

THE SKEPTICAL INTELLIGENCER

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Incorporating the Skeptical Adversaria: the ASKE Newsletter

Edited by Michael Heap

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CONTENTS

Regular features and announcements

From the ASKE Chair	2	Language on the Fringe	5
Logic and Intuition	3	Of Interest	15
The European Scene	4	Upcoming Events	21
Medicine on the Fringe	5	About ASKE	21

Book reviews and commentaries

We Do Things Differently – The Outsiders Rebooting our World by Steve Dulson	10
Mark's Bookshelf Mark Newbrook	11

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

More on ideomotor suggestion

In the Winter 2017 issue of the *Skeptical Intelligencer* I discussed dowsing, or water-divining, using metal rods and mentioned the ideomotor effect whereby a seemingly involuntary movement occurs in response to the idea, suggestion or expectation of that movement. Ideomotor suggestion, though often cited as *the* explanation of the apparently spontaneous rotation of the dowsing rods is, as I stated, actually one of three possibilities, the others being deliberate movement of the rods and incidental movements that happen naturally as one is walking along holding the rods in the horizontal position. In all three cases the key movement is the lifting of the centre of gravity of the rods above their respective fulcrums at the hands and gravity will do the rest.

The ideomotor responses (IMR) is the primary explanation for several claims of paranormal phenomena that usually involve groups of participants; these include table turning, table tipping and the Ouija board. IMRs in responsive individuals can be demonstrated by the postural sway test, arm levitation, and ‘hands drawn together’. In the first of these one stands in front of or behind the person and suggests that their body is gradually swaying more and more, backwards and forwards. One then emphasises one of these directions – e.g. ‘Your body is swaying forward more and more ... etc.’ With arm levitation one suggests that one of the person’s arms is getting lighter and lighter and will start to float up in the air. In the case of ‘hands drawn together’ it is suggested to the person that in each of their outstretched hands they have a powerful magnet and the magnets are pulling their arms and hands closer together.

I personally am not very responsive to any of the above three suggestions but there is another one that does work for me and that is the suggestion of pendulum movement (which, amongst other things is used by some as a dowsing method). For demonstration purposes at meetings I make my own pendulums but sometimes my wife lends me her pendants as well, on the condition that they are all returned. The suggestion is given to the person holding the pendulum that it will shortly begin to swing (the direction can be specified or not) and when this happens, suggestions are given that the movement will increase in amplitude. I believe this works well because it only requires a tiny movement of the hand or fingers to create a noticeable sway of the pendulum. In fact one may not even need to have someone else repeat the suggestions: self-suggestion works with me. (Don’t give up if it doesn’t work at first on yourself; after some familiarisation with the procedure I found it started to work for me.)

Pendulums were used by some psychotherapists (and maybe still are) as a way of ‘communicating with the patient’s unconscious mind’.

Now this is where the fun starts. Place a blank sheet of paper under the suspended pendulum and give the suggestion (or concentrate on it if you are doing it yourself) that as you are thinking of the message ‘yes’ the pendulum will begin to swing, all on its own, in one orientation (usually left-right, up-down, clockwise or counter-clockwise) to communicate that message ‘yes’. If this happens, draw the direction on the paper. Then do the same for the message ‘no’ and mark the paper accordingly. If you feel

inclined you can do likewise for the message ‘I don’t know’ and even ‘I don’t want to tell you’. Now you can ask the pendulum any questions that require the answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’. For demonstration purposes I usually start with factual questions about the person - ‘Was Tracey born in England?’, ‘Has Tracey ever been to Japan?’, and so on (note the use of the third person). Likes and dislikes may be the subject of further questioning – e.g. ‘Does Tracey like pork sausages?’. If you are going to ask more personal questions you may first ask permission, thus: ‘Do I have permission to ask if Tracey is happy in her current job?’ Only if the response is ‘yes’ is the question asked.

If you are doing this on your own you are free to ask any questions you like. I once met a woman at a meeting who told me that she and her husband used pendulums when making decisions such as whether to move house or not. ‘It doesn’t always get it right’ she informed me.

Pendulums were used by some psychotherapists (and maybe still are) as a way of ‘communicating with the patient’s unconscious mind’. ‘Did something happen when Bill was a child that is still troubling him?’ might be one question. If a ‘yes’ response is elicited a further question might be ‘Did it happen before Bill’s tenth birthday?’. And so on. An important caveat is that this is not a method of establishing ‘the truth’, and its dangers are obvious (e.g. the creation of false memories).

Nowadays, the preference is to use ideomotor finger signals, usually in the form of slight twitching movements of the fingers (and sometimes the thumb) of one or both hands. The procedure is on the same lines as that for the pendulum (one finger for ‘yes’, another finger for ‘no’, etc.). With patients (in the past) and demonstration subjects I usually ask the person to support one

arm on the table or arm of the chair with the hand hanging loosely. The movements may be difficult for some members of the audience to see.

I don't think there is anything wrong in telling the person that it is their 'unconscious mind' that is providing the answers. But this explanation is far too simplistic from the standpoint of a modern understanding of the human mind and smacks of magical thinking. The procedure may be better seen as a safe way in which patients can communicate with their therapist, and indeed with themselves, about complex and potentially very upsetting aspects of their life, while the normal means of communication – face-to-face verbal exchanges – allow them to maintain their usual psychological defences. The therapist may ask, 'How did you get on with your mother?'. 'Great! She was marvellous' the patient, say Nita, may reply. But the relationship may have been more complex and troublesome than Nita's response would suggest. By assigning the answer to something as slight as the flicker of a finger, of which Nita might not even be aware, *perhaps* she can start to broach the

possibility that sometimes things were not 'marvellous' and that maybe there were some feelings of hurt, anger and rejection along the way.

This way of understanding IMR signalling is not too far from everyday communication by unconscious 'body language' and other non-linguistic effects whereby one message is delivered consciously in speech form, while a contradictory message is discernible in more subtle physical cues. 'Had a good day at school?' a parent may ask their child on his or her arrival home. 'Yes' may be the reply, but that slight lowering of the head, averting of gaze, or whatever, may convey the opposite message.

There has been little research on the nature and therapeutic application of IMR signalling. I recently came across a paper published in 2012 (*note 1*) which reported a non-clinical laboratory experiment comparing verbal yes/ no responses with those indicated by a Ouija board. Briefly, in a yes/ no general knowledge test, when participants said they did not know the answer, verbal responses were, as expected, 50% correct but Ouija-board answers were 65% correct.

This experiment has been heavily criticised in the skeptical literature (*note 2*) and it certainly cries out for replication. But, just because a Ouija board was used, we skeptics shouldn't immediately feel obliged to go on the offensive. Maybe IMRs offer a more sensitive means of responding to uncertainty than a straight yes/ no verbal response. (Here I am reminded of experiments on 'perceptual defence' in which words presented on a screen too briefly to be identified may nevertheless evoke a physiological response when they have negative emotional valence). If I were researching this, I would prefer to use a pendulum or even IMR finger signals rather than a Ouija board.

Notes

1. Gauchou H.L., Rensink R.A. & Fels, S. (2012). Expression of nonconscious knowledge via ideomotor actions. *Conscious Cognition*, **21**, 976-982. At: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22377138>.
2. Dunning, B. (2017) Ouija Boards. At: <http://skeptoid.com/episodes/4591>.



LOGIC AND INTUITION

Why always four? (*continued*)

The puzzle in the Winter 2017 issue provoked a number of contributions from readers. Recall that you write down any number, (or any word for that matter) count the number of letters, write that number down, count the number of letters, and so on. Whatever your original number, you always converge on the number four. Why is this and is there a proof?

Before I summarise comments by readers, here is another example of what I believe is termed *iteration*. Start with any number; if it is even divide it by 2 and if it is odd multiply it by 3 and add 1. Do this with the resulting number....etc. and you will reach the recurrent series 4, 2, 1. Give it a try – it

works every time. (*Very useful when you're waiting in the dentist's – Ed.*)

Back to the earlier example. Readers Jon, Raj, Mark (Newbrook) and I agreed on the following.

Firstly, In Jon's words, 'For numbers above 4 (*in English*) the number name always has fewer letters than its referent so the process results in decreasing numbers until 1, 2, 3 or 4 is reached. If 1, 2 or 3 the process converges on four.'

And Raj notes that four is the only number that has the same number of letters spelled out as the number itself.

Moreover, there appear to be no 'reciprocal pairs' of numbers (my terminology) to get stuck on. For example, supposing our ancestors had decided that the integer 3 is called

'three'. Now consider the following chain:

Seventy seven, twelve, six, three, six, three, etc.

You could also end up repeating a series of numbers (see below).

So I don't think there is a simple mathematical proof for this 'mathematico-linguistic' puzzle

Now, what about other languages? It seems that the above conditions must apply but Mark notes that 'in some languages numerals have different case- and/or gender-marked (spoken and) spelled forms; one would have to choose from these in counting letters. Further, some languages are written not in alphabets but in syllabaries or abugidas, where each character represents a syllable rather than a

phoneme (see below for Tamil); we need to consider how to handle such cases in this context. Even where a language is written alphabetically it may use a different alphabet, and there may not be one agreed system of transliteration into the Roman alphabet (and do we use the original or the transliterated forms, in any case?). And in all languages there may be variant forms for letter-names e.g. in different dialects, or in different periods’.

Jon informs us that Spanish would converge on cinco (5). Raj tells us, ‘I tried this exercise in my mother tongue Tamil and it seems to converge at number three. Number three in tamil is

expressed using three Tamil (*letters*) (mu + in + ru)’. Mark comments, ‘Nice example. Note the syllabic Tamil script (one ‘letter’ per syllable rather than – roughly – one per phoneme as in a true alphabet). Not that this affects anything to be printed, but just to be clear: the Tamil script does represent syllables rather than phonemes but it is an abugida like Ethiopic, not a true syllabary like Japanese kana’. (*You’ll have to look this up – Ed.*)

Mark observes that in French there is no integer with the same number of letters as its referent. And I discovered a recurrent series of numbers as follows:

Quatre (4), six, trois, cinq, quatre, etc.

Mark notes a reciprocal pair in Ancient Greek:

Tesseris (4), okto, tesseris, etc.

Jon uses a dialect version of ‘four’, namely tessera, in Modern Greek to give the following reciprocal pairs:

Tessera, epta, tessera, etc.

But he also notes that pende (or pente), has the same number of letters as its referent (5) so we might also have instances of convergence on 5 (e.g. if we start with the number 20 which is ikosi).

Now, according to Mark, in the case of the Welsh language (*You may go home now – Ed.*).



THE EUROPEAN SCENE

European Council for Skeptics 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/>
ECSO now has a new Twitter handle, @SkepticsEurope.

The ECSO website now has comprehensive calendar of skeptical events taking place across Europe.

17th European Skeptics Congress

Susan Gerbic has written a five-part account of her experiences at the above congress which took place from September 22nd – 24th, 2017 Wrocław, Poland. To access each of these, simply Google ‘Skeptical Adventures in Europe’.

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 around 115 in number.

The ProVax Challenge

‘As many of you know, the lack of vaccinating is becoming a serious issue (again, not only) in Europe. That is why the Czech Skeptics Club Sisyfos has created the #ProVaxChallenge.

‘It is a challenge for all, who are not afraid of needles. And an even bigger challenge for those, who are. Join MUDr. Jaromir Sramek, the chairman of the Czech Skeptics Club Sisyfos, in a 2018 vaxathon.

For further details click on the ECSO website (see above).

European Scientific Cooperative on Anthroposophic Medicinal Products

From the blog of Edzard Ernst:

‘The European Scientific Cooperative on Anthroposophic Medicinal Products claims that “there is a need for a regulatory framework for anthroposophic medicinal products

(AMPs) in Europe. The existing regulatory requirements for conventional medicinal products are not appropriate for AMPs”’.

For further information click on:

<http://tinyurl.com/y7cpcy73>

Esprit & Matière

Memoirs of a Former Mystic

Currently in progress, ‘This is a film where a former spiritual leader dares to expose what she once taught and believed in so fondly. After 10 years of being a New Age guru and iconic Crystal Child, Jessica Schab, aka Jessica Mystic, chose to quit her ‘mission’ and started deconditioning herself from the esoteric ideas that had ruled her life for so long.

‘This documentary takes us into the mysteries of gullibility, fantasy and self-deception, and makes us question why we give them so much power over our thinking. Through an unusual story, we discover how well-meaning beliefs so often have unsuspected dramatic consequences.

‘Using self-irony and offbeat humour, Jessica challenges us to be more sceptical and to detect the numerous psychological pitfalls we don’t think we are susceptible to.’

The film has a dedicated website, www.memoirsofaformermystic.com.

Electromagnetic hypersensitivity

Tim Trachet of the Belgian Skeptics has emailed about 'a license for a new version of cellular communication networks: 5G' by the regional government of Brussels. He goes on to say, 'Recently an anti-5G committee was created in Brussels. It claims that 10 % of the population is "electro-sensitive". But they also refer to a

"Scientist's Appeal for 5G Moratorium", published some months ago. It contains signatories of a lot of persons of the academic and scientific world.' See:

<http://tinyurl.com/y7ljr9t>

'There is more than enough scientific evidence that cellular telephony is not harmful And there is no reason that 5G should be worse. With each new generation of GSM telephony there is

opposition. But I should ask you to look at the signatories and see if (they) are known as serious, competent people in this discipline.'

Please email the Editor if you come up with anything.

For other news from Europe see 'Of Interest'.



MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

Richard Rawlins

The easiest thing of all is to deceive oneself; for we believe whatever we want to believe.

Demosthenes: 384 - 322 BC

The words we use determine how we think, how we communicate with others and the meaning of what we say. Those who wish to fool gullible patients lacking appropriate thinking skills, who want to deceive and take advantage of vulnerable patients making decisions under stress, who intend defrauding them and all those who pay for their services, will use words moulded to suit those nefarious tasks.

The range of therapies promoted by such practitioners generally go under the rubric 'supplementary, complementary and alternative medicine'. For some reason, the 'S' is usually dropped and the domain is referred to as 'CAM'. I prefer 'camistry' – practiced by camists on camees. Practitioners of conventional, orthodox medicine, those regulated by the GMC, GDC, NMC, and the professions regulated by the HCPC, are obliged to do all they can to base their practices and treatments on evidence – evidence obtained by plausible reproducible scientific methods (*note 1*). They do not always succeed, but they are expected to try, and to be honest should they fail. Such an approach is very different from that employed by enthusiasts for camistry.

For camists, 'It seems to me...', 'It's what patients like and want' are adequate enough excuses to continue with their pseudo-medicine, repackaged as 'evidence-based' – falsely claiming they bask in the light of professional and intellectual rigour. Many claim, 'If it works, that's all that matters', ignoring the fact that they have no evidence that the methodologies they endorse are the cause of any benefit. The logical fallacy *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* has quite passed them by (*note 2*).

The words employed to fool the unwary are many - a recent article identifies 83!

Caveat emptor: camists and their acolytes may not always be motivated by a genuine desire to help patients. They may simply want to sell a book, conference, product or professional service – and find the cloak of respectability afforded by association with mainstream medicine is a boost to their marketing and fraud. Some may be sycophants and hope for preferment from persons of importance. But how are we to judge? When any practitioner makes a claim that their practice is 'evidence-based', we should demand to see the evidence, examine it critically, and be alert to the psychology: the profit motive of course, but also the prophet motive which allows them to revel in the

adulation their pretence of superiority evokes.

'Mainstream medicine' is not homogeneous – there are a wide variety of methods and techniques for the relief of ailments and pathological processes. All health care practitioners, have striven down the ages to improve the care offered and have constantly sought alternatives to their current practice. As and when those alternatives have withstood critical examination, those alternatives have been adopted in the corpus of mainstream medicine. Methods and philosophies outside the new norm remain 'alternative' and become anachronistic.

The words employed to fool the unwary are many – a recent article identifies 83! All the usual suspects are there: 'holistic, detox; optimise, natural, organic, energy, aura, magic, quantum, traditional, vital', and the new kid: 'integrative' (*note 3*). After the flush of enthusiasm for 'alternative lifestyles' of the 1960s waned, the term 'alternative' was not deemed to be of sufficient help to the vaunted commercial ambitions of camistry's promoters, and 'alternative' morphed into 'complementary' – suggesting therapies 'may be used alongside regular treatment'. They may indeed be used, but to what effect?

In the 1980s the buzz word became 'integration'. In the US over the last fifteen years, 'integrative' is the adjective which has emerged from the marketing

departments of promoters who want to smuggle camistry onto the mainstream agenda. In the UK, the adjective is 'integrated'. Thus, 'integrated health' or 'integrated medicine'. Even major and much respected institutions such as the Mayo Clinic have been obliged to offer 'integrative medicine' to satisfy the demands of patients and of the medical professionals who want to get on the band-wagon.

In 1993, Prince Charles created his 'Foundation for Integrated Health' to promote the 'integration' of aromatherapy, Reiki, naturopathy, homeopathy, cranio-sacral therapy and nutritional therapy with NHS services - which were expected to pay for them. The Foundation closed in 2010 after financial irregularities, but four of its former fellows or directors went on to found the 'College of Medicine'. Initially registered as 'the College of Integrated Health', in 2017 it was restyled as 'The College of Medicine and Integrated Health'. Its directors have been entertained by the Prince at Clarence House and it uses Prince Charles' Dumfries House for conferences. No doubt its directors would welcome the appellation, 'Royal'.

On the other hand, in the UK, the government, Department of Health and medical institutions, including the Medical Royal Colleges and BMA, use the term 'integrated' to refer to the integration of primary, secondary, tertiary and social care services. *Caveat emptor, caveat imperator.*

The Mayo Clinic, the UK 'College of Medicine and Integrated Health' and 'Royal London Hospital for Integrated Medicine' all claim that: 'Integrative medicine combines, or integrates, the best of conventional medical care with the best of evidence-based CAM'. Given that by definition, there is no plausible scientific evidence base for any CAM, such a claim is spurious and misleading. And it is difficult to determine whether any professed beliefs that camistry is evidence-based are sincerely held; are manifestations of cognitive bias and the Dunning-Kruger effect (*note 4*); or are expressed

for malign purposes - such as healthcare fraud.

For their full expression, such beliefs require faith - 'based on a spiritual conviction rather than proof' (Oxford Dictionaries). When dealing with matters of faith, common courtesy requires tip-toeing around this issue - but professional integrity demands a more critical approach. The GMC demands doctors do not proselytise their faith to patients, and that fully informed consent is obtained before treatment is commenced. That necessitates patients being told the evidence on which practitioners base their belief that a proposed course of treatment will have a beneficial effect on a specific disease or ailment. If they do have evidence, they will be offering 'medicine' - but here I am considering the domain of treatments for which there is no plausible, reproducible, rational evidence for beneficial type II effects of the treatment on any pathology. There may be evidence of type I effects - the benefit from a constructive professional relationship with an empathic practitioner - but that is the result of TLC and placebo responses. They may be nice and pleasurable, but are not the result of any physical pummelling, pillules, pricking, potions or preternatural powers (*note 5*).

As David Gorski has pointed out, mixing cow pie with apple pie only makes apple pie worse

Now, 'integrated' or 'integrative' is the camist marketeer's favourite pitch. Dr Michael Dixon, of the 'College of Medicine and Integrated Health' has argued that: 'Belief and mindset play an enormous part in healing - science needs to take account of this. Patients' symptoms are frequently metaphors and effective treatment can often be symbolic and culturally dependent'. Agreed, but he then goes on to ask: 'Might it not be wiser to direct NHS resources according to pragmatic trials of cost effectiveness and safety rather

than a limited interpretation of science that excludes the effect of the mind? (*note 6*). That is a false dichotomy and another logical fallacy. 'Science' is very engaged with the mind and its workings, but proponents of 'integrated health' as currently marketed and promoted want to see camistry integrated with rational evidence-based medicine - and want the NHS to pay for camists' ministrations. *Caveat emptor iterum* - as David Gorski has pointed out, mixing cow pie with apple pie only makes apple pie worse (*note 7*). Science can only be harmed by such attempts at 'integration', and nudging patients down the slippery slope of camistry can pervert their mindset and result in orthodox treatments being ignored - to their detriment as Steve Jobs discovered.

Camists and camees endorse, encourage, emote and enthuse with mindsets which are largely inimical to modern scientific understanding. Mindsets which are imbued with logical fallacies, mired in whims and fancies and lack sound rational constructs. Treatments are proposed which are anachronistic, antithetical to reason, and ineffective. To reiterate - there may be benefits - type I effects due to the care, consolation and solace of the consultation. These are worthy and valuable achievements, but camists routinely fail to acknowledge that their treatments merely stimulate placebo responses and do not have any substantial type II effects on any pathological process.

Some camists come close to acknowledging they are using fake remedies and treatments, but they simply cannot let go of the psychological crutches used to induce the placebo responses. It is nearly three hundred years since Franz Anton Mesmer gave up his tubs of iron filings, and over a hundred years since hypnotists abandoned using a swinging watch. Many Chinese healthcare practitioners gave up their traditional methods during the 20th century, and embraced modern developments initiated in the West. Mao Zedong stated clearly 'I do not use Traditional

Chinese Medicine' (note 8). NICE does not recommend homeopathy for any condition, and only Glasgow and Bristol still allow homeopathic remedies to be prescribed to NHS patients. Modern mainstream medicine is not 'Western' - there is only one form of 'medicine' - that which works within limited, but progressive, scientific parameters. Who would wish otherwise?

In 2016, even the Royal London Homeopathic Hospital felt it wise to drop its pretence and its name 'Homeopathic' but now causes the greater offence to critical thinkers and those with conventional professional and intellectual integrity by styling itself: 'The Royal London Hospital for Integrated Medicine'. Given there is no speciality of 'integrated medicine', whatever else its patients are offered, it is not 'medicine'. And any of its doctors who fail to properly inform their patients of the nature of the treatments they propose are acting unethically.

Camistry works. The concern, care, condolence and corroboration of patient preferences offered by camists generate dopamine and other neurotransmitters akin to those released during sexual experiences -

which most people find pleasurable. So, chiropractors recommend regular attention for 'maintenance'; homeopaths advise remedies for every emotional response; acupuncturists encourage visits for quite needless needling.

Placebo responses are generated by mainstream doctors' practices to some extent, but doctors are constrained by the ethic of being honest and having integrity about what they are doing - and that does require at least some evidence that the actual therapeutic process has a recognisable effect on pathology. A 'warm feeling' from TLC is not good enough. Camists who are sincere about healthcare 'integration' must come into the consulting room from the cold, embrace the future, abandon their present implausible techniques, and concentrate on their skills at counselling and emotional engagement - they will be welcome. They should clasp Aesculapius' snake, the ancient symbol of health, but discard the snake-oil, please.

Notes

1. General Medical Council, *Good Medical Practice*, London.
2. Prof. David Colquhoun, *DC's Improbable Science*: at: <http://tinyurl.com/qgnsunv>.

3. Dr Yoni Freedhoff: at:

<http://tinyurl.com/yb6ycj99>.

4. Kruger, J. & Dunning, D. (1999) Unskilled and unaware of it: How difficulties in recognizing one's own incompetence lead to inflated self-assessments. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **77** (6), 1121-1134.

5. Dr Richard Rawlins, *Real Secrets of Alternative Medicine*. Placedo Publishing 2016, page 27.

6. Dr Michael Dixon quoted in The Times, *Doctors turn to herbal remedies...*, March 24th 2018.

7. Gorski, D. (2013) Complementary therapies in radiation oncology: mixing cow pie with apple pie? *Focus on Alternative and Complementary Therapies*, **18** (3), 133-135.

8. Zhisui Li, *The Private life of Chairman Mao*, quoted by Edzard Ernst and Simon Singh in *Trick or Treatment*, Bantam Press, 2008.

Richard Rawlins is an orthopaedic surgeon, Liveryman of the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries, member of Council of the BMA, and author of 'Real Secrets of Alternative Medicine'. He is also a member of The Magic Circle.



LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

Susan Martinez, formerly Ehrman, still panicking

Some readers may remember my review of Susan B. Martinez's 2013 book *The Lost History of the Little People: Their Spiritually Advanced Civilizations around the World in Skeptical Intelligencer* 17:1 (2014), p 15. Martinez proclaimed that she had a Columbia PhD, but correspondents on the Skeptical Humanities web-site, where I placed a short version of the review, were unable to locate her in the university's records. Well, thanks to the diligent Jason Colavito's researches, I have finally learned that

her PhD (1972) was under her old last name, Ehrman (it would have been helpful of her to state this). The dissertation is titled *Wayuunaiki: A Grammar of Guajiro* and deals with a Colombian language. Like the archaeologist Barry Brailsford in New Zealand, Ehrman/Martinez clearly started off as a perfectly respectable mainstream scholar but later 'went feral', in her case after coming upon the deep-fringe 'Oahspe' material published in 1882 by John Newbrough (Note 1).

Some riders on recent entries

The well-known American artist Jasper Johns, an admirer of the second (largely posthumous) philosophical account of language and the world produced by Ludwig Wittgenstein, is another non-linguist who comments on language with an idiosyncratic conception of matters of linguistic form and structure. He describes language as essentially made of (a) alphabetic letters and (b) words, demonstrating an unusually strong awareness of what a linguist would call 'double articulation', a fundamental feature of human language: we find

series of individually meaningless sounds making up meaningful words or similar items. But, while words and such exist both in speech **and** (where a language is written) in writing, the former is obviously the more basic (*pace* Derrida etc.), and thus ‘phonemes’ would be better here than ‘letters’. As usual, the non-linguist (who typically does not consciously know the concept ‘phoneme’) sees writing as closer to the centre. And of course by no means all written languages are (normally) written **alphabetically**; there are no ‘letters’ in written Chinese, for example. I came across this material in the context of ‘blurb’ for Johns’ two 3D pieces ‘Painted Bronze’, exhibited at the Royal Academy in late 2017 along with a large collection of other works by Johns.

Vis-à-vis my comment on the greater-than-acknowledged geographical spread of some non-standard linguistic forms (such as ‘Cheshire’ *pon* = ‘pan’): it is also, of course, the case that words and other forms are often very recognisably shared between related **languages**. In 2014 I got off a train at Lund railway station in Sweden and saw outside a statue of two lively children; the legend read LEKANDE BARN. Although the grammatical ending *-ande* is unfamiliar to English-speakers, rural Cumbrian people would immediately understand this to mean ‘child[ren] at play’ (even without seeing the statue!). The mainly Cumbrian English word *laik* means ‘play’, as in *rugby laikers*; *bairn* and like forms are found widely in Northern England and in Scotland.

However, such effects are sometimes exaggerated, in a **reversal** of the misperceptions regarding *pon* and such. The Cumbrian local historian and dialectologist Bill Rollinson claimed that rural Cumbrian people and Icelanders untutored in English could readily understand each other’s speech (not just the odd word); unsurprisingly, he was unable to present any hard evidence of this. In fact there are many non-mainstream claims of this kind, mostly involving

languages which are not as closely related as English and Icelandic, or indeed are not related at all, at least in historic times; predictably, these claims are again lacking in hard evidence.

More polysemy: the varying meanings/uses of the word *liberal* generate some confusion. In the United States, *liberal* is close in meaning to *radical*; those referred to as liberals are left-wing, postmodernist, etc. and are mostly not especially interested in individual freedom. In the UK, there are two distinct meanings of the word, involving (a) the ‘19th Century liberalism’ or libertarianism of the Whigs, John Stuart Mill, the Libertarian Party in the United States, etc. and (b) the liberalism of the Liberal Party (now the Liberal Democrats), which involves much higher levels of state regulation than a Whig could accept and in some ways resembles right-wing Labour Party thought (even though the Liberals were once described by a Labour Prime Minister as ‘watered-down Tories’!). But in Australia the Liberal Party is the main **right-of-centre** party, corresponding with the British Conservative/ ‘Tory’ Party.

The Cumbrian local historian and dialectologist Bill Rollinson claimed that rural Cumbrian people and Icelanders untutored in English could readily understand each other’s speech.

And the word *suspicion* has come to have a polysemous but distinct sense in the context of policing, where it was at one stage frequently abbreviated to *suss* and was used to refer to people being stopped and searched/interrogated by the police because they appeared (to the police) as likely offenders (it was often held that what is now called ‘racial profiling’ was involved here). The issue to hand involves the phrase [*arrested*] *on suspicion of*, which often (not always) refers to a situation where it is quite clear that the person in question has

performed the act in question (so there is no occasion for suspicion in the usual sense) but not yet clear whether or not it constitutes the named offence. (Given the presumption of innocence until proven guilty, the word is arguably redundant here! But more next time on innocence until proven guilty!)

On lack of respect for expertise: it is widely reported that students from privileged backgrounds are being encouraged by their institutions to assume that all their work is excellent and that if they receive disappointing grades in their assignments or exams the fault lies with the teacher or the marker. I have encountered such cases myself, and even august institutions such as Harvard are allegedly implicated. See for instance Note 2.

And some commentators argue that the days of intellectual expertise are numbered if not already gone, because the ‘esoteric’ knowledge jealously guarded by academia (eh?) is now out in the public domain and much of it **refutes** mainstream academic opinion. One ‘jenX’, commenting on my Amazon reviews of non-mainstream works including those of Martinez and Edo Nyland, and on my references to my 2013 book, states (English uncorrected): ‘It seems you were inspired to write your book as an affiliate of ‘the world-wide skeptical movement’. In my experience those fervent ‘debunkers’ appear to be a group that mainly wants the good old days of truly esoteric knowledge back. Sorry dude but those days are gone forever. All of the puzzle pieces are out here now and many of us among the profane masses are putting them together, so between us and all the double agents who’ve been working on this setup for millenia, I’m sure humanity will pull through this creation cycle intact. I foresee the brethren weeping into one another’s lambskin aprons, seeking consolation over their lost fantasy of superiority, but they can then choose to move on with the rest of us’. Echoes of the editors of *Quest* over-optimistically inviting erstwhile mainstream

opponents to join in with their own 'exciting new paradigm'! One wonders how many of the 'profane masses' understand the disciplines in question well enough to advance new analyses which carry adequate degrees of persuasion (few, one would judge), but to all appearances such issues will not deter them.

On 'free speech': during the 1990s the increasingly 'politically-correct' human ethics committee at my then employer, Monash University in Melbourne – which, like its counterparts elsewhere, is supposed to deal with issues regarding confidentiality, not offending or upsetting survey participants, etc. – began taking it upon itself to interfere with ostensibly non-ethical aspects of postgraduate and Honours Year dissertations, **including the subject-matter**, especially where an ethical issue could, however unconvincingly, be adduced. I gather that this pattern of behaviour is now widespread. For instance, I have heard of a case where a student was 'discouraged' from studying the C20 psycho-social consequences of the oppression of Aboriginal women (surely a wholly reasonable and potentially valuable topic) and more or less instructed (over the head of her supervisor and her department) to focus instead upon the **resistance** of some such women to this treatment (which would surely be a **further** project). And now we hear of a case at Bath Spa University in the UK, which has rejected a qualified student's application to undertake PhD research on 'detransition', the situation where some people who have switched gender subsequently change their minds and seek to reverse the process. The ethics committee is reported as excluding the topic as 'politically incorrect' and as liable to give offence and to stir up criticism of the university's work in this area. The student, understandably annoyed, is taking the matter further (see Note 3).

So too may a student reportedly denied graduation by Sheffield University because of his personal anti-gay posts on social media; these

involve quotations from the Bible and are associated with his adherence to a traditional interpretation of Christian belief. While his choice of words and his placement of his posts might be deemed ill-considered, it does seem strange and (to libertarians) alarming if (as his allies at the Christian Legal Centre observe) it really is held that people are entitled to **hold** such views but **not** to **express** them. A decade or so ago, some British Muslim activists were openly promoting this very stance in respect of disagreement with the tenets of Islam. Once again, the need to avoid giving offence, especially to members of certain groups, is seen as decisive. On this Christian case, see Note 4.

In this context: I have been involved in an exchange in the Australian journal *Investigator Magazine* with Jerry Bergman, an American scientist who is also a traditionally-minded Christian (and a young-earth creationist). Bergman recently published a piece in *Investigator* entitled 'Loss of Freedom of Speech in Universities', arguing that it is most important to promote and protect freedom of speech, in universities in particular. One could hardly disagree! Only in special cases, all of which must be fully justified, can exceptions be made to this principle (see Language on the Fringe, *The Skeptical Intelligencer*, 20:4). There is surely no right to enforce the suppression of views with which one disagrees, or of criticisms of one's own views, merely because one is unsettled or offended by alternative views.

There are, however, a few points to be made here, which I offered in response. The most striking point is that **some** of the currently disfavoured views discussed by Bergman (such as alternatives to evolutionary theory) are suppressed to various degrees by established mainstream academics, who are typically 'modernists' (inspired by the C17-18 'Enlightenment') and in some cases active skeptics, and are almost all sincerely concerned with respect for the truth (which may be complex but

must be coherent) and with 'hard' standards of evidence and argumentation; while **others** (such as traditional ideas which are now often deemed sexist or racist, arguably unfairly) are suppressed by younger scholars, younger university administrators and student bodies, especially those representing 'minority' or hitherto disadvantaged groups and their ideas. These latter (to whom I referred in my piece 'Expertise and Scholarship Devalued and Ignored' in *The Skeptical Intelligencer* 20:3) are often 'postmodernists' or even relativists, ostensibly concerned with 'affirmative action', with 'diversity', and with the (*prima facie* odd) idea 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 – although they then often contradict this position by endorsing their own 'politically correct' and/or culture-specific (sometimes traditional/pre-scientific) viewpoints as superior! With the increasing foregrounding of the notion of 'triggering', many members of these groups have been persuaded to see themselves as needing protection from any hint of beliefs or attitudes at variance with their own. Richard Dawkins has justifiably described this as the infantilising of the student body, and other writers have also attacked this development (see for instance Claire Fox in *I Find That Offensive!*, Mike Hume in *Trigger Warning: Is the Fear of Being Offensive Killing Free Speech?*, Tom Nicholls as discussed in 'Expertise and Scholarship Devalued and Ignored', and Jim Nelson Black, cited by Bergman).

It should be emphasised here that mainstream scientists, historians etc. would **not** endorse the relativist idea (mentioned by Black) that 'we have no grounds for determining what is true'. If this were accepted, the scientific enterprise would grind to a halt; scientists in particular cannot afford to be relativists. Of course, all scientific findings about the truth are provisional (although some are unlikely in the

extreme to be overturned). There are no ‘absolute standards of truth’ in science as there are – in the minds of believers – in religion. What philosophically sophisticated scientists **might** say is (a) that **in the domain of religion** – despite the claims made by believers to the effect that they are in possession of absolute truths – the basis for arriving at truth (even provisionally) is in fact much **less** secure than it is in science and we have no reliable grounds for determining what is true (the various ‘revealed’ religions disagree, often strongly, with each other, and there appears to be no reliable means of choosing between them), and (b) that it is therefore illegitimate to teach religious doctrines as simply factual – or (c) to teach theories in scientific domains which are derived very largely from religious ideas. (Classes in comparative religion, in the philosophy of religion and indeed in theology are of course fully acceptable.)

Peter Field, a leading (retired) scholar of Arthurian literature, has endorsed Simon Keegan’s claims that the legendary King Arthur’s court was near Huddersfield.

Thus, those scholars in universities who challenge the status of anti-evolutionary ideas and those relativists (etc.) who challenge ‘non-politically-correct’ notions form **two separate sets** of thinkers, with little overlap. This contrast is obscured by Black, who personally regards evolutionary theory as ‘unproven’ and as similar in status to a religion (a rival to revealed religions) – even though the figure of God, central to religions proper, is either rejected or at least marginalised in this specific context by most evolutionists.

It is discouraging to find that thinkers who differ so deeply from each other as do most members of these two sets (and have clashed repeatedly – one thinks of the battles

between mainstream historians such as Mary Lefkowitz and various ‘Afrocentrist’ thinkers obsessed with ‘diversity’ and the need to combat ‘white supremacism’) can nevertheless be perceived (albeit not always accurately) as **sharing** this tendency to suppress rival views. Bergman himself does not make this point, partly because he, like Black, ignores the separation between modernist scientists and other mainstream scholars on the one hand and ‘trendy’ postmodernists on the other.

Bergman’s inclusion of both types of issue in his article also seems to involve the fact that those who now encounter hostility on **both** fronts include, very saliently, traditional, conservative Christians. In the United States, where in recent times Christianity has been much more important in public life than in the rest of ‘the West’, and where belief in creationist interpretations of *Genesis* remains strong, there is a much higher-profile opposition between conservative believers and ‘materialist’ scientists and philosophers than there is in other ‘Western’ countries, where many, perhaps most believers cheerfully accept evolution and where atheists and agnostics combined are now often in the majority or at least are numerous and confidently assertive about their views. And in ‘the West’ as a whole there is also an opposition between conservative Christians and traditionally-minded people more generally on the one hand and, on the other, the too-easily-upset, often shrill postmodernist advocates of iconoclasm (instantiated by the recent calls for the removal of images of historical figures now deemed racist or otherwise unacceptable), of the setting-up of ‘safe spaces’ where **their** views (though not traditional Christian views!) are immune from challenge (see above), and of the suppression of much ostensibly harmless material (some of it humorous or tongue-in-cheek; Bergman discusses one such case) and of conservative Christian opinions about, for instance,

homosexuality (as in the British case mentioned above).

Most ‘card-carrying skeptics’ will surely agree with Bergman in opposing the suppression of conservative Christian views – even though most of us disagree with those views, do not want any laws to be grounded in them, and reserve the right to express our own contrary views (another manifestation of free speech).

More next time on Bergman’s points in the specific context of the teaching of evolutionary theory, and on other aspects of these matters.

And to close: on King Arthur in Yorkshire: Peter Field, a leading (retired) scholar of Arthurian literature, has endorsed Simon Keegan’s claims that the legendary King Arthur’s court was near Huddersfield. Field identifies Camelot with the site of a Roman fort at Slack (on the Roman road between Chester and York). This (tentative) identification is admittedly based on circumstantial evidence, and for a serious academic the basis for the claim appears *prima facie* remarkably weak. Of course, Keegan has enthused over this support from (one member of) the mainstream. See Note 5.

Notes

1. For the thesis, see <http://tinyurl.com/y9he2u2d>.

On the language, start at <http://tinyurl.com/y7o6jzfu> (as usual, there is a possibly under-filtered but useful entry at:

<http://tinyurl.com/y8xe2sye>).

And for Colavito’s comments on a further book by Martinez, see <http://tinyurl.com/y8xe2sye>.

2. <http://tinyurl.com/ycntmqy6>

3. <http://tinyurl.com/y9vshu6m>

4. <http://tinyurl.com/yayeedap>

5. <http://tinyurl.com/ybjs6afu>

Mark Newbrook took an MA and a PhD in linguistics at Reading University and spent many years as a lecturer and researcher in Singapore, Hong Kong and Australia; he has authored many articles/reviews and several books, including the first-ever general skeptical survey work on fringe linguistics (2013).

REVIEWS AND COMMENTARIES



We Do Things Differently – The Outsiders Rebooting our World by Mark Stevenson. London: Profile Books, 2017, pp 304. ISBN 978-1781253007.

How innovations and schemes by activists, inventors and entrepreneurs together can make the world a better place.

Reviewed by Steve Dulson

The writer, Mark Stevenson, describes himself as a ‘futurolgist’ (among other things) which is intriguing in itself. ‘We Do Things Differently’ is an interesting collection of conversations with activists, inventors and entrepreneurs whose inventions, schemes and ‘movements’ aim to make the world a better place. Each chapter focusses on one particular innovation or scheme but with Mark’s commentary linking the fundamental approaches being utilised by the main individuals involved (and they come from a wide range of backgrounds, professions and locations across the world). There is a thoughtful summarising of the main tenets that underlie the thinking behind each idea and these are cross-referenced throughout the book. The main point is that all of the people involved have not been afraid to think and/ or do things differently, often at complete odds with those who are in positions of power and influence who seek to enforce and reinforce the current status quo; they are not ‘tinkering with the system, but looking to change the system itself’.

Chapters 1 and 2 concern patient-lead medical research through social media, sharing their symptoms and experiences and confirming what medication does or doesn’t work for them, sometimes outside of the official prescriptions/ channels. The potential applications include significant reductions in the time and cost involved in officially commissioned medical trials, as well as the avoidance of bias and bogus results (the average ‘time-to-market’ from discovering a drug to general availability being twelve years!). They are effectively

out-performing existing clinical research by using ‘repurposed Internet dating technology’. Chapter 3 concerns the issue of drug-resistant infection/diseases and touches on the widespread corruption in the pharmaceutical industry. By thinking outside the box and inviting amateur science students to assist in annotating the tuberculosis genome in their free time, an Indian science professor and his team identified seventeen ‘targets’ in the bacterium in just four months (five of which had already been validated elsewhere). Algorithms were then applied to study the pathways that could be utilised to block the development of the disease (as well as others).

All of the people involved have not been afraid to think and/ or do things differently, often at complete odds with those who are in positions of power and influence

Chapter 4 considers examples of more effective food production methods in Jharkhand and Madagascar, where the main thrust seems to be designing agricultural processes that work within existing ecosystems rather than trying to replace them with large-scale industrial farms with expensive-inputs. Better use of limited resources through local knowledge is the way forward. This seemed obvious to me but it must be tempting for farmers in developing economies to be more easily swayed by multinationals’ promises of high yields. They now

seem to be re-discovering that, in their circumstances, the old ways are actually the best, albeit with the odd bit of help from modern chemicals and machinery.

The next few chapters then explore potential sources of clean and renewable energy, largely based on the (garden-shed based) work of the engineer Peter Dearman. His initial work concerned the counter-intuitive idea of conserving energy as cold rather than (more conventionally) heat. The Dearman Engine is powered by the 700 fold expansion of liquid....air and, whilst it may not be possible to effectively replace fossil-fuel energy sources just yet, it is being used to solve another important problem – non-polluting refrigeration units in food distribution trucks. Developing technologies to harness liquid air for use as a freely available energy source (possessing enough energy-density to at least power food refrigeration and air conditioning units) as well as becoming a completely non-toxic energy storage medium is a fascinating possibility, and not just for the typically hotter, developing world.

The book discusses the way in which the world needs to rethink how the power we use is generated and owned ‘if we’re to have any chance of making the future more sustainable, equitable, humane and just’. After an interesting potted history of the beginnings of the electricity generation and distribution systems that we have come to know and love, Stevenson investigates the small town of Gussing in Austria which has rebooted its prosperity after seeing poverty-stricken times during the twentieth century. It

has taken the few resources that it had (lots of trees) and developed a way of using the waste product to convert mass into gas (up to forty thousand tonnes of sawdust a day) as well as diesel(!), thereby owning and producing its own renewable energy source and rebooting its industrial productivity into the bargain.

Chapter 8 discusses the 'energy trilemma' and presents the pros and cons of the options available in an even-handed manner. Balancing security of supply, equitable access and environmental sustainability is problematic, to say the least, and the debate on the disparity between the subsidies received by fossil fuel vs green energy sources is not as clear cut as one might think. The next chapter highlights the inevitable changes that seem imminent in the energy market as renewable energies become more widely adopted and centralised utility monopolies have to fight for control against more localised, community-based ownership. Internet entrepreneur, Bob Metcalfe, has proposed an 'Enernet', which could operate in the same way that the internet works but allows consumers to buy energy from providers of their choosing, thus giving renewable energy producers a more level playing field. Game changing stuff!

Chapter 10 sees Stevenson engaging with community projects in crime-ridden Detroit, where urban farms and distribution networks have sprung up in the most economically

deprived areas and seem to be thriving. The economy is being rebooted through innovation and the determination of local communities. Chapter 11 then tracks the successful rise of people power in the favelas of Brazil through participatory budgeting, which is even making politicians popular! By encouraging locals to be involved in the process of making budgeting decisions for local service, utility and infrastructure maintenance projects, democratic reform is slowly gaining momentum. The trick is to try and keep that momentum from fizzling out. There are some interesting musings on the nature of true democracy here too; the way to solve problems that arise in a democracy is.....more democracy.

The final topic-driven chapter concentrates on the field of education, focussing on the 'worst school in the country', Hartsholme Academy in northern England. Having been put into 'special measures' by the UK Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) in 2008 (we're talking drugs and baseball bats in the playground here), it achieved the highest rating of 'outstanding' just two years later. The underlying reason for this success story is that the new Head, Carl Jarvis, questioned why the existing curriculum was not working and came at the whole concept of learning from a completely different angle. The pupils were consulted on the way they were to be taught, becoming self-motivated to learn by more effective engagement

with the subjects and actually structuring their own lessons so that they worked in teams and took pride in achieving their goals by playing to individuals' strengths and helping each other out. The final chapter acts as a summary and pulls all of the general ideas together, emphasising what the innovators and interviewees have in common.

For me, the book does meander a bit in places but the author does try not to get too bogged down in the detail and refers back to previous chapters in an attempt to maintain the general theme. The writing is friendly, good-natured and humorous in tone and a good rapport was obviously achieved with some quite awkward characters during the research phase. A small niggle from my point of view, are the occasional typos and even a repeated sentence here and there (and yes, I am available for proofreading work). The book concludes that the global (and 'globalised') systems we all live under may have worked quite successfully for a while (being particularly successful for those at the top of the pile) but they have become tired and are in desperate need of rejuvenation through different ideas and alternative approaches if those at the bottom of the pile are to benefit in future. These new approaches seem to be most effective when they come from leftfield thinkers or people who can repurpose current thinking and apply it differently. This is an interesting, optimistic and thought provoking book.

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MARK'S BOOKSHELF

Mark Newbrook



The Mystery of Skara Brae

Laird Scranton

Inner Traditions: Rochester (VT) & Toronto, 2016, pp 199

This is a book proclaiming a non-mainstream proposal including claims about ancient languages which, somewhat unusually, involves Great Britain.

Laird Scranton has produced a series of books regarding alleged links between Egyptian, African and Indian/Buddhist thought. To the extent that they involve language, they are concerned mainly with the phonological (pronounced) forms of words rather than with scripts (and also with some apparently non-linguistic

written symbols). Scranton develops further the ideas of Marcel Griaule and Robert Temple about the cosmological knowledge of the Dogon tribe in Mali. Like Temple, he argues that the conceptual and symbolic cosmological system of the Dogon is largely shared with that of ancient Egypt. (This idea is associated with the Afrocentrist view

that many African cultures and languages are linked with Egypt.) Scranton goes on to claim links between Egyptian and Buddhist thought and symbolism. Still more dramatically, he holds that (a) spoken Dogon word-forms (Dogon is not written), (b) corresponding Egyptian words, (c) Dogon symbolism considered as a system and (d) aspects of Egyptian hieroglyphic writing collectively demonstrate awareness of cosmological ‘truths’ discovered only recently by modern science, for instance, string theory. (Temple for his part attributes some of this alleged knowledge to ancient contact with extraterrestrials.) Scranton believes that the observed similarities are too close, numerous and systematic to have arisen by chance. If he is correct, the upshots are obviously major; but he has not been able to convince mainstream scholars of this. For more on Scranton’s earlier work, see Chapter 1 of my 2013 book *Strange Linguistics* (under ‘Egypt’).

In this present book, Scranton argues that the ruined Neolithic village of Skara Brae in Orkney, apparently abandoned in stages around 2500 BCE, is also linked with the Dogon, Egypt, early Greece, etc., and was indeed a major source of influence on these cultures; it may represent an intermediate stage between the very early site at Göbekli Tepe in Turkey – much discussed by non-mainstream ancient historians; see for instance my review of Gordon White’s book *Star Ships in The Skeptical Intelligencer* 19:4 (2016) – and these familiar later ancient civilisations.

How far such dramatic claims are **historically** feasible is arguable. Scranton invokes evidence of various kinds in support of his claims, most notably evidence drawn from comparisons of ancient cosmologies (a subject in which he proclaims his especial competence). But he makes extensive use of linguistic data too, and this is the area where my own expertise permits me to make extended comments. As with the pre-modern Dogon, there is no written language

associated with Skara Brae (the occupiers were probably pre-literate) (*note 1*); so Scranton has to argue in comparative philological terms, on the basis of known later languages which he believes were used at the site (see below on these languages). He repeatedly proclaims that words from the various far-flung languages of the cultures in question have common origins or are shared by way of ancient contact.

Scranton argues that the ruined Neolithic village of Skara Brae in Orkney, apparently abandoned in stages around 2500 BCE, is also linked with the Dogon, Egypt, early Greece...

When I was looking at Scranton’s earlier works some years ago, I had some correspondence with him about his approach to comparative philology. As I pointed out to him, his philological/etymological methods are of the usual non-mainstream kind, **very** widely exemplified in many works of this kind; they are grounded in superficial and unsystematic (and often also very approximate) phonetic/phonological similarities between words. Scranton ignores not only grammar but also other systems, including phonological systems. (His equations are ‘**unsystematic**’ in the sense that different tokens of the same given phoneme or sequence in Language A are equated with different phonemes or sequences in Language B, as it suits his case – with no indication of why this should be.) In addition, the words in question often have only very approximately similar meanings (in some cases, apparently **unrelated** meanings).

As 230 years of scholarship has taught us, language change simply does not work like this. If one proceeds as if it **might** work like this, there is altogether too much probability of unearthing wholly accidental similarities. The equations which

Scranton proposes are therefore altogether unreliable.

In addition, many of the pairs of words which Scranton regards as significant are very short; this obviously increases further the chance of accidental similarity. Earlier examples include Dogon *po* and Egyptian *pau-*, and Dogon *dada* and Egyptian *dd*.

At that earlier time Scranton was apparently quite unwilling to take on board my explicit criticisms of his linguistic methodology. To my knowledge, in fact, he has **never** acknowledged the force of my criticisms, or those of any other linguist. And he does not try to argue either that his equations **are** in fact systematic (which he could not hope to do, given the forms cited) or that the principles of mainstream comparative philology which rule his equations out of consideration should be abandoned or seriously loosened up.

In one of these earlier books, Scranton does state that when he proclaims an equation between, say, a Dogon and an Egyptian word for [allegedly] related concepts he is not necessarily referring to ‘a strict linguistic lineage for the words’. Although he was not then, it seems, actually aware of the objections that a linguist would raise to his equations, he was perhaps sufficiently concerned about this aspect of his case to try to ‘cover’ himself in this way. But it is not at all obvious what **other** kind of valid relationship between such words might be involved.

Presumably, Scranton was in the past, and is again now, relying on his untutored readers being unaware of all these linguistic considerations. Indeed, even in this new book there is no evidence that Scranton himself has learned anything from my comments. His phonetic and semantic equations are just as unsystematic, superficial and approximate as in his older books; there is no reason to accept them. And once again many of the words discussed are very short, and their meanings often not closely similar. Overall, Scranton’s approach to

language data is altogether unscholarly, and the implications in his ‘blurb’ to the effect that he himself is genuinely knowledgeable about linguistics are misleading.

It must be acknowledged that Scranton does now invoke in his support the notion of ‘ultraconserved words’: words which supposedly remain in languages in recognisable forms and with essentially unchanged meanings for very long periods; he uses this expression several times, commencing on p 4, and on p 3 he refers in this context to ‘a high degree of purity of language’ (even though at best only certain individual words would be in question here). Like some other non-mainstream writers, he believes (p 4) that such words often refer to ancient, shared cosmological concepts. Of course, his decisions as to which particular words are of this type are inadequately based, because of his totally unreliable philological methods. But he has in fact drawn here upon a body of material on the fringes of mainstream historical linguistics, going back to the works of Merritt Ruhlen and beyond. There is, for instance, a piece (*note 2*) by Mark Pagel, Quentin D. Atkinson, Andreea S. Calude, and Andrew Meade on the web site of the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, arguing for the reality of a set of 23 especially frequent and very stable words that can supposedly be used to establish very deep ‘genetic’ relationships between languages which are too ancient for the successful application of standard historical linguistic methodology. If this were correct, the need for systematic sound/meaning correspondences, mentioned above, would disappear, at least in these specific cases. Finding (fairly loose) resemblances among these words across several language families would be enough to prove that the languages are related, descended with modification from a single parent language. However, these ideas appear to be considerably overstated, to say the least; see the comments of the skeptical linguist Sarah Thomason (*note 3*). And Scranton himself does

not actually rehearse the fairly technical arguments involved here; he simply accepts the notion of ‘ultraconserved words’ as a given, because it suits his case to do so.

Like most writers of this kind, in fact, Scranton blames the impasse between his ideas and those of professional scholars, on all fronts. As early as p 1, for example, he accuses Egyptologists of ‘informed blindness’, ‘distortions’, adhering to ‘entrenched theory’, etc. This approach is very familiar to skeptical scholars.

As early as p 1, for example, he accuses Egyptologists of ‘informed blindness’, ‘distortions’, adhering to ‘entrenched theory’, etc.

From my point of view, it is possible that Scranton’s arguments involving the comparison of ancient cosmologies and archaeological patterns, not to say genetics, are by and large stronger than his linguistic ‘arguments’. I claim no professional expertise in these disciplines and therefore have little to say about them in this review. However, here too there are certainly issues with Scranton’s methods. On p 23 of this work he openly uses a children’s book as a source for the nature of the dwellings at Skara Brae, rather than authoritative archaeological publications of the site! And the anthropologist Colin Groves has suggested (personal communication) that only four of Scranton’s thirteen main conceptual parallelisms between Egypt/Africa and Buddhism have any force – and that even in these cases coincidence cannot be excluded, given that similar parallelisms exist between cultures **known** to have had no contact (*note 4*). The same might be said for the archaeological parallelisms with Dogon building-styles which Scranton invokes in the case of Skara Brae (he also claims that the Skara Brae buildings match R.A. Schwaller de Lubicz’s highly controversial interpretation of the Egyptian ‘Temple

of Man’ at Luxor), and indeed for the inevitably speculative links which he proposes in respect of cosmological thinking.

These latter links are speculative precisely because there are no written accounts of the thought of the denizens of Skara Brae (nor even clear graphic representations of their ideas). Scranton relies on cross-linguistic sets of word-forms which he believe indicate shared cosmological notions of this nature. But, as I have pointed out, his methods in this area are wholly unreliable. And he also makes a series of more specific errors in respect of the languages in question.

Firstly, he states (p 10) that two ‘archaic’ languages were used in Orkney: Norn and Faeroese. **Neither** of these languages is archaic. Like Icelandic, both were products of the Norse diaspora of the late 1st Millennium CE. Norse languages did not exist in the Atlantic (or at all) at the much earlier date of Skara Brae, and thus cannot be relevant here.

The date of the arrival in Scotland of speakers of Scots Gaelic has now been rendered uncertain by genetic data, but it was certainly **no later** than the traditionally-given date of C4 CE – the time of Pictish hegemony; see below – and Gaelic (a type of ‘Q-Celtic’) **may** have been relevant in Caithness and Orkney at a relatively early date, suggesting that Scranton’s short chapter on Gaelic words, which commences on p 122, **might** just conceivably be of more interest; but his philology is, predictably, no better here.

Secondly, Scranton goes on to state that Faeroese is ‘of unknown origin and not obviously founded on Scandinavian roots’. This again is quite wrong. Faeroese is quite plainly North Germanic (Norse) in origin; its vocabulary, grammar and phonology are very largely of this nature. There are a few Celtic loans (as there are in Norse generally), but there are no significant ‘exotic’ elements which might require dramatic explanations in terms of remote origins or significant early contacts. Indeed, if Faeroese were

not Norse it would be impossible to explain its obvious structural and lexical similarities with Icelandic or indeed its more distant similarities with mainland Scandinavian Norse.

Thirdly, Scranton states here that Norn is closely related to Norwegian. This is a clear over-statement: Norwegian is a branch of mainland Scandinavian Norse and has thus undergone the major changes characteristic of that linguistic grouping. Norn itself died out in C19, predictably surviving longer in Shetland than in Orkney; it is represented now only by some words in dialectal Shetland and Orkney English. It was clearly (and predictably) fairly similar to Faroese, sharing many phonological and grammatical traits and much vocabulary, and the two languages may even have been mutually intelligible to a degree. This means that any statement suggesting that Faeroese had an exotic origin would also apply to Norn. (But in fact neither language had such an origin.)

Fourthly, there is no evidence that Faeroese itself was ever actually used in Orkney. I suspect that Scranton misunderstood a passage which can be found on the Scots Language Centre website and which reads: 'For almost a thousand years the language of the Orkney Islands was a variant of Norse known as Norroena (or Norn in Scots). The distinctive and culturally unique qualities of the Orkney dialect spoken in the islands today derive from this sister language of Faroese, which too developed from Norse brought in by settlers in the 9th century, and from Icelandic' (*note 5*). Scranton seems to have wrongly taken this to mean that Faeroese itself was used in Orkney. (The plain fact is that we simply do not know, and very probably cannot ever know, what language(s) was/were spoken at Skara Brae.)

Fifthly, as in his earlier works Scranton repeatedly relies here upon **current** forms of words (Dogon, Faeroese, etc.), rather than the oldest known cognate forms in older phases of the languages in question (where

available; in the cases of historically unwritten languages such as Dogon this must involve **reconstructed** older forms, if any can be arrived at), or, best of all, forms reliably reconstructed for ancestor languages, which are obviously much more relevant where very ancient times are in question. In fact, he pays little attention to the historical relationships between languages, and when he does include such considerations he is often in error (see above). Scranton also ignores known or well-supported etymologies for individual words (again as before, and like many other such writers).

Scranton provides very few specific references to scholarly sources.

In this context, Scranton also refers (with no specific references, as often elsewhere; see below) to two distinct cultural groups 'known' to have lived in Orkney: the Peti and the Papae; the latter are reported as wearing white robes. The term *Peti* seems, in fact, to refer to the Picts, who in the period traditionally considered pre-Gaelic populated a much wider geographical area extending well south of Orkney and spoke a still mysterious language which was probably 'P-Celtic' (close to Old Welsh) or else non-Celtic, maybe indeed non-Indo-European. Because the language and its words are still not firmly identified, written Pictish texts (although in a familiar script) cannot be reliably read, and thus no arguments can be based on interpretations of Pictish words or structures. The Picts themselves are very familiar to archaeologists; their artefacts and (mainly Latin) references to them are known from over 600 years before the Atlantic Norse – but not from anything like as early as the date of Skara Brae. The term *Papae* probably refers to Christian monks or missionaries, who are often described as wearing white in Icelandic accounts (in which they are called *Papar*) and who would obviously also long post-

date the denizens of Skara Brae. (On these two peoples, see for instance the work of Aidan Macdonald, *note 6*.)

Scranton glibly pairs these two groups with the Norn and the Faeroese languages, which obviously makes no sense. He also states that *papi* means 'fathers' (clerics?) in 'one local language of Orkney Island'; but (ludicrously) he does not identify this language. The same problem arises elsewhere; for instance on p 20 he states vaguely that a Dogon concept is rendered in 'some [other] cultures' as *pa*; and on p 32, when discussing Indian words, he says that 'in some languages' a word has a certain form and a certain meaning, but fails to identify these languages, again making his statement unnecessarily difficult to check.

Scranton makes further linguistic errors. He repeatedly misuses the key basic (1st-Year undergraduate) linguistic term *phoneme* to mean 'morpheme' or 'word'; he often uses the obscure expression *phonetic root* without explanation; he identifies some forms (for instance, *ga*, on p 45) as 'archaic' without providing evidence; he continues his old practice of using E.A. Wallis Budge as a purportedly authoritative source of information on Egyptian (as he well knows, EAWB's transliterations have long been – reasonably – superseded; but they often suit his case marginally better than those transliterations which are now accepted by Egyptologists); he adopts idiosyncratic interpretations of Egyptian hieroglyphs (pp 1, 163, etc.); he relies for information on the linguistic situation in Orkney on old sources such as George Barry's 1805/1808 work *The History of the Orkney Islands* in preference to including recent scholarly works (compare my observation above on his use of a children's archaeology book); etc.

And overall (not only in respect of linguistic information) Scranton provides very few specific references to scholarly sources. In addition, he frequently uses expressions such as 'is known', 'is [generally] understood',

‘was given as’, etc., apparently so as to avoid providing specific references (but, each time, he himself obviously must have obtained the information in question from **somewhere!**). And on p 33 he cites as an authority on Egypt the Greek historian Herodotus, who certainly visited the country but appears to have misunderstood much that he was told. Etc., etc.

Overall, at least in as much as Scranton’s proposals involve language data, it is again impossible to take them seriously.

Notes and references

1 Audrey Fletcher, in ‘Skara Brae: Ancient Egyptians and the Cosmos’ (2000, revised version 2014; part of a longer work; see <http://tinyurl.com/y9bplxmb>), presents much non-linguistic ‘evidence’ in support of a supposed link with Egypt – and argues that an ‘inscription’ found

at the site is in fact in hieroglyphic Egyptian and represents the Egyptian word *mer*, ‘pyramid’ (which she also quixotically believes was a name for Egypt itself). Fletcher claims that Skara Brae was an **offshoot** of Egypt, not its progenitor as Scranton holds, and Scranton does not appear aware of her work. In any event, the marking discussed by Fletcher consists of one very short series of simple geometric forms, and in the absence of longer texts or cultural artefacts readily interpreted as Egyptian the default position must be that the similarity with the Egyptian forms is accidental (and the Skara Brae ‘inscription’ non-linguistic).

2 <http://tinyurl.com/ouu585w>

3 <http://tinyurl.com/bo8qsr3>

4 Groves died on 30/11/17, aged 75.

There is an obituary on p 23 of *Fortean*

Times 362, by the cryptozoologist Karl Shuker; see also:

<http://tinyurl.com/y94jt7vk>

and <http://tinyurl.com/ya8h9p6c>.

Groves was a faculty member at the Australian National University for over 40 years (including a very active ‘retirement’), an active (and egregiously fair-minded) member of Canberra Skeptics (with especial focuses on creation-evolution and cryptozoology), and my friend. He and I collaborated on a review of the second (1998) edition of Robert Temple’s book *The Sirius Mystery*; it can be found in *The Skeptic* (Australia) 19:4 (1999), pp 56-60. On Groves’ life and works, one might start at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colin_Groves.

5 <http://tinyurl.com/yb6fw4mt>

6 <http://tinyurl.com/yd3dyg8y>

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/>

Skepticism: general

‘Alien megastructures’ debunked. Why are we so quick to assume it’s aliens? Humans often ascribe agency, intelligence, and intentionality to mysterious phenomena And our tendency to do that may be rooted in our species.... The idea that there might be gigantic alien structures orbiting a distant star just bit the dust.’

<http://tinyurl.com/y7e9h2uo>

‘Some problems of the skeptic movement: Thoughts about the present

OF INTEREST

and the (best) future for rational skepticism.’ Essay by Marko Kovic.

<http://tinyurl.com/ya3uyas5>

Science and human progress

Review of Steven Pinker’s, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (Penguin, Random House)

<http://tinyurl.com/yc8c3wd7>

James Randi

From Philosophy Now: ‘James Randi (The Great Randi) has won the 2017 Philosophy Now Award for Contributions in the Fight Against Stupidity. ... We will be showing an acceptance video by him at the Philosophy Now Festival on 20 January.’

<https://philosophynow.org/festival>

Pseudo-science

‘In 2018 we need less nonsense and more science. Quantum physics is now used to explain and market a host of ridiculous ideas and products.’

<http://tinyurl.com/yd4h77wn>

Annotating web pages

‘Elsevier and Hypothesis are announcing a collaboration to align annotation capabilities in Elsevier’s Research Products with the emerging ecosystem of interoperable clients and services for annotation based on open standards and technologies.’

<http://tinyurl.com/yc2cnvgn>

Alan Henness of the Nightingale Collaboration explains: ‘I have been using Hypothesis for a while to correct and annotate (usually) web pages on quack websites. They have taken several years to build their tool and get it right and it can be used to add annotations to any page whether that page has a commenting system or not, and, because the website cannot control what is annotated, it can be a powerful tool’.

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/>

Website of interest

Friends of Science in Medicine (Australia). See their latest newsletter:

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

Medical research

‘Bias enters health studies at all stages and often influences the magnitude and direction of results. To obtain the least biased information, researchers must acknowledge the potential presence of biases and take steps to avoid and minimise their effects. Equally, in assessing the results of studies, we must be aware of the different types of biases, their potential impact and how this affects interpretation and use of evidence in health care decision making. To better understand the persistent presence, diversity, and impact of biases, we are compiling a Catalogue of Biases....’ At:

<https://catalogofbias.org/about/>

‘In a 2003 paper in BMJ, the authors made the tongue-in-cheek observation that there are no randomized controlled trials (RCTs) of parachutes. This paper has been widely read, cited and used to argue that RCTs are impractical or unnecessary for some medical practices. We performed a study to identify and evaluate claims that a medical practice is akin to a parachute.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y8r5lvde>

‘Fake news and alternative facts have become commonplace in these so-called “post-factual times.” What about medical research - are scientific facts fake as well? Many recent disclosures have fuelled the claim that scientific facts are suspect and that science is in crisis.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y8xay2oa>

And: ‘Non-publication of clinical trials results is an ongoing issue. The US government recently updated the requirements on results reporting for trials registered at ClinicalTrials.gov. We set out to develop and deliver an online tool which publicly monitors

compliance with these reporting requirements, facilitates open public audit, and promotes accountability.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/ybeahkb4>

And from the AllTrials campaign: ‘Today we’re announcing something new -- the AllTrials Unreported Clinical Trial of the Week. From now on, every week, we will highlight in a piece in the BMJ a trial that is overdue to report results as identified by the FDAAA Compliance Tracker. The FDAAA TrialsTracker shows 120 trials are overdue to report results or have reported late since it launched a little over a month ago. At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yb56xsbq>

Right to Try

‘The “Right to Try” law won’t lead to miracle cures: For terminally ill patients, false hope and disappointment are more likely’:

<http://tinyurl.com/y9k8sy6f>

See also: ‘“Right to Try” Legislation is a Trojan Horse’ by Michael Becker at:

<https://mdbcancerjourney.com/>

And: ‘The cruel sham that is “right-to-try” will be up for a vote in the House tomorrow’ at:

<http://tinyurl.com/ydfoqprl>

Drug addiction

‘Why the disease definition of addiction does far more harm than good’. ‘Among other problems, it has obstructed other channels of investigation, including the social, psychological and societal roots of addiction.’

<http://tinyurl.com/yc8bod5e>

Alternative medicine: general

David Treadinit (*Don’t you mean Tredinnick?–Ed*) speaks up again for alternative medicine in cancer treatment: At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yb25rtb2>

From 3rd April 2018, The Royal London Hospital for Integrated Medicine (RLHIM) will no longer be providing NHS-funded homeopathic, herbal and other alternative medicine remedies. At:

<http://tinyurl.com/ybhgjqhd>

However: ‘GPs are increasingly dissatisfied with doling out pills that do not work for illnesses with social and emotional roots, and a surprising number of them end up turning to alternative medicine’. In full at:

<http://tinyurl.com/ydgglymu>

Vaccination (and measles)

‘The results of a study looking at, in part, the “too many, too soon” complaints of antivaccination activists were completely negative. There was no difference in vaccine antigen exposure between two groups who differed in the number of infections over a two year period. Therefore there is no correlation between vaccine antigen exposure and susceptibility to other infections.’

<http://tinyurl.com/ydyg5awa>

Also: ‘Public health experts are urging parents to immunise their children against measles as the potentially deadly bug has now spread to five regions in England. With more than 100 cases confirmed, Public Health England warns that the UK could be on the verge of an outbreak due to a rise in cases across Europe.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y7bthbnl>

And: ‘Mapping the anti-vaccination movement on Facebook’, N. Smith & T. Graham, *Information, Communication & Society*, Published online: 27 Dec 2017 (by subscription). At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yban46ej>

See also ‘How countries around the world try to encourage vaccination’ at:

<http://tinyurl.com/y9za8lrq>

WHO warning as European measles rate jumps from record low.

<http://tinyurl.com/y9g55naj>

‘People who believe conspiracy theories about President John F. Kennedy’s assassination, the death of Princess Diana, a New World Order and 9/11 are also more likely to be skeptical of vaccines, new research ... has found.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yacnpupq>

Plus: The Psychological Roots of Anti-Vaccination Attitudes: A 24-Nation Investigation. Hornsey, M.J., Harris,

E.A. & Fielding, K.S. *Health Psychology*, Feb 01, 2018. At:

<http://tinyurl.com/ycumcob8>

Also ‘Even as the flu season, with its consequent hospitalizations and deaths, rages on, chiropractors are outdoing themselves in promoting anti-vaccine ideology at this year’s “Freedom for Family Wellness 2018 Summit Washington, D.C.” (but actually in Reston, VA), scheduled for March.’

<http://tinyurl.com/ybnwxmkb>

And: On Radio 4 ‘science journalist Adam Rutherford explores the continuing legacy of the anti-vaccine movement on the anniversary of one of its most notorious episodes, and explores its impact on health, on research and on culture both at home and abroad.’ At:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09rwgcg>

Meanwhile: ‘A recent article in The San Diego Union-Tribune presents a pair of articles that gives a false balance regarding vaccinations. Those who oppose vaccination do so on the basis of ideology rather than science, thus placing the public’s health at risk.’

<http://tinyurl.com/ybt86pua>

Autism

‘Indiana mom arrested for feeding her autistic daughter bleach after Facebook group touted it as cure.’

<http://tinyurl.com/ybb3p6dz>

see also:

<http://tinyurl.com/y8amsuba>

Also, the Society of Homeopaths is coming under pressure to clamp down on CEASE therapy, which some of its members use on autistic children: At

<http://tinyurl.com/y8laxfna>

Chronic fatigue syndrome

‘Fresh analysis of a controversial study, which recommended exercise and psychological therapy for people with chronic fatigue syndrome, suggests their impact is more modest than first thought.’

<http://tinyurl.com/ycckpmsby>

Homeopathy

‘Criticism of homeopaths against homeopathy criticism I: There is no evidence.’ ‘It is evident that

homeopathy associations are dealing with critical arguments more intensively than before, e.g. with the work of the Information Network on Homeopathy (INH), a Germany-based team of doctors, pharmacists and other scientists with a skeptic’s approach on homeopathy.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yb6e53a6>

Continuing its decline, the number of prescriptions for homeopathy products dispensed in community pharmacies in England plummeted 25% in 2017 to just 5,105. At:

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

And: Review of homeopathy services and treatments by Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire Clinical Commissioning Groups. At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yboyvb54>

The British Homeopathic Association (BHA) has called for a judicial review of what it calls the ‘fundamentally flawed’ process that will prevent homeopathy products being prescribed on the NHS. At:

<http://tinyurl.com/ybrzpm3>

Georgian College cancels Homeopathy program. At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yc7u3dg6>

Indian homeopath in custody for causing death by negligence. At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y8z34rtu>

Cancer: myths and quackery

‘In this post, we want to set the record straight on 10 cancer myths we regularly encounter. Driven by the evidence, not by rhetoric or anecdote, we describe what the reality of research actually shows to be true.’

<http://tinyurl.com/ploeahd>

‘Amanda Mary Jewell has no formal medical training and injects desperate visitors to her £145-a-day Caribbean clinic with dangerous and banned products.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y85g7naz>

Also: ‘The deadly false hope of German alternative cancer clinics’:

<http://tinyurl.com/ya7knqdk>

also see:

<http://tinyurl.com/y7lrnfj7>

Meanwhile: ‘An accused ‘quack doctor’ insisted today that studying his patient’s blood enables him to cure cancer. Errol Denton, 52, claims ... uses diet tips and natural herbs help him beat the disease.

<http://courtnewsuk.co.uk/i-can-cure-cancer/>

And: ‘Kitchen cupboard remedies have become so mainstream that they become potentially dangerous when recommended for life-threatening diseases such as cancer. In fact, just a few months ago the Express asked “Can turmeric really cure cancer? Woman says benefits of golden spice ‘cured’ her disease”’. At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y7zfaxod>

Naturopathy

‘Maybe one day, once I have decades of experience as a doctor and further training in my area of specialization, I will be able to speak about health matters with the tone of authority of the average naturopath.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y9wf4k3k>

‘Britt Maria Hermes was a committed practitioner in America’s multi-billion-dollar complementary medicine industry. Then she found her clinic’s herbal treatment for cancer was potentially illegal – and overnight became a highly vocal sceptic.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y7sk82ca>

Acupuncture

‘A woman in Spain has died from a severe allergic reaction after a session of live bee acupuncture. With low plausibility, the potential for fatal outcomes, no evidence to suggest that benefits outweigh even minor side effects, and lots of dead bees, this is an intervention that should be avoided.’

<http://tinyurl.com/y9kd8xgl>

Dietary nonsense

‘Before you begin a New Year’s detox, look for these ten signs you may be getting scammed’:

<http://tinyurl.com/y7lttylb>

‘Are you doing “Dry January”? Experimenting with gluten-free snacks? Or stocking up on “superfoods”? If so, Anthony Warner warns, you are, in fact, building up a

damaging relationship with food, and should probably stop it, now...In this insightful interview with Olly, he takes on the bad science of the “clean eating” movement, explains the reality of “anti-oxidant” blueberries, and will make you think twice before you ever cook in coconut oil again.’

<http://tinyurl.com/yd4otq6y>

A YouTube star who said turning vegan cured her cancer and stopped her being a lesbian has died of cancer.

<http://tinyurl.com/yddl899e>

Indian traditional medicine

Indian Medical Association protest against plan to let ‘quacks’ practise medicine... Short bridging courses for traditional healers will lead to ‘army of half-baked doctors’:

<http://tinyurl.com/ycew4mfk>

Shambhallah healing

The Advertising Standards Authority ruling against Shambhallah Healing Center. (Claims to reverse diabetes and hypertension in 30 days) at:

<http://tinyurl.com/yarbt55w>

Water

‘Despite being a hub for technological advancement, California’s bay area is also notorious for absurd anti-science health trends such as the movement opposing vaccinations which, in 2014, led to the most significant measles outbreak the state had seen in decades. Joining the absurdity of the “anti-vaxxers” is a new and equally ridiculous trend – “raw water”. That’s actually unfiltered, untreated, raw spring water, which, even when from the seemingly cleanest of sources, can spread diseases like cholera, E. coli, Hepatitis A or Giardia.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y79lrx8y>

See also: ‘The water consciousness movement is a trend towards eschewing tap or bottled water for drinking and instead turning to unfiltered, unpasteurised, unsterilised spring water...Proponents and, indeed, suppliers of this trend say that tap water in the US has been filtered – removing bacteria and minerals that they believe benefit the body.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yabg7nxw>

Meanwhile: Study finds that 93% of bottled water show some sign of microplastic contamination. At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y7xmabw5>

Colonic irrigation

‘Don’t listen to Gwyneth Paltrow: keep your coffee well away from your rectum.’

<http://tinyurl.com/ycgf7jzg>

Quantum Wellness Clips

‘Mark Metus, a Collingwood, Ont., chiropractor, owns a business that makes wearable clips that are supposed to boost a person’s strength and balance. He scored a \$100,000 deal on CBC’s Dragons’ Den back in November for a 30 per cent share of his company. The deal fell through after the segment was taped, but the company’s sales have increased significantly since the episode aired.’ Now: ‘Health Canada informed Marketplace today that it has required NeuroReset to stop selling three more of its products (Neuro Connect One, Neuro Connect Lifestyle, Neuro Connect Golf) because the company doesn’t have the necessary medical device licences’.

<http://tinyurl.com/ycjmyavo>

Rosemary Water Ltd.

Advertising Standards Authority Ruling on Rosemary Water Ltd.: Complaint upheld.

<http://tinyurl.com/ydalwd7n>

Sleep problems

‘Devices to aid sleep flood the market in spite of lack of scientific evidence of improved health, better sleeping habits.’

<http://tinyurl.com/ybd9urtw>

Young-blood transfusions

‘How a society gala was used to sell young-blood transfusions to baby boomers desperate to cheat death.’

<http://tinyurl.com/y7n5y6mn>

Crystal healing

‘National Geographic Just Sent Me a Crystal Healing Water Bottle [Updated]’

<http://tinyurl.com/yaaajgfl>

‘Treatments You Can Trust’

The Professional Standards Authority has removed accreditation from Treatments You Can Trust. ‘Accreditation is removed when a register does not meet our Standards for Accredited Registers.’

<http://tinyurl.com/ybg3ltu9>

Miracle Mineral Solution

The Netherlands Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority has issued a ban on the sale of MMS (sold as Miracle Mineral Solution, Miracle Mineral Supplement or Master Miracle Solution). Also, they advise the health minister to encourage stricter regulation of MMS on the European level.

<http://tinyurl.com/ybfft782>

Theranos blood test

‘The founder of a US start-up that promised to revolutionise blood testing has agreed to settle charges that she raised over \$700m (£500m) fraudulently.’

<http://tinyurl.com/ycdhuqg5>

PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHIATRY

Depression

‘Is everything Johann Hari knows about depression wrong? The Observer has published an excerpt from Johann Hari’s new book (*Lost Connections: Uncovering the Real Causes of Depression – and the Unexpected Solutions*), challenging what we know about depression. But do his own claims and arguments stack up?’

<http://tinyurl.com/y743q9vn>

Parapsychology and anomalistic psychology

An introduction and video of a lecture by Chris French.

<http://tinyurl.com/y8k8p95c>

Conspiracy theories

‘Why Do People Believe in Conspiracy Theories? The need to find order in a confusing world.’

<http://tinyurl.com/y8h6vj4g>

And: ‘Why believing conspiracy theories feels so good’:

<http://tinyurl.com/y8dqfyea>

Also: From Brian Dunning: *Conspiracies Declassified* is my new book which appears on bookstore shelves imminently. It disassembles 50 of the most popular conspiracy theories from the worlds of politics, history, science, and pop culture. It's targeted for the mass market, as we're hoping for the biggest impact in improving critical thinking in the world.

<http://tinyurl.com/y6wrztkj>

Urban legends

'In 1996 in Niagara, a tornado tore through a drive-in theater, ripping apart the movie screen—just as it played the scene in *Twister* in which a tornado demolishes a drive-in movie theater. "It seemed like the screen was coming alive," remembers one witness. Another: "We're watching *Twister*, and my god, we had a twister!" It's an incredible story, as its many "witnesses" will readily attest. But did it actually happen? Jay Cheel's short documentary *Twisted* investigates this Canadian urban legend, revealing the fallibility of memory, the subjectivity of truth, and the enduring power of human storytelling.'

<http://tinyurl.com/y8h9wz>

Mental illusions

'Mental Illusions is an educational program which uses insights from psychology (and other sciences), skepticism and magic with the purpose of encouraging people to learn about the mind and critically examine pseudoscientific and supernatural claims.'

<https://www.mentalillusions.com/>

Risk assessment for reoffending

'The credibility of a computer program used for bail and sentencing decisions has been called into question after it was found to be no more accurate at predicting the risk of reoffending than people with no criminal justice experience provided with only the defendant's age, sex and criminal history. Since being developed in 1998, the tool is reported to have been used to assess more than one million defendants.'

<http://tinyurl.com/yckl4ooe>

Facilitated Communication

'After he was accused of molesting his young special needs son, Jose Cordero spent 35 days in a Miami jail and was barred from seeing his family for months. The allegations did not come directly from the 7-year-old boy, who has autism, speaks little and cannot write on his own. Instead, they came from the child's elementary school teacher who claimed he relied on a technique called "hand over hand," guiding the boy's hands with his own to write down the disturbing details of sexual abuse. This form of "facilitated" communication is a science that has been largely debunked in the wake of high-profile scandals involving wrongfully accused parents over the past couple decades.'

<http://tinyurl.com/y8h9wz>

Eye-gaze communication

'Why communication from a "locked-in" child is a miracle we must question.' 'If Jonathan Bryan can communicate we should celebrate, but hard evidence is needed before we change how severely disabled children are cared for.'

<http://tinyurl.com/y7uy8kmv>

Participants for research projects

You are invited to take part in a research project conducted by a third-year psychology undergraduate for his dissertation. The objective of this research is to investigate the relationships between betting preferences, personality, and paranormal beliefs.

<http://tinyurl.com/ydx8upcv>

Omega-3 supplements

'Dietary supplementation with the omega-3 fatty acid DHA had no impact on reading, working memory or behaviour of under-performing UK schoolchildren, suggests new research that contradicts previous findings.'

<http://tinyurl.com/yc7volt>

Midbrain activation and reading blindfolded

'Today we're heading to India, where a wave of a new technique in child education appears to be conferring an almost magical superpower upon

children: the ability to see blindfolded. They can read books, even reportedly see through solid objects, all while securely blindfolded. Parents all over the country are scrambling to give their children this apparent edge in life, buying expensive classes for their kids to learn this skill. And all indications given to the general public are that it works. The kids have even been featured on television showing off this incredible ability.'

<https://skeptoid.com/episodes/4613>

Derren Brown

'Derren Brown: Good or Bad for Science and Skepticism?' Excellent article, praising the magician Mr Brown for his advocacy of science but questioning whether he himself does not flirt with pseudoscience (*It's about time – Ed.*).

<http://tinyurl.com/y8xee2yg>

POLITICS AND PUBLIC POLICY

Post-truth

'We've been told that facts have lost their power, that debunking lies only makes them stronger, and that the internet divides us. Don't believe any of it.' 'Ten years ago last fall, Washington Post science writer Shankar Vedantam published an alarming scoop: The truth was useless.....'

<http://tinyurl.com/y95vwfcb>

Economic forecasting

'To borrow from Yogi Berra, it is tough to make predictions, especially about the future. But 2017 was particularly difficult. On many of the biggest forecasts — global growth, inflation, the trajectory of the big powers — the experts got the year wrong.'

<http://tinyurl.com/ygyyuc3c>

Evidence-based policy in government

Ben Goldacre was awarded an MBE in the latest New Year's Honours for services to evidence-based policy.

Transparency of evidence: An assessment of government policy proposals May 2015 to May 2016. Can someone outside government work out what the government is proposing to do, and why? At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y95jqgoa>

‘The What Works Network was created in 2013 to ensure that the best available evidence on “what works” is available to the people who make decisions on public services. Five years on, this report looks at the impact of the Network, which has grown to include 10 independent What Works Centres.’

<http://tinyurl.com/ybt296ka>

See also:

<http://tinyurl.com/yb3nrldl>

Evidence-based policy for advertising codes

CAP (Committee of Advertising Practice) and BCAP (Broadcasting Committee of Advertising Practice) have published a document ‘outlining their approach to evidence-based policy making, their key considerations when assessing potential changes to the Advertising Codes and the different regulatory options available to them’.

<http://tinyurl.com/y79vnyrl>

Website of interest

Reality Check: FM4’s midday news magazine investigates the stories behind the headlines.

<http://tinyurl.com/y7vmavrnl>

Research and Parliament

‘Research plays an important role in the UK parliament; it can help MPs and peers scrutinize government policy, examine pressing issues of the day and pass laws. ... Read a how-to guide to getting your research into Parliament, brought to you by Taylor & Francis, Sense about Science and POST (Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology).’

<http://tinyurl.com/y7jh3u47>

The Troubled Families Programme

‘In 2011 David Cameron made a speech in response to the riots of August 2011: “They [troubled families] are the source of a large

proportion of the problems society... [These are] people with a twisted moral code... Drug addiction. Alcohol abuse. Crime. A cult of disruption and irresponsibility that cascades through the generations.” The Troubled Families Programme (TFP) was developed on the back of this speech and committed £450 million to intervene in the lives of 120,000 “troubled families”. ... Despite its widespread support the TFP is fraudulent. This is made clear, not just in Professor Gregg’s book, but also in the National Evaluation of the programme, commissioned by the Government.’

<http://tinyurl.com/ya859nlb>

ECOLOGY

GMOs

About ‘Food Evolution’: Film on GMOs and the scientific evidence for safety/ harm.

<https://www.foodevolutionmovie.com/>

Nuclear power

‘Nuclear power has been vilified in popular culture and among much of the environmental community. Yet the next-generation reactors currently in development may actually be key to avoiding global catastrophe. The young entrepreneurs heading this energy revolution realize they’re up against more than the climate clock – they need to convince all of us that the new nuclear is safe and achievable. Filmed across four continents over twenty two months, Emmy-winning director David Schumacher’s film focuses on how the generation facing the most severe impact of climate change is fighting back with ingenuity and hope. The New Fire tells a provocative and startlingly positive story about a planet in crisis and the young heroes who are trying to save it.’

<http://newfiremovie.com/>

RELIGION

Faith healing

‘In Idaho, medical-care exemptions for faith healing come under fire’. ‘Nearly one-third of the roughly 600 gravesites in Peaceful Valley Cemetery belong to

a child, advocates say. Spotty records make it difficult to identify how and why the children died before their burial at the graveyard used by the Followers of Christ, a splinter sect that practices faith healing and believes that death and illness are the will of God. But coroner and autopsy reports gathered by advocates, and former church members’ childhood memories, tell a story of children needlessly dying from a lack of medical care.’

<http://tinyurl.com/y922yfec>

Exorcism

‘Exorcists are back – and people are getting hurt’ by Deborah Hyde: The rise of exorcism in Catholic and evangelical churches is like a new Inquisition. But there are ways to stop the witch-hunt.’

<http://tinyurl.com/y9jzfh8y>

MISCELLANEOUS UNUSUAL CLAIMS

Ghosts

‘Do ghosts exist? If not, why do we see them? In each episode of the Haunted podcast Danny Robins looks at a real life ghost story in forensic detail trying to work out what really happened, with the help of experts, sceptics and the people who witnessed something they just can’t explain. Danny visits a famous racetrack where drivers return from the dead; sees a suburban house haunted by a racist ex-tenant; talks to a widower who shares his bed with a phantom; and meets the parents who became convinced a ghost wanted to kill their baby daughter.’

<http://tinyurl.com/ya9o6rvs>

By Hayley Stevens: ‘It’s that time of the year when I sift through the worst ghosts that made the news this year and bring you what I judge to be the most awful of them all. By awful I don’t mean evil or terrible ghosts we should all be afraid of, but ghost stories that had me rolling my eyes’. At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y8pvnf98>

And: ‘If you ever needed convincing that there is always a rational explanation for any supposedly “supernatural” phenomena, particularly in superstitious Indonesia, then perhaps

this story will be the nail in the coffin for *hantu* myths and theories'. At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y9zxejqj>

Bigfoot

'A woman who claims to have encountered Sasquatch (Bigfoot) while on a hike the San Bernardino mountains is filing a lawsuit against the state of California and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife for refusing to acknowledge its existence.' According to her, her daughter actually spotted the massive man-like creature covered in hair first, staring at them while up about 30-feet

in some trees. The woman called 911 but she says authorities didn't believe her.'

<http://tinyurl.com/y8xp23mr>

Time travel

'A 'Time-traveller' claiming to be from 2030 passes a lie detector test after claiming that Donald Trump will be re-elected and Artificial Intelligence will take over.' He said humans will arrive on Mars in 2028 and time travel will become common.....

.....But he has been slammed by sceptics online who doubt he is who he says he is.'

<http://tinyurl.com/yddtqg4z>

Astrology

'A recent Observer article insisted millennials are embracing astrology. Like astrology itself, this claim is very questionable'. At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y8tnhb5q>

'Tory MP David Tredinnick (*for it is he*) seems to believe that astrology could inform and improve UK healthcare.' At:

<http://tinyurl.com/zuk47ak>

UPCOMING EVENTS

ECSCO

The ECSCO website has a calendar of events of skeptical interest taking place all over Europe, including the UK. See 'The European Scene', earlier

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://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/>

Chris French is giving one of these presentations:

'Close encounters of the psychological kind' at the Dead Dolls House, London N1, 7:30 pm on April 10. Go to:

<http://tinyurl.com/ydfvjhvp>

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:

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