

THE SKEPTICAL INTELLIGENCER

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Incorporating the Skeptical Adversaria: the ASKE Newsletter

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Editor's Announcement

ASKE's *Skeptical Intelligencer* 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. Details about house style are available from the Editor. We also welcome writers who would like to contribute a regular column - e.g. an 'On the Fringe' feature or take over one of the regular features.

REGULAR FEATURES



FROM THE ASKE CHAIR

Michael Heap

The 17th European Skeptics Congress

September 22nd – 24th 2017

<http://euroscepticscon.org/en/home/page-2.html>

This congress was held on the above dates in the beautiful city of Wrocław in Poland. It was hosted by the Polish Skeptics' Club and the Czech Skeptics' Club (Sisyfos) and featured some parallel workshop sessions for the general public (including children) and an exhibition 'Captured Mind' prepared by the Copernicus Medical Centre. There was also a pre-congress 'Skepticism for Breakfast' meeting in Prague which featured many of the congress speakers. And, of course, there were the usual (and very important) social gatherings in local bars and restaurants and a Gala Cruise on the river Oder with a magic show.

The first day of the congress was devoted to 'Science and Religion'. The first talks concerned the nature of religious belief in contrast to science and rationalism. There followed a presentation by Anglican priest Petr Jan Vinš, and a lively, hard-hitting talk by Nigerian Leo Igwe, a human rights advocate, on bizarre paranormal claims that are accepted by African communities and even touted as 'science'. The speaker argued that religious beliefs hamper the rational and scientific interpretation of such phenomena.

The afternoon session was devoted to exorcism, 'the use of prayers or religious rituals to drive out evil spirits believed to be possessing a person or place'. Exorcisms are on the rise in Poland and elsewhere, both under the auspices of the Catholic Church and in charismatic and Pentecostal places of worship. The first talk on this theme was by a speaker with a committed belief in the authenticity of Catholic exorcism on the grounds that things can happen during an exorcism that are

not explicable by our current scientific understanding of the natural world, such as whole body levitation, the subject of the exorcism speaking in a language unknown to them, and the spitting out by the subject of nuts and bolts. Although the speaker was a scientist with a PhD from Max Planck University, he took an over-credulous stance which clearly annoyed many delegates. He is involved in producing the Polish monthly magazine *Egzorcysta*, a copy of which was freely available at the congress.



**James Randi
Wrocław 2017**

After this there was a talk by producer and director Konrad Szolajski, who introduced his film *The Battle with Satan*. This is an account of the investigation by a Catholic priest Father Radon of three young women, each struggling with emotional problems, who were subject to repeated exorcisms over a long period of time on the basis that they were 'possessed'. The film was so disturbing that I understand some delegates simply found themselves unable to view it. (The hostility, evident at the congress, towards those who advocate this kind of intervention by the Church in people's lives may have arisen from the experiences of some of the delegates in their formative years.) These distressing rituals provided no benefit to these vulnerable young people, but it was reported that one of them returned to normality once she had acquired a boyfriend.

The Saturday morning session covered topics relating to 'Science, Pseudoscience and the Media'. It was disturbing to hear from Ovidiu Covaciu of Romania about the egregious methods of the anti-vaccination propagandists in his country and elsewhere. Also Sofie Vanthournout talked about the work of Sense about Science (Ms Vanthournout is Director of Sense About Science EU).

GMOs and the irrational fears surrounding this development were the topic of the first of the afternoon sessions. Mark Lynas's talk included video footage of his interview with a TV presenter who persisted in asking him how anyone could now trust his opinions and judgement after his change of mind about the alleged dangers of GMOs.

Saturday's programme was concluded with three papers on psychological issues and, as in previous sessions, a panel and audience discussion. The first of the presentations was by Susan Blackmore on out-of-body experiences, followed by Scott Lilienfeld on confirmation bias in science (including forensic applications) and the 'replication crisis' in psychology (Zbyněk Vybiral).

Sunday began with a paper by Deborah Hyde, an analysis of the case of a shoemaker in 16th century Wrocław who died and was given a Christian burial but whose ghost was widely reported to be witnessed in the town when rumour spread that he had died by his own hand (which was in fact true). Physicist Holm Hümmler then gave a most entertaining and informative account of quantum physics and its misuse in supporting paranormal claims and quack medical and cosmetic treatments.

Throughout the congress, to everyone's delight, the figure of James ('the amazing') Randi, now 89 years of age, was regularly to be seen. Being

the most approachable of men, many delegates took the opportunity of shaking his hand and expressing their appreciation of his tireless work over the decades to promote scientific thinking and debunk irrational and misleading claims and practices. And so the congress programme closed before Sunday lunch with what for many was the highlight of the event, namely an interview (including video

footage) of Randi by Massimo Polidoro of the Italian skeptics and the opportunity for delegates to question him about his many exploits. It is a pleasure to record that Randi was in the true sense of the word 'amazing' and as informative, perceptive and, when justified, as hard-hitting as ever.

This was a well-attended and extraordinarily successful congress with a wonderful, friendly atmosphere.

The Polish and Czech organisers are to be congratulated that all their hard work paid off spectacularly, with special mention to Tomasz Witkowski, Urszula Zadorożna, Leoš Kyša and, in particular, Claire Klingenberg, now elected as the new chair of the European Council for Skeptical Organisations. Videos of presentations will be on YouTube shortly.



LOGIC AND INTUITION

Number of numbers

Here's a nice little number problem that requires no knowledge of mathematics to solve if you do it logically by trial and error. But maybe

if you are a mathematician you can come up with a proof of some sort.

Can you find a ten-digit number with the following property: numbering the digits from left to right, its first digit equals the total number of

zeros in the number; its second digit equals the total number of 1s in the number; and so on, until its tenth (last) digit equals the total number of 9s in the number?

Answer on page 20.



THE EUROPEAN SCENE

European Council for Skeptical Organisations

There are quite a number of countries with national skeptical organisations, many of which 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/> (which has an email contact facility)

Facebook:

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

The ECSO Board

<http://tinyurl.com/y98m4klr>

At the ECSO Council On 24th September 2017 in Wrocław the following members were elected to the Board of ECSO (to serve 2017-2019):

President: Claire Klingenberg (Czech Skeptics Club Sisyfos, Czechia)

Vice-president: Tim Trachet (SKEPP, Belgium)

Treasurer: Amardeo Sarma (GWUP, Germany/Austria/Switzerland)

Member: Paola De Gobbi (CICAP, Italy)

Member: Pontus Böckman (Vetenskap och Folkbildning, Sweden)

Associate member: András Gábor Pintér (Szkeptikus Társaság, Hungary)

Associate member: Michael Heap (ASKE, UK)

Associate member: Catherine De Jong (Vereniging tegen de Kwakzalverij, Netherlands)

Associate member: Leon Korteweg (De Vrije Gedachte, Netherlands)

The ESP - European Skeptics Podcast



Building a bridge for skeptics

<http://theesp.eu/>

Interviews with active skeptics are now approaching 100 in number, along with

announcements about the skeptics' events across Europe.

Homeopathy in Europe

See the recent statement by the European Academies' Science Advisory Council at:

<http://tinyurl.com/yby34z64>

and summary at:

<http://tinyurl.com/ya6p3qy8>

Gauri Lankesh

'The Center for Inquiry (CFI) and the European Council of Skeptical Organizations (ECSO) jointly condemned the murder of journalist and rationalist Gauri Lankesh, 55, in Bengaluru, India. Lankesh was shot down Tuesday evening by unidentified terrorists at the entrance of her home.'

See the full press release at:

<http://tinyurl.com/ybkjics2>

The 18th European Skeptics Congress

This will take place in 2019 (location to be decided).



MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

Richard Rawlins

Four hundred years ago, the grocers were, well, gross. They not only dealt in goods *en gross*, but grossly guarded the mysteries of their trade. The idea of tradesmen uniting in common cause had come over with William the Conqueror, and by 1180 a Guild of Pepperers plied their trade in London. As they also dealt in herbs and spices more generally, by 1365 they were known as ‘The Mistery of Grossers, Pepperers and Apothecaries’. A Greek *apotheke* being the storehouse where dried goods were stored (and thence, *boutique*). By 1617, the apothecaries were ready to establish their own company, styled ‘Society’. This year sees celebrations of four hundred years since the grant of a Royal Charter by King James I who perspicaciously opined: ‘The grocers are but merchants; the apothecaries are a mystery’. By 1704 the apothecaries were granted the right to practice medicine, much to the chagrin of the physicians - not assuaged by the 1815 grant of power for the Society to license and regulate medical practitioners in England and Wales. The Society finally ceased to be recognised as a provider of primary medical qualifications in 2008, but continues to offer postgraduate diplomas.

With its Royal Charter came the right to have a Coat of Arms – depicting Apollo, ‘the inventor of physic’, astride a ‘wyvern’. The ancients thought such a serpent could never fall ill – and depicted a snake on the staff borne by their god of health, Aesculapius. This logo is now used by many medical organisations worldwide, including the BMA, but not generally by Americans. They tend to use two snakes entwining the winged staff of Hermes (aka Mercury), the messenger to the gods. Carrying messages was the role of the US Army medical assistants who adopted the junior god’s emblem for their

uniforms. No doubt the gods will forgive those who transgress and use the emblems inappropriately.

Atop the Society of Apothecaries’ arms, the crest is a rhinoceros, proudly declaring the apothecaries’ attachment to the traditions and tenets of their craft. Since the times of ancient Greece and Babylon, ground rhino horn has been held to have healing powers. Virtually all esoteric medical traditions of Asian cultures have used horn down the millennia, and with an expanding, increasingly demanding population, there is ever more perceived need for the poor mammals’ horn – albeit, falsely perceived. To satisfy the commercial ambitions serving the faith of patients who lack critical faculties and indulge in flight from science, in 2016, 1,054 of the world’s 30,000 rhinos were killed in by poachers in South Africa alone. The worlds’ regulatory authorities have set up anti-poaching and anti-smuggling protocols backed by tougher legislation, but demand continues to rise. In South Africa and China, some horned animals are now farmed, with the sawn-off horn growing back at two centimetres a year.

There is a hint, not reaching the standard to be accepted by most scientists, that very high concentrations of animal horn, not exclusively rhinoceros, might lower fevers induced in lab rats. Whether this is eventually proven or not, the modest concentrations used in ‘traditional medicine’ have no effect. Any benefit perceived by patients is a result of the placebo effect. Rhino horn is a condimentary medicine - it adds flavour and spice - patients may ‘feel good’, but horn powder has no effect on any specific condition.

Horn’s traditional use as an aphrodisiac seems apocryphal and an example of sympathetic magic – the horn resembling the desired effect. Nevertheless, because of the

continuing, entirely misplaced beliefs of so many camists that ground horn can treat fever, metabolic diseases, auto-immune diseases, snakebites, typhoid, carbuncles, food poisoning and possession by evil spirits, all five species of rhinoceros are on the edge of extinction. (‘Camist’, a practitioner of CAM - complementary and alternative medicine.)

The slow grind of scientific stringency has dispelled any notion that rhino horn has any more effect on these conditions than toe nail clippings - the keratin is the same - but ‘Traditional Chinese Medicine’ and other condimentary medicine practitioners continue to sell their powders, and endorse the slaughter of the innocent. What they claim is ground horn could be floor sweepings - the patient cannot not tell.

As practised today, TCM is not traditional but rather developed during the 1950s by committees of the Peoples’ Republic of China; not historically Chinese but rather Indian; not medicine in any modern sense but rather an alternative to scientific evidence-based systems. TCM is undoubtedly popular throughout the Far East and is now regularly seen in western shopping centres and high streets.

TCM is based on ancient Chinese concepts and philosophies of diet and disease originating in India, with a variety of other techniques added – principally massage of numerous types, such as *Tui Na*, acupuncture, moxibustion and herbal medicine. Myths identify Shennong as the ‘divine farmer’ who devised a formulary of medicinal plants in the twenty-fifth century BC. Accounts suggest he was a friend of Huang Di, the Yellow Emperor (after the Yellow River), and together they were party to secrets of medicine, alchemy and making gold. The *Neijing* is regarded as the oldest organised medical textbook and the

basis of the original TCM. Its ideas spread throughout China, Japan, Southeast Asia, and Korea but TCM as we know it today is a more recent development.

The oldest beliefs of the peoples developing as Chinese were shamanistic, with influences of demons and spirits on health and well-being paramount. The *Neijing* additionally considered the effects of diet, the environment, emotions, the five elements, *qi* and *yin* and *yang* (the basic balanced forces of nature, or poles of existence). Various combinations of *yin* and *yang* give rise to water, fire, wood, metal, and earth – the five elements which form our world. The vital energy then passes through channels styled *meridians*, affecting all parts of the human body. This ‘vital energy’ is termed in Chinese: *qi*, *chi*, *ch’i*, pronounced ‘chee’ – in Japanese: *ki*; Vietnamese: *xi*; Korean: *gi*. Blockage to free flow leads to imbalance and thereby, disease and illness.

Balance and harmony between *yin* and *yang* is a fundamental concept of much traditional Chinese philosophy, science and medicine. *Yin* and *yang* are regarded as complementary but opposites and are particularly expressed in Buddhist adaptations of Taoist philosophy. Arising from an initial and ultimate nothingness (*wuji*) and finding expression in the works of traditional Chinese philosophers who sought to explain the mechanism of the universe, *yin* and *yang* are represented in the Taoist *taijitu* – a circle divided by an S-shaped line separating black and white, each side with a dot of opposite colour. Different traditions offer different variants of the meridians. There is little coherence between them, and quite how a contemporary practitioner decides which to choose and use is mysterious and has no rational justification. There is considerable disagreement amongst TCM practitioners about how to diagnose patients and what treatments go with which disease. Modern scientific analysis cannot be applied to such metaphysical considerations.

Given there is no scientific evidence of *yin*, *yang*, *chi*, *meridians*, nor the wide variety of pulse qualities practitioners claim to be able to detect – any diagnosis offered is clearly unscientific and any treatment based upon it must be regarded as alternative and incompatible with modern medicine and healthcare.

The Chinese know this perfectly well, and today their doctors are trained in conventional medicine just as those in the West. A false dichotomy is presented – as if there is a difference between ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’ medicine. There is not. There is simply ‘medicine’ – medical and healthcare practice which works and has an effect on disease, illness or injury, on all peoples of the world – and that which does not. Other medical systems are alternatives. For traditional, metaphysical and often political reasons, some healthcare systems are more tolerant of alternative medicine systems than others. Economic necessity in the West tends to require evidence of effectiveness before public funding of medical systems. In the East, tradition may hold greater sway, even in the absence of scientific evidence of effectiveness.

Funding of some traditional systems might assuage the concerns of the populace and keep them tolerably contented but that is politics, not science. Karl Marx regarded religion as ‘the opium of the people’ in much the same way. In the 1840s Emperor Mianning had acupuncture removed from the curriculum of the Imperial Medical Institute as being old-fashioned and not in tune with developing science-based medicine. China has always used Western precepts when they clearly have value and does not cling on to tradition without good reason. After the communist revolution of 1949, the People’s Republic of China determined that healthcare of some sort should be made available to all its citizens. There were clearly not enough regularly educated and trained doctors, so Mao Tse-tung took a pragmatic view and established a system of traditional

healers known as ‘barefoot doctors’. At least they provided the populace with some healthcare, irrespective of whether their practices actually worked or not. The fact patients were receiving some attention was better than nothing and good for morale. Mao himself described these practitioners as snake-oil salesmen and said: ‘Even though I believe we should promote Chinese medicine, I personally do not believe in it. I do not take Chinese medicine.’ The Communist government founded the State Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine in 1954.

Other current concerns relate to the composition of traditional medicines themselves. Many contain herbs of indeterminate origin which would not pass the basic tests required to be classified as a ‘medicine’ by orthodox regulatory authorities. Many might still contain compounds derived from endangered species. Indeed, this is the principal attraction of TCM for many camees who like CAMs. The demand for rhinoceros horn in Traditional Chinese Medicine is rising.

Bones of tigers have been regularly used in TCM, particularly in making medicines for arthritis. Some authorities suggest that enthusiasm for these medicines was behind the tiger conservation crisis in the 1990s. *Panthera tigris* is now an endangered species. TCM also has a need for the bile of the black bear, and bear farms have developed in China since the 1980s. Conservationists also express disquiet at the demands of TCM for musk deer and seahorses. In Korean medicine, the endangered pangolin is slaughtered for its scales which are made simply of keratin, just like human nails. Given there is little or no scientific evidence of the efficaciousness of remedies prepared using these ingredients, conservationists’ concerns are well founded. They should be borne in mind by camees interested in these systems of medicine, and by those minded to support them.

The origins of the methods used to make diagnoses and develop treatments may be from the West or

East, but modern doctors and healthcare professionals of all traditions share a commonality of understanding which has become orthodox. Which is not to say it is unchanging or that there are not at times a very considerable disagreement amongst orthodox practitioners. Indeed – that is the nature of science. There will always be change and development. It is because traditional practitioners have been reluctant or unable to give up their beliefs and practices that they have been obliged to develop ‘alternative medicine’ and promote their practices as offering ‘complementary approaches’. Many patients appreciate traditional approaches and gain benefit from them, in the sense they ‘feel better’. It is essential however, that comes understand what it is they are exposing themselves to, the risks they are taking and that they are able to give fully

informed consent. We are now some five thousand years from Shennong’s time. There is some way to go.

It is time that the suppliers of traditional medicines were dealt with as are those who deal in illicit drugs. And time that patients had more indelibly impressed on their consciences the simple fact that rhino horn is no better than floor sweepings, and is indistinguishable from toe nail clippings as far as disease specific effects are concerned. *Caveat emptor*.

The apothecaries have learnt the errors of their ways, no longer pulverise horn in their Black Friar’s Lane laboratory, and to mark the 400th anniversary of the granting of its Charter, The Society’s Appeal Fund is supporting *Save the Rhino* - patron, the Duke of Cambridge. Will he become an apothecary? The Society’s Anniversary Banquet in the City of London’s Guildhall next December

will reveal all. The rhino is still used as a logo on Society merchandise, and will have been seen adorning the ties and scarves of many eminent doctors, nurses and pharmacists, even if the symbolism has not always been appreciated. Given the billions being made by manufacturers of ‘traditional Chinese’ and other Asian medicines, it is unlikely we will see reversal of the rhino’s fate any time soon, but political science, knowledge and consciences, do slowly have their effect - and as Lao Tzu suggested in the *Tao Te Ching* (circa 600 BC): 千里之行，始於足下. ‘The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step’.

Dr Rawlins is author of a recent book on alternative medicine entitled ‘Real Secrets of Alternative Medicine’ (Amazon) - see www.placedo.co.uk.



LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

Yet more on cave ‘art’, words and structure

I discussed this last time. It emerges that one of the scholars I mentioned as advocating a semasiographic rather than an artistic interpretation of cave ‘art’, Genevieve von Petzinger (*The First Signs*, 2016), is not in fact overstating her case; she does **not** herself think (as Ronald Hutton’s cited words might suggest) that the system of 32 symbols which she finds used across various prehistoric sites represents ‘writing’ (i.e. written language), but suggests that it is in fact semasiographic/semiotic in a non-linguistic sense, not capable of expressing the specific features and in particular the grammar of any spoken language used by its originators – as may also have been the case with the much later, possibly cross-linguistic Indus Valley Script. This applies even to the impressive ‘La Pasiega Inscription’ (the term *inscription* is

arguably tendentious here). Von Petzinger acknowledges that the earliest-known indisputable manifestations of genuine writing do not appear until long after these ‘texts’. She is quite well informed about linguistics, in particular demonstrating awareness of the key point that words are not enough to constitute a language. But her treatment has an odd, not to say naïve-sounding focus in places, notably where she fails to identify ‘double articulation’ (or its equivalents in writing) as crucial to the identity of language, and where she ‘skips’ a stage in the exposition of the importance of syntax in this context (if one is to combine words of different classes – nouns, verbs, etc. – these classes must first identifiably **exist**). (Although potentially misleading, such infelicities are perhaps inevitable, and for the most part they are not in themselves so very blameworthy or damaging; obviously, a linguist might

display similarly limited competence in von Petzinger’s own fields.)

In the general context of very early human language, it has been suggested that *Homo erectus* must have had some form of language (possibly signed rather than spoken, as has also been proposed for Neanderthals) in order to plan a voyage to already insular Flores around 900,000 years BP in sufficient numbers to establish a long-surviving settlement, and to build the substantial boats presumably needed for such an expedition. But all claims about non-*sapiens* language are currently tentative, and naturally no-one is thinking in terms of **written** *erectus* language. Of course, if *erectus* did have language, there seems no reason to suppose that the much later *sapiens* languages would have arisen from that source; they would surely represent a separate development.

More on language (etc.) and art

I have discussed this general topic-area repeatedly of late. See for example my material on the 2016 Wellcome exhibition, the exhibition on reading at Bury, Katie Paterson's 'Syzygy' (now followed up with a similar show called 'All The Dead Stars' at the very interesting Ingleby Gallery in Edinburgh), etc.

Riders to this material: (1) As noted, the catalogue at Bury emphasised the limitations of language, and I have acknowledged these and have compared the very different cognitive and communicative strengths of language, art, mathematics/logic, etc.; but it remains unclear how a human being might convey **specific non-numerical** truths/ideas **other** than by means of language; (2) Did Derrida's comment, quoted in the Bury catalogue, about resistance to 'tampering with language' perhaps refer to professional mainstream linguists, analytical philosophers etc. objecting to post-modernist notions such as his own, **not** to the more familiar clash between linguists' anti-prescriptivism and the (often naïve) prescriptivism often voiced outside linguistic circles? As usual, Derrida's words resist unambiguous interpretations; perhaps this is deliberate!

Another artist without (it seems) specific expertise in linguistics who has ventured into this area is Michael Dean, a finalist in the 2016 Turner Prize. The work of the finalists was displayed at Tate Britain; see the catalogue for an essay on Dean and an interview with him.

There are also reviews of Dean's work, notably one by Paul Teasdale which is available online (*see note 1*). Teasdale begins with Ludwig Wittgenstein's idea that in principle there can be no such thing as a private language, 'an untranslatable lexicon [vocabulary] of which only one person can make sense'. He suggests that according to Michael Dean the opposite would seem to be the case. But, like much other discussion of such projects and of Dean's work in

particular, there is an initial error here: in fact, a language is **not** defined chiefly by its vocabulary, but by its structural characteristics both general (cross-linguistic/pan-human) and specific. It will be noted that the same basic error arises in many of the discussions of language and art reviewed in recent instalments and also in the material critiqued under 'Words and structure' last time and above. Non-linguists, even if very astute in other respects, are prone to seeing languages mainly as assemblies of words rather than as systems.

Having said that, the 'private language' argument is not exactly **resolved**; Wittgenstein's position is far from universally shared, and if he **were** right the large issue of how language then began in the first place would remain (this issue is much discussed in this and other contexts; see for instance J. N. Hattiangadi's 1987 book *How is Language Possible?*). And in any case it is not clear that Dean's work does involve a genuinely private language or aspects thereof. Dean obviously has a first language and indeed is literate in same; he may also know other languages to various degrees. Any ideas he has about language on his own account will inevitably be influenced by these non-private systems. The philosophically controversial notion of a private language essentially applies to humans isolated from birth (an unlikely but barely feasible scenario) or somehow having 'lost' their first and only languages, developing their own systems in the **absence** of such influences. Even *a priori* invented languages (discussed by me in this forum a while ago) are grounded in shared world-experience and non-linguistic conceptualisation.

Furthermore, Dean's 3D art itself basically involves visual representations of features of **written** language, especially alphabetic letters, and indeed has a typographical element. Teasdale describes him as 'exploring the transmutation of language from the spoken word to its

graphical representation and on to its subsequent reading', and as 'explor[ing] the mediating position of language between the author and the reader, as well as the active-to-passive-to-reactive flow of the force of a word upon an object and how the meaning of that word is then transmitted'; but these considerations extending beyond the written forms into the core of language are conducted without any acknowledgement of the vast tradition of linguistic scholarship regarding such matters – and, once again, are too centred upon the word as a unit of language as opposed to the structural features which distinguish language from all other known modes of communication, and indeed upon the written as opposed to the more central spoken mode of language.

The Tate catalogue too likens Dean's 3D configurations to 'words in a sentence', but with no reference to the structures (as distinct from the words themselves) which are required for a sentence to be used or understood and which are not, as it seems, overtly expressed in Dean's artworks. The words *grammatically* and *syntactical* are used, but (as is more or less acknowledged) grammar, if felt to be needed, has to be **supplied** (like even some aspects/features of the words themselves?) by the viewer – whether or not it is thought that the artist's own specific intentions in such respects are especially important; this latter is a matter for art theoreticians, although in his interview with Teasdale Dean does say 'the word should be read in the same way that it was written'.

In earlier instalments I have raised this issue of grammar needing to be supplied in other contexts, notably that of alleged alien communication involving the vocabularies of human languages but **not** their grammars. Because most non-linguists (understandably) struggle to be explicit about matters of grammar (or to invent same), this is a pattern which arises repeatedly.

Dean also makes use of the written forms of words in his stickers attached to parts of his display, relying to a degree on phenomena involving ambiguity, homophony and homonymy such as those featuring the words *shore* ('edge of sea', 'prop up') and (in many but not all accents!) *sure*.

Confusion on the Australian fringe

When I was the Australian Skeptics' 'pet linguist', I was confronted with many examples of local non-mainstream (and worse!) thought regarding linguistics and the philosophy of language. A Melbourne-based writer called Alan Jones, finding me more amenable than other linguists with whom he had tried to correspond, used to send me (or hand me, after marching into my office!) pages of impenetrable material attacking Noam Chomsky and the linguistic world at large – in the process revealing his own confusion – and proposing his own account of the phenomenon of language, which involved novel systems of terminology regarding its supposed 'modes'. He talked as if the meanings of these terms were immediately clear. When I asked him to clarify his statements, he declared that explicating his ideas in more mainstream terms was impossible, because mainstream ideas contained inherent assumptions which he rejected. He also demanded to know where exactly I myself was 'coming from' (in the manner of the professional philosopher C.E.M. Joad of *The Brains Trust* fame!) – even though my questions were deliberately framed so as to import as few assumptions as possible. I only ever really understood (or thought I understood) one paragraph that he wrote, and even that appeared confused. We got nowhere!

Another person sent to my department at Monash Uni a long hand-written letter addressed to 'the person responsible', challenging what he took to be academic orthodoxies. It proved impossible to understand this

document in any detail, and mercifully the return address provided was illegible!

One of the first things I was given as a new lecturer in the department was an essay by a Chinese person, living locally, who was seeking to be admitted to our MA-by-coursework program. He argued that English should not be 'squared', that is, written in a grid with one letter per cell, as is often done by writers more accustomed to writing Chinese – where this method works well, since each Chinese character represents an entire word. He thought that this hindered such people from grasping the nature of English. We found ourselves unable to admit him! Over the years I received a number of other odd proposals, of varying degrees of sophistication, emanating from the Australian Chinese world. Many of them focused upon genuine or perceived contrasts between Chinese and English, an issue which is emphasised – and often oversimplified – in schools in Chinese-dominant societies such as Hong Kong.

An arguably more coherent Australian thinker who struggled to communicate with mainstream scholars was Lawrence Trevanion, who presented his philosophical notions in the Australian Skeptics' journal. Like Jones, he assumed as obvious much that was in fact unfamiliar even to well-informed readers, including for example distinctions between pairs of notions such as 'Truth' (initial capital) and 'truth' (all lower case). I pointed out to him that he needed to **explain** such distinctions – and anything else which involved concepts and terms which he did not find explicated in his reading; but he stated that achieving this would have been like cutting his way through a jungle! I could not see the resemblance; it should not be so difficult to notice that one is using some specific terms in a way not found in the relevant literature (of which he appeared to be adequately aware). Scott Campbell, who was at that time my philosophical equivalent in the Skeptics organisation, also tried to help Trevanion find the 'path' through his

supposed jungle towards 'normal' philosophical discourse or at least intelligibility, but again with only limited success.

Trevanion felt that his correspondence with me and our exchanges in the journal were regularly hindered by mutual misunderstanding. He certainly misunderstood me at various points, attributing to me viewpoints and specific ideas which as far as I could see I never suggested I endorsed and which I certainly do not in fact endorse. But my problems with his own work did **not** involve misunderstanding but rather repeated **failure** to understand (as in the case of 'Truth' versus 'truth'). Confusion (sometimes genuine, sometimes disingenuous) between misunderstanding and failure to understand is in fact quite common in non-mainstream rejoinders to mainstream criticism (and is also found, for example, in Chomskyan rejoinders to the criticisms levelled by non-Chomskyan linguists).

Another example of a deep-thinking but confused/confusing person in Australia who developed his own linguistic theories (and issued attacks on the mainstream of linguistics) is the psychologist and amateur logician John Trotter. See my discussion of Trotter in this forum (2012-13) and in Chapter 10 of my 2013 book *Strange Linguistics*.

Atheisms

An article by Graham Lawton in *New Scientist* (15/4/17) titled 'Thank God I'm An Atheist' argued that 'atheism is not simply an absence of belief in god but also a set of alternative beliefs'. Some, indeed, have actually described atheism as 'just another religion'. But of course there is no **one** atheism. Lawton cites suggestions to the effect that supernatural beliefs are so 'hard-wired' that even atheists easily succumb to them (perhaps especially in the proverbial 'fox-holes' when death appears imminent?) and often entertain quasi-religious beliefs in 'higher powers', everything happening 'for a purpose' or the like – and maybe even need rituals to replace those provided by religions.

But many more forthright atheists, myself included, entertain **no** such beliefs and certainly need **no** such rituals. Our alternative concepts are simply not religious, or even spiritual, in nature. On the other hand, some atheists (again including me) are **less** forthright than others in **other** respects; for instance, I do not hold

that the existence of God is impossible as some maintain, merely that it is unlikely and that there are no compelling positive reasons, abstract or empirical, for accepting it. And atheists also differ in respect of how unadaptive/harmful they think religion is. (Lawton states dogmatically that it is **not** unadaptive; I do not know how

he can be so certain of this.) We are, all in all, a more varied mob than we are often given credit for.

Note

1. <https://frieze.com/article/focus-michael-dean>.

REVIEWS AND COMMENTARIES



No Way to Treat a Friend: Lifting the Lid on Complementary and Alternative Veterinary Medicine by Niall Taylor and Alex Gough. Old Pond /5M Publishing, Sheffield. ISBN 9781910455913, 2017. £14.95.

With the alternative medicine industry under increasing attack, the spotlight here is on its use on animals.

Reviewed by Richard Rawlins

Wikipedia tells us that ‘Veterinary medicine is the branch of medicine that deals with the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of disease, disorder and injury in non-human animals’. Many maintain there are only two sorts of ‘medicine’ – that which works, and that which does not, irrespective of the species of animal. The fundamental principles are the same, and well recognised amongst all properly educated scientists and practitioners of modern evidence-based medicine, veterinary or human. Less well known to the general populace is the extent to which so many vets subscribe to the tenets of complementary and alternative medicine – CAM (which I term ‘camistry’ and which is practiced by ‘camists’). The addition of the adjective ‘veterinary’ serves to emphasise the professions and practices of this book’s authors, and the locus of their concerns. I serve a common cause with them - to expose the foolishness, flimflam and fraud inherent in camist practice; to warn patients and animal owners of the dangers faced by illogical irrational healthcare practices; to advise against wasting time, money and trouble needlessly; and to resist the flight from science which is becoming all too prevalent in the ‘post-modern’ world.

A world where many commentators find self-indulgence and wishful thinking replaces realism and critical thinking.

Camistry can work, as does conventional medicine, in two dimensions. Firstly, through the effect of a constructive therapeutic relationship between patient and empathic practitioner. Secondly through the specific effect of the therapeutic modality: the pushing, pins, pummelling, powders, pills, potions, processes and preternatural powers utilised. If there is plausible reproducible evidence that for a specific modality, the second dimension works, it is termed ‘medicine’. If not, that modality has to stand as CAM. And whereas human medicine regularly utilises the non-specific dimension to provide pleasure and satisfaction (hence ‘placebo effects’), this is less easily achieved in animals. Yet placebos and the TLC of concerned owners do find practical expression.

Faced with a suffering animal, Taylor and Gough sagely advise:

Only the hardest of hearts surely, could argue with those seeking consolation in complementary therapy under such circumstances. The problems start though, when

therapists begin to believe they can not only provide solace during the course of a serious disease but that they can actually treat such diseases alone and unaided. And, as veterinary surgeons, this problem is all the more acute when such practitioners believe they can treat diseases in animals. Unlike their owners, animals are unlikely to benefit from lengthy, sympathetic chats or exhortations to ‘think positively’. One of the most humbling things about being a veterinary surgeon is the recognition of the enormous trust animals place in us, their human caregivers. They rely on us to act in their best interests and we owe it to them not to permit our own personal beliefs or philosophical rationalisations to get in the way of getting things right. In short, animals don’t have the luxury of making lifestyle choices and that, finally, is the difference between CAM and CAVM – and that’s where this book comes in.

Indeed it does. Fooling vulnerable and gullible patients, or owners, on the grounds that ‘it makes them feel better’ and ‘it’s what they want’ is patronising and unethical. As a doctor of humans, I regard the vulnerable and gullible in the same way a vet regards his animal

patients. The ‘lifestyle choices’ humans make are frequently ill-informed, irrational, even bizarre – but unless certified under relevant mental health legislation, humans are entitled to make them. Animals need, and have, more protection. Although I am a registered medical practitioner, I cannot legally treat a non-human animal.

It would have been my preference to have the domain of CAM in veterinary practice termed as VCAM (or V camistry) – easier to pronounce, and emphasising that the heart of the matter is the practice of ‘medicine’, irrespective of the species. But with that carp out of the way, I cannot seriously fault this book. The anecdotal style and naming animal patients is not common in most UK medical texts, but no matter, the heart of the problem is clearly set out and the examples will engage the sympathies of many readers.

Although purporting to be written by two authors, there are a number of references in the first person, such as “I believe...” - indicating there is but one author. There should be credit where credit is due.

One (unidentified) author opines: *Alternative medicine practitioners on the whole probably genuinely believe in their treatment practices, and though this is hard to prove, I personally believe there are few genuine fraudsters or charlatans in the CAM world.*

Given the thrust of this book is that expressed opinions should be supported by evidence, the author also should acknowledge there is no basis for his assertion. Indeed, given the arguments that are so well presented in this book, in my opinion, it more likely than not that proponents of VCAM know perfectly well their treatments have no effect on specific conditions, and that they are simply seeking commercial advantage.

It is hard to ‘prove’ that faiths, which have no basis in reality, are sincerely held, but we must consider - which is more likely, that the practitioner is sincere, or that they are not? It is for those who make health claims to prove the benefit of the treatments they propose, and here much regular veterinary practice is lacking, as is the case for human medicine. But we have to consider probabilities, and they should be grounded in plausible and reproducible science, not wishful thinking. *No Way to Treat a Friend* makes its case lucidly, and although principally directed at veterinary surgeons, all healthcare practitioners will find stimulus and some surprises from this study. I regularly lecture on the value of controlled trials and refer to James Lind’s 18th century research on scurvy, but I never knew that ‘dogs make their own vitamin C’!

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Dear Martin, Dear Marcello: Gardner and Truzzi on Skepticism Edited by Dana Richards. World Scientific, 2017, pp. 458. ISBN: 978 981 3203 69 3 (hbk.), \$88/£73; 978 981 3203 70 9 (pbk.), \$48/£40.

Correspondence between two of the pioneers of modern skepticism.

Reviewed by Ray Ward

Martin Gardner (1914-2010) was a philosopher of science, Marcello Truzzi (1935-2004) trained in sociology. Both had backgrounds in magic, giving them intimate knowledge of how people can be tricked and believe things unsupported by evidence. Both were founders of CSICOP, but Truzzi soon left and founded his own journal, *The Zetetic Scholar* (not to be confused with *The Zetetic*, which became *The Skeptical Inquirer*), and much of their correspondence is about Gardner’s disapproval of what Truzzi published, which he thought conferred too much respectability on nonsense, while Truzzi criticised what he saw as CSICOP’s debunking stance, which he considered to be in breach of its

declared position of not dismissing anything without full evaluation. As the Introduction sums it up neatly, Truzzi contended that Gardner and CSICOP acted like lawyers, more interested in winning a case than abiding by science’s rules of conduct. But, as it also says, CSICOP was never intended to be a scientific organisation, performing experiments or carrying out field studies; as Gardner himself says in one of his letters, it had no lab. Gardner also opposed ‘believers’ in the paranormal becoming CSICOP members (as opposed to subscribers). He specifically mentions Puthoff, of whom the Introduction nicely says that he and Targ imagined they could do research in parapsychology, but dealt

with ‘psychics’ who were cleverer than they were.

The book has four sections of greatly varying length: ‘The Road to CSICOP’, ‘The Demarcation Problem’ (by far the longest), ‘The Dissolution’ and ‘Return to Cordiality’.

All the early letters are from Gardner, Truzzi’s having apparently not been preserved. There is much about Geller (and professional magicians’ astonishment at the obviousness and crudity of some of his tricks), proposals for the body which became CSICOP, and reputable publishers making a big thing of their integrity when dealing with other subjects, but bringing out the most dreadful rubbish on the ‘paranormal’. Gardner withdrew a book from

Crowell because they published John G. Fuller's *Arigo*, about the Brazilian 'psychic surgeon', while Andrija Puharich's appalling *Uri*, saying Geller was controlled from an alien spacecraft, was actually published by no less a firm than Doubleday.

One of Gardner's themes is that proposed explanations for 'paranormal' phenomena are often ridiculously complicated when they are in fact very simple, for example, the idea that Geller surreptitiously applied some chemical for his cutlery-bending. Ted Serios, the man who claimed to project images onto film, and Jule Eisenbud, the man who fell for his tricks and wrote a whole book about him, are also discussed, with Gardner making an interesting comparison with Arthur Conan Doyle and the Cottingley Fairies: both intelligent men taken in by rather crude deception, and both absolutely unable to alter their opinion in the face of mountainous evidence.

Gardner is very vehement about Gauquelin and Velikovsky, to whom Truzzi was more sympathetic. Gardner makes the good point that taking Gauquelin seriously meant his work would be trumpeted as evidence for astrology, when in fact he was unequivocal that it provided no evidence whatever for traditional astrology. Other points Gardner makes which have become familiar in the skeptical field are that scientists are bad at testing paranormal claims (one proudly spoke of '20 years experience of designing electronic instruments' - to which Gardner's comment was: 'as though that qualified [him] for psi testing!'); that the presence of a skeptical mind is conveniently claimed to inhibit paranormal powers; and that even when claimants' cheating is proved beyond all doubt it doesn't mean they *always* cheat: the mystic 'fluence comes and goes in an unpredictable manner, it can't be turned on and off like a tap, and maybe they don't want to disappoint people. Gardner gives an example of the appalling dangers of belief in the paranormal: a girl in need of an operation who wanted to fly to the

Philippines and have it done by the phoney 'psychic surgeons' there.

Truzzi, however, is similarly critical (sometimes very strongly so) of Paul Kurtz ('a devious scoundrel') and Philip Klass (both of whom I had the pleasure of meeting and found very pleasant). He does, however, make the apposite comment that 'The problem with most psi investigators ([John] Taylor is the best example) is that they are so arrogant that they believe they are too smart to be fooled.' He mentions investigators who are so certain they cannot be deceived that they say people faking psychic powers do in fact have such powers and are lying when they deny it, referring to the famous case of Conan Doyle insisting the Houdini had such powers. I was reminded of those who similarly said that Mike Edwards and Steve Shaw, the perpetrators of Randi's Project Alpha, and who completely fooled the investigators at the McDonnell Laboratory, were also lying when they denied having paranormal powers! There is much discussion of the definitions of *charlatan* and *crackpot*, and Truzzi mentions the sad case of the indubitably brilliant Linus Pauling's obsession with vitamin C.

There is frequent mention of the dodgy publisher Bernard Geis, but with his name misspelt 'Geiss' (and in one letter his first name becomes Irving!).

A curious feature is that postal addresses, phone numbers etc. are replaced by '[item] withheld'. The intention to protect privacy is no doubt admirable, but somewhat pointless in many cases - publishers whose addresses would be publicly available, for example, or Gardner's number when he is dead - and it would save space if they were simply omitted and either replaced by "..." or, like a great deal of other irrelevant matter, simply omitted.

At one point Gardner and Truzzi apparently agreed to differ and stop arguing - but then continued! 'We are hopelessly of different mindsets - lets stop trying to convert each other', said Gardner, and 'How you can admire a man who took Doyle's fairy photos

seriously is beyond me.' Things really did get hostile, Truzzi calling Gardner 'intellectually dishonest' and saying he must conclude 'the truth matters little' to him. Eventually Gardner bluntly asked Truzzi to stop writing to him; there were a few more contacts, a gap of about a year, then the correspondence resumed quite cordially.

Gardner comes over best. Truzzi was indubitably clever, but guilty sometimes of what I call the 'cart before the horse' approach: 'We have a mystery; how can we solve it?' rather than 'Is there really any mystery?' He suggested Gauquelin's 'Mars effect' might have something to do with athletes' and their parents' body types and such people's frequency of sexual intercourse - an example of Gardner's point about over-complicated explanations! As Gardner says, it is far more likely that his raw data were inaccurate. (See my review of *Tests of Astrology* by Dean and others, *The Skeptical Intelligencer*, 19 (4), Winter 2016, pp. 8-9 for more information.)

The editing is decidedly poor, with many oddities of punctuation, wording and spelling, and it is not clear whether they are in the originals (in which case this should be indicated) or are transcription errors; and the index is almost useless: there are only two references to Gauquelin (one misspelt 'Gauguelin'), who is actually mentioned in hundreds of letters, two each to Klass, Sagan and Targ, and three each to Velikovsky, Geller, Puthoff and Kurtz, all of whom are also in fact mentioned many times. The book is a treasure-trove of apposite comments on many well-known people and claimed phenomena, and it is a pity that they will so often be untraceable because of the poor indexing. It is also brave to publish very blunt remarks about people like Geller and von Däniken ('an outright charlatan') who are still alive. This is an indubitably valuable book, but its value could have been greatly enhanced by better editing and indexing.



MARK'S BOOKSHELF

Mark Newbrook

Expertise and Scholarship Devalued and Ignored

A brief survey of some recent work illustrating this phenomenon and of comments on same

On 3/3/17, Simon Clarke addressed the Furness & South Lakeland Astronomical Society at their monthly meeting in Barrow; his talk was based on his recently updated 73-page book *This Will Blow Your Socks Off*, which he described in advance publicity as 'a book about the true history of man on earth and, more importantly to your group, it gives details of the alien species that are known to visit / live on earth. It also explores many anomalous structures around the world that don't fit in with the world[']s view of the linear development of man'. The specifically astronomical content of the talk was in fact minimal (perhaps five minutes in the hour); it concerned the supposed 'rogue' planet Nibiru (here spelled *Nuburu*). Even Clarke's discussion of the alleged presence of aliens on Earth, which he reached only at the very end of his talk, was brief. The rest of the talk dealt, in a somewhat rambling and often loosely-argued manner, with a wide range of dramatic non-mainstream claims involving genetics, historical cartography, archaeology, etc. and in particular issues in ancient engineering (see below). Clarke later told me that he had never addressed an audience before, and despite his palpable courage it showed.

Most of the FSLAS members present understandably had little interest in this material; some regulars, as I learned later, had decided not to attend because they had guessed from Clarke's 'blurb' that the talk would contain little to engage them. And, as far as the astronomy was concerned, I myself had previously given, in that forum, a skeptical talk (in my capacity as a hopefully reasonably competent amateur astronomy enthusiast) on non-

mainstream astronomical theories, which naturally dealt **only** with astronomical matters with which the members were previously unfamiliar and which met with a good reception. In contrast, I think that by-and-large they were not especially interested in hearing even about non-standard astronomy from a 'devotee'.

As a broad-based skeptic, I was in fact the only member of the audience to take a serious interest in Clarke's ideas. I had obtained and read the book (slightly more disciplined than the talk) during the preceding week, and I engaged him in public discussion afterwards. Clarke strays into my own discipline of linguistics in places and predictably makes various errors, relying on linguistically confused/ill-informed non-standard sources such as Zechariah Sitchin (on Sumerian) or simply arriving at his own amateur analyses through misunderstanding what he has read. In one case he gave an oral account of an issue (the texts on the Rosetta Stone) which actually contradicted the account given in his own book; and **both** accounts are wrong! Confronted (to his evident surprise) with a professional linguist, Clarke was (to his credit) happy to acknowledge these errors; but as usual this pattern of widespread error on my own 'home turf' induced doubt in my mind as to Clarke's reliability in respect of other subjects with which I was less familiar.

Another problem with Clarke's book involves the altogether minimal referencing, which amounts to occasional in-text summaries of the ideas of named authors with no specific citations (and these authors' comments are sometimes tendentiously misinterpreted) and one page listing YouTube videos produced by earlier non-mainstream thinkers whom he invokes in support of his thinking, accompanied by the invitation to 'buy yourself other books on this subject'.

There is no proper reference at all to mainstream academic sources. Readers (scholarly or otherwise) wishing to pursue the case further would thus have to do almost all the work themselves. Perhaps because of his limited awareness of scholarly norms but also in part because of his negative attitude to mainstream scholarship *per se* (see below), Clarke appears not to care about this issue: he writes entirely for a lay audience and sees no reason to respect academic norms by referencing in a careful, scholarly manner the sources supporting his views (even though these views patently require strong support because of their dramatically iconoclastic nature) or indeed those promoting the alternative mainstream views.

Clarke's choice of title for his book is another clear indication of his intended audience! His written English is also very informal and grammatically loose, and his tone is typically highly dogmatic (he admits that he struggles to reduce this effect, apparently because he is in general so very sure that he is right).

Clarke has written other works and 'churns out' short books and e-books at a rapid rate. Indeed, it emerges from correspondence that he regards this activity (which obviously is likely to involve the further dissemination of errors) as higher in priority than engaging with mainstream scholarship and subjecting his views to systematic, well-informed criticism. Like many such writers, he believes that mainstream scholars are essentially hidebound and are overwhelmingly biased against new ideas and outsiders. Where he does refer to them (as groups) in his book, it is with disdain. They purport to have special authority but in reality have none, and are not worthy of his serious attention or respect. He is indeed convinced that their rejection of iconoclastic ideas arises from bad motives (see below).

Clarke himself adopts absurdly self-indulgent criteria for the ‘proof’ of extraordinary claims regarding aliens on Earth, etc. (in places uncorroborated anecdotal reports seem to satisfy him). And, rather than seeking to convince experts whose views differ from his own, he is much more interested in persuading the ‘man in the street’ (who is typically less than well equipped to assess his claims against mainstream ideas) that he is right and the experts wrong.

Now careful skeptics will acknowledge that there is a degree of conservatism in the academic mainstream; but they will of course argue that (except where there really is palpable bias) this conservatism serves a useful purpose: it prevents the too-ready acceptance of novel ideas, encouraging their proponents to furnish strong evidence and argumentation (though some such thinkers are unwilling to undertake this task, seeing mainstream criticisms as biased and unfair). They will also suggest that most non-mainstream thinkers not only are inadequately informed but also exhibit **more** dogmatism than do mainstream academics. (On these points, see the discussion in the Introduction to my 2013 book *Strange Linguistics*.) However, Clarke, like most such writers, largely disagrees with these caveats, despite accepting that my own critiques of his ‘linguistics’ might be valid. (But see below on his willingness to exchange ideas – or at least to argue for his own ideas – in a specifically skeptical forum.)

Obviously, if Clarke’s program of persuading the ‘man in the street’ to accept ideas such as his were very successful on a broad, cross-disciplinary front, the gulf of thought between scholars and the general population would become truly vast, creating a deep-rooted ‘two-culture’ situation (a nod here to C.P. Snow for the term). This gulf is even now considerably larger than some ‘ivory-tower-denizens’, and indeed academics in general, might fondly imagine; some commentators already identify the

more popular ‘fringe’ ideas (e.g., the view that UFOs represent extraterrestrial spacecraft) as constituting the ‘real mainstream’ and regard careful scholars and especially skeptics as pig-headed ‘debunkers’ or even as ‘fanatics’ whose interpretations cannot be taken seriously. If this situation worsened, the recruitment of intelligent young people and of talented but hitherto untutored (or self-tutored) lay-persons into the scholarly world would become increasingly difficult. This is not, of course, to say that mainstream scholars are **always** right (even where there is a consensus among them) and unqualified amateurs wrong and fit to be ignored; but it would surely be unfortunate if entire amateur versions of disciplines, massively at variance with the academic mainstream but inadequately grounded, were to dominate popular thinking across entire communities.

Still worse, such amateur ‘paradigms’ might usurp the position of legitimate scholarship, as has indeed happened in cases where political considerations have intruded; one thinks of the baleful domination of academic thought in the Soviet Union by politically-favoured fringe thinkers such as the ‘biologist’ Trofim Lysenko and the ‘linguist’ N.J. Marr, and of the more recent effects on curricula (especially in the United States) of ‘Afrocentrism’ (see also below). At one stage the editors of the anomalist journal *Quest*, already anticipating the eventual triumph of their own ideas over current scholarly opinion, recommended that those hitherto deemed fringe should ‘forgive’ their orthodox opponents for suppressing or ignoring their ideas, and should then invite them to abandon what the anomalists themselves see as an unjustified excessive concern with ‘rigid’ standards of evidence and to join in with their own ‘exciting new paradigm’. (This last would naturally be unlikely to occur, even if the current academic mainstream really were actually unseated from ‘power’ by an intellectually-unwarranted quasi-Kuhnian paradigm-shift!) Similar (if

not always so ‘generous’) sentiments have been expressed over the years by specific non-mainstream groups such as the ‘American Epigraphists’ and some of the ‘Neo-Velikovskyans’.

Clarke himself has professional expertise in respect of engineering issues, and he is naturally strongest in this area. For example, he considers (along with various **un**-qualified authors such as Erich von Däniken) that the huge temple complex at Baalbek in what is now the Lebanon could not possibly have been constructed using known ancient engineering methods. Clarke also disputes the conventional dating of parts of the complex, but this is of secondary importance. He holds that Baalbek must have been built using C20/21-level technology, by an unrecognised technologically-advanced ancient human civilisation (Graham Hancock’s view) or by extraterrestrial aliens (von Däniken’s).

It was suggested that Clarke might, with my help, write a serious paper (perhaps to appear in this forum), putting forward his claims and arguments on this particular case. Somewhat to my surprise, he expressed himself willing to attempt this, possibly because he saw me as unusually willing to seek fair assessment for his ideas. I have made comments on an initial draft and am standing by.

The general tradition of work upon which Clarke draws does not always furnish good models for persuasive, careful scholarly writing. Von Däniken in particular is notorious for adopting a casual approach to ‘scholarship’. For example, in one of his books he openly (mis-)quotes *Exodus* from memory! One assumes that he owned a Bible but simply could not be bothered to look the passage up! Some other revisionist historians superficially appear more interested in referencing their claims than Clarke or von Däniken, but may provide ludicrously vague references to sources, etc. In his bizarre books on the ‘lost’ land of Mu, for instance, James Churchward frequently thought it sufficient to give references such as

‘Greek record’ (often in support of an obviously legendary or mythological narrative which he was inviting his readers to regard as sober history)!

Some more recent writers present their ideas more coherently and with more discipline than does Clarke, and might be regarded by unwary, academically-untutored readers as academically sound; but they may still manifest unwelcome features. The journalist Simon Keegan’s *Pennine Dragon: The Real King Arthur Of The North* (pp 227; 2016; emphasis in original of title) is identified in its ‘blurb’ (and in the text, in other wording) as ‘finally identify[ing] the legendary King Arthur Pendragon with a genuine historical ruler’ (based in what is now Yorkshire). Such forthrightness, not to say bombast, is vanishingly rare in genuinely scholarly work; in that context, it would be taken as implying a **very** unusual degree of (near-)certainty, and if this did not appear to obtain it would itself invite criticism.

This is not Keegan’s first book about Arthur; but he has not, it seems, learned how to present his material in a scholarly manner. Or maybe, like Clarke, he does not really care. But his comments (*for instance, see note 1*) suggest **some** interest in dialogue with the relevant academics. On the other hand, not only does he appear bombastic but in addition his referencing, if not as ‘bad’ as Churchward’s, is scanty and fearfully uneven. In one reference, he names an article and the website on which it appears, with no ascribed authorship (and no explanatory apology for this omission). On the very next page there is a reference to a named author ‘from Early British Kingdoms’ (is this another website?). Later there is a bare reference to ‘Britannia.com’, and another on the same page to a named author with no accompanying book/article-name. Elsewhere, Keegan refers to sets of manuscripts of texts exhibiting crucial differences, but without giving details, even in a note aimed at scholars rather than the general reader. There are no footnotes

or endnotes and there is no bibliography. Etc. And, while there is no real mainstream consensus in this case (the ‘default’ mainstream view is perhaps that there never was any one historical person whom one might identify with Arthur), it would not be unreasonable, in the context of a novel proposal for the identity of such an important and disputed figure, to ask for more and better-referenced attention to the academic literature containing its hard-earned knowledge. Again, a scholar wishing to pursue the case further would be obliged to undertake large amounts of routine work which Keegan should have rendered unnecessary. Like Clarke, Keegan does not appear to regard this issue as important.

Furthermore, Keegan frequently befuddles the non-expert reader, either deliberately or through a lack of concern. He cites statements in Welsh without translating them, leaving the reader without Welsh to take it on trust that he is interpreting them correctly. (One always instructs students writing assignments or papers to translate anything written in a language other than that of the text itself, as a matter of politeness and helpfulness. This is no insult to the scholarly reader, who may know fifteen languages but not **that** one!) And some of Keegan’s Latin examples are simply wrong (there can be no excuse for this).

More crucially: like many such writers, Keegan often seems to think that it is sufficient to argue that some historical scenario which would be convenient if it were true is not actually **excluded** by the textual and other data. But very many (mainly non-academic) authors have presented novel claims about the identity or location of Arthur, all disagreeing among themselves. He was not based in Yorkshire as Keegan claims, but in Southern Scotland or in South Wales or on the Wirral! Keegan needs to argue that his own interpretation is superior not only to the ‘default’ mainstream view mentioned above (no one historical ‘Arthur’) but also to these earlier proposals. But in fact he

hardly refers at all to other modern Arthurian thinkers who offer their own theories. (This is a common pattern among ‘Atlantologists’, ‘decipherers’ of the Phaistos Disk, etc.) And Keegan overtly proclaims a very strange view of the acceptable use of evidence in this area: ‘The evidence that Arthur never existed is flimsy compared to the evidence that he did’. But how could there ever be clear evidence that Arthur **never** existed (in any guise) at this remove? And in respect of the evidence **for** a historical Arthur: one does not believe in an ancient, poorly-recorded scenario merely because a) some sources do mention it (briefly and/or obscurely) and b) it is not impossible – especially where the original sources disagree with each other on specifics and may well have had their own political/cultural ‘axes to grind’. We are not justified in assuming, for instance, that the Battle of Badon was really fought, just because Gildas states that it was, or in simply trusting in the existence and historical accuracy of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s alleged Welsh-language source.

There are also various sheer errors in Keegan’s account. One of the most blatant involves his suggestion that parts of early Welsh names ‘are almost certainly plays on the [modern English] word ‘wall’, as in Hadrian’s Wall’ (his conventions). Even in the world of deep-fringe ‘linguistics’, chronologically absurd claims like this are particularly incoherent (even if the words in question lack established etymologies). Keegan is no philologist and his linguistic arguments are very loose more generally, but claims of this kind are obviously especially implausible.

Incidentally, Keegan is described as having studied medieval history at St John Rigby. Readers without a good knowledge of Merseyside might not realise that this is a (respected) sixth-form college, not a tertiary institution.

If Keegan really has a case, he has not presented it in a way that will encourage scholars to pay attention. But he might convince some of the

many who take an amateur interest in the legend of Arthur and are not sufficiently aware of these issues. Of course, it could be argued that other works advocating seriously non-mainstream ideas but composed and referenced in a manner more closely approximating scholarly writing (as is easier in these days of desktop publishing) are even **more** dangerous than books of this kind; they can be taken as truly authoritative, especially if explicitly presented as such, even by relatively astute readers who happen not to be versed in the relevant specific disciplines. There is of course a vast non-mainstream literature on Arthur, and some other recent books on this topic exemplify this point; one such is Francis Lot's two-volume work *The Island of Avalon*.

Another recent book is the lawyer Piers Morris' *They Exist* (pp 237; 2015), which asserts that 'there has been an interrelationship with advanced extraterrestrial intelligence from the beginning of human history' and is presented as 'a review of key literature on extraterrestrial existence'. The extraterrestrials are identified as reptilian and as having been involved in the genetic origins of humanity (this notion is in fact quite widespread).

Morris provides a bibliography, but no specific footnotes or endnotes; in the body of his text, he generally cites only authors and entire works. Apparently taking certain non-mainstream authors (William Bramley, the afore-mentioned Zechariah Sitchin, R.A. Boulay, Lloyd Pye, etc.) as authoritative, he presents their ideas as factual, often without offering any assessment of these ideas as compared with mainstream thinking on the matters in question. Objections are soft-pedalled (e.g., 'Some disagree with Sitchin's translations, but...'). At points Morris fluctuates between mythological/legendary material and points of established historical fact in the same paragraphs, which serves to downplay this contrast. Once again, the untutored reader is arguably misled into treating doubtful material as veridical and is hindered by the weak

referencing from examining the claims in detail.

Morris is not a linguist and makes some errors on this front. By way of support for his ideas, he also makes (in a forthright manner) some other specific factual claims which could be disputed (to say the least); and he interprets the Hebrew scriptures in tendentious ways which conform with his thesis, thereby suggesting that it is a mistake to regard deep-time Jewish beliefs (and thus Christian beliefs) as in opposition to the account which he himself gives for human origins (as most Christians would maintain).

Because Morris regards the case for the extraterrestrial origins of human DNA as so strong, he asks why 'intelligent design theory' as presented by Michael Behe and others is resisted as strongly as it is in the scholarly mainstream, failing to rehearse adequately the often persuasive counter-arguments which have been raised by mainstream evolutionists. This pattern is repeated elsewhere in the book, with the result that various non-mainstream views might appear to the reader to be more strongly grounded than they are. Indeed, Morris largely ignores mainstream academic opinion on a broad front. His wide-ranging 3-page bibliography includes almost no works of a mainstream or skeptical bent.

Failure to present mainstream objections to non-mainstream claims is common in such literature; indeed, Graham Hancock openly announces this as his own preferred manner of proceeding, likening such debates to courtroom trials where the opposing advocates obviously have nothing to gain from drawing attention to points which favour the other side. Writers such as Hancock and Morris generally share Clarke's opinion that mainstream interpretations and mainstream objections to revisionist thinking do not arise from genuine expertise but rather from bad motives (the desire to retain 'power' and credibility, suppress inconvenient truths, etc.), and they thus feel no compunction about leaving them out of consideration (except at

points where they believe they can easily demolish them). This is another way in which such books fail the interested and critical but untutored reader.

I return in closing to the general question of the devaluing, rejecting and ignoring of expertise and scholarship, as proclaimed most openly among these writers by Clarke. This topic is the subject-matter of the excellent 2017 book *The Death Of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge And Why It Matters* (pp xv+252), by Tom Nicholls. Nicholls is a professor of national security affairs at the U.S. Naval College and at Harvard. His theme is the increasing anti-intellectualism of American society (and much of what he says also applies to other 'western' societies). The most obvious manifestation of this in a skeptical context is the now prevailing (and of late often openly expressed) view that all opinions on a topic are equally valid and worthy of respect, regardless of the differing degrees of relevant knowledge and experience of those upholding them. Thus some undergraduates maintain that their pre-existing ideas (personal or culturally-grounded) about intellectual matters hitherto taken to involve discipline-specific expertise are on the same footing as alternative ideas which they are taught by their lecturers – despite typically being unable (at that stage) to mount either coherent support for the former views or coherent criticism of the latter. In addition, their cultural and personal sensitivities must supposedly be respected; views which they find 'offensive' must be excluded from curricula. This kind of stance clearly hampers both the dissemination and proper assessment of well-grounded established positions and the development of new knowledge through **rational well-informed** exchanges of ideas. An instance of this with which I myself am very familiar is the now often fierce insistence that poorly-supported, politically-motivated 'Afrocentrist' accounts of ancient history are at least as valid as the

established accounts and should be taught as such. My friend Mary Lefkowitz at Wellesley College in Boston notoriously fell foul of this when she critiqued some blatant Afrocentrist nonsense; her professional expertise in classical studies was dismissed as irrelevant, and neophyte objectors treated her not as an expert but merely as someone who had ‘learned’ the established ideas (which were in fact, they proclaimed, mistaken). Similar effects arise in the context of ‘creationism’ and more widely.

Naturally, as I said above and as Nicholls cheerfully concedes, it is not the case that mainstream scholars and experts more generally (in those fields where there really are genuine experts) are always right and unqualified amateurs wrong. But (except in the rare cases where genuine bias can be identified) serious scholars are much more **likely** to be right than neophytes or rank amateurs. Only occasionally is the opposite the case – and the onus is upon said amateurs to justify their claims, using whatever help they can muster. Failing this, where there is a

scholarly consensus this should be (provisionally) accepted.

Cases such as that of the qualified engineer Clarke theorising about Baalbek and other such ruins are somewhat different. But even here there is an onus upon such thinkers to treat scholarship with respect and to present their evidence for their alternative views with due care and attention. Watch this space!

Notes

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

ANNOUNCEMENTS

SKEPTICISM, SCIENCE AND RATIONALITY (GENERAL)

Sense About Science

Keep visiting the Sense About Science website for new developments:

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

Good Thinking

Make sure that you are on the Good Thinking’s Newsletter email list:

<http://goodthinkingsociety.org/>

Advertising Standards Authority

‘The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) welcomes the publication in full of Dame Janet Paraskeva’s independent audit of our performance against our Commitment to Good Regulation.’

<http://tinyurl.com/ycgcty3m>

Post-truth

All European Academies (Allea), which brings together 59 bodies including the UK’s Royal Society and Germany’s Leopoldina, have said that ‘in response to current challenges’ it would look into ‘the alleged loss of trust in science and evidence, its underlying causes, the way different disciplines are dealing with it, and questions on how valid knowledge can and should be acquired’.

<http://tinyurl.com/ya4mm8b2>

OF INTEREST

Unreliable news

From the New York Public Relations website: ‘The Breaking News Consumer’s Handbook. Rather than counting on news outlets to get it right, we’re looking at the other end. Below are some tips for how, in the wake of a big, tragic story, you can sort good information from bad. We’ve even made a handy, printable PDF that you can tape to your wall the next time you encounter a big news event.’

<http://www.wnyc.org/story/breaking-news-consumers-handbook-pdf/>

Plus: Rumour and ‘alternative facts’ surrounding the case of Dr Dao, and his ‘re-accommodation’ by United Airlines.

<http://tinyurl.com/ydaodlzs>

MEDICINE

The Nightingale Collaboration

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/>

Alternative medicine: General

‘Mum spent £50,000 on alternative medicine after boob job left her seriously ill.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yck2nth8>

‘Deluded billionaire gives UC Irvine \$200M to study homeopathy and “alternative” therapies.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y6vkr8mt>

Cancer quackery

A study has shown that, although rare, alternative medicine utilization for curable cancer without any conventional cancer treatment is associated with greater risk of death.

<http://tinyurl.com/y8cwltoh>

‘Quack healer who claimed he could cure cancer over Skype faces jail.’

<http://tinyurl.com/yb24s7tu>

‘Federal court orders disgraced wellness blogger to pay penalty after she sold a cookbook and app after claiming to have cured cancer naturally.’

<http://tinyurl.com/yd9k3avp>

‘Beware cancer cure diets that do more harm, warns widow.’

<http://tinyurl.com/ycqzxlx2>

Also: ‘Report: Attendance at a Pseudoscience Lecture on Gerson Therapy: On Tuesday the 15th of August at a Holiday Inn conference room in Liverpool two of my colleagues from the Merseyside Skeptics Society and I attended a talk entitled “Censored for Curing Cancer”. Also in attendance were around 70 members of the public – some of

whom were cancer patients The speaker, Patrick Vickers runs the Northern Baja Gerson Centre clinic in Mexico where, as Patrick described it, “we’re treating advance terminal diseases. Not just cancer but virtually every single disease we’re successfully treating, and we’re doing it with Gerson Therapy”.’

<http://tinyurl.com/y726wcwk>

Drug companies: Transparency index

‘The results of clinical trials are being routinely and legally withheld from doctors, researchers, and patients. This is a problem for industry-sponsored trials, and for trials funded by governments and charities. We have ranked all the world’s major drug companies, and a selection of smaller firms, by the commitments they make to clinical trials transparency. Next, we will be ranking the policies of non-industry trial funders.’

<http://policyaudit.alltrials.net/>

Chemotherapy for cancer

‘Chemotherapy may help cancer spread, new study shows.’

<http://tinyurl.com/y7kafhvb>

But ‘They do not demonstrate that chemotherapy is ineffective but rather point the way forward to improving chemotherapy regimens.’

<http://tinyurl.com/yblgyhkp>

Naturopathy

‘The journey of a “doctor” who joined the cult of alternative medicine and then broke out of it.’

<http://tinyurl.com/yabhoyuz>

And: ‘Jade Erick, 30, died in March 2017 after California naturopathic doctor, Kim Kelly, gave her an intravenous (IV) preparation of curcumin, a chemical constituent in the Indian spice turmeric that is over-hyped in alternative medicine. An FDA report released yesterday found that Imprimis Pharmaceuticals (NASDAQ: IMMY), a compounding pharmacy based in San Diego, California, mixed the curcumin emulsion product used in Ms. Erick’s treatment with ungraded castor oil that had a warning label stating, “CAUTION: For

manufacturing or laboratory use only.”’

<http://tinyurl.com/y9gkc8qk>

‘Naturopaths are fake doctors who, increasingly, are cosplaying real doctors.’

<http://tinyurl.com/ybtp7ck7>

Scientology and quackery

‘Fiona O’Leary, an autism activist from Cork, Ireland is taking on a Church of Scientology field group in faraway Clearwater, Florida. This week she filed a complaint with the Florida Department of Children and Families, alleging that children are being harmed by taking the Purification Rundown there, and is urging others to follow suit. She also alleges that autistic children are being mistreated by subjecting them to Scientology auditing.’

Autism

Mother investigated for giving son bleach enema to ‘cure’ his autism’.

<http://tinyurl.com/y8m7vffd>

Vaccination

‘Correcting Robert F. Kennedy Jr.’s vaccine “facts”.’

<http://tinyurl.com/ybe76x72>

‘The elimination of measles has been achieved in the UK for the first time, the World Health Organization says. The global health body classes a country as having eliminated the disease when it has stopped it freely circulating for at least three years. While there are still small clusters, many of these are brought in from abroad and they are not spreading. But health experts said there should be no complacency, warning there were several large outbreaks across Europe. The news comes just a week after it was announced England had achieved the target of getting 95% of children to have had the first dose of the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine by their fifth birthday. Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland were already achieving it.’

<http://tinyurl.com/y7a27v5h>

Efficacy of mainstream medication

A very informative article by Dr Harriet Hall appeared in July on the Science-Based Medicine website entitled ‘Most patients get no benefit from most drugs’. The article is mainly about the dilemma of whether or not to take statins and discusses the importance and limitations of the number-needed-to-treat (NNT) statistic – that is the average number of people that it is required to treat before one of them will benefit.

<http://tinyurl.com/y6ud5h4k>

Alkaline diet

Robert O. Young of San Diego has been sent to prison for 3yrs 8mths for practicing medicine without a license. Young wrote a book, *The pH Miracle*, which claimed to successfully treat low energy, poor digestion, aches and pains and disease, with an alkaline diet was sentenced for practising medicine without a license.

<http://tinyurl.com/y8q3t643>

Chiropractic

‘Chiropractic treatment, a \$15-billion industry, has its roots in a ghost story.’

<http://tinyurl.com/y7p4yofj>

Also: ‘A baby’s neck has been broken by a chiropractor in an incident doctors say shows the profession should stop treating children.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/p2ob3cb>

‘Can chiropractic care help a sick child?’ Apparently not:

<http://tinyurl.com/y9yy8y4n>

‘Why I’d never send my patients to a chiropractor’:

<http://tinyurl.com/y8fd2ajc>

And: ‘Malaysian chiropractor goes global with unorthodox hammer method. Spoiler alert: It is terrifying.’

<http://tinyurl.com/ya8nnpbb>

‘TO-MOR-GONE’

An Amish farmer has been convicted of selling a caustic poison as patent medicine. Samuel A. Girod claimed that ‘TO-MOR-GONE’ could cure skin disorders, sinus infections, and cancer. Girod was sentenced to 6 years in prison.

<http://tinyurl.com/yccay3gp>

Homeopathy

Failings in manufacturing by homeopathy manufacturer Raritan found by FDA:

<http://tinyurl.com/yb6smxzq>

‘The Spanish Ministry of Universal and Public Health has sent an instruction to all health departments to remind them that homeopathy is excluded from the portfolio of national health services. Furthermore, it outlaws practices described as pseudoscience and their promotion and development in public health centres.’ See:

<http://tinyurl.com/y9dp4vuv>

‘Why won't the UK's leading homeopathic firm provide evidence that its products work?’

<http://tinyurl.com/yaawhr4b>

‘Nearly 18 months after the Registrar of the Tamil Nadu Homeopathy Medical Council (TNHMC) had lodged a complaint of a major scam involving previous office-bearers, the Central Crime Branch (CCB) has registered an FIR against the council's former registrar and former president for allegedly issuing fake certificates to several people.’ See:

<http://tinyurl.com/y8mv3ztx>

There is a public consultation currently taking place on whether the NHS should stop the availability of certain medicines on prescription, including homeopathy and herbal remedies. You can submit your thoughts via a simple online form, and you have until October 21st to do so. Got to:

<http://tinyurl.com/ybtt627r>

‘Should homeopathy be banned? Homeopathy is pseudoscience. No scientific base or proof exists to support the bizarre theory that “like cures like”.’ Go to:

<http://tinyurl.com/ydgofa5s>

‘A nine-month-old baby in Connecticut had dangerously high levels of lead in her blood after chewing on a homeopathic “healing bracelet” used to ease teething pain.’ Go to:

<http://tinyurl.com/y8uzvdcv>

India gets first state-of-the-art homeopathy research lab.

<http://tinyurl.com/y7kbmlux>

Lightening process

‘Clinical and cost-effectiveness of the Lightning Process in addition to specialist medical care for paediatric chronic fatigue syndrome: randomised controlled trial.’ Original article at:

<http://tinyurl.com/y874r5tv>

Summarised at:

<http://tinyurl.com/y7nvpzzl>

For critical account see:

<http://tinyurl.com/ydd946q8>

Veterinary medicine

A magazine ad for Berrimans Pet Food, seen on 25 January 2017, featured the headline ‘Too Much Protein is Bad’. All About Dog Food, an online dog food guide, challenged whether the ad misleadingly implied that a high protein diet caused health problems in dogs. The complaint has been upheld by the Advertising Standards Agency.

<http://tinyurl.com/ydx127fl>

‘This morning, the Two Oceans Aquarium in Cape Town, tweeted that it was “nurturing their precious penguins” by giving them a range of quack treatments including ‘laser therapy, acupuncture and magnetic pulses’.’

<http://tinyurl.com/y7a27v5h>

Paolo Macchiarini

‘Scientific pioneer, superstar surgeon, miracle worker – that’s how Paolo Macchiarini was known for several years. Dressed in a white lab coat or in surgical scrubs, with his broad, handsome face and easy charm, he certainly looked the part. And fooled almost everyone.’

<http://tinyurl.com/yaetvcn>

Mother Teresa and the miracle that made her a saint

‘A lady namely Monica Besra had an ovarian tumour. She placed a picture of Mother Teresa on her belly and prayed. Then the miracle happened! The tumour disappeared magically. Vatican approved this claim as a miracle. So the gates were open for her to become a saint. Was Monica Besra’s ovarian tumour really cured by the supernatural powers of Mother Teresa’s picture placed on her abdomen? The

Missionaries of Charity insist it was. The Vatican has approved the story officially as a first-class miracle. The case of the miracle makers won’t stand in front of any court of law. Their witnesses have vowed to keep mum, not to contradict each other. Their certifiers are anonymous and untraceable. Their proof is obviously faked. And to top it all: their crown witness has vanished!’

<http://tinyurl.com/yaamms6d>

Slapping therapy

‘A Chinese “slapping therapist” has been charged with the manslaughter of a six-year-old diabetic boy. Hongchi Xiao, who has been promoting the controversial practice of slapping skin to release toxins from patients has been extradited from the UK to Australia over the death of the boy in Sydney in 2015.’

<http://tinyurl.com/ycxe5n8h>

PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHIATRY

Dyslexia

‘The STEP Physical Literacy programme: have we been here before?’

<http://tinyurl.com/y885fqng>

Memory

‘Think you can trust your recollections? Think again. Scientists are uncovering the shockingly common phenomenon of false memories.’

<http://tinyurl.com/yb6kp7rf>

From Chris French re ‘a planned series of 15-minute programmes from Monday 9 Oct to Friday 13 Oct on Radio 3 at 22:45 on the subject of memory. Five different people will be reading essays on various aspects of memory. One of them will be me (another will be my colleague, Prof Fiona Gabbert) but I don't know what night I'll be on. I'll be talking about childhood memories’.

Sleep paralysis

Chris French ‘will be on All in the Mind on Radio 4 on 31 October (yes, Halloween) talking about sleep paralysis and exploding head syndrome (yes, it's a thing)’.

'Grit'

'Let's dial down the hype about grit – new paper finds no association with creative achievement.'

<http://tinyurl.com/ycej83c4>

Learning styles

'Do you consider yourself a visual learner? When you see something, do you commit it to memory? Or do you perhaps learn faster by hearing new information? The idea of "learning styles" has been around since the 1950s, and the theory is still widely believed by educators and the public, according to a recent study in *Frontiers in Psychology*. But there's not much evidence that indicates the theory is true.'

<http://tinyurl.com/y8lmmn2d>

RELIGION

Exorcism

Demand for exorcists is soaring in France.

<http://tinyurl.com/y967kddr>

<http://tinyurl.com/y9gkc8qk>

Cults

Escaping Utopia: Growing Up in a Cult, Getting Out, and Starting Over by Janja Lalich & Karla McLaren Paperback, 30 Aug 2017.

<http://tinyurl.com/ybfsy5qp>

CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate change

It has been reported that 'All mentions of Australia were removed from the final version of a UNESCO report on climate change and world heritage sites after the Australian government

objected on the grounds it could impact on tourism'.

<http://tinyurl.com/ju48uqe>

'A claim by Britain's leading climate science sceptic, Nigel Lawson, that the world's average temperature has fallen in the past 10 years was based on an "erroneous" temperature chart, his think tank, the Global Warming Policy Foundation, has admitted. The former Tory Chancellor was interviewed on BBC Radio 4's Today programme about the release of former US Vice-President Al Gore's new film, *The Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power*, which describes how climate change is already having significant effects on the planet but also that the plunging cost of renewable energy means there is a solution. The film points out the world's average temperature had hit the highest on record for three years in a row – 2014, 2015 and 2016 – and an increase in extreme weather events.'

<http://tinyurl.com/ybxggo39>

POLITICS AND PUBLIC POLICY

Sex education

The weight of scientific evidence finds that Absence-Only-Until-Marriage programs are not effective in delaying initiation of sexual intercourse or changing other sexual risk behaviors.'

<http://tinyurl.com/yd7nyj5b>

Rudolph Steiner School

'An independent school deemed unsafe for children has apologised for its "past failings" as details about a teacher dismissed for gross misconduct were

revealed. Two Ofsted inspections of the Rudolf Steiner School in Kings Langley carried out last year unearthed serious child safety concerns, leading to a ban on accepting new pupils.'

<http://tinyurl.com/y8e8bnvg/>

And now: Britain's flagship Steiner school has been ordered to close amid fears over child safety.

<http://tinyurl.com/yamp35nn>

MISCELLANEOUS UNUSUAL CLAIMS

Psychics and mediums

Princess Diana (from beyond the grave) advised her medium to vote for Brexit.

<http://tinyurl.com/y9n5segx>

UFOs and aliens

'Is there a scientific explanation for all alien abductions?' Chris French (*for it is he*) gives the answer.

<http://tinyurl.com/yc4dfth>

Conspiracy theories

'Believing widely doubted conspiracy theories satisfies some people's need to feel special.'

<http://tinyurl.com/yagsptmd>

'Big cat' sighting

'The mystery surrounding a 'big cat' sighting in a Hampstead garden has been solved.'

<http://tinyurl.com/yczz5mme>

Cryptography

Voynich manuscript: the solution, by Nicholas Gibbs.

<http://tinyurl.com/y7andvbg>

UPCOMING EVENTS

QED

Question, Explore, Discover.

'QED is a two-day science and skepticism convention taking place at the Mercure Piccadilly Hotel in Manchester from the 14th-15th October 2017. Fantastic speakers from the worlds of science and entertainment will be joining us for a

weekend celebration of science, reason and critical thinking.'

<https://qedcon.org/>

THE ANOMALISTIC PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCH UNIT AT GOLDSMITH'S COLLEGE LONDON

<http://www.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://tinyurl.com/lwohd4x>

CONWAY HALL LECTURES LONDON

25 Red Lion Square, London
WC1R 4RL

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

CENTRE FOR INQUIRY UK

For details of upcoming events:

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

LONDON FORTEAN SOCIETY

For details of meetings:

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

COUNCIL OF EX-MUSLIMS OF BRITAIN

For details of meetings:

<http://tinyurl.com/y8s6od5r>

18TH EUROPEAN SKEPTICS CONGRESS

See 'European Scene' earlier.

SCIENCE EVENTS IN LONDON

Eventbrite lists a series of scientific meetings in London (some free, some not-so-free). At:

<http://tinyurl.com/m8374q9>

'The Community Science Programme takes place from 7 to 26 October 2017 with the majority of events taking place at the Mayor's Parlour at Kensington Town Hall, Hornton Street, W8 7NX. All events are free to attend. The evening of the 26th will concern paranormal topics, including a presentation by Chris French.'

<http://tinyurl.com/y8qw26ne>

'Funzing' organises evening talks at social venues in London, some being of interest to skeptics. See:

<http://uk.funzing.com/>

Logic and Intuition

The answer to the puzzle is 6210001000.

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>>