

THE SKEPTICAL INTELLIGENCER

The Quarterly Magazine of ASKE
THE ASSOCIATION FOR SKEPTICAL ENQUIRY
Vol 20, 2017, Number 4, (Winter)



Incorporating the Skeptical Adversaria: the ASKE Newsletter

Edited by Michael Heap

To access a Word or pdf copy of this issue, please contact the Editor at m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk. If you are an ASKE member in the UK and would like a paper copy, again email the Editor.

CONTENTS

Regular features and announcements

From the ASKE Chair	2	Language on the Fringe	5
Logic and Intuition	3	Of Interest	12
The European Scene	3	Upcoming Events	15
Medicine on the Fringe	4	About ASKE	16

Book reviews and commentaries

Mark's Bookshelf <i>Mark Newbrook</i>	8
---	---

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

Oh to be a dowser!

In November it was announced that 10 out of the 12 UK water companies had admitted to occasionally using water divining or dowsing to locate leaks or pipes (later communications by the companies indicated that their use of this method was very limited). Media reports informed readers and listeners that the scientific evidence for dowsing indicates that it is no more effective than guesswork, although there were some insistent voices to the contrary.

I have a family interest in dowsing. In 1963, with my parents and brother, I went on a touring holiday in Southern Ireland and we visited 'auntie' Alice (actually my mother's cousin) and 'uncle' Paddy in a village called Bunmahon in County Waterford. They lived in a typical white-walled Irish cottage and although they were poor they had quite a big garden, land being cheap in Ireland in those days. They also had a donkey called Billy. In the middle of their garden uncle Paddy had sunk a well. He had located the source of the water for this well by using his special gift: uncle Paddy was a dowser or water diviner. He demonstrated his ability to us by a taking a forked twig in both hands and positioning it over the well. The twig flipped over. My dad had a go but nothing happened, likewise when I attempted. But I believed in uncle Paddy's special power; at my young age, and when no one was coming up with an alternative explanation, I had no reason to doubt him, and family lore had it that companies had actually paid him to locate water on their premises.

I brought back with me to England two of uncle Paddy's dowsing twigs and for years they remained on our kitchen windowsill. But whenever I had a go with them nothing happened.

Years later a friend showed me two dowsing rods that he had found in the attic of a house he had just moved into.

These consisted of two slender metal rods, probably fashioned out of wire coat hangers, each bent at a right angle a few inches from one end. The dowser loosely holds the smaller shaft in each hand with the longer shafts parallel and pointing ahead and walks slowly forward. At some point the rods will swing inwards (or outwards depending on their initial position). To someone using the rods for the first time this comes as a surprise but it has a simple explanation that has nothing to do with the presence of water or water pipes.

I believed in uncle Paddy's special power; at my young age, and when no one was coming up with an alternative explanation, I had no reason to doubt him.

If the centre of mass (COM) of each rod is kept below the level of the fulcrum (where the corner of the rod is supported by the hand) the rods will remain in this position. It is therefore best to hold the rods with the COM at or just below this level (this can be accomplished by trial-and-error adjustments at the outset). Movements, deliberate or otherwise, affect the location of the COM of each rod relative to the fulcrum, and if it rises above the level of the fulcrum, gravity will cause the rod to swivel. These influences (which clearly must affect both rods in a similar way, otherwise only one rod would move) include slight movements at joints such as the wrist, elbow and shoulder, tilting movements of the body back and forth, and variations in the evenness of the terrain on which the person is walking that affect body posture. Eventually, the neophyte dowser may discover the actual mechanism triggering the movement of the rods, and the fact that at any time they can create this at will

may cause them to lose interest in the whole enterprise. This certainly happened in my case as I potted around my friend's house, and when I explained it to my friend, he lost interest also. I find it hard to believe that those who practise dowsing have not, at the earliest stages of their careers, realised the simple mechanism behind the movement of the rods (*note 1*).

None of the above involves ideomotor suggestion, the process whereby a seemingly involuntary movement occurs in response to the idea, suggestion or expectation of that movement. For ideomotor suggestion to operate, the person must have some cognisance of what the relevant physical movement is and when it is required, though one may argue that this knowledge could be at an unconscious level.

Hence the most parsimonious explanations of a positive response from someone familiar with dowsing are that the rods are raised (i) by chance, (ii) deliberately or (iii) under ideomotor influence. Speaking for myself, I believe it can be a combination of all three: when I am attempting to dowse, any sense that the rods are about to swing seems to trigger a voluntary or involuntary response to raise the shafts of the rods and thus create further movement. I find a subtle upward rotation of the wrist to be the best method; with practice, it is barely detectable by observers.

These factors alone may account for a better-than-chance performance in uncontrolled conditions where a dowser has some inkling from the environment where the target, say an underground stream, is likely to be located. In controlled conditions, dowsers typically attain 100% accuracy when they consciously know that they are in the immediate vicinity

of the targeted material and chance accuracy when they don't. I understand that in the case of the JREF Challenge, dowsing was the most frequently tested claim and no one was ever awarded the prize. ASKE has taken part in testing one experienced dowser, who was unsuccessful. Controlled studies, including one by GWUP, the German skeptical organisation, have provided no convincing evidence for the effectiveness of dowsing (see the Wikipedia entry for dowsing for a summary of these). So, depending on the circumstances, the phenomenon of dowsing by rods appears to be a combination of random, voluntary and involuntary influences on a simple physical response.

For the best part of 20 years I have been visiting schools during Science Week to talk about 'Science and the Paranormal' and I always do a demonstration of dowsing. The challenge is for the students to explain why the dowsing rods move and thus they learn a little more about force, gravity and, of course, human nature, the most interesting thing being why, for hundreds of year, so many people have believed that they possess this extraordinary ability and why they continue to do so to this day.

As for dear uncle Paddy, maybe he did possess a special gift. But thinking about it a bit more, finding water in Ireland may not be as impressive an accomplishment as all that.

Note

1. I recall many years ago on television the then president of the British Association of Dowsers purportedly showing that movements of his hand were not responsible for the movements of his rod (*are you sure you are still talking about dowsing? – Ed*). His method was to encase the held part of his rod in a sheath (an empty biro) so there was no direct contact between hand and rod. Surely this man knew that this would have no effect whatsoever on the movement that actually caused his rod to swing, namely the *upward* rotation of his hand at the wrist and not a *horizontal* rotation?



LOGIC AND INTUITION

Why always four?

Here is a puzzle to keep you busy in the New Year:

Choose any number.

E.g. Seventy eight

Count the number of letters.

Twelve

Count the number of letters.

Six

Count the number of letters.

Three

Count the number of letters.

Five

Count the number of letters.

Four

Count the number of letters.

Four

We're now stuck on four.

This always happens whatever number you set out with.

Why?

Is there a proof for this?

Is it true in French, German, Spanish, etc.?

Please email your comments to the Editor for the next issue.

'Science Friction'

'Finally, a documentary about scientists who get misrepresented by the media. Those TV documentaries you see, and the science experts they feature? Did you know that producers often edit them out of context, and twist their words, to make it seem like they promoted some pop sensationalism instead of the real facts? Science Friction is going to expose these faux documentaries by name, and will give the scientists a chance to clear the record. The film is intended for theatrical release. The networks are not going to like us very much, so we are crowdfunding the production, right here on this page. The people want honest science reporting!' More at: <https://sciencefriction.tv>.



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/>

17th European Skeptics Congress

This congress was organised by the Polish Skeptics' Club in cooperation with the Czech Skeptics' Club Sisyfos and took place from September 22nd – 24th, 2017 in the wonderful city of Wrocław, Poland. Videos of some of the presentations are available on YouTube by Google searching "European skeptics congress" videos'.

The 18th European Skeptics Congress

This will take place in 2019 in Ghent and will be hosted by the Belgian and Dutch skeptical societies.

The ESP - European Skeptics Podcast



Building a bridge for skeptics

<http://theesp.eu/>

Interviews with active skeptics are now over 100 in number, along with announcements about the skeptics' events across Europe.

29th EU Contest for Young Scientists

Brussels, 26 September 2017

<http://tinyurl.com/y7ybyfs8>

'The European Commission's top prizes for young scientists were awarded to Karina Movsesjan from the Czech Republic for "The role of

RAD51 mutations in cancer development", Adam Jan Alexander Ohnesorge from Switzerland for "The forgotten prisoners – Civilian prisoners of the Great War in Corsica" and Danish Mahmood from Canada for "W.I.N.I.T.S. (Wireless Interconnected Non-Invasive Triage System)".

'The three second prizes and three third prizes were given to projects from Poland, Canada, Ukraine, Austria, Bulgaria and Germany. A detailed list is available online.

'The winners were among 146 promising young scientists aged 14 to 20 who presented their projects at the 29th edition of the EU Contest for Young Scientists over the last days in Tallinn, Estonia. The winners shared a total of €53,500 in prize money, as well as other prizes such as science trips.'



MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

I remember our history teacher once telling us that one advantage of Queen Victoria's longevity was that whenever any of her ministers came up with a 'new idea', she was frequently able to inform them, 'We tried that years ago and it didn't work'. This memory now pops up in my mind with increasing regularity as the years roll by, particularly in relation to health fads and health scares.

My memory of the 1980s is that this was a particularly rich period for these issues. For example, at the present time there is some concern about whether aluminium may be a risk factor for the development of dementia (*note 1*). I recollect that there was a panic about this in the early 80s. Some people I knew even stopped using their aluminium saucepans and forewent their afternoon cup of tea, this

beverage having a high concentration of aluminium. I also recall a similar panic in the media about mercury fillings, which were touted as being the cause of all sorts of illnesses (see the Wikipedia's 'Dental amalgam controversy'). In response to this, some people had their mercury fillings replaced by other substances. This was the intention of a patient I saw who had multiple sclerosis. He displayed an enviable fighting spirit but feared he was losing the battle and felt the need for some psychological support. He had read somewhere that mercury amalgam could be the cause of certain autoimmune diseases and next on his list after seeing me was a dental practitioner willing to replace his fillings (*note 2*).

Around this time there was also an explosion in the number of people

claiming to have some kind of food allergy that accounted for whatever symptoms and problems they experienced in life. It was announced that many psychiatric conditions are not 'all in the mind' but are due to a reaction to certain foods. Often, claims like this are associated with a particular individual who makes a name for (usually) himself as 'a crusader for truth' (*note 3*). In this case it was the late Dr Richard Mackarness, then a psychiatrist at Park Prewitt Hospital in Basingstoke, who wrote a popular book in 1976 called *Not all in the Mind: How Unsuspected Food Allergy can Affect your Body and your Mind*. I have written more extensively about this in a previous 'Medicine on the Fringe' (*note 4*). Even psychologists were amongst those who attended training courses on recognising and

treating food allergy or intolerance; suddenly their patients were being put on exclusion diets. Thus, almost overnight they stopped being psychologists and became dieticians.

As I noted in my 2012 article, food allergy and food intolerance have failed to establish themselves as serious considerations in the mainstream assessment and treatment of people with mental health problems. But overvalued ideas like this tend to have a habit of springing back to life and the media still occasionally feature some 'crusader' who has made it their favourite hobby horse, with headlines such 'Depressed? Have you considered your diet?' (Google search, for example, Dr John Biffra). Naturally (*Bad pun – Ed.*) the alternative medicine industry continues to push these claims by offering patients expensive but useless allergy tests.

Vitamin and mineral deficiencies have often been suggested as possible causes of, or exacerbating factors in, many mental health problems and mainstream research continues to explore the evidence. Again, however, we see how such ideas can become overvalued and a crusade for some. In the 1980s a doctor who practised near Harley Street was heralded in the Sunday broadsheets when he proclaimed that anorexia nervosa should be treated as a zinc deficiency. I

recall one consultant psychiatrist with whom I worked shaking his head in sorrow and telling me that some of his anorexic patients had opted out of treatment and joined the stampede up to London to be treated by this doctor. Ten years, later a biochemist came to give a lecture to our university psychiatric department, promoting (unsuccessfully) the claim that schizophrenia was more or less caused by zinc deficiency.

Even psychologists were amongst those who attended training courses on recognising and treating food allergy or intolerance; suddenly their patients were being put on exclusion diets.

Still in the 1980s, a number of my psychosomatically-minded medical colleagues became very taken with the idea that much physical and psychological malaise is caused by hyperventilation and they treated their patients accordingly, namely by instructing them in diaphragmatic breathing. During Q&A sessions at conferences they would often jump to their feet and ask the speaker, 'Have you considered that your patient(s) might be hyperventilating?' One of

them got into trouble when he was covertly filmed offering an expensive course of therapy to an AIDS patient to correct his supposed habit of over-breathing, which the doctor had decided was responsible for some of the man's symptoms. Hyperventilation continues to be recognised as an important feature of anxiety, though nowadays it is treated more by cognitive than physiological means. I have not noticed any reigniting of the claim that it could be the underlying cause of many patients' mental health problems. But if and when it does, please excuse me if you hear me saying 'Here we go again!'

Notes

1. This is associated with similar - unverified - ideas about aluminium, vaccination and autism - see the medical section of 'Of Interest' in this issue.
2. In relation to the above note, there is now a scare that mercury in vaccinations is causing autism and various developmental brain disorders (see Wikipedia's 'Thiomersal controversy').
3. Mr Andrew Wakefield is a striking example of this.
4. *Skeptical Adversaria*, Autumn, 2012, pp 5-6. Available at <http://www.mheap.com/food.html>.



LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

Thinking without words

I have had much to say in this forum about the lay view that a language consists mainly of its **words**; grammatical and other structures, much less easily grasped by the untutored, are largely ignored. Another example: in a letter in *New Scientist*, 24/6/17, p 54, Clive Sherlock reported that his young trilingual daughter says that she does not **think** in **any** specific language, and that he himself, after Zen training, no longer thinks in his

native English (even though he himself is monoglot). 'Thoughts are no longer associated with words unless they need to be conveyed to others.' Once again it is apparently all about words! But what of the grammatical/logical structure, and most obviously the ordering, of complex thoughts – all of which varies from language to language? Is Sherlock saying that his complex thoughts are nowadays unordered and have no internal structure involving anything like grammar, until he comes to express

them? What of the logical relations between arguments in propositions? And, indeed, what of the point that even where words alone are in question, **many** words, and the associated concepts, are to a degree language-specific? Concepts are not **all** cross-linguistic, still less universal, and one-to-one translations are not **always** available. (One might argue that not **all** thought is even quasi-linguistic in nature. True enough; but clearly **some** is, as Sherlock concedes in referring to his own pre-Zen practice! Or perhaps

even structurally complex thought can be non-linear; this might be analogous to cases where two or more morphemes are signalled by different body parts at the same time in signing.)

Do they say that, too?

In this and other contexts, I have also discussed the work of amateur dialectologists in this forum. A striking point which I have not so far made is that such authors, who are typically of local origin and are aware mainly of the contrast between the usage of their own locality (of varying degrees of ‘broadness’) and standard usage, often talk as if the non-standard forms they cite are found **only** in the specific area in question. Sometimes this is true – for example, *utch* (‘I’) was used only in one fairly small part of Somerset (‘Utchland’) in the last phase of its existence – but more often even the broadest usage is more widespread. An instance: as is well documented in both amateur and professional dialectological work, forms such as ‘Cheshire’ *pon* (‘pan’) are also current in broader Staffordshire speech and indeed more widely across the North Midlands. Errors such as this serve to exaggerate the distinctiveness of the relevant dialects and accents.

Diffusion and diffusion

In Chapter 1 of my 2013 book *Strange Linguistics*, I discuss the notion of **linguistic diffusion** or **differentiation**: the idea that a language may differentiate into various later languages, which are therefore regarded as ‘genetically’ related and which tend to retain broad structural similarities and to share large amounts of vocabulary (despite often now being used mainly in different areas). (For instance, everyday Latin differentiated into French, Spanish, Italian, etc.) I contrast this with the notion of **language contact and ‘borrowing’**: unrelated (or distantly related) languages may come into contact when their speakers come into contact, and may influence each other, coming to share some specific forms (words, etc.). (Thus English and Chinese now share some vocabulary.) It is notable

that the term *diffusion* is also used in this latter context. Some historical linguistic theories (mainstream and non-mainstream) differ crucially in respect of the emphasis which they place on ‘genetic’ relatedness on the one hand and borrowing on the other; and it is important to be aware of how the term is being used in each case, by linguists of all brands and by other scholars. The same point can be made regarding other, non-linguistic aspects of human culture (artefacts, religious beliefs, etc.) For a possibly confusing example, see p 16 of Michael Witzel’s 2013 book *The Origins of the World’s Mythologies*.

Words with the Greek-derived suffixes -phobia, -phobic, etc. originally referred to fear... But they have now come to refer, in some cases, to hatred of (or at least unreasonable opposition to) a group or their cause.

Meanings: change and error

Words with the Greek-derived suffixes *-phobia, -phobic, etc.* originally referred to fear, as did the Greek word itself. But they have now come to refer, in some cases, to hatred of (or at least unreasonable opposition to) a group or their cause. The best example: *homophobic* was at one time used to mean ‘afraid of gay people’. But one reason for such fear might be awareness of one’s own suppressed gay feelings. And so, after a while, *homophobic* was often being used more specifically to refer to fear of this specific kind. And because this fear was often deemed (not unreasonably) to be at the root of many (though, of course, not all) cases of expressed hatred of gays, *homophobic* was increasingly used to refer simply to **hostility** to gays – adopted for **whatever** reason, and not always involving fear at all (for instance where beliefs about the will of God are involved). The usual meaning and reference-range of *homophobic* have shifted.

Some words have specifically local references and are not used much outside the communities in question – but they may be used by outsiders discussing or coming into contact with a relevant community, and such usage may in some cases be ‘off-target’. For example, the Australian English word *outback* refers to the vast desert and near-desert areas which make up the centre of Australia and parts of its northern and north-western coastal strips. It does **not** normally refer to more populated rural areas, nearer to larger population centres, which English people would call ‘the countryside’; these areas are known to Australians as the *bush*. But visitors can get confused! During the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, a car full of British journalists on an excursion drew up in the western New South Wales town of Jerilderie (the scene of one of the C19 outlaw Ned Kelly’s escapades). The driver asked a local ‘Is this the outback?’ To his surprise, this caused vast hilarity. And a Brit who had been an exchange student at a university in Melbourne told me (and she was clearly not joking) that while there she had lived in the ‘outback’. I was amazed; even with a car, the commuting would have been ridiculous! Victoria, the smallest and most densely populated mainland state of Australia, has very little outback, all of it hundreds of kilometres west of Melbourne. ‘Oh, where?’ ‘Cranbourne.’ Cranbourne is an outer suburb of Melbourne, with a large population. It is not even ‘bush’. The bush starts quite a way past Cranbourne! (Universities in the outer suburbs **are** called *bush unis*; but this **is** a joke!)

Riders to ‘Expertise and Scholarship Devalued and Ignored’

A few additional points can be added to the last issue of ‘Mark’s Bookshelf’:

I remarked that if the program adopted by Simon Clarke and others, aimed at persuading the ‘man in the street’ to accept ideas such as theirs, 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. The recruitment of intelligent young people and of talented but hitherto untutored (or self-tutored) laypersons into the scholarly world would then become increasingly difficult. In fact, this has already occurred in some African-American and Australian Aboriginal communities, where self-appointed mentors and leaders have discouraged the young from learning ‘white man’s’ history or science and have urged them to embrace wildly non-standard ideas about the past which exaggerate the status of the groups in question. Some young Aboriginal people, for example, have been persuaded that their ancestors were able to fly in the air unaided and even travel into space, because of spiritual powers. Instead of learning science and technology, they want to re-embrace their myths and to recover these powers.

I referred to Clarke’s uncaring ignorance of scholarly procedures. In fact, many advocates of non-mainstream ideas display gross ignorance of wholly normal scholarly conventions. I was once attacked for referring to the ‘medium’/non-mainstream ‘Egyptologist’ Ann Walker by her surname alone, even though this is (nowadays) very much the norm in academic writing. (Things were different in the past; for example, in 1957 an academic reviewer of Noam Chomsky’s first book referred to the author as ‘Mr Chomsky’ throughout.) And my colleague Jane Curtain and I were lambasted by devotees of the highly non-mainstream ‘Reverse

Speech’ theory for using our correct academic address, ‘Monash University’, when identifying ourselves as the authors of papers, emails etc. These people clearly had no concept of an academic address and took the view that only university officials, representing Monash in a corporate sense, were entitled to use the university’s name in this way. Indeed, David Oates, the founder of RS, kept referring to his intellectual dispute with Monash University, even though we repeatedly pointed out that this dispute was with us, not our employer.

Some young Aboriginal people ... have been persuaded that their ancestors were able to fly in the air unaided and even travel into space, because of spiritual powers.

I also referred to 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. The ideas of those identified as ‘experts’ have no special status. Another instance: when Jane Curtain & I were working critically on Reverse Speech as skeptical linguists, it was suggested by RS devotees that we should see ourselves not as ‘experts’ (a term which we had not actually used) but instead as ‘investigators’. This latter term is popular on the fringe, and often serves to obscure or discount the contrasts between the levels of expertise possessed by different groups of ‘investigators’. If Curtain & I were only other ‘investigators’, our qualifications in linguistics (about which we **had** been explicit) were not to be seen as especially important, and our comments had no special status. (Other RS devotees criticised our philosophy of science, as manifested in this material, as importing informal logical fallacies. We disagreed, and

said so – but at least these latter critics were attacking what they saw as specific faults, not simply discounting our expertise.)

Another aspect of this disrespect for learning involves the use of mocking article-titles. For example, one maverick linguist who sought to debunk the conservative mainstream thought of the distinguished historical linguist Donald Ringe entitled his paper ‘Ringe-A-Rosies’. Even if he had (or thought he had) a strong case against Ringe, there was no call for this. And such titles are very rarely used in mainstream comment on mainstream work. (Even where a skeptic is discussing blatantly ‘fringe’ work, they are not especially common.)

Further considerations suggest themselves in respect of the promulgation of grossly non-mainstream ideas such as RS. I hope that it goes without saying that serious skeptics will never seek to censor their opposition or to deny a platform to anyone with any views whatsoever to express on a given topic. This ‘Free Speech’ policy applies no matter how ignorant or offensive these people may appear, and includes the (largely pseudo-academic and often non-academically motivated) ‘denial’ of historical events such as the Nazi Holocaust and of scientific (near-)facts such as anthropogenic global warming – which obviously has to be countered **somehow** but (I urge) **not** by measures which are themselves illiberal. (On this view, exceptions to this principle, special cases which all must be fully justified, might arguably be slander or libel, the unscrupulous advertising of clearly dangerous fringe-medical products/methods, open incitement to violence or threats of violence, child pornography, shouting ‘Fire!’ when there is no fire, etc.)

Deborah Lipstadt (who successfully defended a libel suit aimed at her by the Holocaust-denier David Irving), Claire Fox (author of *I Find That Offensive!*) and Mike Hume (author of *Trigger Warning: Is the Fear of Being Offensive Killing Free Speech?*) are among the ‘good skeptics’ who have

argued forcefully for the toleration of all opinions. But of course these scholars also argue for the right to **criticise** or to openly **dissent** from such opinions as appear to warrant same (a right which the various groups of shrill advocates of ‘safe spaces’ and such seek to deny). See in addition the work of Frank Furedi, who argues for tolerance (i.e., non-censorship) where fringe or ‘pet’ ideas are concerned but for no more – not active celebration of nonsense, as is sometimes demanded, nor even the treatment of all points of view as worthy of serious attention (and, he also argues, there is no right not to be offended).

So: all these authors concur that those who **disagree** with any viewpoint (however fashionable or ‘politically correct’ it may be) – particularly (but not exclusively) those with relevant expertise – are equally entitled to express their disagreement, preferably with whatever evidence and/or argumentation they can muster. In the context of genuine free speech, skeptical challenges are crucial, and it is crucial that they themselves be not discouraged by censorship. And I suggest that this is how skeptics, mainstream scholars and experts more generally should seek to counter the ideas of the ignorant, the prejudiced and those who deny their expertise without good reason.

Geometric figures, God and disproof

Last time I discussed varying interpretations of the notion of atheism. It is notable that some atheists, noting that there can be no empirical proof of a universal negative, are ready to ‘concede’ that the existence of God cannot actually be **disproved**. See for example the comment by Page & Navarick on p 54 of *US Skeptic* 22:2 (2017). But in fact one **can** prove, logically, that **some** things do not exist. There cannot possibly, for instance, be any round squares, because the notion of a round square is self-contradictory (no geometric figure can be simultaneously round and square, by definition). And, while the notion of God may not be as **obviously** self-contradictory as that of a round square, it is possible to argue that it is in fact ultimately self-contradictory in more subtle ways, and is thus excluded from the realm of the possible. Though an atheist myself, I personally think that this view is overstated – but it is not **clearly** wrong.

Public domain? Who may read what?

I recently wanted to find out something about a Leeds University MA thesis of the 1970s (and maybe to lay my hands on a copy). I was told, however, that data protection laws required me to

seek the permission of the author, and all that the university could do was try to contact him and give him my contact details. I was in fact unable to trace the author; the person who eventually emailed me said he was a different former Leeds student with the same name. (Long-standing readers may recall a similar event which occurred in a much earlier phase of this still mysterious matter!) And of course the author of any thesis will eventually die; what will be the situation then? There seems to be no notion here that work for which one has been awarded a postgraduate degree should be available to interested parties, as it surely should be (just like a published book) – for the sake of accountability and the free exchange of information. Why such secrecy and control?

I was so troubled by this scenario that I emailed my own postgrad *alma mater*, Reading, to ask that my 1982 PhD thesis be placed in the public domain, so that prospective readers did **not** have to seek my permission in the future. Reading reacted with surprise. ‘**Of course** our past theses are available, as is all the relevant information about them! You don’t have to do anything.’ Great news! But how can different universities in the same country have such divergent understandings of the law on this point?

REVIEWS AND COMMENTARIES



MARK’S BOOKSHELF

Mark Newbrook

Gef! The Strange Tale of an Extra-Special Talking Mongoose

Christopher Josiffe

Strange Attractor Press (London),

2017, pp 404

As discussed in Chapter 8 of my 2013 book *Strange Linguistics* and in my comments in this forum on alleged ‘Bigfoot-talk’, etc., there are various reports of non-human animals using

language – either human languages or hitherto unknown languages of their own – and often possessing other human-like skills (mathematical, etc.). A few of these reports involve, even more dramatically, apparitions of what appear to be the spirits of deceased animals. One of the most striking cases of this specific nature involved a ghostly mongoose (initially mis-

identified as a weasel) which went by the name ‘Gef’ (pronounced ‘Jeff’). During the 1930s, Gef allegedly interacted with the Irving family, who lived on a farm at a remote (and reportedly numinous) location called Cashen’s Gap near Dalby in the Isle of Man. He sang and spoke intelligently in English and other languages.

Sometimes Gef allegedly travelled, alone or with the family members, around Man and beyond, notably to Liverpool – although he was not clearly seen by anyone outside the family. Photographs purporting to show him are unconvincing. Nevertheless, he became famous, especially in Man itself under the name ‘The Dalby Spook’ (the word *spook* applies to paranormal entities of various kinds associated with hauntings). The psychic investigator Harry Price visited the farm and looked into the case (see below on his ideas and his book on the subject). The farm buildings themselves later fell to ruin and were partly demolished in 1971; but, when I myself visited the Dalby area in 2014, I found that the story was still very familiar to locals (as did Josiffe on his extended visit four years earlier).

Christopher Josiffe is a cataloguer at the Senate House Library, University of London. Having taken an interest in Gef, he has studied the relevant materials held in the Harry Price Library and Archive, and in the Society for Psychical Research archive at Cambridge University Library, and he has conducted interviews and perused sources in the Isle of Man itself. Josiffe has previously declared his belief that some sort of anomalous phenomenon was genuinely taking place in this case; he expands upon his interpretation of the matter in this new book, which is the result of seven years’ meticulous research.

One valid point which is made in the book is that it is difficult to see a motive for fraud in this case. The Irvings themselves were, it seems, quite convinced of the reality of Gef. The story appears altogether unbelievable at first blush, especially as it involves an animal which is not indigenous to Man or indeed to Europe. Some people who have expressed belief in Gef have had their sanity called into question, notably in 1936 when Harry Price’s associate Richard Lambert ended up by issuing a successful writ for defamation in this context. No-one else appears to have

made much money from the story. Of course, none of this proves that the story should be regarded as factually true.

The family suggested at one stage that Gef was the result of cross-breeding between a weasel and a mongoose, and that this explained both his enhanced intelligence and his human-like phonation.

Gef was reported as claiming that he had been born in India (as would be expected) in 1852 and had been haunting the Cashen’s Gap site for over twenty years when his interaction with the family began. His oral output included much laughter and also speaking and singing in English, Manx (still current in rural Man in the early 20th Century), Hebrew, Russian, Spanish, Welsh, etc. He sang *Ellan Vannin* (the Manx anthem), English hymns, and popular songs in English, Manx, Spanish, etc. Under pressure, he claimed some largely passive knowledge of ‘Hindustani’ (Hindi/Urdu), which would fit in with his claimed origins – but (as in cases of human ‘xenoglossia’ = speaking or understanding languages which one has not learned [in **this** life!]) the evidence of his grasp of the language (including small amounts of actual output) was unconvincing (as Josiffe himself has confirmed).

Some of Gef’s oral behaviour suggested rote learning rather than any real understanding; for instance, if interrupted he would resume later at **exactly** the same point in the text in question, and he would sing in ‘gibberish’ in an accent reminiscent of the Hindi or Urdu which he had allegedly overheard on Liverpool docks. His voice was clear and human-like (which suggests that his vocal organs were not – after death, at least – those of a mongoose; although he could still also screech like a mongoose), but extending well above any adult human voice, resembling a

typical teenage girl’s pitch when he was at the top of his range. Gef’s accent in English was apparently Manx, as was some of his usage.

The family suggested at one stage that Gef was the result of cross-breeding between a weasel and a mongoose, and that this explained both his enhanced intelligence and his human-like phonation; but this does not seem to make sense.

Gef reportedly resisted Price’s investigation, complaining about his skepticism; and this might be read as evidence of a hoax. Price did indeed conclude that a ‘psychological’ explanation appeared the most likely. Josiffe devotes an entire long chapter to the possibility of a hoax or other non-paranormal explanation; in this and in other chapters, he compares the case with other well-known cases such as that of the Cottingley Fairies.

Josiffe remains open-minded as to the true explanation for Gef. He has suggested that Gef was ‘formed’ from the collective minds of the three family members. Support for this view is furnished by the fact that Gef’s reported interests and knowledge overlapped substantially with those of the family; his ability to speak some Hebrew/Yiddish (like the father) and fragments of other languages known to some degree to other family members was also interesting in this context. On the other hand, this kind of evidence might alternatively be read, again, as suggesting a hoax. However, Gef also appeared to have some knowledge of other matters such as song lyrics which were supposedly **unknown** to the family (although, if any of this at all is true, these lyrics and such may have been known to associates of the family or to others whom Gef had encountered on his travels).

Josiffe’s specific interpretation depends, of course, upon acceptance of the reality of collective minds and related phenomena more generally. Most mainstream scientists and most skeptics would obviously resist these notions.

On Gef, see also Harry Price’s report *The Haunting of Cashen’s Gap*:

A Modern 'Miracle' Explained; (London, 1936); Paul Chambers, *Paranormal People* (London, 1998), pp. 16-20; 'Talking mongoose', *Paranormal* (online) (18 January 2010); an earlier work by Josiffe: 'Gef the Talking Mongoose', *Fortean Times*, 269 (2010), pp. 32-40; and sources cited by Josiffe, notably including 'Fortean' texts from 1977 and 1982.

Amarigna & Tigrigna Qal Hieroglyphs for Beginners

Legesse Allyn

AncientGebts.org Press (Los Angeles), 2009, pp 70

Amarigna & Tigrigna Qal Roots of English Language

Legesse Allyn

AncientGebts.org Press (no location given), 2014, pp 122

The earlier of the two books discussed here is a general work focusing upon (a) a claim regarding the readings to be ascribed to Egyptian hieroglyphs and (b) an associated claim regarding the origins of familiar modern languages. The more recent book (which is more likely to engage non-specialist English-dominant readers with an interest in etymology and language origins) is one of a series of books expounding the latter claim as it applies to specific languages, or rehearsing the author's views on other more specific issues such as the reading of the Rosetta Stone.

Background: since (and before) the accepted C19 decipherment of the hieroglyphic and associated scripts used to write Ancient Egyptian, there have been many non-mainstream proposals regarding spoken and written Egyptian, including divergent interpretations of the scripts and of the language itself, as well as of the relationships between Egyptian and other scripts/languages. For a summary, see my article 'Non-Standard Theories Involving the Ancient Egyptian Language', in *The Skeptical Intelligencer* 17:1 (2014), pp 9-10.

Some of these non-standard theories involve the 'Afrocentrist' view that the ancient Egyptians were essentially black Africans (on this specific issue, see the section 'Black or not?' in my 'Language On The Fringe #35' in *The Skeptical Intelligencer* 19:4 (2016), pp 5-7). More specifically, there is a tradition of non-mainstream work linking Ancient Egypt and its language with the very largely black African society of Ethiopia, a long-standing independent society situated relatively close to Egypt and especially close to the territory once called 'Nubia' with its familiar ancient connections with Egypt (indeed, some of the pharaohs were Nubians).

Some of these non-standard theories involve the 'Afrocentrist' view that the ancient Egyptians were essentially black Africans.

The most common linguistic aspect of this involves Ge'ez, the ancient language of Ethiopia, which is related to Egyptian but only distantly. Ge'ez and related modern Ethiopian languages are written in the Ethiopic script, which is an 'abugida' (one symbol per syllable, divisible into attached parts representing individual phonemes) and which appears to have originated either in South Arabia or in Ethiopia itself; the script itself appears unrelated to the Egyptian scripts. Exaggerated claims have been made by Ethiopian authors without an adequate knowledge of linguistics (notably Ayele Bekerie) about the properties of this script and of other aspects of early Ethiopian language and culture (including the above-mentioned links with Egypt). Some of these claims are tendentiously endorsed by better-known non-Ethiopian African writers such as Saki Mafundikwa (see again 'Black or not?').

A recent contributor to this body of work is the Ethiopian writer Legesse Allyn, an 'amateur Egyptologist', who

argues (most explicitly in the older, general book) that the Egyptian hieroglyphic script (to which he gives the name *Qal*) actually represents the words of the languages Amarigna (usually called 'Amharic' in English) and Tigrigna (more usually called 'Tigrinya' in linguistics texts); these languages, he claims, were dominant in Egypt itself in dynastic times (5,000-2,000 years BP). The pronunciations of all Egyptian words/sound-sequences, as represented hieroglyphically, must therefore be reinterpreted in this light. Anyone who can read Amharic or Tigrinya and learns to read hieroglyphs can thus decipher Egyptian texts authoritatively.

Both Amharic and Tigrinya are familiar languages; they are still spoken today by millions. Amharic, descended from Ge'ez, is the main language of modern Ethiopia, and Tigrinya, also related to Ge'ez, is current both in Ethiopia and in neighbouring Eritrea.

Prima facie, one might ask why Allyn thought it more probable that the forms of these two languages might be found represented in ancient hieroglyphs rather than those of Ge'ez, which is **known** from a date much closer to those of the inscriptions in question. Points of this kind immediately arouse suspicion as to the specifically linguistic expertise of the author. This suspicion is intensified when one reads (*note 1*) comments such as 'Did you know that hieroglyphic characters do not represent letters? It's true. When hieroglyphs were invented, no other writing existed. So hieroglyphs do not represent letters'. This is risible. Firstly: some other scripts **pre-date** Egyptian hieroglyphs, notably cuneiform as used to write Sumerian. Secondly: individual characters in scripts do not 'represent letters' (except when one alphabet is being transliterated into another). If a script is alphabetic, each character **is** a 'letter'; these letters (approximately, at least) represent **phonemes** of the relevant spoken language, which obviously existed before it was written (even in

the case of the very first scripts, alphabetic or other). (In an abugida – or indeed, less transparently, in a syllabary – individual characters represent **sequences of phonemes** making up syllables.) So there is **no** anomaly in the idea that hieroglyphs might represent ‘letters’ = phonemes, as they did in dynastic times – whether or not they were **initially** used in this way. At this point, Allyn appears linguistically naïve. Thirdly: on Allyn’s account, how would hieroglyphs come to represent the sounds of Amharic and Tigrinya, as he claims?

In addition, Allyn ignores the grammatical differences between Egyptian and his two favoured languages (yet another example of an amateur ‘linguist’ focusing unduly upon vocabulary). On grammar, see further below.

As noted, Allyn’s *Amarigna & Tigrinya Qal Roots of English Language* is one of a series of more specific books produced by him; each such book furnishes Amharic and/or Tigrinya etymologies for a large number of words in the modern form of the language in question, and is clearly aimed (as is apparent from the ‘blurb’) at persuading speakers of that language that much of their vocabulary is derived from these languages, and thus promoting Afrocentrism. Of course, this is only a new version of the familiar fanciful claim to the effect that a specific language dear to a non-mainstream writer should be regarded as an *Ursprache*/Proto-World. The languages discussed here by Allyn include Chinese, German, Japanese and Spanish.

Each word-specific entry in each of these books presents the Amharic & Tigrinya words, the Egyptian hieroglyphs supposedly representing these words (‘originated as...’) and etymological information about the forms of the word in question in the relevant modern language and in related languages. This information is attributed to the Online Etymological Dictionary (*note 2*) which was compiled by Douglas Harper; the main

source is said to be Weekley’s *An Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* (1921), but others are listed. For English, the ‘OED’ (!) material lists forms according to sub-families of Germanic and Indo-European, and appears largely sound as far as it goes; but in general Allyn himself does not appear to have done any more than cut-&-paste repeatedly from his source into his own text.

Allyn proclaims that Amharic & Tigrinya ... were brought out of Africa at that time and thus provided the roots of (all?) later languages. Here he displays his ignorance of the range of rates of linguistic change.

Allyn’s use in this context of terms such as ‘rooted’ suggests that he regards the historical relationships between Amharic & Tigrinya and modern languages (at least some; see below) as ‘genetic’ (each entire modern language discussed by Allyn is descended from these two languages) rather than merely involving the ‘borrowing’ of particular linguistic items (words, etc.) in a contact situation unknown to mainstream historians and historical linguists. This would make the forms genuinely cognate, and **systematic** patternings of correspondence would therefore be expected if the links were genuine. (On cognatehood and associated issues, see Chapter 1 of my 2013 book *Strange Linguistics*.) But in fact the similarities between the forms appear **unsystematic**, and in many cases they are in addition very approximate indeed (e.g. Amharic *gara* meaning ‘mountain’ and given as the source of English *hill* and its Indo-European cognates). Allyn himself offers no comment on or justification for the etymologies he proposes, and so they must stand or fall – obviously, they must provisionally fall – in the absence of actual evidence.

In addition, Allyn provides no discussion of grammatical or

phonological systems, which are absolutely central to any claims involving ‘genetic’ relationships between languages. Neither is there any general discussion of the alleged ‘genetic’ affiliations between the languages. The details would depend upon exactly when the linguistic diversification is supposed to have occurred, but given what Allyn says about the exodus from East Africa (see below) much older ancestors of the languages in question, going back at least as far as Proto-Indo-European and the like, would be involved, rather than recent forms in specific languages. This fits in with Allyn’s practice (familiar to observers of the ‘linguistic fringe’; Laird Scranton proceeds in a similar but even less sophisticated way) of devoting each section of his work to one modern language, without adequate attention to its known ‘genetic’ affiliations. One must suspect that – like most amateur ‘historical linguists’ – Allyn has insufficient linguistic expertise to deal convincingly with such matters (or even to concern himself with them).

The ‘blurb’ for this book refers to the current mainstream view that modern humans migrated out of East Africa some 50,000 years BP (though a somewhat greater time-depth may be needed in order to allow time for the ancestors of the Aborigines to reach Australia). Allyn proclaims that Amharic & Tigrinya (long before they were used in Egypt, of course) were brought out of Africa at that time and thus provided the roots of (all?) later languages. Here he displays his ignorance of the range of rates of linguistic change. 50,000 years of linguistic change at any known rate would obliterate any evidence of ‘genetic’ relationships (recognisable cognates, etc.). Compare cases such as that of Welsh, German and Russian, all demonstrably related (Indo-European) with a common ancestor used less than 10,000 years BP but displaying **very** few similarities discernible to non-linguists. To be recognisable today as source languages, Amharic & Tigrinya would have had to diversify into other

known languages long (40,000 years?) after being 'brought out of Africa'. But then they would surely have undergone massive changes in the interim; it would be misleading to describe Amharic & Tigrinya themselves, in anything like their known forms, as having been 'brought out of Africa'. There is, in fact, no reason to suppose that Amharic & Tigrinya existed *per se*

so long ago. Even in Egyptian dynastic times, Ge'ez, not the later Amharic, was current in Ethiopia.

Another of Allyn's errors involves his reliance (shared with David Leonardi and such) upon the seriously dated work of E.A. Wallis Budge as a source of mainstream Egyptological interpretations of the hieroglyphs. But in any event Allyn's 'evidence' for

ascribing Amharic & Tigrinya readings to hieroglyphs is tendentious and unpersuasive, to say the least – as also applies to his other claims

Notes

1. See for example <https://plus.google.com/+LegesseAllyn>
2. <http://www.etymonline.com>.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

SKEPTICISM, SCIENCE AND RATIONALITY (GENERAL)

Sense About Science

Keep visiting the Sense About Science website for new developments:

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

'We are delighted to announce the winner of the 2017 John Maddox Prize for standing up for science: Dr Riko Muranaka. A journalist and lecturer at Kyoto University, Dr Muranaka is recognised for her work championing the use of evidence in public discussions of the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) vaccine.' See:

<http://tinyurl.com/ybsjvf5q>

Good Thinking

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

<http://goodthinkingsociety.org/>

Websites of general interest

'The Credibility Coalition is working to establish the common elements of trustworthy articles. As many independent projects are now working on fighting misinformation and analysing trust, a common framework is needed.' At:

<http://tinyurl.com/ya2nkrq>

Also: 'Friends of Science in Medicine (FSM) was formed at the end of 2011 to emphasise the importance of having health care in Australia based upon evidence, scientifically sound research and established scientific knowledge. The founders of FSM were and are

concerned about the increasing number of health courses and interventions on offer to Australians that fall far short of this standard, as well as the inadequacy of the measures that are supposed to protect students and consumers from such practices.' At:

<http://www.scienceinmedicine.org.au/>

And: 'While the bread and butter of Gizmodo UK is in the bits and bytes of technology, we have a lot of fun in the off-topic areas, with many of the stories being filed in the WTF category. Bookmark this page for the sillier stories, from ridiculous examples of body-art, to... sausages made of skittles?' At:

<http://www.gizmodo.co.uk/tag/science/>

Research practices and integrity

'A recent paper in *Child Development* has caused concern by alleging a causative connection between non-ionizing radiation and a host of conditions, including autism and cancer. In this work, we outline why these claims are devoid of merit, and why they should not have been given a scientific veneer of legitimacy. We also outline some hallmarks of potentially dubious science, with the hope that authors, reviews and editors might be better able to avoid suspect scientific claims.' At:

<https://peerj.com/preprints/3355/>

'Evidence to House of Commons Sci Tech Select Committee on Research Integrity...It's a very interesting inquiry overall. In the session before

you can see Ivan Oransky from RetractionWatch and others.' At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y8e7om9j>

'Researchers find oddities in high-profile gender studies: Exclusive: Strange statistics, lack of collaborators, and ethical questions remain unaddressed.' At:

<http://tinyurl.com/ycbhnbzb>

From Sense About Science and the National Institute for Health Research: Five steps to help you involve the public in communicating research. At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yblq58t3>

and:

<http://tinyurl.com/y9k4c2tr>

'Many academics are eager to publish in worthless journals.' At:

<http://tinyurl.com/ybdngmqx>

Could Lowering The P-Value Threshold Benefit Research? At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yb3aylaf>

Critical thinking

Principles of Curiosity is a free film from Skeptoid Media. It presents a general introduction to the foundations of scientific skepticism and critical thinking, focusing on a simple process called 'the three Cs'. At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y94rgbjh>

Pseudoscience, etc.

'Another year, another round-up of the dangerous and the daft. There was so much to choose from this year so this is just the tip of the iceberg of nonsense on stilts. As ever, it's divided into health, diet and general craziness.'

<http://tinyurl.com/ybgdsbuq>

OF INTEREST

‘Gwyneth’s Goop website is handed accolade for WORST pseudoscience nonsense after promoting sex dust, vaginal steaming and bio frequency healing stickers.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y7psoetg>

Forensic science

‘UK judges to get scientific guides.’

<http://tinyurl.com/ya4txbuj>

Evolution

‘Galapagos finches caught in act of becoming new species.’

<http://tinyurl.com/ybo8ftmq>

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

The Australian government is removing private health insurance subsidies from a range of natural therapies. At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yc8dyool>

‘Science-Based Satire: Alternative Medical Adverse Events on the Rise.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/ycaqkpcu>

‘I recently attended ... an integrative medicine conference called “Get Your Life Back NOW!” held in Orlando, FL on November 3-4, 2017. There were actually three separate but related events that weekend: a conference for medical professionals, a conference for the general public, and a \$350-per-plate gala called Doctors Who Rock in honor of the “game changers of the global integrative health movement” like Dr. Andrew Wakefield, Dr. Joseph Mercola, and Dr. Lee Cowden.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yc78u8qc>

Useful website

Health News Review The mission is to improve the public dialogue about health care by helping consumers critically analyse claims about health care interventions...’ At:

<https://www.healthnewsreview.org/>

Medical research

‘What happens when a clinical trial fails? ... (T)he vastly more common experience in the life of a clinical scientist is failure: A pivotal trial does not meet its expected outcome. What happens then?’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yafl12hh>

Vaccination

More cases of measles reported in Gloucestershire outbreak. The outbreak remains centred on the fee-paying Wynstones Steiner school. ‘Apparently vaccinations are on offer, but we are not told how many families are taking up the offer.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yc2zcsp6>

And: ‘A woman in suburban Detroit has been sent to prison for seven days for failing to vaccinate her nine-year-old son. Rebecca Bredow, 40, agreed to provide her son with immunisations in November, during a court battle with her ex-husband – who wanted their son vaccinated. But on Wednesday she told a court: “I couldn’t bring myself to do it.”’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yaelkh7m>

Also: ‘In 2016, an estimated 90,000 people died from measles – an 84% drop from more than 550 000 deaths in 2000...’ ‘Saving an average of 1.3 million lives per year through measles vaccine is an incredible achievement and makes a world free of measles seem possible, even probable, in our lifetime,’ says Dr Robert Linkins, of the Measles and Rubella Initiative (MR&I) and Branch Chief of Accelerated Disease Control and Vaccine Preventable Diseases at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y8mxbvzd>

‘Professor Christopher Exley: The latest darling of the antivaccine movement’ (re autism and aluminium). At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y73vwhnm>

and

<http://tinyurl.com/y8au2t13>

and

<http://tinyurl.com/ybquxkb5>

And: ‘What makes some parents fall for anti-vaccine messaging?’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yb35koua>

Meanwhile: ‘Three years before launching an offshore herpes vaccine trial, an American researcher vaccinated patients in U.S. hotel rooms in brazen violation of U.S. law, a Kaiser Health News investigation has found’. At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yapahjly>

Cancer quackery

‘A cancer charity has appointed a digital nurse to combat “fake news” online, which they say leaves patients “scared and at risk of bogus cures”. Macmillan Cancer Support found two-fifths of people with cancer looked up information about their diagnosis on the internet. One in eight of those went online because they didn’t fully understand what their doctor had told them. Glaswegian nurse Ellen McPake, who landed the job, says she wants to correct the misinformation that exists’. At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y95t7r7r>

‘Creeping quackery: “Integrative” cancer care spreading in NIH-supported centers.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yaegoctu>

Likewise: ‘The quackery of “naturopathic oncology” is metastasizing.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/ydb6pcf1>

Meanwhile: ‘This systematic evaluation of oncology approvals by the EMA (*European Medicines Agency*) in 2009-13 shows that most drugs entered the market without evidence of benefit on survival or quality of life. At a minimum of 3.3 years after market entry, there was still no conclusive evidence that these drugs either extended or improved life for most cancer indications. When there were survival gains over existing treatment options or placebo, they were often marginal.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/ya3uxsw8>

And: ‘A quack who claimed to be able to heal cancer patients over Skype after he saw the soul of dead woman fly out of her body was hit with a £4,700 court

bill today. Jerry Sargeant, 39, claims to have flown in a spaceship and be able to 'edit your karmic blueprint' on his website 'Star Magic Healing', Westminster Magistrates Court heard.

<http://tinyurl.com/y8gzpr63>

Also: See review of *The Woman Who Fooled the World: Belle Gibson's Cancer Con* by Beau Donnelly & Nick Toscano, Scribe at:

<http://tinyurl.com/yc7axod5>

'Dr Patrick Vickers of the Northern Baja Gerson Centre in Mexico will deliver a riveting two hour lecture of "The American Experience of Dr Max Gerson, M.D." The lecture will present the indisputable science supporting the Gerson Therapy and it's (*sic*) ability to reverse advanced disease.'

<http://tinyurl.com/yb8nm4bo>

Homeopathy

'Queensland pharmacy academics have assisted a *Courier-Mail* investigation into homeopathic medicines for kids – which turned out to be made from sugar.'

<http://tinyurl.com/y7s2w65n>

'NHS England calls for homeopathy to be blacklisted; Enfield CCG ends homeopathy funding.'

<http://tinyurl.com/yaq4h7y6>

...see also 'Items which should not be routinely prescribed in primary care: Consultation Report of Findings, Version number 1, First published: 30 November 2017' at:

<http://tinyurl.com/y82h9wjg>

And 'The Society of Homeopaths: failing to make the case for homeopathy'. At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y7m5jgao>

Meanwhile: The FDA says it's going to take a tougher approach to the \$3 billion-a-year homeopathy market. 'People may be putting their trust and money in therapies that bring little or no benefit in combating their ailments, or worse — in products that may cause serious and even irreparable harm', FDA Commissioner Dr. Scott Gottlieb told reporters'.

<http://tinyurl.com/y8u2u7py>

and

<http://tinyurl.com/ybeet2wy>

HIV

'A doctor affiliated with Gwyneth Paltrow's Goop calls HIV as the cause of AIDS "an assumption".' At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y8gawmqj>

Diets

Does the alkaline diet really work and is there evidence to support the controversial claims made about its health benefits? At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yalxc23n>

Also: 'Dietitians like me don't take the Pioppi Diet seriously.' At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yd8u9whq>

Nasal sprays

'A poster, in a London Underground train, for Boots' "COLD & FLU DEFENCE Nasal Spray" featured text that stated "clinically proven to defend against cold and flu"... Following a complaint to the Advertising Standards Authority, The ad must not appear again in its current form'. At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y9zzmwkg>

Placebo (and nocebo)

Expensive medicines can seem to create worse side-effects than cheaper alternatives. At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yd4rshb3>

Original article at:

<http://tinyurl.com/ybqog8b7>

And: 'The placebo effect is amplified when doctors appear likeable and competent.' At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yamrvtwg>

Veterinary medicine

'Veterinary regulator (*the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons*) blackballs homeopathy in animals.' At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y8ub6j5o>

'What is homeopathy for dogs and should vets be allowed to use it? The Telegraph Vet's view.' At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yc8bm585>

Also take a look at 'Why homeopathy "works"' at:

<http://tinyurl.com/yb3ld5pp>

'Denise Smith, 58, from Northampton, treated the cat's leg wound with manuka honey, believing it had healing properties, according to the RSPCA. She was found guilty of causing unnecessary suffering to a cat at

Wellingborough Magistrates' Court. The animal - called Blacky - had to have its leg amputated. The RSPCA said Blacky survived surgery and was successfully rehomed, but had to be put to sleep when the cancer returned.' At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y7cpnn58>

PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHIATRY

Exploding head syndrome

'Of all the sleep disorders, "exploding head syndrome" (EHS) has arguably the most intriguing name. EHS has been described as "a sensory parasomnia characterised by the perception of loud noises and/or a sense of explosion in the head when transitioning to or from sleep. These noises are not associated with significant pain, but lead to abrupt arousal and feelings of fright".' At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yc5fs4sj>

Exploding head syndrome and sleep paralysis

Take part in Goldsmith College's Big Sleep Survey: At:

<http://www.sciencefocus.com/bigsleepsurvey>

Brain imaging

How a focus on rich educated people skews brain studies. At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yc369tcx>

Autism

'A woman who says that the Church of Scientology in Dublin offered her a €1,600 detoxification programme that would cure her autistic son has complained to gardai.' At:

<http://tinyurl.com/ycmmupk4>

Participants for research

Please spare 15-20 minutes to participate in a study of beliefs and personality. At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y8m4a3tr>

POLITICS AND PUBLIC POLICY

Skeptical politician

'Speaking at a science conference in Ottawa on Thursday, Canada's newly appointed governor general, Julie Payette, directed some harsh comments

towards climate skeptics, astrologists, and believers of “divine intervention”.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yajd6qhc>

ECOLOGY

Climate change

BBC apologises over interview with climate denier Lord Lawson. ‘The complaint centred on two statements by Lawson: that the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change “has confirmed that there has been no increase in extreme weather events” and “according to the official figures, during this past 10 years, if anything, mean global temperature, average world temperature, has slightly declined”.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/ya3ptal5>

Since then: ‘Ofcom has launched an investigation into the Today programme after it allowed Lord Lawson to make inaccurate comments about climate change. Four BBC science presenters told us how they think the corporation should cover climate controversies.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y8kor8pn>

Meanwhile: ‘This “warrior” for climate skepticism actually looked at the evidence and changed his mind.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y9qzf6m7>

Also: How well have climate models projected global warming? At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y8qdv36g>

RELIGION

‘Christian education’

‘International Certificate of Christian Education: ready for university?’

<http://tinyurl.com/y7o9z76x>

And: ‘Putting Life Back Together after Accelerated Christian Education’. At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yccjsnsd>

Cults

The Facebook site below is ‘A page of resources, information, links, events by different leaders, organizations, survivors, experts on cults, trauma, abuse, emotional manipulation.’

<http://tinyurl.com/y95wvdkp>

MISCELLANEOUS UNUSUAL CLAIMS

‘Intuitive Writing’

Video in English of an experiment on ‘intuitive writing’ by Czech Skeptics.

<http://tinyurl.com/ybhhl9h>

Nibiru

The Earth has not been destroyed by a planet that does not exist. The mythical

planet Nibiru was meant to destroy Earth on September 23 after a Christian numerologist claimed it was about to collide with our planet. After the prediction flopped, some claimed Nibiru would instead trigger apocalyptic earthquakes on November 19 that would obliterate our planet. In response to the rumours, a top Nasa scientist said the planet can’t exist because its gravitational forces would have already stripped Earth of its moon.

<http://tinyurl.com/y8l6bt3p>

Ghosts

Why do people see ghosts? Read what experts say.

<http://tinyurl.com/y7mvzju8>

Spontaneous human combustion

‘Did a pensioner spontaneously combust while walking in a London Street?’

<http://tinyurl.com/yasghgit>

Smelling salts

‘They offer players a putrid punch in the nose but likely little actual performance boost. So how exactly did smelling salts become an essential part of NFL game days?’

<http://tinyurl.com/yb26cvw9>

UPCOMING EVENTS

EUROPEAN SKEPTICS PODCAST

The website of the ESP has a calendar of events of skeptical interest taking place all over Europe. At:

http://theesp.eu/events_in_europe

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>

18TH EUROPEAN SKEPTICS CONGRESS

See ‘European Scene’ earlier.

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>

SCIENCE EVENTS IN LONDON

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

<http://tinyurl.com/m8374q9>

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

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

HUMANISTS UK

The 2018 convention of Humanists UK will be held in Newcastle over the weekend of 22–24 June. Tickets are on sale now.

<https://humanism.org.uk/convention2018/>

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>>