

SCIENTIFIC TOPICS

GMOs

'Suffice to say, there are a lot of rumors about GMOs, and there's a good chance that you've bought into at least one of them. But what's the truth? Let's look at 10 common beliefs about GMOs - and why they're wrong.'

<http://tinyurl.com/hbvlqhw>

Genetically modified mosquitoes could be released in the Florida Keys as early as this spring, an official said, after voters in Monroe County, Florida, approved the experiment in a referendum on election day.

<http://tinyurl.com/h2md4fu>

Climate change

Environmentally friendly groups at Companies vs Climate Change said they will work to make sure Trump won't undo all the progress the country has made.

<http://tinyurl.com/jgfgo85>

MEDICINE

The Nightingale Collaboration

Recent activity reported in the Nightingale Collaboration newsletter has yielded progress on a number of fronts relating to misleading claims about medical benefits, including kinesiology and - you've guessed it - homeopathy. So remember to keep visiting the Nightingale Collaboration website. If you do not already do so, why not sign up for free delivery of their electronic newsletter?

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

Evidence-based medicine

An exciting development from the Nuffield Department of Primary Care Health Sciences, University of Oxford. 'We're the Evidence-Based Medicine

Data Lab, at the University of Oxford. We build working, useful products to help academics and doctors. We campaign for better data in healthcare.'

<https://ebmdatalab.net/>

Trading Standards referrals

Referrals to the Advertising Standards Authority and, where appropriate, outcomes are listed on the website below (see for example the recent ruling on Chinese Clinics [Balham] Ltd). 'The ASA can and will refer cases to Trading Standards when a marketer is unwilling or unable to follow our rules and our self-regulatory sanctions have not brought them into line. If you wish to make a complaint about one of these advertisers, please contact the ASA and your complaint will be passed to Trading Standards.'

<http://tinyurl.com/z2bz8ug>

Clinical trials

'Around half of the clinical trials done on medicines we use today are not published. A tragic truth that needs to be changed, to help doctors do their job properly and to not betray the trust of all those who have volunteered.' See Síle Lane give a barnstorming talk to a TEDx meeting in Madrid in September about the AllTrials campaign at:

<http://tinyurl.com/hsatjez>

'A recent survey of clinical trials in China has revealed fraudulent practice on a massive scale, according to a government investigation. China's food and drug regulator recently carried out a one-year review of clinical trials, concluding that more than 80 percent of clinical data is "fabricated," state media reported.'

<http://tinyurl.com/hkza8lt>

Painkillers

'Pills that kill: why are thousands dying from fentanyl abuse? ... Fentanyl is a painkiller that is 50 times stronger than heroin. It has already killed thousands, including Prince... The latest and most disturbing twist in the epidemic of opioid addiction that has crept across the United States over the past two decades, claiming close to 200,000 lives.'

<http://tinyurl.com/z47x523>

Placebo

'A new study is the first to demonstrate beneficial placebo effect for lower back pain sufferers who knew they were taking 'fake pills.' Patients who knowingly took placebos reported 30 percent less pain and 29 percent reduction in disability compared to control group.'

<http://tinyurl.com/j5h4vfx>

'How to use your brain power to fight off a cold'. Newspaper feature on the power of placebo ('A neuroscientist explains').

<http://tinyurl.com/jbaplxh>

Alternative medicine: general

'Australia's regulation of complementary medicines claims is badly flawed.'

<http://tinyurl.com/z57jmxw>

NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde has voted to end funding seven inpatient beds at the Centre for Integrative Care at Gartnavel Hospital in order to save money. Services will continue to be provided on an outpatient basis. The NHS Centre for Integrative Care is the only such service in Scotland and offers a range of alternative therapies for people with long-term conditions such as chronic pain, low energy, low mood and anxiety. It previously operated as the Homeopathic Hospital.

<http://tinyurl.com/j8q3lpy>

'Holistic dentistry'

'The term holistic, as it is currently used by many dentists, turns out to be little more than an advertising gimmick.'

<http://tinyurl.com/hxnk9mc>

Homeopathy

Parents of infants and young children should not use unlicensed homeopathic teething tablets or gels which are available to buy online due to the risk of side effects, UK's Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency has warned:

<http://tinyurl.com/gubub5k>

And in the US: 'Ten deaths of children who used homeopathic teething tablets and 400 adverse events associated with the tablets have been reported to the US Food and Drug Administration....'

The FDA warned caregivers to stop using the products, which parents use to soothe teething babies, and to take their child to a doctor immediately if the child experiences problems. The agency is investigating the adverse events and the cases involving the deaths, as "the relationship of these deaths to the homeopathic teething products has not yet been determined and is currently under review... The deaths and adverse events -- including fever, lethargy, vomiting, sleepiness, tremors, shortness of breath, irritability and agitation -- occurred over the past six years.'

<http://tinyurl.com/zycga2c>

Also in the US: 'The Federal Trade Commission today announced a new "Enforcement Policy Statement on Marketing Claims for Over-the-Counter (OTC) Homeopathic Drugs."..... The policy statement explains that the FTC will hold efficacy and safety claims for OTC homeopathic drugs to the same standard as other products making similar claims. That is, companies must have competent and reliable scientific evidence for health-related claims, including claims that a product can treat specific conditions.'

<http://tinyurl.com/z8dmhgt>

In the UK: see blog about regulation of homeopathy and homeopathic remedies in the UK:

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

On the same theme: 'Medicines legislation has long placed restrictions on the supply of unlicensed medicines. Unregistered homeopathic medicines are treated in exactly the same as unlicensed medicines in law. Whilst the supply of unregistered homeopathic medicines by homeopathic pharmacies to the general public, and by lay homeopaths to their clients continued for many years in an uninterrupted manner (less so these days) the legality of both is questionable.' See article on homeopathy and the legislation of medicines at:

<http://tinyurl.com/gw3v6gy>

Also see 'From the ASKE Chair' for news about veterinary homeopathy.

Kangen water ionisers

‘What shape is your water? I ask in case someone tries to flog you a machine they claim will produce water with a hexagonal molecular structure, resulting in all kinds of miraculous health benefits.....Leading promoter Tracey Peake gushes on Facebook that the device can “make a huge difference to people’s health and wealth!”’

<http://tinyurl.com/zvahkp2>

Logan fertility method

www.beautycompanybelfast.com

‘A website for the Beauty Company in May 2016 included a page headed “Logan Fertility Method™” and various claims were made that the massage treatment could treat fertility issues’. As a result of complaints, the Advertising Standards Authority has ruled that ‘The ad must not appear again in the form complained of. We told The Beauty Company not to state or imply that they could treat infertility, or difficulties conceiving naturally. We told them not to use the name “Logan Fertility Method” and advised them that references to fertility made in relation to the massage were likely to mislead’.

<http://tinyurl.com/z5v9zk6>

Osteopathy

‘There is clear guidance on the conditions that osteopaths may advertise to treat on the CAP website. However, many osteopaths breach these guidelines and continue to offer treatments for conditions outside the “allowed” list. Osteopaths who do this are misleading prospective patients and the general public.’

<http://tinyurl.com/hvg8nua>

Chiropractic

‘Katie May, a Los Angeles model and social media star, died last February when her family stopped life support. She had suffered a massive stroke to her brain stem that left her hospitalized. May was only 34 when she died and is survived by her seven-year-old daughter. However, new reports from Los Angeles assistant chief coroner Ed Winter confirm that May suffered this stroke because she

received adjustments from a chiropractor.’

<http://tinyurl.com/gpbux3z>

Disgraced former physician Andrew Wakefield is a keynote speaker at upcoming chiropractic “pediatrics” conference.

<http://tinyurl.com/zqjby9j>

A controlled clinical trial published in the European Journal of Neurology has shown that that, for migraines, chiropractic spinal manipulative therapy **is no better than a placebo**. Accordingly, the Chiropractors’ Association of Australia announced in a press release that ‘A paper published in the European Journal of Neurology in September 2016 was the latest in a series of papers to confirm the effectiveness of chiropractic health care in treating people with migraines’!

<http://tinyurl.com/jgpkzgl>

Another miracle cure

A man who calls himself ‘the archbishop’, Mark Grenon of the ‘Genesis II Church’ claims his ‘miracle mineral solution’ cures virtually every illness and disease, including breast cancer, diabetes, HIV, autism, leukaemia and herpes ‘just with the one drop an hour’. Grenon claims he is protected from federal laws because he is part of a church and the ‘miracle cure’ is a sacrament that is not being sold but is offered for a ‘donation’. The ‘miracle cure’, termed Miracle Mineral Solution, turns out to be dilute (but not homeopathic) industrial bleach (sodium chlorite).

<http://tinyurl.com/hbvlgqw>

In October 2016, in Ireland a leading Co Kildare member of the Genesis II Church was convicted at Naas District Court manufacturing a miracle cure. ‘Bishop’ Patrick Merlehan, was charged with manufacturing MMS not in accordance with the Health Products Regulatory Authority and with placing MMS on the market, contrary market regulations.

<http://tinyurl.com/jz38dse>

Veterinary pseudoscience

‘Landmark disciplinary case against Staffs vet represents victory against pseudoscience’. Staffordshire-based

veterinary surgeon Roger Meacock MRCVS has undertaken to amend his website after the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons alleged it contained content which was either misleading or inaccurate to the point of bringing the profession into disrepute.

<http://tinyurl.com/hbhlktk>

See also ‘From the ASKE Chair’ for news about veterinary homeopathy.

Dermofibra

The Advertising Standards Authority has held up complaints about a brochure claiming extraordinary properties of garments made of ‘dermofibra’ (‘BeGood clothing’). ‘The ad must not appear again in the form complained about. We told My35 Health and Wellness Club to ensure that future ads did not claim that the BeGood clothing could affect body circumference, microcirculation, appearance of cellulite, excess fluid, or skin tone, or that the garments had an effect caused by reflection of infrared light, unless they held evidence to demonstrate that this was the case.’

<http://tinyurl.com/hmuebpg>

Faith healing

A ‘faith-healer’ who operated from Leicester, England, has had his nine-year prison sentence extended by five years as he has not paid back £613,500 conned from his victims. ‘However, the extension to Mohammed Ashrafi’s sentence could be cut if he pays back the missing cash’.

<http://tinyurl.com/hx2lvr5>

Colon hydrotherapy

Colon hydrotherapy uses enemas or apparatus for the irrigation of the colon and is described as a treatment to aid the evacuation of waste from the large intestine. (*Do we want to know this? – Ed.*) The treatment is also known as colonic irrigation. For the latest update on this by the Advertising Standards Agency visit the website below.

<http://tinyurl.com/hzegfvo>

Craniosacral Therapy

‘Craniosacral therapy (CST) is based on the principle that by feeling the intrinsic flow of the craniosacral rhythm, the therapist can help relieve any restrictions in the flow of cerebral

spinal fluid around the body which may be causing ill health.... To date, neither the ASA nor CAP has seen evidence that CST can improve health or that it can treat or alleviate medical conditions or their associated symptoms.' Visit the Advertising Standards Agency website below.

<http://tinyurl.com/h2rxk32>

Cryonics

The Department of Health is reviewing regulations on cryonics after a UK charity revealed that children as young as 7 have been signed up.

<http://tinyurl.com/j5avb78>

PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHIATRY

Cognitive Biases

'This amazing graphic shows all the cognitive biases and organizes them into themes - extremely helpful!'

<http://tinyurl.com/j3j2m7v>

Unreliable memory

The October 2016 Newsletter is now available on the BFMS website. In it there is an article by Professor Jean La Fontaine who compares cases of satanic abuse and false memories; a Goldsmiths' psychology student discusses research into the implications of fantasy proneness; and a BFMS member writes a powerful and moving letter to her sister's therapist.

<http://tinyurl.com/zsddaun>

Elizabeth Loftus, whose work on human memory exposed her to death threats, lawsuits and a campaign to have her sacked, has been awarded the 2016 John Maddox Prize.

<http://tinyurl.com/z9679f7>

See a summary of Professor Loftus's lecture on 18.11.16, at the Forensic Psychology Unit, Goldsmith's College:

<http://tinyurl.com/zw9cspb>

'Why eyewitnesses give false evidence – and how we can stop them.'

<http://tinyurl.com/jdo7lsb>

Ritual satanic abuse

Sir Edward Heath sex investigation could be shut down as police expert says satanic ritual abuse claims are 'pernicious fabrication'.

<http://tinyurl.com/zwv8293>

POLITICS AND PUBLIC POLICY

Government policy and evidence

'Sense about Science and the Nuffield Foundation commissioned RAND Europe to provide an overview of emerging trends and social changes which may affect the way in which the British public understand and engage with the political process, policymaking, services and information sources, and the role of evidence and expert opinion within this.'

'The review thoughtfully explores issues at the heart of our apparent crisis in politics, questions ideas behind the so-called post-truth society, and presents an impressive array of research into how changing social, economic and technological conditions might be influencing political engagement, trust, and policymaking.'

The report is free to download at:

<http://tinyurl.com/gpc2flc>

The first ever review of whether the UK government is transparent about its use of evidence when developing policies has been published by Sense About Science.

'Researchers counted a total of 593 policy announcements between May 2015 and May 2016 from 13 domestic government departments. They scored a sample of the underlying policies against the evidence transparency framework, asking 'Can we tell what evidence has been used? Can we tell how the government has assessed or used this evidence?'

'Researchers would struggle to follow the government's reasoning, with standards of transparency varying widely between and within departments.'

<http://senseaboutscience.org/activities/transparency-evidence/>

The report is reviewed by Civil Service World at

<http://tinyurl.com/hbnf3q8>

Also see 'From the ASKE Chair'.

RELIGION

Islam

Keep in touch with the latest projects by the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain, now very active in supporting the freedom and rights of ex-Muslims and non-believers in the UK.

<http://www.theghostportal.co.uk/about/>

For information on the Campaign against Sharia Law in Britain, including upcoming events, see:

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

God: good or evil?

Stephen Law asks, 'Why is belief in a good God much more reasonable than belief in an evil God?' Brief video.

<http://tinyurl.com/jgrw5dn>

Jehovah's Witnesses

Mother dies giving birth after refusing a blood transfusion.

<http://tinyurl.com/jr68uwd>

MISCELLANEOUS UNUSUAL CLAIMS

Ghosts

A great many people claim to have witnessed ghosts and ghouls. Neil Dagnall explores the possible reasons.

<http://tinyurl.com/zesoq7z>

'GHost is a visual arts and creative research project by artist Sarah Sparkes which explores the nature of ghosts both metaphorically and practically in its activities..... The GHost Portal website will be collecting local Liverpool ghost stories. Stories will then be archived at The Museum of Liverpool.... The GHost Portal will also be publishing links to artists and groups who are interested in ghosts. You can submit your links here.'

<http://www.theghostportal.co.uk/about/>

Amelia Earhardt

'New analysis strengthens claims that Amelia Earhardt died as a castaway....'

<http://tinyurl.com/hcbahoc>

....however: 'No, there is no chance that the old skeleton from Nikumaroro is Earhardt, and no serious scientists think so'....

<http://tinyurl.com/h8rg6gd>

....On the other hand (*we don't want to know – Ed.*).

UPCOMING EVENTS

THE ANOMALISTIC PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCH UNIT AT GOLDSMITH'S COLLEGE LONDON

<http://www.gold.ac.uk/apru/speakers/>

Chris French has organised 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>

Also of interest (and open to the public) is the programme of seminars organised by Goldsmiths Psychology Department which can be found at:

<http://www.gold.ac.uk/psychology/dept-seminar-series/>

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>

British witchcraft documentaries of the 1970s (presented by the London Fortean Society)

Speaker Gary Parsons

Date 23rd January 2017, 7:30 am - 9:00 pm (ticket £6.08)

My death, my decision? (presented by the Conway Hall Ethical Society)

Speaker Phil Cheatle

Date 29th January 2017, 11:00 am - 1:00 pm (standard ticket £3.00)

Stand up for Darwin (presented by the Central London Humanists and the Conway Hall Ethical Society)

Participants Lawrence Krauss, Jay Foreman, Kate Smurthwaite, London Humanist Choir and special guests

Date 11th February 2017, 7:00 pm - 11:00 pm (standard ticket £21.83)

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/>

See Conway Hall Lectures above. Also:

The spirits of Crossbones Graveyard

Speaker Sondra L Hausner

Date 26th January 2017, 7.45pm
(standard ticket £4.00)

Venue The Bell, 50 Middlesex Street, London E1 7EX

Everything you know about science is wrong

Speaker Matt Brown

Date 30th March 2017, 7.45pm
(standard ticket £4.00)

Venue as above

BRITISH HUMANIST ASSOCIATION

For details of meetings:

<https://humanism.org.uk/>

Darwin Day

Speaker Maggie Smith

Date 8th February 2017, 7.00 – 9.00pm
(standard ticket £12.50)

Venue Leeds Beckett University

<https://humanism.org.uk/events/darwinday2017leeds/>

LOGIC AND INTUITION: ANSWER

The answer to the 'Simon's favourite number' problem is that the number below 26 (25) is the square of a number (5) and the number above (27) is the cube of a number (3). The important lesson here is that it can be

proved that 26 is unique in this respect – we don't have to test every number to infinity to show that this is so. So if you think you are up to the proof – go ahead.

Incidentally, in base ten, 26 is the smallest number that *is not* a palindrome to have a square (262 = 676) that *is* a palindrome (*Well blow me down* – Ed.)

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>>