

# THE SKEPTICAL INTELLIGENCER

The Quarterly Magazine of ASKE  
THE ASSOCIATION FOR SKEPTICAL ENQUIRY  
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*Incorporating the Skeptical Adversaria: the ASKE Newsletter*

*Edited by Michael Heap*

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## AN IMPORTANT DATE FOR YOUR DIARY

The 18<sup>th</sup> European Skeptics Congress will be held at the University of Ghent from Friday August 30<sup>th</sup> to Sunday September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019. The organisers of Q.E.D. in Manchester are taking a well-earned rest in 2019, so those of you who regular attend this event will still have the opportunity to meet up once again with your skeptical friends from far and wide. The event is jointly hosted by the Dutch and Belgian Skeptics and is in English. Ghent is a wonderful, vibrant city with many historical attractions. And of course there is the Belgian beer. How could you resist? The Congress Facebook is at:

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



## FROM THE ASKE CHAIR

Michael Heap

### The ASKE Paranormal Challenge

ASKE's revised Paranormal Challenge (*note 1*) has been running for some time but attracts only the occasional enquiry. Recall that a prize of £10,000 is awarded to anyone succeeding in demonstrating under scientifically controlled conditions that they have an ability that ASKE would consider to be 'paranormal', one criterion for this being that it is not explained in 'normal', 'everyday' terms. (We have to be a bit careful with wording. For example 'not explained by science' is not necessarily the same as 'paranormal' as there are phenomena - consciousness for example - that science can't as yet 'explain'.)

In the Spring 2017 issue I wrote about a preliminary test that I had witnessed some years previously in which a dowser failed to locate any of three water-containing pipes buried in the ground. I myself also conducted a test on an unusual claim for an electronic voice phenomenon. Or was there supposed to be a voice? I never got to the bottom of it and my patience and persistence was not rewarded by any generosity of spirit on the part of the claimant (see the Spring and Summer 2014 issues).

More recently, with the revival of the Challenge, there have been several enquirers and two claimants have undergone preliminary testing. Coincidentally they both made the same claim - that their thoughts could be telepathically transmitted to other people. That is, people could pick up their thought content without any of the normal means of communication.

As a psychologist I have always found people who believe they have a paranormal ability to be more interesting than the ability they claim to possess. These two claimants were no exception. In their case, their claimed ability resembled that of a positive symptom of schizophrenia

known as 'thought broadcasting', so obviously I had to think carefully before engaging with them in any test of their claim.

From information I acquired about the first claimant ('A') I inferred that he probably did have a mental health problem but he appeared to value his claimed ability and enquired whether I could arrange for someone to give him a brain scan so that scientists could study why he possessed this gift. He described exactly how he should be tested, namely that a four-digit number should be chosen at random and shown only to him. He would then think of it and a 'receiver' would say what the number was. This is the reverse of the usual method of testing telepathic ability and relies on the honesty of the receiver (who could, if they were so inclined, claim that it was *they* who should receive the prize!). A was a bit wary of being tested by skeptics but seemed quite happy with my arrangement that he be tested by a skeptic group situated closer to his part of the world than I was.

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*He attended the skeptics' test  
having never attempted what he  
claimed he could do!*

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Of course he failed the test. What might have saved everybody's time and energy was his that he initially undertake the test with friends or family members to make sure that he did have this specific ability. Indeed I did impress upon him the advisability of his doing this - it would have been simple enough. But he attended the skeptics' test having never attempted what he claimed he could do!

With most claimants, their possessing an extraordinary ability is an *overvalued idea*, albeit usually a benign one, and A was no exception. Hence, especially with someone who is psychologically vulnerable, their

failure to demonstrate the ability in question has the potential to be quite upsetting for them. Accordingly, to those few claimants I have communicated with I have always insisted that if they do not pass the test it does not mean that they do not possess their claimed ability. All the failed test has shown is that they were unable to demonstrate it *on this occasion*. I believe that this is entirely rational. For example, in the case of the dowser I mentioned at the beginning of this piece, when I informed fellow skeptics of what had happened some of them said, 'Yes, and I bet he still insists that he has this ability'. Of course he would! It's not simply a matter of it being too painful for him to relinquish a belief in his own exceptionality. So far as he is concerned, over the years he has observed what he genuinely believes is overwhelming evidence that he has this special ability and it is not irrational for him to consider that one instance of failure proves that he hasn't. For him *that* would be an extraordinary claim and we know what extraordinary claims require.

The second person ('B') claimed the same ability as A but they differed in important respects. I shall only give those details that I feel are necessary for present purposes. B had gone to extraordinary lengths to find someone willing to test what would be best described as the ability of other people to know his thoughts. Like A, he believed this was actually happening in his everyday life, but unlike A it caused him great distress. Ordinarily I would not have accepted his request, but B was intelligent and insightful and had some academic knowledge of psychology. He was aware that his belief might be a symptom of mental illness and if it were he would seek appropriate help. He considered that a test would clarify the situation for him - he was not interested in winning the

prize. Given the time, effort and money he had invested in his search for someone to test him, on balance I felt it might help him if I complied with his request. We agreed on a protocol which required him to look in turn at each of a series of pictures and a 'receiver' would choose which he was thinking of from a set of six.. He was wary of the receiver being a skeptic and so I arranged for three people to be presented who were all committed believers in paranormal phenomena. He was allowed to choose which of the three was to be the receiver. The first picture was simply for the purposes of rehearsing the procedure. The receiver did not choose the picture *B* was thinking of and on enquiry the other two people reported only vague impressions unconnected with the

picture viewed by *B*. At this point *B* appeared somewhat disconcerted and reluctant to go on with the test proper. My feeling was that he may have concluded that this was not going to work – perhaps he had the sense to realise he was being asked to do the impossible. He himself voiced the idea that the receiver and the other people present were all rather elderly and perhaps the effect would be more likely to emerge in younger people. I informed him that, under the rules of the Challenge, if we continued with the test and he was not successful he would have to wait at least a year before re-applying but if he called a halt at that point because he did not think the test was appropriate – in his case because the participants were too

old - we could resume the test later. He opted for the latter.

When the others had left I had a long chat with *B* and he spoke about other things that were troubling him and had been doing so for some years. He was aware of my professional background and I advised him that I felt it would not be helpful for him to continue his search to have his belief put to the test. However he was committed to being tested before he made up his mind what to do next. I emailed him the following day and after receiving his reply I did not hear from him again.

In the next issue I shall examine some more recent enquiries about the ASKE Challenge.

#### Notes

1. <http://tinyurl.com/y4gu7n3u>

### 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.



## LOGIC AND INTUITION

### Déjà vu

Do not adjust your mind: reality is at fault. Or it certainly was in the last issue, where I repeated the puzzle I had given in the Summer 2018 issue. Many apologies for this startling error. (Incidentally, what is unique in the English language about the word 'startling'?) So let's have two puzzles this time. There is a hint for the second puzzle at the start of the answers on page 21 so be careful if you don't want to see this.

### The last man standing

The scene is the bar of our local cricket club where old Fred is regaling us with stories – some of them of doubtful authenticity in my opinion - of when he captained our team in the late 1950s.

'Did I ever tell you about the time we were playing home to Whitewell Park and I bowled them all out in the first 10 consecutive balls?' he asked. 'There wasn't a run scored. I think it was dear old Jim Shufflebottom who was the last man standing'. So what number (1 to 11) was Jim in the team?

### The biased coin

Alison is repeatedly tossing a coin in order to generate a random series of noughts and ones (e.g. 0011011100...). She knows that the coin is biased but she has worked out a simple method whereby a random series is guaranteed. What is her method?

If you get stuck on this there is a hint at the start of the answers on page 21.



## 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 also has a Twitter handle, @SkepticsEurope.

The ECSO website now has a comprehensive calendar of skeptical events taking place across Europe, replicated at the ESP website (below).

### The ESP - European Skeptics Podcast



Building a bridge for skeptics

<http://theesp.eu/>

In the most recent episode (as of 22.3.19): ‘Canali’ on Mars (or rather not), we catch up on the Pope and especially Cardinal Pell, a huge study that disproves the link between vaccines and autism, Amazon and Facebook take a stand against anti-vaccers, successful Swedish fights against colloidal silver and anthroposophy, the Hungarian government stabs science in the back, Elsevier gets further pushback on their outrageous pricing models and Hungarian pharmacies will inform all

customers that homeopathic preparations have not effect. Plus, by mistake or divine intervention, The Daily Mail publishes a scientifically correct article! Leonardo da Vinci sends us off by reminding us that even 500 years ago, some people realised how necessary it is to conduct experiments.

You’ll also find a comprehensive calendar of event of skeptical interest taking place all over Europe at:

[http://theesp.eu/events\\_in\\_europe](http://theesp.eu/events_in_europe)

### European Skeptics Congress 2019

See the announcement on the cover of this issue.



## MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

Michael Heap

The activities of anti-vaccination campaigners and their disastrous consequences on people’s lives are now the subject of increasing media attention at an international level. Readers will no doubt be aware that this campaign has been fuelled in large part by the discredited research of Mr Andrew Wakefield in the 1990s claiming a link between childhood autism and the MMR (measles, mumps and rubella) vaccination. Mr Wakefield now works in the US where he is politically active in promoting anti-vaccination propaganda (*notes 1 & 2*).

Extensive surveys in recent years have not found any increased risk of autism in MMR-vaccinated children. The most recent of these was reported in March 2019 in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* (*note 3*). A total of 657,461 children born in Denmark from 1999 to 2010 were followed up from 1 year of age to August 2013.

Over 95% of the children received the MMR vaccine. The vaccine did not increase the risk of autism in those children who were not considered at risk for the disorder, neither did it trigger it in those who were. Furthermore, a study of more than 38,000 children in Ghana found that all-cause mortality was significantly lower in those who received the measles vaccine after the third diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis vaccination. ‘The study adds to growing evidence that, when administered in the WHO recommended sequence, measles vaccination provides non-specific benefits to child survival. The findings have implications for achieving the Millennium Development Goal 4 of reducing child mortality’ (*note 4*).

Despite overwhelming evidence of the effectiveness and safety of the MMR vaccine and the risks of failing

to vaccinate, which include life-long disability and even fatality, anti-vaccination campaigners persist in disseminating their deceitful propaganda and playing on the fears of parents who are very sensitive to such warnings. Typically, I recall a father declaring on television that he would not put his two small children at risk by having them vaccinated, despite the evidence that he thus placed them at much higher risk.

Anti-vaccination campaigners have been successful in decreasing the uptake of vaccinations in many parts of the world with the predictable deleterious effect on child health (see the ‘Of Interest’ section in previous issues of this magazine). One example, the latest of many, is from the state of Washington, where an emergency has been declared owing to a measles outbreak in Clark County. Predictably the outbreak has occurred almost

exclusively among the unvaccinated (notes 5 & 6). One man whose family was at the centre of a measles outbreak in Vancouver said he didn't vaccinate his children because he and his wife were influenced by reports that linked the MMR vaccine to autism (note 7). And in Costa Rica, which last had a case of measles in 2014 (imported – the last one that originated there was in 2006), a search of people who had been in contact with a visiting French family had to be undertaken when one of the members was found to have contracted measles' (note 8). In France itself three people died of measles in 2018 and the first death in 2019 has just been reported at the time of writing. Since 2008, health officials there have recorded 20 deaths related to measles (note 9). Ukraine had more than 54,000 cases in 2018, with 16 deaths, partly attributable to the poor uptake of vaccines. The World Health Organisation has now included 'vaccine hesitancy' as one of the top 10 global health threats this year (note 10). A Google search immediately indicates that this is a world-wide problem.

Mercifully, the press and television have gone on the attack against the vaccination conspiracy theorists (see e.g. note 11) and those in charge of social media and other internet facilities have been taking action too. Recently 'YouTube (has) said it would prevent channels that promote anti-vax content from running advertising, saying explicitly that such videos fall under its policy prohibiting the monetization of videos with "dangerous and harmful" content. The move comes after advertisers on YouTube pulled their ads from these videos, following inquiries from BuzzFeed News' (note 12). And Amazon has pulled at least five anti-vaccination documentaries questioning the safety of vaccines from its Prime

Video streaming platform' (note 13). These include 'Vaxxed: From Cover-Up to Catastrophe'; 'We Don't Vaccinate!'; 'The Greater Good'; 'Shoot 'Em Up: The Truth About Vaccines', a purported exposé on the danger vaccines pose by potentially contributing to autism, asthma and neurological damage; and 'Man Made Epidemic', described as an investigation into 'the autism epidemic and whether MMR vaccines have a role to play'.

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*A remarkable development is that of children opposing their parent's decision not to vaccinate.*

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Governments are also acting. In the UK the Health and Social Care Secretary Matt Hancock has announced that he wants new legislation to force social media companies to remove content promoting false information about vaccines (note 14). In France last year, legislation was introduced making it mandatory for parents to have their babies vaccinated against a wider range of illnesses including mumps, measles and rubella. Despite the reported death (see above) cases of measles appear to be decreasing this year (note 15). In the Republic of Congo the government has recently launched a vaccination program whereby over 2.2 million children will be vaccinated (note 16). Meanwhile, in Israel the Ministry of Health has cracked down on anti-vaccine doctors (note 17). And in March, New York's Rockland County declared a measles state of emergency, and banned unvaccinated minors from public spaces (note 18).

Finally, a remarkable development is that of children opposing their parent's decision not to vaccinate. It

has been reported that some teenagers are turning to online forums like *Reddit* to find advice on how to be vaccinated against their parents' wishes (note 19). And 'Vancouver doctors are seeing an uptick in the number of unvaccinated teens and young adults seeking to be inoculated against measles in the wake of an outbreak of the disease at two schools in the city' (note 20). Also look at this from the *Washington Post*, 5.3.18 (note 21):

Ethan Lindenberger began by questioning his parents' anti-vaccine stances and eventually got himself inoculated, a rebellion that caught the attention of the national media and Congress. The 18-year-old from Ohio announced on YouTube that he had been invited to speak Tuesday before the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions at a hearing devoted to examining outbreaks of preventable diseases.

Further recent new items on this topic can be found under 'Of Interest'.

#### Notes

1. <http://tinyurl.com/yx9cvah2>
2. <http://tinyurl.com/y39dxmyy>
3. <http://tinyurl.com/y5j9g3gd>
4. <http://tinyurl.com/ycnopgc7>
5. <http://tinyurl.com/yy2wgjbg>
6. <http://tinyurl.com/y3mkz194>
7. <http://tinyurl.com/yx18bebw>
8. <http://tinyurl.com/y4r8m44s>
9. <http://tinyurl.com/yyk9as76>
10. <http://tinyurl.com/y9nhww6a>
11. <http://tinyurl.com/yxzq3954>
12. <http://tinyurl.com/y6lcwov3>
13. <http://tinyurl.com/y4zfavkf>
14. <http://tinyurl.com/y5wjz8xx>
15. <http://tinyurl.com/yxt5s6jq>
16. <http://tinyurl.com/y2acu8yz>
17. <http://tinyurl.com/yad3d2rt>
18. <http://tinyurl.com/yygq6m55>
19. <http://tinyurl.com/yaqc36y7>
20. <http://tinyurl.com/y6c55jku>
21. <http://tinyurl.com/y2mb7nlr>



## LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

### Language and the arts revisited

In November and December 2018, an installation called ‘Language [as] Meta-Technology - Disinformation - Passengers Offsite #1’ was exhibited at Sluice HQ, a small gallery-cum-office in Hackney, London. I myself visited this exhibition on its final day (and, to my initial alarm, was recognised as soon as I entered; the producer/investigator Joe Banks remembered me from a brief encounter ten years before!). The exhibition was in part a response to the gallery itself, formerly a sign-maker’s premises. The content was semiotic (involving the ‘science’ of communicative signs as a general phenomenon) rather than specifically linguistic in character, and the ‘blurb’ cited the philosopher/ semiotician C.W. Morris, the writer Umberto Eco and the telecommunications theorist Colin Cherry.

The possibility of communication implies not only the possibility of truthfulness but also the possibility of untruth (lies, errors) and the possibility of doubt; and Banks’ now elusive book *Rorschach Audio – Art & Illusion for Sound* focuses upon these aspects of semiotics as manifested both in written language and in speech, in recent times no longer ephemeral but admitting of mechanical recording. Skeptics will be interested in particular in his critical discussion of the highly suspect ‘Electronic Voice Phenomenon’.

The exhibition itself involved the use of technology for speech recording, speech synthesis, speech coding and psychoacoustic research, and the notion that language itself can be regarded as an over-arching ‘technology’. Specifically, it included (among other things) a sound installation named ‘Theophany’ lasting only 0.083 seconds, an ‘allegorical portrait’ of nuclear scientist Robert Oppenheimer called ‘Spellbound’, and a split-screen representational video installation named ‘Ammonite’; all

three of these related to religious notions of various kinds (without necessarily endorsing any such notions as factually true). Banks regards science/technology as inherently (in part) artistic, and these displays undogmatically invite renewed consideration of the artistic aspects of communications technology and of semiotics itself. ‘Disinformation’ is in fact a wider, critically acclaimed project developed by Banks, involving electronic communication and its psychological ramifications.

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*The possibility of communication implies not only the possibility of truthfulness but also the possibility of untruth (lies, errors) and the possibility of doubt.*

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Banks referred in discussion to the group ‘Art & Language’, a collaborative enterprise involving various explicitly conceptual artists and created in the late 1960s; it has gone through a range of manifestations over the years. An underlying (and not altogether unreasonable, if rather sweeping) assumption was that language ‘is the basis from which ideas and concepts are built’. Language makes possible the emergence of key words (referred to as ‘index words’) which ‘appear, disappear, and for some even persist’; viewers and artists can analyse the ‘evolution’ of a word through the ‘proposal’ of various definitions. While all this appears altogether platitudinous to a linguist, the ideas involved were apparently perceived by the artists as novel and theoretically interesting in context. Group members accordingly became engaged in a shift from ‘conventional “non-linguistic” forms of art’ (painting, sculpture, etc.) to text-based works. It is not clear that anything has emerged

from this tradition in which a linguist, as opposed to an art theoretician, would find fresh insights. But the works created are often very interesting in themselves.

### The language of insects

Chapter 8 of my 2013 book *Strange Linguistics* deals with claims regarding the use by non-human animals of communication systems which might reasonably be described as genuinely linguistic. I confessed in my Preface that when putting the book together I had (to my embarrassment) simply been unable to trace some notes which I had once made on claims regarding the alleged linguistic capabilities of insects and of the ‘god-like’ giant squids; this material was therefore absent from my text. One item to which one of these notes referred was the 1974 science-fiction/horror movie *Phase IV*, which was a box-office failure and attracted some scathing reviews but now has a cult following (it is readily available online). A remark recently made by Joe Banks (see above) drew my attention to this movie once again (many thanks to him!).

The movie deals with a scenario in which a colony of ants in the Arizona desert have (for unknown reasons) undergone rapid evolution, have developed a ‘hive mind’ and have eliminated all their natural predators (larger insects, spiders, etc.). Perceiving this situation as threatening, two scientists, despite struggling to obtain official support, attempt to study and ultimately to eradicate these mutant ants. The ants build substantial, regular structures and communicate using a language-like geometric ‘written’ representation system which gains the capacity of referring to the humans; one of the scientists, portrayed as having experience with animal communication, deciphers this system in part. Eventually the ants kill the other scientist (already rendered

weak and delirious by an ant-bite) by means of a dead-fall as he sets out to destroy their queen, which he believes is to be found in a mound of earth. The first scientist takes over this task, but finds in the mound a young woman who had remained in the area and at an earlier stage had apparently suffered the same fate as his colleague; she is alive, and the two of them await the development of the ants' plan to adapt the human race and integrate it into their new world.

The 'ant language' plays only a minor role in the movie, but it is interesting and illustrates well the rather obvious point that any sophisticated communication system developed by a species other than humanity would in all likelihood be very different indeed from human language, and perhaps (as emerges in this movie) not even readily recognised as language-like. This might apply especially to a species like an ant; languages developed by *Homo erectus* or by sasquatches, as discussed in this forum, or even by other mammals, would probably differ radically from ours but not so dramatically. In some of her fiction, Ursula le Guin develops the rudiments of such communication systems, including those of ants, but without sufficient structural detail to invite serious comment.

Other fiction writers have imagined ants and such taking over the world, albeit without the notion of 'ant language'. In his 1905 story 'The Empire of the Ants' (adapted in 1977 as a rather unimpressive movie where the ants have attained implausibly large proportions!), H.G. Wells portrays newly intelligent ants as beginning to spread from a South American base to threaten the human world. In Frank Herbert's 1966 novel *The Green Brain* an intelligent organism arises from nature's resistance to humanity's largely successful attempts to eradicate insect life and induces social insects to form humanoid collective organisms to further its fightback. In a somewhat different vein, J.H. Rosny's 1922 novel *L'Etonnement Aventure de Hareton Ironcastle* (translated as *Ironcastle* by

Philip Jose Farmer in 1976) envisages a vegetable-like entity spreading from an alien spacecraft which has landed in a jungle, possibly to challenge human hegemony. One is also reminded of the small but frighteningly powerful and voracious aliens found on the Moon in the 2011 alternative-history/'found-footage' movie *Apollo 18*.

Vis-à-vis the movie *Empire of the Ants*: when it was in the cinemas, my brother, then a junior local government pest-control operative, caused some alarm and then some amusement by creating a bogus case-sheet headed 'Classic Cinema, Hoylake: Ants'!

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*Languages developed by Homo erectus or by sasquatches ... or even by other mammals, would probably differ radically from ours but not so dramatically.*

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There are, of course, other fictional accounts of animals (usually vertebrates) being found to have or to have developed languages and/or scripts, or learning human languages. In Carolyn Parkhurst's *The Dogs of Babel* (2003), a linguist sets out to teach his dog to speak, in order to solve the mystery surrounding the unexpected death of his wife, witnessed only by the dog (no spoilers!)

#### **The Sinclairs in America: inconsistent usage or worse?**

The Sinclair family has a long-standing connection with the spectacularly ornate Rosslyn Chapel south of Edinburgh, which has long been seen by many as associated with the 'mysteries' involving the medieval Knights Templar and their supposed successors (which also prominently feature Rennes-le-Château in France). The Chapel came into increased prominence when it appeared in Dan Brown's 2003 novel *The Da Vinci Code* and the associated movie. Andrew Sinclair's 2006 book *Rosslyn; The Story of Rosslyn Chapel and the True Story behind the Da Vinci Code* puts forward the view that after the

Templars were suppressed in 1307 his family was instrumental in re-locating the Scottish lodges to North America, thus preceding the Cabots, Columbus, etc. as European settlers. The main figure in this story is Prince Henry Sinclair, Earl of Orkney (1345-1400/1402), who allegedly 'discovered' America (secretly) in 1398. (Others have made more grandiose claims on behalf of Henry Sinclair; for instance, Frederick Pohl declared that he became identified with the Mi'kmak demigod Glooscap, whose statue can be seen presiding over the tribal cultural centre & emporium near Truro, Nova Scotia.)

Like Brown, Andrew Sinclair also draws strong links between the Templars and the Freemasons and associates the Templars with the 'Holy Bloodline of Jesus' and the Holy Grail. These ideas are quite widely entertained as probably true.

However, other (more scholarly) works have critiqued and indeed arguably debunked these claims. See for instance the books written by the leading Freemason Robert L.D. Cooper, and more recent work by the diligent and very proficient skeptical historian Jason Colavito (*note 1*). As Colavito points out, 'there is not one single authentic medieval document that (a) confirms a Holy Bloodline of Jesus, (b) links Henry Sinclair to the Knights Templar, or (c) documents any voyage by Henry Sinclair to anywhere outside of Europe'. And in fact there is no supporting archaeological evidence either.

These facts have not deterred pseudo-history enthusiasts with axes to grind from promoting the Sinclair story. Diana J. Muir is an 'investigative historian' with a particular interest in the Sinclair family; she has been researching their activities for 'more than 30 years'. In her 2018 book *The Lost Templar Journals of Prince Henry Sinclair* Muir reports the accidental finding in 2005, in a basement in Greenville, Tennessee, of journals written by Henry Sinclair and his descendants (which, if genuine, would controvert Colavito's points (b) and (c)

above). The cache also includes a map drawn on lambskin. Nine years later, Muir examined these documents closely (why was there such a long delay, given her intense interest in these matters?). They were written in Latin, Old English and Modern English and recounted interactions between the Sinclairs and their associates, the Templars, the Freemasons and Native Americans. Muir invites her readers to 'travel with us as we search for the artifacts mentioned in the journals and validate the story. Book 1 of 10, tells the story of Henry as a young boy from the age of 8 in 1353 until 1395 when he plans a voyage with Captain Nicolo Zeno and his son Antonio Zeno to Greenland'.

A linguist will immediately observe that no-one was writing in 'Old English' at such a late date; Muir is misusing the term, perhaps taking it (as many non-linguists do) to refer to any strikingly unfamiliar pre-modern (or even early modern) form of English. And Modern English is normally held to start from the end of medieval times; a rough boundary might be drawn at 1485 when the Tudor dynasty began and the Renaissance was underway. English from C11 to C15 is known as 'Middle English'. Nothing written by Henry Sinclair could be described either as 'Old' or as 'Modern English'.

And in fact Colavito for his part is convinced that these so-called 'Sinclair Journals' are unlikely to be genuine medieval records. For a start, Muir has not explained how these texts found their way to Tennessee. More tellingly, she has not presented the original texts for perusal by qualified linguists, as would be normal practice. In a most unscholarly manner, she apparently proposes to charge \$US40 for a view of one extract in Latin.

The 'fringe' historian/archaeologist Scott Wolter (best known as the figure behind the *America Unearthed* TV series, and an enthusiast for the Holy Grail, unacknowledged transoceanic contact, etc.) supports Muir's case. (Muir has identified Wolter himself as a descendant of some of the Knights Templar and of European royals!)

Wolter states: 'I have personally examined some of the originals and am convinced they are copies [MN: see below] of older documents. I have also seen the lambskin map which appears to be original. Regardless, we [MN: who is 'we'?] have already found errors in Diana's translations, but they are minor. The vast majority of her translations appear to be good'.

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*The linguistic aspects of this case recall some cases of alleged channelling where deceased individuals from remote time-periods are supposedly using linguistic forms appropriate to the period.*

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Wolter himself does not read Latin, and he repeats Muir's errors of linguistic nomenclature. Colavito asked him whether any expert in Latin (presumably Medieval Latin would be involved) or Middle English had examined Muir's translations and the originals to assess their linguistic accuracy and particularly the accuracy of the usage vis-à-vis its alleged C14 date. Wolter stated in reply that he and Terry Tilton (a Past Grand Master of the Freemasons in Minnesota) had had 'the three surviving pages, one in Latin, one in Old English, and one in modern English' sent to 'Masonic scholars in the appropriate languages in Scotland'. It is not at all clear what Wolter means here by 'the three surviving pages' (is not the entire original text extant?), but in any case (as Colavito himself asks): (a) why were these extracts not sent to independent linguistic experts (not associated with Freemasonry)?; (b) why was this information not offered until a direct question was asked?

And in any event the Masonic scholars consulted declared that 'the Latin and Old English [sic] were not quite consistent with the period', and suggested that other experts be consulted. Wolter apparently holds that C19 copyists (who he openly states were involved in the history of the

documents) introduced the linguistic errors, but there appears to be no evidence of this, and if it **were** true there would be no guarantee that other errors of whatever kind had not also intruded. Certainly nothing has emerged to date which suggests that the texts in question are genuine.

Over the years, other pseudo-historians have advanced similar stories of medieval transoceanic settlement, mysterious documents, etc. – many of them involving the Templars. Colavito refers to some of them in one of his texts dealing with Muir/Sinclair (*note 2*).

The linguistic aspects of this case recall some cases of alleged channelling where deceased individuals from remote time-periods are supposedly using linguistic forms appropriate to the period. Where this is attempted the usage itself is seldom at all convincing to linguists. There are frequently errors and/or anomalies, for instance the mixing of usage from different periods. This suggests that the material has been fraudulently hoaxed and that the unconvincing features are errors which have intruded because the faker lacks the specialisation required if utterances containing accurate forms in pre-modern usage are to be invented (similar effects arise in the cases of some possibly faked ancient-language inscriptions.) The skeptical linguist Sarah Thomason reviewed some such cases and specifically investigated the case of Marjorie Turcott, an American who claimed to be channelling 'Matthew', a C17 Scot (*note 3*). Matthew's dialect is mixed and often inaccurate for the period. (Channellers/entities also make factual errors; for example, Turcott/Matthew makes various factual errors about Scotland.)

### **Parents and names**

Airline staff made fun of a little girl whose name is Abcde, pronounced 'ahb-sidee'. Not very nice. But do not parents have something of a responsibility to give their children names that are readily pronounced and spelled, and do not invite ridicule? These parents did not have the excuse of not knowing the relevant language



well or of wanting to give their child a name which was normal in another language (note 4). They condemned the girl to a future of awkward encounters, inaccurate recording of information, etc. – apparently for no good reason. She will not be able to change her name on her own account until much later, and that too is not a wholly trouble-free process.

### Notes

- 1 See for example <http://tinyurl.com/ya6otyde>.
- 2 <http://tinyurl.com/y7896sy6> (note the amazing comments!)
- 3 “‘Entities” in the Linguistic Minefield’, *Skeptical Inquirer*, XIII (1989), pp. 391-397
- 4 On problems experienced by those with wholly legitimate names which

appear unfamiliar and difficult in a cross-linguistic situation, see for instance ‘Called the wrong name at work? Awkward ...’ (BBC News, 10/12/18: <http://tinyurl.com/y9qouty4>)

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## REVIEWS AND COMMENTARIES



**Homeopathy Reconsidered: What Really Helps Patients** By Natalie Grams. Cham, Switzerland: Springer (Copernicus Books), 2019, pp 124. ISBN 978-3-030-00508-5. £15.34 (Amazon) pbk.

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### Reviewed by Peter Lucy

Recently translated from the German is Dr Grams’ *Homeopathy Reconsidered - What Really Helps Patients*. Properly qualified in medicine, Dr Grams had a successful practice as a homeopath for many years until trying to examine it scientifically. Her honesty overcame her belief and she is now a prominent critic of homeopathy in Germany (where it is still funded by the health insurance system) and a member of the German Skeptics.

The German edition was published in 2015 and Dr Grams explains, in a new introduction to the English edition, that she wrote it ‘as a personal story’, to explain how she rejects the untenable parts of homeopathy on scientific grounds but tried ‘to show a way to integrate the parts of it that seem to be worth preserving into modern medicine.’ It was written to describe a personal journey and to reach out to her homeopathic colleagues. Alas, her approach did not meet with their approval, and she is now treated as a traitor to the homeopathic cause. From the final chapter (as with the Introduction, it is a new addition to the original book) she states that homeopaths ‘have all flatly rejected my theses and suggestions,

seeing them as some kind of heresy, and have insisted that [homeopathy] can offer a specifically effective drug therapy’.

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*She states that homeopaths have all flatly rejected my theses and suggestions, seeing them as some kind of heresy’.*

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Between the introduction and final chapter we have a thoughtful, honest, comprehensive, and slightly confusing account of her journey. Most skeptical readers will be familiar with Samuel Hahnemann’s theories – like causing like, and that the more dilute a substance is the more effective it becomes. This idiocy was probably little more erroneous than the mainstream medical practices of that time – the late 1700s – and, with extreme dilution ensuring that none of the poisonous remedies actually existed in the homeopathic remedy prescribed, was relatively safe. Dr Grams is fair to homeopathy’s founder, and she warmly acknowledges the talking cure portion of homeopathic diagnosis, while repeatedly confirming the fact that none of the ‘globules’ (a

term for homeopathic remedies new to me) could have had any physical effect at all. Indeed, she mentions prescribing ‘globules’ with a 200C dilution factor, which of course is substantially weaker than one atom in the known universe (taking the universe to be  $10^{80}$  atoms, or 40C in homeopathic jargon).

It is fair to say that translation does not favour some of the concepts. Dr Grams tries to break down homeopathic treatment into the ‘talking cure’ and the globule prescribed, and the former gets confusing. We go from the three disease levels - Physical, Emotional and Spiritual - to concepts of ‘Vital Force’ and ‘Spirit-Like energy’, and are led to believe the process of ‘anamnesis’ (the one-to-one consultation where the patient describes all their symptoms and experiences) is specifically therapeutic. I’m not sure I buy this, but will certainly accept that being counselled by Dr Grams would be beneficial, and that GPs are often used as counsellors by patients for whom no actual drug remedy is needed (can GPs prescribe sugar pills/placebos in the UK?). It is as if Dr Grams is reaching out to her old colleagues, trying to move them from the bogus medicine of

Hahnemann's 'Organon of the Healing Art' and 'Materia Medica Pura' to proper therapeutics. And to explain to herself why she believed in homeopathy for so long. Her honesty, again, is wholly admirable. But I was confused by statements such as 'I have seen [...] malignant cancerous ulcers recede under homeopathic treatment [...] as well as anxiety and depression'. (page 1)

Dr Grams delves deep into the various (conflicting) strands of the homeopathic web, regularly quoting a Dr Rajan Sakaran (*note 1*) One quoted example will suffice - (Sensation Refined, Mumbai 2005, quoted on page 71)

*The Core Sensation.*

*Basically, the aim is to identify not only a situational sensation, but a general sensation for the patient. From the spiritual level of sensation on, this is all about a principle that's generally valid in us i.e. the sensation is not limited to the particular illness.*

*Homeopaths postulate that this core sensation is upstream to our entire perception and that we perceive our whole life and the outside world through this – including also the illness. This may allow us to recognise an entire "false perception" via the disease, as though the disease were a kind of keyhole.*

Gosh! ('I think we have made progress this week! Please keep taking the globule – 1 per day only, of course – and I'll see you at the same time next week!')

There is certainly a need in conventional, scientific medical treatment to differentiate between needed drugs, and counselling. I am not persuaded that homeopathic mumbo-jumbo is the correct cover for the latter, though I can appreciate Dr Sakaran's patter.

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*Homeopathy's underlying physical theories are of course bogus, but homeopaths are not inclined to abandon them.*

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Which brings us to the final chapter, where clarity resumes. Some years after *Homeopathy Reconsidered's* original publication, Dr Grams has moved on and now concludes that homeopathy cannot evolve to proper psycho-therapeutic counselling and treatment. Homeopathy's underlying physical theories are of course bogus, but homeopaths are not inclined to abandon them. (Dr Grams may have been slightly naïve to think that they would. Very few have her intellectual honesty.) I will follow her publications with interest and respect, and was grateful to have the opportunity of

reading her account. I can't wholeheartedly recommend it, as the central portion does get bogged down. Unless you are particularly interested in analysis of anamnesis, and the various branches of homeopathic diagnostic interpretation, perhaps take the book as a personal journey, which is of course how Dr Grams herself describes it.

(Regarding the translation issues, I can sympathise: when I was working for a US computer company, a manager, knowing I had some German, asked me to translate an HR slideset that had been sent from European HQ in Germany. The slides had been created in California, and probably made little sense in the original America English HR-speak. Once directly translated into German, and then back again, searching for meaning was troublesome.)

I am a layman skeptic, with no medical qualifications. For an account of Dr Grams excellent work, and her journey see Note 2.

#### Notes

1. <http://tinyurl.com/y5fvak6a>
2. <http://tinyurl.com/yxd8lxz5>

*Peter Lucey read Russell Millers 'Bare-Faced Messiah' in the 1990s, and then took part in Scientology discussions on the old usenet groups, where he encountered the sci.skeptic FAQ. Skepticism has been a growth experience ever since. He has been a member of ASKE for some years.*

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**12 Rules for Life: An Antidote for Chaos** by Jordan B. Peterson. Allen Lane, 2018, pp xxvi, 409. ISBN: 9780241351635. £20, hbk.

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## Reviewed by Ray Ward

I am suspicious of books introduced by others, remembering Hugh Trevor-Roper's dictum that no book but a posthumous one needs an introduction by another hand (though he did himself write an introduction to a book about the Kennedy assassination), so I was a bit concerned to see that this book has a foreword by one Norman Doidge, a

Canadian psychiatrist and psychoanalyst. Doidge does not, however, simply say what a fine book we are about to read, but has some interesting things to say himself: that Peterson decorated his house with Soviet propaganda 'to remind himself of something he knew he and everyone would rather forget: that hundreds of

millions were murdered in the name of utopia... a delusion that had practically destroyed mankind'; and: 'Ideologies are simple ideas, disguised as science or philosophy, that purport to explain the complexity of the world and offer remedies that will perfect it. Ideologues are people who pretend they know how to "make the world a

better place” before they’ve taken care of their own chaos within.... Ideologies are substitutes for true knowledge, and ideologues are always dangerous when they come to power, because a simple-minded I-know-it-all approach is no match for the complexity of existence. Furthermore, when their social contraptions fail to fly, ideologues blame not themselves but all who see through their simplifications.’

Peterson is a Professor of Psychology at the University of Toronto, after posts at McGill and Harvard, and a clinical psychologist (though he put his practice on hold in 2017). Canada has been called the fount of all political-correctness-gone-mad legislation, and Peterson hit the news in 2016 when he criticised a new Bill adding gender identity as a prohibited ground of discrimination, which he called introducing compelled speech into law. He would not, he said, use terms like ‘zhe’ and ‘zher’.

This book consists, says the blurb, of ‘twelve profound and practical principles for how to live a meaningful life’, some rather platitudinous (‘Stand up straight with your shoulders back’, ‘Treat yourself like someone you are responsible for helping’, ‘Set your house in order before you criticize the world’), others hard of attainment (‘Do not let your children do anything that makes you dislike them’), and some pretentious and rather silly (‘Do not bother children when they are skateboarding’ and ‘Pet a cat when you encounter one in the street’).

After the recent plethora of reports of males identifying as females and vice versa, non-sexually-specific toilets, etc., it is refreshing to see someone say that male and female, parent and child are vital and fundamental parts of the environment to which we have adapted: natural categories, deeply embedded in our perceptual, emotional and motivational structures. I was reminded of the recent remark by a retired geneticist of my acquaintance that, despite the above-mentioned reports, decades of studying sex had convinced him that the vast, overwhelming majority of human

beings are anatomically and physiologically male or female.

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*It is refreshing to see someone say that male and female, parent and child are vital and fundamental parts of the environment to which we have adapted.*

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Peterson says some interesting things: ‘Standards of better or worse are not illusory or unnecessary.... The idea of a value-free choice is a contradiction in terms. Value judgments are a precondition for action.’ Diversity is an ideological shibboleth, and the 1960s saw ‘a general denigration of adulthood, an unthinking disbelief in the existence of competent power, and the inability to distinguish between the chaos of immaturity and responsible freedom’. Deceit makes people miserable beyond what they can bear, fills humans with resentment and vengefulness, and produces terrible suffering: the Nazi death camps and the torture chambers and genocides of Stalin and the man he rightly calls ‘that even greater monster, Mao’.

Peterson has some good phrases: ‘[P]arents should come in pairs’ (his emphasis); ‘A small minority of people are responsible for most of the production in any field’; ‘the Soviet Union’s extensive mistreatment of political prisoners, its corrupt legal system, and its mass murders ... were not aberrations but direct expressions of the underlying communist philosophy’; and, for Derrida and his post-modern Marxist acolytes, ‘There are no facts. Hierarchical position and reputation as consequence of skill and competence? All definitions of skill and competence are merely made up by those who benefit from them, to exclude others, and to benefit personally and selfishly.’

As a member of the British False Memory Society I found Peterson’s remarks on memory particularly interesting. While the sexual abuse of

children is distressingly common it is not, he says, a common as poorly-trained psychotherapists think, and does not always produce terribly damaged adults. But therapists will often axiomatically assume that a distressed adult must have been abused as a child. They dig, infer, intimate, suggest, overreact, bias, tilt, exaggerate the importance of some events, downplay others, trim facts to fit their theory, and convince their clients they were abused - if only they could remember. So they start to remember, and accuse, and sometimes what they remember never happened, and those accused are innocent.

Peterson tells how George Orwell ‘concluded that the tweed-wearing, armchair-philosophizing, victim-identifying, pity-and-contempt-dispensing social-reformer types frequently did not like the poor, as they claimed ... *they just hated the rich* [his emphasis]’, disguising their resentment and jealousy with piety, sanctimony and self-righteousness, and that things haven’t changed much today.

Why, asks Peterson, do we teach young people that our culture is the result of male oppression, with disciplines as diverse as education, social work, art history, gender studies, literature, sociology and, increasingly, law actively treating men as oppressors and their activity as inherently destructive? He describes the past and present horrors of the introduction of Marxism in the Soviet Union, Vietnam, Cambodia and North Korea: tens of millions died, hundreds of millions more were oppressed, the resulting economic systems were corrupt and unsustainable, the world entered a prolonged and dangerous cold war, and ‘The citizens of those societies lived the life of the lie, betraying their families, informing on their neighbours - existing in misery, without complaint (or else).’ Khieu Samphan of the Khmer Rouge received a doctorate from the Sorbonne, and when he was given the opportunity to put his theories into practice a quarter of the Cambodian population were worked to death in the killing fields.

While all gender differences are said to be socially constructed, someone who desires gender reassignment surgery is unarguably considered a man trapped in a woman's body (or vice versa). As Peterson points out, both cannot be true - unless it is rationalised away with the claim that logic itself, and science, are merely part of the oppressive patriarchal system.

Nuggets of interesting information (people born in small towns are statistically over-represented among

the eminent, perhaps because it is easier to stand out in small communities) are mixed in with personal anecdotes of uncertain relevance (the touching story of his daughter's struggle with arthritis) and accounts of harrowing cases from his clinical practice. Peterson is wordy and prolix (as a former abstractor I could have reduced the length of this book very considerably without losing anything significant), and his humour is sometimes heavy, but he has many excellent points to make.

*Ray Ward is a Chartered Librarian, has a degree in Politics, is retired after a career in library work, and is a Fellow of the British Interplanetary Society and a member of Mensa and many other bodies. His interests include space, astronomy, aviation, politics, the English language, and quizzes: he has twice been on Mastermind (and his subjects reflect the breadth of his interests: Manned Space Flight and The Life and Times of Anne Frank), and he was the BBC Radio 4 Brain of Britain 2012.*



## CONTRIBUTED ARTICLES

### THE TEXTS ON THE SILPHO MOOR DISK

#### **Mark Newbrook**

*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).*

There are several cases in the UFO literature of what are alleged to be inscriptions in extraterrestrial languages and/or scripts, or (perhaps more relevantly here) in human languages reportedly being used by extraterrestrials. These include a case reported by Janet and Colin Bord (*note 1*) about the alleged finding in 1965 (by John Reeves) of paper bearing an unintelligible manuscript; as this finding immediately followed a UFO sighting in the same area, the material was interpreted as alien ('Martian') in origin. A decipherment was later offered but with no authority or conviction. But a more striking and persistent case (also mentioned by Bord and Bord (*note 2*)) involves the 'Silpho Moor Disk' (18 cm wide; shaped like a stereotypical 'flying saucer') allegedly found on a moor in Yorkshire in 1957, again after a UFO sighting. The Disk proved to be hollow and made of copper, and contained a cylinder in which a cluster of seventeen copper foil sheets was discovered. Sequences of

characters described as 'hieroglyphs' were found both on the base of the Disk and on the sheets. These inscriptions too have been 'deciphered' as containing extraterrestrial messages. To my knowledge, no qualified linguist has previously assessed this material.

The first major publication on the Disk was by Philip Longbottom (*note 3*), the culmination of a series of reports in the forum in question; Longbottom sought at this point to 'clear the air' after some allegedly erroneous claims had been made. Much more recently, Nick Redfern wrote an article (*note 4*) largely based on Longbottom's work, and in 2018 the well-known folklorist & ufologist David Clarke published an article about the Disk, with references to earlier material (*note 5*). What remains of the Disk is in storage in the Science Museum in London. No symbols are now legible; but photographs of some of the sequences are displayed in the sources.

The first question a linguist would ask is: Why were the symbols described

as 'hieroglyphs'? This is particularly puzzling given that the symbols on the base were compared by one of the alleged finders with Russian lettering. If the symbols did indeed resemble Russian (Cyrillic) lettering, they would not have been at all similar to genuine (Egyptian) hieroglyphs. But it may be that the term *hieroglyph* was being used loosely to mean 'unfamiliar symbol' (as does occur) and that no link with Egypt was intended. And in fact the symbols which are reproduced in the sources resemble neither Egyptian nor even the simpler Cyrillic characters.

Longbottom reports that he transcribed the symbols and in the course of one night's work arrived at the basis of a decipherment into English, using the symbols on the base of the Disk as a 'key' (it is not made clear how this process worked). He then 'fleshed out' the decipherment over the following week (100 hours of work in all). Longbottom identified the symbols as forming groups, with the symbols in each group differing from each other in

terms of orientation (turning through angles): he states that the symbols on the Silpho Disk sheets are ‘all variations of T, V and L in our language’ (he means ‘script’, of course; see below). He apparently focused in particular upon a group in which one symbol resembles a Roman upper-case T. See below on a similar interpretation of these symbol-groups offered by a more recent writer.

Longbottom does not state which original language he thinks is involved. Presumably, if it were a language he could identify he would have named it; so one must assume that he thought it was a language new to him, as its supposedly alien origin would suggest was likely. This omission may reflect the common lay confusion between language and script (*note 6*). But in any case it is obviously not possible to translate a text in a hitherto-unknown script into a known language without first deciphering the text as being in another language which one already knows or can learn. And no-one can learn a wholly novel language – especially one written in a wholly novel script and provided without any translations at all – in one night or even in one week. Even where the written forms of hitherto unknown **human** languages are concerned (and where no users are available to help), decipherment is a major, lengthy exercise involving vast expertise – especially where, as in the case of the ancient Sumerian language, the other languages written with versions of the same, initially obscure script are not ‘genetically’ related to the language in question. On this interpretation, Longbottom’s account appears unbelievable; at best, he was utterly confused about what he was doing.

Maybe Longbottom meant ‘transliteration’ rather than ‘translation’ when speaking of ‘decipherment’. If what he produced is **only** a transliteration, the implicit claim is that the text is (in whole or in large part) in **English**, in an unfamiliar script, that is to say a cipher (see below on ‘phonetic spellings’). Even transliteration of such material would not be a straightforward

task for someone not trained in cryptography. But Longbottom states that the linguistic variety which he thought he had discovered intuitively struck him as being ‘not just a simple substitution code’ and indeed ‘not a “made-up” language but one in constant use’. It will be noted that he talks here of the variety as a ‘language’, not as a mere transliteration of material in English. This would mean that Longbottom did indeed translate the material, or imagined that he had. But the discussion of details keeps returning to English. This question thus remains unresolved.

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*The text is rendered by  
Longbottom as a diatribe by two  
associated aliens called Ulo  
(reported as Ullo by some  
secondary sources) and Tamgee.*

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If mere transliteration is in question (or indeed if both transliteration and translation are in question), one wonders why Longbottom did not simply provide a list showing correspondences, as does the more recent writer making a claim about the Disk (see below).

If a supposedly alien object did bear a text in a known human language, one might surely wonder (a) how aliens could have come to be conversant with a human language – and indeed (b) why an alien who somehow **was** conversant with English would not simply use the Roman alphabet rather than disguising the text in this way. (Not effectively, it seems, given the alacrity of Longbottom’s decipherment - achieved, apparently, without the benefit of cryptographic or indeed linguistic training!) Whatever the original language might be – English or another – some statements in Longbottom’s rendering of the text (see below) would, if true, partly resolve the former question (a) but do not convincingly resolve the latter (b).

In any event: Longbottom believed that he had indeed arrived at the meaning of the text. He never explained

**how** he had done this, apparently assuming that one can do this kind of thing by simply poring over the original (and that his readers would accept this). He does display a degree of sophistication in stating that the symbols each had a range of values, determined by their positions relative to ‘the line’ (this kind of thing does occur in various scripts). (But positing such variations in interpretation can easily become a basis for arbitrarily assigning different values to the same symbol as suits one’s case.) Some symbols are interpreted as abbreviations and others as ‘phonetic spellings of familiar [English?] words’. But there is no indication here of the basis for his interpretation of the material or his authority in offering it.

As rendered by Longbottom, the text consists of some 2,000 English words. He does not state how many character-tokens were used to make up the original versions of these words, but if the text was written alphabetically and the words were English words or words from a language with similar average word-length there must have been around 10,000-15,000 in all. The simple quasi-alphabetic forms of the characters as reproduced in the sources suggest that the spelling is indeed alphabetical, which fits in with Longbottom’s comments and is certainly how the aforementioned later ‘decipherer’ interprets the data (see again below).

The text is rendered by Longbottom as a diatribe by two associated aliens called Ulo (reported as Ullo by some secondary sources) and Tamgee; they discuss matters regarding their species and its modes of operation, their knowledge of English and of other human languages (imperfect and featuring ‘mistakes’ reproduced and mentioned by Longbottom), themselves as individuals and the behavioural changes which they claim must be made by humanity (a common theme in such contexts, often involving ‘contactees’!). Interestingly, some specific knowledge of French is displayed; and the aliens say that they listen to French songs on human radio!

On a meta-linguistic front: at one point Ulo/Tamgee discuss the aliens' methods of printing/typing their texts. It is then remarked, obscurely: 'Ulo can't tell your script ... Ulo does not understand connection between script and sound. Then we use our adapted script which you can know by key sent.' In fact, many of the comments made throughout the text are obscure, partly because the English is garbled.

In 2018 a correspondent (not now contactable) sent David Clarke his interpretation of some of the symbols from the Disk. He reproduces the symbols found on the body of the Disk, apparently copying from Longbottom, and focuses upon two groups of eight variant symbols; each symbol is formed by turning the previous member of the group (as ordered by the 'decipherer') through 45 degrees. In one orientation, one of the two symbols strongly resembles upper-case T, and in two of its orientations the other symbol resembles V and L. All this, of course, corresponds with Longbottom's account. This new correspondent explicitly transliterates the sequences of symbols from the Disk itself into sequences of Roman letters or groups of letters, again failing to indicate how he arrived at these interpretations. He then reads the sequences as English, albeit with some of the Roman letters not represented and others replaced by letters which are homophonous in context. The message is said to read: 'Friends: Message inside to be dealt with by philosophers, not officials. Good wishes, Ulo'. Shades of Plato! Note the use of the name Ulo, which of course could again have been obtained from Longbottom's work. None of this wording occurs in Longbottom's English text, which is based on the inscriptions on the sheets found inside the Disk.

Jenny Randles (*note 7*) and her contacts came to the view that the Disk is a hoax; and Clarke's research has unearthed nothing to gainsay this view. As Clarke points out, no-one has ever confessed to being the hoaxer, and the exercise would have cost much more than the £10 for which the Disk was

eventually sold – but despite these points the case surely **must** be deemed a hoax, and Clarke is confident that the pranksters who created the Disk were in fact two journalists employed by the *Scarborough Evening News* at the time (both now deceased). They were university graduates and at least one came from an ex-WWII forces background. Longbottom himself may or may not have been involved in the hoaxing. The stunt was probably an offshoot of the scare surrounding the Soviet *Sputnik 1* satellite and may have been motivated by the desire to see how many people would 'fall for' such a story. The Disk itself seems have been part of a domestic central-heating boiler system, the top of which resembled a 'flying saucer'.

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*The message is said to read:  
'Friends: Message inside to be  
dealt with by philosophers, not  
officials. Good wishes, Ulo'.*

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It should be noted that without rather greater linguistic expertise than Longbottom himself evinces the concoction even of these unconvincing inscriptions, specifically, would have been difficult, to say the least (it is much harder than most lay people – or even science-fiction writers – imagine to invent parts of what might even begin to pass as a mysterious language or script). However (even ignoring the probable origin of the Disk itself) neither Longbottom nor the new analyst gives us any reason to accept their interpretations, or to consider the written material authentic. (As Clarke reports, some 'UFO-believers' have expressed themselves as convinced that the symbols on the Disk are genuinely of exotic origin – but these are people with no linguistic training.) (*note 8*)

Similar claims, of varying degrees of sophistication, are made for symbols reportedly seen on UFOs and other alleged alien artefacts, and also for the patterns seen in crop-circles, some of which are allegedly linguistic (binary ASCII coding or distorted Roman

letters, representing English or other human languages). But many of the proponents of such claims appear reluctant to take on board the wholly reasonable skepticism of qualified linguists; discussion of these cases is thus often difficult.

#### Notes

1 Janet and Colin Bord, *Life Beyond Planet Earth: Man's Contact with Space People* (London, 1992), pp. 79-83

2 *Life Beyond*, pp. 83-84, and sources cited by Bord and Bord

3 Philip Longbottom, 'The Silpho Moor Mystery'. In *Flying Saucer Review*, 4:6 (1958), pp. 15-17 (available at <http://tinyurl.com/hh5f9xc>).

4 <http://tinyurl.com/y8n7sskf>

5 David Clarke, 'The Return of the Silpho Moor Saucer'. In *Fortean Times* 364 (2018), pp. 42-46; see also <http://tinyurl.com/y8sp8ple>.

6 A script is a system for writing down one or more languages. There may be differences of detail between the forms of a given script used to write specific languages; for example, Swedish is written with the same script as is English but with extra letters. A language is much more complex than a script; it is an entire communication system with a phonology, grammar, vocabulary etc. A given language may be written in different scripts by different users/communities or on different occasions or at different times (for instance, Turkish used to be written in one script but in the 1920s moved to another) - or the language may not be written at all or may on a given occasion be spoken rather than written (indeed, there was a time when **no** languages were written). The confusion that otherwise well-informed and astute lay people evince in this respect illustrates the more general point that linguistics is, even at this basic level, just as much a specialist discipline as are the better-known scientific disciplines, and that matters of linguistic form which appear very transparent to anyone who has studied the subject beyond first-year undergraduate level may be quite opaque to others, including even

polyglots. Another example involves the confusion between translation and transliteration, which is typically grasped once explained but is often obscure in advance (surprisingly, to a linguist). Such confusion is, of course, in no way to the discredit of the linguistically-untrained, but has the consequence that what they say about

language is often largely unintelligible and almost impossible to assess. (But some 'fringe' writers on linguistic matters, such as David Leonardi, **culpably** display vast confusion when attempting to describe linguistic forms or to theorise about them, even when they know the languages in question well; they should have informed

themselves better in advance of working in this area and ensured their grasp of the basics.)

7 Jenny Randles, *UFO Retrievals* (Blandford, 1996), pp. 77-82

8 I thank David Clarke for all his help with this matter.

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## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### OF INTEREST

#### SKEPTICISM, SCIENCE AND RATIONALITY (GENERAL)

##### **Sense About Science**

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<http://goodthinkingsociety.org/>

##### **Websites of interest**

From Chris French: 'Jelena Levin, co-host of the European Skeptics Podcast, has asked me to spread the word regarding Parli, an interesting new website, and I am happy to oblige. In her words: "We have interviewed Turi who created the website (*see below*) it's an interesting idea of creating a database for the opinions (well researched and argued opinions) from all over the world. He is currently looking for the contributors to the website, I was hoping you could spread the word. It is still a very new project.'" At:

<http://www.parli.co>

Also: 'I'm a practical and pragmatic person, so I intend this as a resource for anyone who wants the world to be a more rational place. I'm an independent consultant in clinical science, so there's an emphasis on biomedicine, but I'll roam freely through the labyrinths of pseudoscience and superstition. Tools and techniques I have learned, which help me to avoid getting lost, I'll pass on to you here. Please post any of yours in the comments.' See blog on 'How effective is the ASA?'. At:

<https://majikthyse.wordpress.com/>

##### **Research Integrity**

Universities UK are running a consultation on the updating of a document entitled the Concordat on Research Integrity.

<http://tinyurl.com/y4zvpldy>

##### **Science misinformation**

In a new study, researchers describe some evidence-based strategies to combat science misinformation. At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y3njzfgj>

And: 'The Evidence Hunter activity pack empowers young people by equipping them to ask, "What is the evidence behind this claim?" It aims to develop the skills and confidence needed to critically assess claims online and reduce the spread of false information.'

<http://tinyurl.com/yc4omz2f>

Download at:

<http://tinyurl.com/ybswz9dz>

##### **Scientific retractions**

Top Scientific Retractions of 2018:

<http://tinyurl.com/y8fes9ov>

##### **Magicians and pseudo-science**

'Magicians play a significant role in the skeptical movement. They have, as Liam Neeson famously said, a particular set of skills. They are very adept at deception, using techniques that have been honed through trial and error over centuries. It is a great example of cultural knowledge. Having the ability to deceive others, purely for entertainment and with informed consent, also makes them adept at detecting the use of the same techniques for nefarious purposes. This, essentially, has been James Randi's entire career. But at the same time some stage magicians make skeptics uncomfortable by not being entirely upfront with their audience. Now, I am not suggesting that all magicians tell their audience how the tricks are done, and I completely understand the need to create a mystique as part of the performance. However, I have seen skilled magicians (like Randi or Banachek) perform amazing tricks with complete candor about the nature of those tricks, without diminishing the entertainment value. Magicians typically create a narrative by which they "explain" their tricks to the audience. A magician, for example, could say, "I am using sleight of hand." Or they could say (or strongly imply), "I have true psychic ability." The Amazing Kreskin falls

into this latter category. There are also those like Uri Geller who (sort of) pretend they are not doing magic at all, but have special powers. In the gray zone are those like Derren Brown' (*I've been saying this for years – Ed.*).

<http://tinyurl.com/y89ayynd>

### **QED**

For an account of the October 2018 QED meeting, featuring interviews with Michael Marshall, Chris French and others see the *Observer* article at:

<http://tinyurl.com/yadc657c>

## MEDICINE

### **General medicine**

'A growing number of doctors and patients are questioning whether modern medicine has overstretched itself. The medical model focuses on pathology and clinical markers of disease rather than quality of life or wellbeing. This model alone is not enough to address many of the multiple and complex challenges that people face with their health and wellbeing. Tomorrow's health professionals will need to be different to today's; they will need to understand how to provide compassionate, coordinated person-centred care. It's time to rethink medicine.' At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y2dndshy>

Also: 'The war on "prediabetes" could be a boon for pharma—but is it good medicine?' At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y6eq17x7>

### **Medical research**

'Two thirds of clinical trials run by NHS Trusts have not posted their results, a new analysis shows. Out of 263 clinical trials completed more than a year ago, only 93 have results on the European registry. NHS Trusts have failed to post results for the remaining 170 trials, in violation of EU guidelines.' See:

<http://tinyurl.com/y2zzcxjs>

However: 'A national clinical trial transparency strategy will be published before the end of this year, the UK government has announced. The statement marks a significant step towards ensuring that all clinical trials

conducted in Britain are registered and publish their results. The new strategy is expected to include central monitoring of all clinical trials conducted in the UK to check if they were registered and reported.' See:

<http://tinyurl.com/y2ap5qvz>

See also: 'Horizon scanning: How shoddy clinical trial reporting undermines health policy making' at:

<http://tinyurl.com/yv96ja5>

Meanwhile: 'Researchers commonly make incorrect statements about correct trial reporting. There are recurring themes in researchers' responses when their work is criticised, some of which fall short of the scientific ideal. Research on methodological shortcomings is now common, typically in the form of retrospective cohort studies describing the overall prevalence of a problem. We argue that prospective cohort studies which additionally issue correction letters in real time on each individual flawed study—and then follow-up responses from trialists and journals—are more impactful, more informative for those consuming the studies critiqued, more informative on the causes of shortcomings in research, and a better use of research resources.' Paper at:

<http://tinyurl.com/y2cq9tc7>

And from the *Lancet*: 'In this Viewpoint, we share our experience of censorship in evaluation research for global health. Our experience shows a broader trend of donors and implementing partners who deliberately use ethical and methodological arguments to undermine essential research. In a context of chronic underfunding of universities and their growing dependence on donor-driven research grants, we propose several structural and cultural changes to prevent manipulation of research governance systems and to safeguard the independence of research.

<http://tinyurl.com/yv96ja5>

### **Flouridation**

'If at first you don't succeed, Coun. Diane Colley-Urquhart says — try, try

again. In 2016, the veteran Calgary city councillor failed to convince her colleagues to take a look at the impacts of the city's decision to stop water fluoridation. During Monday's council meeting, she will bring forward the exact same motion to see if her colleagues want to revisit the fluoride issue.'

<http://tinyurl.com/y6zdk6jf>

### **Alternative medicine**

'Results of 'CAM tests' are often accompanied by extensive clinical interpretations which may recommend, or be used to justify, unnecessary or harmful treatments. There are now a small number of laboratories across the globe that specialize in CAM testing. Some CAM laboratories operate completely outside of any accreditation programme whilst others are fully accredited to the standard of established clinical laboratories. In this review, we explore CAM testing in the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia with a focus on the common tests on offer, how they are reported, the evidence base for their clinical application and the regulations governing their use. We will also review proposed changes to in-vitro diagnostic device regulations and how these might impact on CAM testing.'

<http://tinyurl.com/y5pnbezv>

### **Cancer screening**

'Over time, prioritization of cancer screening has hardly declined. The expectation of success has rather increased and, for example, the attendance to mammography screening for early detection of breast cancer has indeed been used as a quality indicator of the health care system. Aggressive efforts to diagnose pre-symptomatic cancer becomes an attractive resort to accelerate the reduction in cancer mortality. Until relatively recently, this remained an elusive goal. Currently, declines in cancer mortality have been documented for several cancers. However, the lion's share for this improvement seems to have been due to therapeutic advances rather than screening.'

<http://tinyurl.com/y82fufp2>



## **Cancer Quackery**

'Netflix has quietly pulled the controversial documentary *Root Cause* from its streaming platform and scrubbed all trace of it from their website. The film, directed by Australian film-maker Frazer Bailey, alleges that root canals cause cancer, heart disease and other serious chronic illness, and that the best way to deal with an injured or infected tooth would be to simply pull it. These claims have no scientific basis.' At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yxqyzwaq>

Meanwhile: 'Longtime readers will remember when I used to blog about cancer quack Stanislaw Burzynski a lot more often. One of the recurring types of posts that I did, with great sadness, was to note the deaths of various patients whose families had been the most outspoken advocates for Burzynski. ... Now, unfortunately, there is a new quack joining Burzynski to prey on these patients and their desperate families. Or should I say "quacks"? I'm referring, of course to Clínica 0-19 and the two doctors there, Dr. Alberto Garcia and Dr. Alberto Siller, whose practice is the Instituto de Oncología Intervencionista.' At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y77c7f89>

And: 'Is an Israeli company within a year of a "complete cure for cancer"?' At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y7jcz8cj>

Also: 'I wish that as an oncologist I could see off quackery through good communication. Unfortunately that doesn't work.' At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y6zj7l8z>

But some good news: GoFundMe has banned donations for controversial cancer treatments. See:

<http://tinyurl.com/y4yjrjoi>

Related to the above: 'The Hallwang Private Oncology Clinic ... has a video of British woman, Gemma Nuttall, in the ovarian cancer testimonials section of its website, despite the fact she died last year. Ms Nuttall hit headlines when Hollywood actress Kate Winslet helped her to raise £300,000 for last-ditch treatment for her illness at the German clinic. After treatment at the

Hallwang, Ms Nuttall's cancer returned in her spine and she died in October last year, but the website still has her story on its website.' See:

<http://tinyurl.com/yye355wl> ....

... and read all about Ms Nuttall at:

<http://tinyurl.com/yxbk95t9>

But some innovative cancer treatments may be successful: 'A four-year-old boy who had pioneering treatment in the United States for a rare strain of leukaemia is now cancer free....Zac and his family, from Shropshire, travelled to Philadelphia after raising £500,000 for travel and treatment. ... He was taken to the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia in November, where doctors said its 17-week CAR T-cell therapy would give Zac a 60% to 80% chance of survival. .... A high-profile campaign to get to the family to the US received a £50,000 boost from Simon Cowell and £100,000 from a mystery donor.' At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yyfh8pfw>

## **Dementia quackery**

Google has been criticised for profiting from false hope by running adverts for unproven dementia supplements. At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yxqgeeya>

And: The US population is aging, and with it is an increasing prevalence of Alzheimer disease, which lacks effective approaches for prevention or a cure. Many individuals are concerned about developing cognitive changes and dementia. With increasing amounts of readily accessible information, people independently seek and find material about brain health interventions, although not all sources contain quality medical information. This landscape of limited treatments for dementia, concern about Alzheimer disease, and wide access to information have brought a troubling increase in "pseudomedicine." Pseudomedicine refers to supplements and medical interventions that exist within the law and are often promoted as scientifically supported treatments, but lack credible efficacy data. Practitioners of pseudomedicine often appeal to health concerns, promote individual testimony as established fact, advocate

for unproven therapies, and achieve financial gains.' At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y9hof3tx>

And: 'Developing treatments for Alzheimer's disease has been notoriously difficult, and now the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is cracking down on companies fraudulently claiming that their dietary supplements can help treat, prevent or even cure the disease.' At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y636oek>

## **Chronic fatigue syndrome**

'The emails, tweets and blog posts in the "abuse" folder that Michael Sharpe keeps on his computer continue to pile up. Eight years after he published results of a clinical trial that found some patients with chronic fatigue syndrome can get a little better with the right talking and exercise therapies, the Oxford University professor is subjected to almost daily, often anonymous, intimidation...He believes that chronic fatigue syndrome is a biological condition that can be perpetuated by social and psychological factors. Sharpe is one of around a dozen researchers in this field worldwide who are on the receiving end of a campaign to discredit their work. For many scientists, it's a new normal: From climate change to vaccines, activism and science are fighting it out online. Social media platforms are supercharging the battle.'

<http://tinyurl.com/y2fw9no8>

## **Vaccination**

(See also '*Medicine on the Fringe*')

Even with measles outbreaks across the US, at least 20 states have proposed anti-vaccination bills. At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y27oa6q6>

And: 'Half of all parents with small children have been exposed to misinformation about vaccines on social media, according to a new report that finds the most common reason not to vaccinate is the fear of side-effects. "We need to counteract health misinformation online and via social media," said Shirley Cramer, the chief executive of the Royal Society for

Public Health (RSPH), which published the report.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y8kz6k5k>

Meanwhile: ‘How One Scientist Is Fighting Anti-Vaxxers and Their Online Harassment Campaigns.’ See:

<http://tinyurl.com/y6czafmu>

### Placebo

From Alan Henness: ‘Anyone thought that placebo effects were limited to medicine (and pseudo medicine) might like this (*the OBD2 performance chip power booster and ECU remap module*). This is a guy (Big Clive) who takes electronic stuff (usually cheap ebay stuff) apart to see how it works - or doesn’t. This is a small device that people buy to improve their car’s performance, fuel consumption or other benefit. It plugs into a connector that’s on most modern cars and it flashes LEDs that makes it look like it’s working and digitally talking to your car’s engine management system. You have to drive for a hundred miles or so while it ‘learns’ about your driving style, how the car runs, etc and lo and behold, after that, you notice that it is faster, accelerates better or uses less fuel than it did before! Amazing! Except... all the device does is flash its LEDs. It does not - and cannot - change the performance of your car. It doesn’t even try to - it’s just an expensive LED flasher. Any improvement you notice (probably proportional to the price you paid for it) is purely a figment of your imagination. But if it was able to change the performance of your car, you might find your insurance was null and void.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y7g6y5ty>

And: ‘A thorough understanding of placebo effects is critical to the science of medicine, and to understanding how objectively worthless interventions can become so popular. A recent article in *Nature: Scientific Reports* presents a series of experiments that take a look at psychological placebos, where the intervention is not medical, but purely psychological. The results are not surprising, but they are instructive for both practitioners and researchers.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y5ct6b3v>

### Homeopathy

‘The Canadian government will no longer fund homeopathic therapies in Honduras. The move comes after an outcry about public funds going to support alternative therapies that have not been proven effective.’ See:

<http://tinyurl.com/y4tf3rq9>

And: ‘A woman who was left with a “bulbous, pointy and red nose” after buying a homeopathic treatment online finally has the nose she has always wanted after going under the knife.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y3ubmsa9>

Also: The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) has ordered 150 homeopaths operating in the UK to stop claiming they can cure autism. ‘Five of them face prosecution for advertising a treatment called Cease therapy, which has no scientific basis and is potentially harmful. ... Cease stands for the Complete Elimination of Autism Spectrum Expression. It is a form of homeopathy, based on the idea that toxins in the environment and vaccines may cause autism’. Therapists claim they can cure autism by removing these ‘harmful’ substances with homeopathic remedies and dietary supplements. But there is no scientific evidence for any link between vaccines and autism, and experts say Cease therapy is potentially harmful. At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y3pcaevz>

### Herbalism

‘A man who touted himself as a “master herbalist” is on trial after prosecutors say he convinced the family of a diabetic boy to stop giving him insulin.’

<http://tinyurl.com/y3kkkgf3>

### Acupuncture

‘Acupuncture is an extremely popular form of complementary alternative medicine (CAM) that has even worked its way into many “integrative” hospitals. It is also fiercely defended by its believers. Unfortunately, it is not well defended by actual evidence, so I want to talk about that evidence and

explain why acupuncture is a placebo.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/ya84mgkh>

And from the US: ‘Legislative Alchemy 2018: Acupuncturists seek practice expansion and competition elimination. Acupuncturists want to expand their scope of practice far beyond sticking needles in people. Too many states are allowing them to treat pretty much anything with unproven and potentially dangerous remedies.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/ydddpgkt>

### Frequency Specific Microcurrent

‘Frequency Specific Microcurrents is a dubious energy medicine treatment in the tradition of Albert Abrams.’

<http://tinyurl.com/y8brv875>

### Chiropractic and osteopathy

‘A horrifyingly unethical study of chiropractic treatment of infants with torticollis’. At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y2aqacsp>

And: ‘An Australian chiropractor named Andrew Arnold is outraging people all over the world after a marketing video of him performing spinal adjustments on a young infant went viral. Healthcare regulators and heads of medical organizations are calling for bans and the chiropractor has agreed to stop treating children as an investigation commences.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yvwwfbw7>

Similarly: ‘Bob DeMaria is a chiropractor who is featured often on alternative medicine sites. He makes frequent appearances on YouTube’s worst health information channel, iHealthTube, to peddle abject nonsense about medical conditions he isn’t qualified to treat. He calls himself “The Drugless Doctor”, which I find a bit confusing as he isn’t a physician, and he always recommends purchasing dietary supplements from his website. On iHealthTube, many of his videos relate to alternative treatments of ADHD and have nearly 750k views. The advice he gives in these videos is completely inaccurate, and arguably quite dangerous.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y9yohymn>

RELIGION AND CULTS

Council of Ex-Muslims

A reminder about the Council of Ex-Muslims website for details of events, campaigns and publications at:

<https://www.ex-muslim.org.uk/>

'Universal Medicine' cult

'Large "Cult B+B" signs appeared around Frome (in Somerset) this morning, March 12, seemingly signposting locations associated with "harmful cult" Universal Medicine. Although based in Australia, Universal Medicine states that "courses in the UK are presented at The Lighthouse Accommodation and B&B in Frome, Somerset." And last night, BBC's Inside Out West's 8.30pm show focused on the Frome operations of "cult leader" Serge Benhayon who has been described as a "charlatan who preys on cancer patients" who had an "indecent interest in girls as young as 10," according to news.au.com. Controversial "healing therapies" include treatments such as "Esoteric Breast Massage". Last night's show interviewed the families of people 'lost' to the cult and explored its bizarre preachings including that people are sexually abused because of what they did in a past life, those with autism were former dictators and that alien like creatures seek our vulnerabilities by smelling us.'

<http://tinyurl.com/y22zjztp>

CONSPIRACY THEORIES

General

'Why conspiracy theories matter. And why 2018 was a highly conspiratorial year.' At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yauo7tm7>

And: 'Did Hillary Clinton mastermind a global child-trafficking ring from a Washington pizzeria? No. Did George W Bush orchestrate a plot to bring down the Twin Towers and kill thousands of people in 2001? Also no. So, why do some people believe they did? And what do conspiracy theories tell us about the way we see the world?' See:

<http://tinyurl.com/y4cszvgk>

Also: 'Manitoba health professionals who perform the common chiropractic treatment known as "high neck manipulations" should be required to explain the risks to patients — and tell them how to detect a bad reaction — before getting consent. Those are the core recommendations in a report presented to Health Minister Kelvin Goertzen last spring by the province's Health Professions Advisory Council. The report was made public earlier this week.'

<http://tinyurl.com/y2g6n8gg>

Should you see a chiropractor or an osteopath for your headaches?

<http://tinyurl.com/y2stw6xw>

'Young blood' transfusions

Can transfusing young blood reverse ageing (video)?

<http://tinyurl.com/yym7ueat>

PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHIATRY

Online course on Parapsychology

This eleven-week online course, designed and led by Prof Caroline Watt of Edinburgh University's Koestler Parapsychology Unit, includes contributions from the world's leading parapsychologists and skeptics. It is open to anyone regardless of geographical location. The next course starts on 8.4.19 and the following one will start on 9.9.19. The course fee is £300 (£150 for student members of the Parapsychological Association). Further details and registration at:

<https://koestlerunit.wordpress.com/online-course/>

Vitamins

From *Which?* magazine: 'Vitamins and supplements are big business. Each year in the UK we spend around £442m on them – but you could be wasting your money. Our investigation found several supplements that don't contain what they say they do and brands making misleading or unproven health claims.'

<http://tinyurl.com/y4v6dxut>

Brain scan claims

'Five days into the new year we made it before the first questionable "brain

scans show interesting and topical result that is far beyond their remit or capabilities" headline popped up. Five days. Not even a week. But hey ho, there we go. This one was the eye-catching/opening "Brain scans show social exclusion creates jihadists, say researchers", published in the venerable Observer and on the Guardian's website. As you might expect, a few people flagged this up to me, with the usual "Is this a thing?" questions. I did an extensive Twitter thread about it given the hour of night (Sunday, 9pm), but for those who prefer a more leisurely/user-friendly read, here's my position in article form.'

<http://tinyurl.com/ya7qvd64>

Blue Monday

Article by Michael Marshall: 'The Blue Monday phenomenon receives more and more criticism every year, but it is just one of countless examples of media-friendly bad science used to promote products.'

<http://tinyurl.com/yc4mcf5r>

Lie detectors

'The government wants to use lie detectors – a discredited pseudoscience – to determine whether domestic abusers are telling the truth.'

<http://tinyurl.com/y76ba26n>

EDUCATION

Steiner schools

'Ofsted now has the power to inspect all Steiner schools after the chief inspector called for a "thorough examination" into "deeply concerning" failures.'

<http://tinyurl.com/yagpou6z>

'Two schools in the West Country have been issued with termination notices by the government after being put into special measures by Ofsted. In January the Steiner Academy Frome and the Steiner Academy Bristol both received the lowest Ofsted rating by inspectors.'

<http://tinyurl.com/yxsq13xt>

see also

<http://tinyurl.com/mcabx9z>

and

<http://tinyurl.com/y4ebeokq>

Also: Research suggests that ‘exposure to intergroup conspiracy theories may be damaging not just because they serve to increase prejudice and discrimination towards the implicated group, but because this prejudice then has the potential to spread across multiple social outgroups.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y4rbxycq>

## MISCELLANEOUS UNUSUAL CLAIMS

### Flat Earth

If you are ever looking for an example of how those who deny the most

fundamental discoveries of science still benefit from them, how about the following: ‘A group of people who believe the Earth is flat have announced their “biggest, boldest, best adventure yet”: a Flat Earth cruise scheduled for 2020. The cruise, organized by the Flat Earth International Conference, promises to be a lovely time. ... There’s just one problem for those seeking to celebrate the flatness of the Earth. The navigational systems cruise ships, and other vessels, use rely on the fact that the Earth is not flat: theoretically puncturing the beliefs of the flat Earth crowd.’

<http://tinyurl.com/y96m3ddy>

### Ancestry DNA testing

‘One set of identical twins, two different ancestry profiles. At least that’s the suggestion from one of the world’s largest ancestry DNA testing companies. Last spring, *Marketplace* host Charlsie Agro and her twin sister, Carly, bought home kits from AncestryDNA, MyHeritage, 23andMe, FamilyTreeDNA and Living DNA, and mailed samples of their DNA to each company for analysis. Despite having virtually identical DNA, the twins did not receive matching results from any of the companies.’

<http://tinyurl.com/ya36wfm9>

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## UPCOMING EVENTS

### EUROPE-WIDE EVENTS

The ECSO website has a calendar of events of skeptical interest taking place all over Europe, including the UK. See: <https://www.ecso.org/european-events/> (or [http://theesp.eu/events\\_in\\_europe](http://theesp.eu/events_in_europe)).

### 18<sup>TH</sup> EUROPEAN SKEPTICS CONGRESS

This will take place from August 30th to September 1st, 2019, in Ghent and will be hosted by the Belgian and Dutch skeptical societies (see announcement on the cover of this issue). The website will be up and running soon.

### HEALTHWATCH

‘The 2019 annual HealthWatch symposium is on its way. The topic will be “Evidence, healthcare and medical devices” as the issue of evidence for implants and devices is an important area, poorly understood and regulated .... It will be held on the afternoon of Monday June 17th in London (in an accessible venue near overground and underground). Further details to follow.’

<http://tinyurl.com/y2tkxqnd>

Note: HealthWatch is a registered charity whose objectives are ‘the advancement for the public benefit of medical knowledge, training and care

in all its branches and in particular the development of good practices in the assessment and testing of treatments and the conduct of clinical trials generally and the promotion of high standards of health care by practitioners’. See:

<https://www.healthwatch-uk.org/>

### THE WELLCOME COLLECTION

Opening in April 11<sup>th</sup> 2019, ‘our free exhibition “Smoke and Mirrors” will be the first ever to focus on the relationship between magic and psychology.

“Smoke and Mirrors” will seek the truth about deception, ask how bias and suggestion affect our senses and decisions, and consider what it is about the human condition that means many of us believe in magic and the supernatural, even in the face of logical explanations.

‘Artefacts from the world of magic will include those from Derren Brown, Tommy Cooper, Paul Daniels, Debbie McGee and Harry Houdini.

‘Explore spirit photography, magic props, psychology experiments and more to see how magic works on – and in – your mind’.

The venue of this exhibition is Wellcome Collection, 183 Euston Road, London NW1 2BE.

### THE ANOMALISTIC PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCH UNIT AT GOLDSMITH’S COLLEGE LONDON

Chris French has organised an exciting programme of seminars for this academic year. Visit:

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

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>

### MERSEYSIDE SKEPTICS SOCIETY

‘This year marks the tenth anniversary of the Merseyside Skeptics Society, and their flagship podcast, Skeptics with a K. To commemorate the event, the team are hosting a special one-day conference with some of their favourite speakers from the last ten years – including Professor Chris French, Dr Alice Howarth, Meirion Jones, Emma

McClure and Simon Singh. There'll be evening entertainment, a lightning session of four additional short presentations, and a picnic in the park... plus event host Michael Marshall will share stories from ten years of skeptical activism. The event will take place on July 6th at the Liner Hotel in Liverpool, and tickets cost just £29. Pick up your ticket at:

<https://mssx.co.uk/>

### **NINE LESSONS AND CAROLS FOR CURIOUS PEOPLE**

**November 29th and 30th, The  
Lowry, Manchester**

'Nine Lessons and Carols for Curious People has been an end of year tradition playing to sold out audiences in London for over a decade. In fact, this year will be the tenth staging of the show. So to celebrate, for the first time ever, this annual celebration of the curious and the creative, this variety night like no other, will be combining ideas, experiments, science, songs,

comedy, poetry and more at The Lowry in Manchester. The event will be hosted as always by QED regular Robin Ince, alongside Brian Cox, and ticketholders can expect to see a host of familiar faces from past QED events, and the very best of the UK science communication community.' Tickets for each evening cost £23 and can be purchased at:

<https://cosmicshambles.com/ninelessons>

### **HUMANISTS UK**

Humanists UK is holding its annual convention in Leicester this year. The dates are Friday June 21st, 7:00 pm to Sunday June 23rd, 4:00 pm and the venue is Athena, Queen Street, Leicester, LE1 1QD. For further details and tickets go to:

<https://humanism.org.uk/events/convention2019/>

### **CENTRE FOR INQUIRY UK**

For details of upcoming events:

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

### **CONWAY HALL LECTURES LONDON**

25 Red Lion Square, London  
WC1R 4RL

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

### **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/>

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## **LOGIC AND INTUITION: ANSWERS**

This is the hint for the 'The biased coin' puzzle: *Sequences!*

And the unique property of the word 'startling'? I understand that it is the longest word in the English language – 9 letters – by which, if you keep taking 1 letter away, a word still remains (until you get to the final letter of course). Can any other language beat this?

### **The last man standing**

Jim is player number 8. In the first over (6 balls), Fred, if he is to be believed, bowls out players 1, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 (remember that player 2 is stuck at the other end). Player number 8 (Jim) then replaces player number 7 but, as it's the start of a new over, Fred changes ends and bowls out player number 2 then players 9, 10 and 11 leaving Jim with a score of 0 not out.

### **The biased coin**

Alison is relying on pairs of tosses.

Let H = heads and T = tails. To generate each 0 or 1, Alison tosses the coin twice. If the sequence is HH or TT she ignores it. Even with a biased coin the pair HT is just as probable as the pair TH. So, let's say HT is 1 and TH is 0.

### **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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