

THE SKEPTICAL INTELLIGENCER

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Incorporating the Skeptical Adversaria: the ASKE Newsletter

Edited by Michael Heap

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CONTENTS

Regular features and announcements

From the ASKE Chair	2	Language on the Fringe	5
Logic and Intuition	3	Of Interest	13
The European Scene	3	Upcoming Events	17
Medicine on the Fringe	4	About ASKE	19

Contributed articles

Religion, Sexuality and the Alleged Right not to be Offended: The Case of Israel Folau <i>Mark Newbrook</i>	8
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Book reviews and commentaries

Anesthesia & the Soul <i>reviewed by James Semple</i>	9
Crypto Profit – Your Expert Guide to Financial Freedom through Cryptocurrency Investing <i>reviewed by Steve Dulson</i>	10
Uncommon Knowledge: The Economist Explains: <i>reviewed by Ray Ward</i>	12

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.



FROM THE ASKE CHAIR

Michael Heap

Hypnosis and eye-witness recall

I was interested to read that crime investigators now feel confident in naming the man they believe to have murdered the Swedish prime minister Olof Palme in 1986. Mr Palme was shot dead while walking home with his wife from a cinema in Stockholm. In July 1989 Christer Pettersson was convicted of the murder and sentenced to life in prison. However, he successfully appealed his conviction a year later when the police found no forensic evidence against him.

Since then, many theories have been in circulation about who was responsible for the assassination and why, some more fanciful than others. One plausible suspect, Stig Engstrom, committed suicide in 2000 and in 2016 Lars Larsson, a writer, accused Engstrom of the murder in his book, *Nationens Fiende (Enemy of the State)*. Engstrom has now been named by prosecutors as the likely assassin.

All of this reminded me that the Olof Palme case was mentioned in a book I co-edited with a colleague in 1998 (*Hypnosis in Europe* by P. Hawkins & M. Heap, London: Whurr Publishers). The author of the chapter 'Hypnosis in Sweden', Claus Garmer, wrote:

It was Ture Arvidsson (*a psychiatrist*) who was asked to help the police by hypnotically enhancing the memories of eyewitnesses to the murder of the former Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme in 1986. Unfortunately this work, although it did shed some light on earlier unclear details, did not provide the answers to the killer's identity. None of the witnesses could recall whether they had seen the killer's face.

The idea that hypnosis has the property of enhancing memory has a long history, likewise its use in criminal investigations as an aid to eyewitness recall. Such claims and applications have now largely been discredited; in the UK in the 1980s, following

unfortunate outcomes in at least two police investigations, the Home Office, while issuing strict procedural guidelines, advised against its use for these purposes. It remains the case that memories elicited during hypnosis are considered as potentially unreliable. Hypnosis may also enhance the witness's—and hence a jury's—confidence in the veracity of such memories.

The idea that hypnosis has the property of enhancing memory has a long history, likewise its use in criminal investigations as an aid to eyewitness recall.

Defence lawyers are aware of this. A few years ago I was asked to give my opinion on the reliability of the evidence provided by a complainant in a rape case who, at the request of the police, had been hypnotised by a medical doctor. No one was charged, the main suspect, X, having provided an alibi for his whereabouts at the material time. These events occurred over 25 years prior to my involvement and there was no existing record of what transpired during hypnosis. Analysis of DNA evidence from the scene of the alleged rape had now identified X as the person who had had sex with the complainant. His defence this time was that sex was consensual. His solicitor seemed to me overly keen to discredit the complainant's testimony because she had been hypnotised. My opinion was that there was no evidence to indicate that her account at her original police interview had altered in any way following hypnosis. Subsequently, X was found guilty at his trial. Where had he been all the years between the offence and his final conviction? Serving a life sentence for a murder committed some months after the rape. The victim was his alibi!

Clearly the use of hypnosis only served to complicate matters in what was a shocking case. I think it likely that the doctor who performed the hypnosis had a reputation in the locality for doing this sort of work and that the police had drawn on his services on more than one occasion.

Concerns about the use of hypnosis for memory enhancement in criminal investigation are more likely to arise in historic sexual abuse claims. If the complainant has had any form of counselling or psychotherapy since the alleged offence the defence will want to know if there is any evidence that hypnotherapy or similar procedure was involved, in which case is the complainant's testimony reliable?

More on Traditional Chinese Medicine

In the Winter 2019 issue of the *Intelligencer* I wrote about Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and my trip to China in October, which included visits to hospitals and medicinal herb markets, and talks on TCM. I noted what a huge industry TCM is and, with the support of the state and of private health insurers, how embedded it is in Chinese culture and everyday life. There seemed to be no likelihood that over time use of TCM would gradually decline, despite the lack of an evidence base as well as serious concerns over animal welfare and the viability of certain species.

Indeed, there are strong political pressures for TCM to thrive and expand. Depressingly, the Chinese government persuaded the World Health Organization (WHO) to include a chapter on TCM in the latest version of its International Classification of Diseases. And more recently, in the face of increasing hostility from some Chinese doctors to TCM, plans have been announced in Beijing to criminalise criticism of these practices. Critics will be prosecuted for 'picking fights to disturb public order' and 'defaming' TCM, which it is claimed

has been playing a crucial role in the prevention and treatment of Covid-19.

For more information see, for example, the *Guardian* (1). There was also a great piece in the *Sunday Times* on 7.6.20 by Dominic Lawson with the title ‘Prince Charles is talking like a crank on Covid-19’ and lamenting the future King’s ill-conceived ideas on the causes of the pandemic, along with his expressions of support for TCM and

woo medicine generally (‘ancient wisdom’) (2).

1. <https://tinyurl.com/y6wlrma>.

2. <https://tinyurl.com/y72r5k8r>

More on Bioresonance

Following the previous ‘Medicine on the Fringe’ account of bioresonance therapy comes good news. In a guest blog on Edzard Ernst’s website, dated 24.5.20, Lorretta Marron reported that,

following a long campaign by Australia’s Friends of Science in Medicine, ‘All devices have now been cancelled by their sponsors or by the TGA (*Therapeutic Goods Administration*). ... Even though the devices are still widely used, and courses still being run, FSM considers this a modestly satisfactory outcome’. See:

<https://tinyurl.com/yatfpr9d>.



LOGIC AND INTUITION

Does the glove change hands?

You have a perfectly good pair of gloves. Unfortunately, they are both for the right-hand. Will turning one of them inside out solve the problem?

One man and his cane

A man has bought a 13ft cane and wants to take it home by bus. The driver

refuses to let him on as the rule is that no luggage should be longer than 12ft. The cane is thin and completely inflexible—it would break if it were to be bent. The man goes away and later returns, boards the next bus with his 13ft cane intact, and completes his homeward journey. How did he solve the problem?

Hint: To solve this convincingly you need some basic knowledge from your schooldays. If you don’t have this you may solve it *in principle*.

Answers on page 18



THE EUROPEAN SCENE

European Council for Skeptics Organisations

Address: Arheilger Weg 11, 64380 Roßdorf, Germany

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).

News from ECSO

The ECSO Board has been meeting regularly (online of course) and, in particular, planning to expand the content and information on the ECSO website. This will include brief summaries of articles in the most recent

issues of magazines published by the various affiliated societies, and English translations of papers that are likely to be of wide interest. The website will also feature informed accounts prepared by some of the national societies on matters of public concern about which much misinformation and conspiracy theorising are currently circulating, such as vaccination, Covid-19 and 5G.

One decision that has now been finalised is that the bi-annual European Skeptics Congress, due to take place next year, has been postponed until 2022 (probably in April in Vienna).

European Medicines Agency

An article by Till Bruckner reports that ‘Over 1,000 clinical trials involving children are missing results from the European trial registry, data released by the European Medicines Agency shows.

The data highlight national regulatory agencies’ failure to ensure sponsors’ compliance with long-standing European transparency rules. They were released in response to a Freedom of Information request submitted by TranspáriMED and Health Action International. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/ycaxklp8>

The ESP - European Skeptics Podcast



Building a bridge for skeptics

<http://theesp.eu/>

Don’t forget to check out the latest ESP podcasts (and news of skeptical interest in Europe). The current podcast is, not surprisingly, all about Covid-19.



MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

Most people would probably assume that it is a given that routine screening for cancer is a good thing and the more of it the better. But this is not the opinion of everyone in the medical profession. Susan Bewley is a longstanding critic of screening mammography and the science and ethics of the AgeX trial (see text). She is Emeritus Professor (honorary) of Obstetrics and Women's Health at King's College London, and chair of Healthwatch (for science and integrity in medicine). She has chaired many NICE Guideline Development Groups. Her interests can be found at <http://www.whopaysthisdoctor.org/doctor/58/active> (Twitter [@susan_bewley](https://twitter.com/susan_bewley)).

Below is an opinion article by Professor Bewley that appeared in the *British Journal of Medicine* on April 14, 2020 (<https://tinyurl.com/qu3mv2c>). It is reprinted here by kind permission of the Professor Bewley and the *BMJ*. (Note: 'Tiny URL' links to principle references have been added for hard-copy readers.)

Things should never be the same again in the screening world

The suspension of routine breast cancer screening during covid-19 offers an opportunity to reconsider criticisms of the programme, argues Susan Bewley

Some unexpected good news has resulted from the NHS having to prioritise the needs of the sick and vulnerable over the fears of the well. In the middle of a global pandemic, we can no longer afford the politically popular luxury of needlessly making the general public unwell through anxiety and [overdiagnosis](#). Routine mammographic [breast cancer screening](#) and the [AgeX clinical trial](#) (*note 1*)—which was designed to generate evidence about [extending screening to women](#) even outside the current 50-70 age group—have stopped.

Although [it was not obvious from national websites](#) or in the media, letters, texts, and phone calls have been informing women since mid-March that all routine screening appointments are cancelled. Services have since been suspended in parts of [Canada](#), [Italy](#), [Scotland](#) and [Australia](#). Mobile mammography screening vans are parked and silent. Staff are clearing the decks and helping those women already in the system after a positive screen. Once this is done, staff will be redeployed for the Herculean task of constraining coronavirus or keeping other parts of the NHS afloat.

Going 'cold-turkey' on screening may be an unexpected, but welcome, way to wean the public off its dependence on searching for diseases that might never have harmed anyone..

This recognition that breast cancer screening is non-urgent must be applauded, and the general public reassured. It suggests that [stopping screening poses little overall danger](#) (and even, by some people's interpretations, possibly none whatsoever) to women (*note 2*). Anyone with a lump, skin dimpling, or other [symptoms](#) who might have an active cancer, should be encouraged to call their GP as usual, as the urgent pathways remain open. Regional breast screening services are telling women that screening is 'on hold'. The intention appears to be to resume screening when, and if, the coronavirus pandemic ends. But this is a golden opportunity for the National Screening Committee (NSC) to pause, reconsider criticisms of the screening programme, and [evaluate whether to modify a](#)

[programme](#) that does not impress [clinically](#) or [cost effectively](#).

Breast cancer treatments have been revolutionised since screening was introduced in 1987, thus long ago traversing the "sweet spot" between pointlessness (that is, finding illness when no effective treatment exists), through usefulness (when screening adheres to the [Wilson and Jungner criteria](#) [*note 3*] by spotting early those patients who will do better with available treatment than if they waited until symptomatic), to pointlessness again (treatments for symptomatic cancer are now so good that the [balance of benefit:risk in mammographic screening tilts towards its causing excessive harm to the well](#) [*note 4*]).

The good news story—that treatment for symptomatic breast cancer nowadays is excellent—has been drowned out by a thirst for 'more' searching and resoothing of anxiety. Going 'cold-turkey' on screening may be an unexpected, but welcome, way to wean the public off its dependence on searching for diseases that might never have harmed anyone.

Even before covid-19, Mike Richards, the UK government's chief inspector of hospitals in the Care Quality Commission, had already called for a [halt to PSA prostate cancer screening](#) (*note 5*). More, even different, screening is not an acceptable answer to the difficult question for urologists of why prostate cancer death rates have risen during an era of opportunistic PSA screening with ever-increasingly numbered multi-needle biopsies used for diagnosis and surveillance.

The NSC can seize the moment to discuss [popular myths about screening](#), especially when presented in the guise of 'case-finding'. There is [no evidence that 'health checks' achieve anything](#) (*note 6*) in terms of [long term outcomes](#) (*note 7*), barring [diverting NHS resources away from looking after those](#)

[who are actually ill](#) (note 8). Let's leave the more difficult task of improving public health to [public health doctors](#) who recognise the need for societal based solutions. We should stand up to vested interests from private healthcare and screening service providers whose profits come with potential health damage. [Reducing smoking and alcohol consumption](#) and lowering obesity would do a lot more for the population's health.

As for those screening programmes that do work and which will survive this crisis, the NSC could set [a higher](#)

[communication standard](#) for decision aids (using natural frequencies, absolute risks, common denominators, spelling out all risks and potential benefits, offering icon arrays, with 'doing nothing' as a default in [Fact Boxes](#)).

If mammography screening does return post pandemic, it must be reinstated without any alarmist messaging, pre-booked appointments, reminders and disclaimers, or financial targets for GPs to encourage attendance. We need better processes and an ['informed consent' leaflet that makes it entirely clear that it's a choice](#) (note

9)—and not necessarily a bad one—to decline.

Notes

1. <http://www.agex.uk/>
2. <https://tinyurl.com/yczbaevw>
3. <https://tinyurl.com/y86xqmw2>
4. <https://tinyurl.com/y82tbsyh>
5. <https://tinyurl.com/y468ps4q>
6. <https://tinyurl.com/y9rarzdo>
7. <https://tinyurl.com/y74wm4xr>
8. <https://tinyurl.com/y7ltug6j>
9. <https://tinyurl.com/yamwj8kh>



LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

Riders on recent entries and other items

Rider in *The Skeptical Intelligencer* 22:4 (2019) on my review of two books by the Ethiopian writer Legesse Allyn in *The Skeptical Intelligencer* 20:4 (2017) – and more on hieroglyphs!

I remarked that there is no reference in the vast corpus of Ancient Greek literature to the 'diglossic' situation which Allyn's re-interpretation of Greek would imply. But of course if Allyn were right only he would have arrived at a correct interpretation of texts in Ancient Greek! So I cannot in fact adduce the silence on this point of Greek texts as normally understood. My apologies! However, if diglossia of this kind really had existed in Greece it would have been reported in Latin texts, and it would have had a serious effect on the very many people who acquired Greek as a second language from C4 BCE onwards. But there is no mention of this in any relevant source. Thus Allyn's proposal still does not hold up, even on this specific point.

Allyn's bombastic self-confidence is striking, to say the least! He says on his web-site: 'ground-breaking research by Legesse Allyn, who has retranslated many important ancient documents

including the Rosetta Stone and the Bible, stands to suddenly make obsolete the very 'facts' that, up to last century, we accepted to be true ... As a college or university student, the sad reality is that you might not be getting the latest facts and information at all. Even if you earn your PhD, the fact is, college and university textbooks do not usually contain facts. That's right. No facts. And if you are majoring in history, linguistics, ancient languages, Egyptology or politics today, your textbooks are not yet likely to be updated with data from Legesse Allyn's research. This means you are paying this century's tuition money for last century's education' (note 1).

Some historians dispute the Israelites' very presence in Egypt at such a date, and others suggest that the biblical dates used here are unreliable.

Allyn is, of course, only one of the many non-mainstream writers who attribute vast significance to Egyptian hieroglyphs and/or dispute their interpretation – in his case reinterpreting them as representing Ethiopian languages and as directly

providing the basis for the Greek alphabet. Now it has long been proposed that the world's first alphabet – the ancestor of the 'abjads' (consonantal alphabets) used to write Semitic languages such as Hebrew and Phoenician, and thus the ultimate ancestor of the Greek and Roman alphabets – did develop out of simplified hieroglyphs, rather as Japanese kana (syllabic symbols) are in origin simplified kanji (Chinese logographic characters). But now the archaeologist Douglas Petrovich has argued that the Hebrew alphabet specifically is directly derived from hieroglyphs. He holds that Israelites living in Egypt in the time of *Exodus*, perhaps 3,800 years BP, modified 22 hieroglyphs into the 22 alphabetic letters used to write Hebrew; he focuses in particular upon 16 letters which he identifies as actually found on Egyptian tablets. Petrovich proposes his own readings of some disputed characters. Among other things, he claims to read in Egyptian documents the names of three biblical figures: Asenath, Ahisamach and Moses himself (note 2).

This theory is nothing if not controversial. Some historians dispute the Israelites' very presence in Egypt at such a date, and others suggest that the

biblical dates used here are unreliable. The similarities between characters are not by any means so clear as to require Petrovich's interpretation. And Petrovich himself acknowledges that the 'acrophonic' and vowel-less nature of the Hebrew script as used in ancient times generates many ambiguities. The interim verdict must be: far from proven!

More about the proposed Egyptian origins of alphabetic writing next time!

The Sinclairs in America:

inconsistent usage or worse? (*The Skeptical Intelligencer* 22:1 (2019))

The 'fringe' historian/archaeologist Scott Wolter, referred to in this context by Jason Colavito, has continued to discuss the alleged C14 settlement of North America by Henry Sinclair and the Templars (*note 3*). Interviewed on the radio in January 2020, Wolter discussed both the Templars and the Minnesota Kensington Rune Stone (dated 1362 but regarded by almost all competent commentators as a C19 fake), and (oddly) extrapolated from such ideas to the notion that one should move away from hard science and should accept that there is an 'intuitive spiritual aspect' to ancient history that 'defies' the laws of science. As part of his new approach to the subject, he announced that he was 'reviewing' an English version of a C19 French translation of a 'Theban' text. He was referring here to a Renaissance-period cypher which he mistakes for a text in an unidentified 'prehistoric language'. (It should be noted that both cities called Thebes in English, one in Egypt and one in Greece, were very much historic; and also that Wolter himself apparently cannot read French!) Part of this text supposedly describes the Newport Tower (the familiar, allegedly mysterious building in Rhode Island) as an observatory. But, as Colavito observes, both the text and the accompanying map are almost certainly hoaxes; there is no trace of any genuine medieval originals. The historical aspects of Wolter's case (based in part on Frederick Pohl's fantasies) do not hold up either.

Rider in *The Skeptical Intelligencer* 22:2 (2019): Viking warrior women revisited – but no second Norse site in Newfoundland after all!

New archaeological work and technologically more sophisticated analysis of older finds have recently strengthened the case for female Viking warriors. The palaeoanthropologist Ella-al-Shamahi (also an explorer and a stand-up comic; self-tagged 'Little Miss Fossil') has been prominent on television, discussing a skeleton discovered in a Viking graveyard in Solør, Norway, which had been assumed to be that of a man. DNA analysis proved otherwise. The remains were found resting on a shield, surrounded by arrows, a sword and an axe; there was a clear injury to the head, suggesting death by trauma in a battle or the like.

Wallace has in fact come to the view that the Norse never established a serious presence in North America south or west of L'Anse aux Meadows, though of course dramatic new finds are always possible.

In Al-Shamahi's National Geographic documentary *Viking Warrior Women*, she reports her travels in the UK and Scandinavia, reviewing more Viking remains, conferring with scholars in the relevant disciplines, and gathering further evidence suggestive of women warriors in the Viking world.

It has been suggested that the woman found in Solør chose to identify as a man, or that bodies were swapped for some reason; but Al-Shamahi argues that eagerness to embrace *ad hoc* explanations of this kind is indicative of biases in the archaeological mainstream. On the other hand, it might be held that she herself displays at times an unduly eager determination to reach the conclusion that female warriors were not merely an occasional phenomenon but in fact were not especially unusual among the Vikings (as some of the relevant literary sources admittedly

suggest). The balance of evidence has certainly shifted – but skeptics in particular will consider it important for all parties to assess the evidence dispassionately. Watch this space!

See *note 4* for reports of recent discoveries, including Al-Shamahi's material. For Jason Colavito's comments on Megan Fox's televised material on Viking warrior women, see *note 5*.

Meanwhile: despite all the initial 'hype', it now appears that there is no persuasive evidence that Vikings once occupied Point Rosee in the south-west of Newfoundland, at the other end of the island from the undoubtedly Norse site at L'Anse aux Meadows (*note 6*). The archaeologist Sarah Parcak, who has always shown herself 'game' to take on controversial topics and sites, dug at Point Rosee with her multi-talented team in 2015 and 2016, but was forced in the end to conclude that the supposedly indicative iron deposits found were wholly natural in origin. My friend Birgitta Wallace, who was on a team that dug at L'Anse aux Meadows, is quoted as not being surprised at the outcome. Wallace has in fact come to the view that the Norse never established a serious presence in North America south or west of L'Anse aux Meadows, though of course dramatic new finds are always possible.

Disappointingly for a linguist, there is no trace at all of written Norse in Newfoundland, even at L'Anse aux Meadows; and all the supposedly Norse (or other runic) inscriptions found or 'found' elsewhere in the Americas appear to be either fakes or misinterpreted natural or non-linguistic human markings. I referred above to the Minnesota Kensington Rune Stone. Another well-known case is that of the 13-character Yarmouth Rune Stone (Nova Scotia), which is definitely **not** in Norse and has been read in many ways, including two readings as Hungarian (a favourite language among fringe 'historical linguists'), one left-to-right and one right-to-left (naturally with completely different meanings). The stone was presented to the local museum two hundred years ago, as if

recently discovered, by an individual with a history of fakes and stunts, and may have been altered a century later by someone who reportedly took a chisel to it to sharpen up the text after years of exposure to the at times bitter Maritimes weather. It now resides inside the Yarmouth museum, and in 2014 I was allowed to be photographed with my hand resting on it. I was tempted to try to souvenir it (!) but it is well-guarded and weighs 150 kilograms. For more on these matters, see Chapter 4 of my 2013 book *Strange Linguistics*.

Schoch on Göbekli Tepe

The maverick geologist Robert Schoch, best known for his claims about the vast

antiquity of the Giza Sphinx, has now claimed that he can translate ‘writing’ he identifies on stones at the impressive early site at Göbekli Tepe in Turkey (much discussed of late in this forum and elsewhere). He regards Göbekli Tepe as the site of a literate civilisation which flourished around 10,000 BP or earlier, long before the oldest recognised writing. As Jason Colavito states, it would be remarkable if a non-linguist could translate a hitherto unknown language of that date! Schoch identifies the script as Luwian hieroglyphs from an area near Troy, further west in Turkey; he suggests that the Luwians took their writing system from Göbekli Tepe. Neither he nor his

co-author is a scholar of Luwian, and the similarities between Luwian script and the markings at Göbekli Tepe (which are very probably non-linguistic) are **very** approximate, to say the least! (*note 7*).

Notes

1. <http://tinyurl.com/qthn8vo>
2. <http://tinyurl.com/vdndonv>
3. <http://tinyurl.com/tlwsvrn>
4. <http://tinyurl.com/qmqavnk>
<http://tinyurl.com/ryb6f4u>
<http://tinyurl.com/y4z4vh9z>
<http://tinyurl.com/vdgzkdf>
5. <http://tinyurl.com/rd7aw9s>
6. <http://tinyurl.com/wfl24pr>
7. <http://tinyurl.com/vg9s2w8>



CONTRIBUTED ARTICLES

RELIGION, SEXUALITY AND THE ALLEGED RIGHT NOT TO BE OFFENDED: THE CASE OF ISRAEL FOLAU

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).

I write here not as a linguist but as a general skeptic, a sometime undergraduate and ongoing amateur philosopher, and a rugby league enthusiast.

Israel Folau, born in Australia in 1989 and of Tongan heritage, has successively played three codes of football at top level: rugby league, Australian Football and rugby union. He has a complex personal religious history but is essentially a conservative Christian.

After a series of earlier comments attacking the liberalisation of laws relating to LGBT rights, Folau hit the headlines in April 2019 by stating on Instagram that ‘Hell awaits drunks, homosexuals, adulterers, liars, fornicators, thieves, atheists and idolators’. This comment drew

strongly-worded reactions from those with different ideas. Folau was found to have breached Rugby Australia’s inclusivist code of conduct, his contracts were terminated and he was effectively banned from top-level rugby union in Australia. In response, Folau proceeded against RA, alleging religious discrimination, breach of contract and restraint of trade. In late 2019 a confidential settlement between the parties was reached.

Rather than seeking to resume his rugby union career, Folau promptly returned to rugby league. The Australian Rugby League (like the Australian Football League) had made it clear that he was not welcome to return to their competition; so he signed for Catalans Dragons, the French club which plays in the predominantly

English European Super League competition (there is now also a club in Canada), and made his debut with the Dragons in February 2020. The British rugby league authorities, while dissociating themselves from his views, could find no reason to bar him. Catalans Dragons **were** warned that action would be taken if Folau repeated his remarks; but he had already agreed not to do this, and his views are now so well known that this constraint may not prove to be especially important in any case (but see also below).

The former tennis champion Margaret Court has also drawn controversy of late in a similar context; Folau is not on his own here, even among sports personalities.

The aspect of this matter which is of interest to skeptics involves the

question of whether or not people are entitled to express sincerely-held opinions on morality and religion which conflict with current (in this case recently-developed) orthodoxies. It should be noted, by way of background, that conservative Christianity is widely followed and indeed is a powerful force among Polynesian people; many people from Folau's own background would agree with him on these issues. And it can hardly be doubted that Folau is sincere in saying what he says. Indeed, from his point of view he is offering **help** to people caught in webs of 'sin' who will otherwise be doomed to eternal woe after death.

Furthermore, Folau has never suggested that gays, transgendered people, atheists etc. should be discriminated against in any sport; indeed, he has explicitly stated that this is not his viewpoint. Still less has he urged people to mistreat members of these groups. His comments at issue here relate to his beliefs about divine punishment for 'sin' in the afterlife. These beliefs are no longer fashionable in 'the West' and are indeed perceived by many as extreme and mistaken, and his phraseology is nothing but forthright/explicit and might well be judged intemperate; but these are other issues.

I acknowledge that many 'liberal' Christians do not agree with Folau on questions of LGBT morality, etc. I am here addressing Folau's ideas specifically, and I am happy to leave Christian proponents of these different opinions to argue among themselves. They should surely start with the question of what their sacred texts actually say and how the relevant passages (e.g., the sections of the Bible which many read as condemning homosexuality) should be translated and interpreted.

I stress that I myself am strongly 'pro-LGBT' (although I **am** exercised by certain specific issues involving transgender) and have moved happily in LGBT circles since I was 18. I am also a life-long atheist and thus deny the very existence of the Christian god and of course the existence of Hell; and indeed

I regard God, as represented in mainstream Christianity, as an immoral and very unpleasant person who, if he did exist, would have no moral right to our obedience. Thus I myself consider Folau's views both mistaken and alarming, and indeed arguably offensive; it could not be held that I hold the views expressed below out of any intellectual sympathy with him.

I regard God, as represented in mainstream Christianity, as an immoral and very unpleasant person who, if he did exist, would have no moral right to our obedience.

On the other hand, as a liberal (and indeed as an atheist) I claim no right to be protected from being offended by the expression of sincerely-held opinions contrary to my own; and I do not grant such a right to others. And I suggest that this is a fundamental aspect of 'freedom of speech' as a feature of scholarship (on empirical or philosophical issues) and of life more generally. It is, of course, rude and unhelpful to offend people deliberately; and outright slander or libel should invite legal action. But, as Richard Dawkins and others have argued, people who are so susceptible to being 'triggered' if confronted by unwelcome ideas that they 'freak out' or become hysterically angry either have allowed themselves to become irrationally self-indulgent or are simply unsuited by temperament to the hurly-burly of serious debate. As another notable liberal, the 'apostate' Salman Rushdie, said when threatened by an Iranian fatwah: faced with ideas which one does not like, one should not try to ban them but should rather ignore them, seek to refute them – or promote one's own ideas. This last is what Ariane Sherine did when she was shocked by a Christian fundamentalist poster on a bus; she started the Atheist Bus Campaign. And I urge that this is how those who share my dislike of Folau's ideas should react to them.

Some have suggested that 'celebrities' such as Folau are under a special obligation not to influence others through strongly-worded statements of their now-disfavoured opinions; choosing to exert such influence is irresponsible. I can see a degree of force in this, especially given that some readers, especially those with prior 'axes to grind', might react in extreme ways to comments which in no way encourage such reactions when read carefully and may even include (as in the Folau case) the explicit rejection of same; but surely at the end of the day one cannot be expected to refrain from stating sincerely-held views which one deems important and helpful. It is also difficult to define the notion of a 'celebrity' sharply enough to apply this principle; and some people are very well known in some circles or territories but largely unfamiliar and lacking in influence elsewhere. It has also been held that groups which have hitherto been oppressed and may still be oppressed to a degree (some ethnic minorities, LGBT people, females, etc.) should be especially protected from the expression of negative opinions, however motivated and however soberly worded. Again, there is a point to be considered here; but I do not think that it outweighs the need to protect (judiciously-exercised) freedom of expression.

Going beyond the official ruling that as a condition of appearing in Super League Folau must now keep his opinions to himself (which is itself arguably unwarranted), some critics seem to hold that even thinking as he does, let alone expressing such thoughts, is altogether unacceptable, a mode of thought which should be consigned to the 'dustbin of history'. It strikes me that such totalitarian attitudes to thought itself are even more alarming. There is also the suggestion here that people with certain 'dated' but respectable viewpoints (in this case, conservative Christians) may simply no longer be welcome in rugby league or for that matter in contemporary society as a whole. This perception has arisen in earlier cases, for instance when Catholic

adoption agencies in the UK were forced to choose between closure and conformity with requirements to act against non-negotiable matters of conscience. If this is really the direction in which things are heading, I for one am more than concerned.

When the news of Folau's imminent appearance in Super League broke, the game of rugby league in Britain was seriously agitated. Some of those opposed to Folau appeared altogether unwilling to countenance contrary views: many LGBT and pro-LGBT rugby league devotees and various

regular supporters (some of them prominent) threatened to boycott Catalans matches, the Hull Kingston Rovers club championed a 'revolt' against Folau's presence in the competition, and the very prominent Wigan club declared that their upcoming home match against Catalans would feature a celebration of LGBT rights. Other followers endorsed the view adopted by the rugby league authorities: Folau's ideas were distasteful but had nothing to do with his career as a sportsman. (Very few actually expressed agreement with

Folau's views.) The Catalans club management (operating in a rather different cultural framework) stood by their decision.

At this point, however, the season was interrupted by the corona virus pandemic. It remains to be seen how the case will 'pan out' as & when the competition resumes.

I may be writing another, longer piece on these matters in due course. Meanwhile, I would be interested to know how the skeptical world divides on this matter, and to read any comments!

REVIEWS AND COMMENTARIES



Anesthesia & the Soul by Gerald Woerlee. Freely available at www.anesthesiasoul.com

Reviewed by James Semple

I should say straight away that I am not the best person to be reviewing this book. I agree too closely with the author about his main message – namely, that the soul does not exist; hence I cannot subject his arguments to the full range of research and discussion which a committed soul-enthusiast might have assembled.

Having admitted to a bias possibly common to many skeptical readers, I can nevertheless recommend this book to anyone at all interested in the nature of human consciousness and the action of anaesthetics in modifying it. Dr Woerlee writes clearly and well, combining a detailed but highly readable review of his long clinical experience in this field of medicine with a fascinating review of its history.

However, his experience and research have led him to the conclusion that the mind in general – and consciousness in particular – are entirely the products of physical brain and body activity. At no stage has he seen any need to invoke non-material aspects of humanity, such as the soul, and in this

he is in conflict with a large body of contrary opinion. To them he pays a graceful tribute:

At this point I would like to acknowledge my indebtedness to my intellectual opposites – people who truly believe in the reality of an immaterial human soul. Their persistent carping and criticism of every one of my arguments was, is, and remains a wonderfully fertile source of inspiration. ... True antagonists such as these are the best tests of the validity of any new or different system of thought.

The case for the soul invariably consists of isolated characteristics extracted from religious and other committed texts, and easily disproved by rational argument.

However, this leads me to my only criticism of this book – the weakness of the case for the soul. He claims to present this case by means of step-by-step analyses throughout the book.

These analyses are such that many readers will comment on the fact that explanations of many mind-body interactions from the viewpoint of a separable soul, are invariably longer and more complex than explanations from a viewpoint that the brain is the vehicle and generator of the conscious mind.

Such analyses abound, but the case for the soul invariably consists of isolated characteristics extracted from religious and other committed texts, and easily disproved by rational argument. It is as if the case for the defence is also being presented by the prosecutor.

The only different section is the large body of testimony about out-of-body experiences. In these, anaesthetised patients report their consciousness separating from their unconscious bodies, floating up to the ceiling and seeing and hearing things taking place in the operating theatre. Dr Woerlee performs a detailed analysis of the different types and stages of anaesthesia and their documented effects on patient hearing and memory,

and shows how these can locate ‘out-of-body’ experiences firmly within the physical sense experiences of the partially-conscious patient.

After reading this book I looked at Dr Woerlee’s other activities on the Net. Aside from publishing other books on his specialism, he is reported as engaging in debates with soul-supporters. If the skeptics maintain any

relationship with such groups, it might be interesting to have a review of this book from the other side of the fence. I was also grateful that - despite the recent triumph of Bell’s Inequality Experiments - no mention was made in the book of quantum theory. The pharmacology took all my concentration: quantum entanglement would have been too much.

James Semple worked in several branches of the chemical industry before joining a London polytechnic to teach several types of science and technology. Now retired to the West Country, he convenes the Science Group of his local University of the Third Age.

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Crypto Profit – Your Expert Guide to Financial Freedom through Cryptocurrency Investing by Peter Bryant. Self-published (2019), pp 133, ISBN 978-1-9163402-0-6.

Reviewed by Steve Dulson

Cryptocurrencies may still be a bit of a mystery to most. In fact, before reading this book, the only one I was aware of was that internet scammers’, blackmailers’, and money-launderers’ currency of choice: Bitcoin. Apparently, there are others and this book describes the origins and uses of the big three (Bitcoin, Ethereum and Ripple [XRP]). The author is a broker and trader at an international asset management company but it is not stated whether his day job is concerned with cryptocurrencies or fiat currencies or both; fiat currencies are those used on a day-to-day basis by us mere mortals, e.g. pounds, dollars and euros. The back cover states that the book ‘is for sceptics and doubters’ and that being ‘cautious and sceptical is good’. Cool, I will.

The book provides a very good summary of what cryptocurrencies are and why they came about. The best (and most successful to date) are those that were designed to fulfil a specific task or solve a specific problem, usually of a digital nature, such as providing quicker, more secure online payment methods with lower fees. The concept of Blockchain technology is described, as well as the Bitcoin ‘halvening’ process. All very informative but I do take issue with some of the wording used. The author claims that ‘cryptocurrencies will thrive because they are useful’ and that they are ‘the

only way to solve some really big problems’. When I think about ‘really big problems’, I think about famine, genocide, war, systematic oppression of minority groups, environmental disasters... Cryptocurrencies do not solve any of these problems. What they do appear to be useful for however is providing better ways to transfer digital monetary value online – mainly between traders and investors in cryptocurrencies. So, they do help traders and investors to be more confident in their trading exchanges and make life quicker and easier for them to transfer the profits they make on their deals. Whilst cryptocurrencies are described as ‘tangible digital assets’ (a contradiction in terms, if you ask me), they can provide more stable ways of transferring ‘value’ between parties that involve less intermediaries and, therefore, lower fees and less chance of errors occurring during the exchange process. The obvious questions to ask are: if cryptocurrency solves so many big problems, why has it not already been adopted universally, and why do we need so many of them? The author himself admits that if something seems too good to be true, it usually is but he does not apply that logic to cryptocurrencies.

The book starts well, providing useful definitions and explanations of the cryptocurrency world and also

providing a nice summary of the major problems associated with the current global financial system (‘broken, unsustainable, expensive and bound to fail’); this includes some revealing comment on the somewhat dubious premises upon which our current financial system is built (e.g. fractional reserves), as well as the risky practices which have resulted in the numerous economic crises we have had to endure. As Mr Marx asked, ‘What is a bank robbery compared to the setting up of a bank?’

The book then concentrates on trying to convince the reader of the guaranteed increase in ‘value’ of cryptocurrencies and encourages us to invest in them because they are different from fiat currencies. Whilst they clearly differ in some respects, they still share the property of not being backed by physical commodities. The argument that a string of digital coding on a computer is a ‘tangible asset’ does not make sense to me. As with all currencies and assets, they only have value if they are generally accepted, used and exchanged by people who regard them as having value. It can be argued that all money is now backed by nothing but trust and I remain to be convinced that cryptocurrencies are any different from fiat currencies in that respect. Reporting on the huge potential profits available to investors (taking

Bitcoin as an incredibly profitable example to date) and distributing those claims in a book such as this goes some way to boosting public awareness and promoting the acceptance of such things and, therefore, increases the value of it, perpetuating a self-fulfilling prophecy. The potential value will only be achieved if the cryptocurrencies become accepted, adopted by financial institutions and used by the general public, thus creating demand.

One of the advantages given for using cryptocurrencies is that they are not regulated in the same way as fiat currencies but are ‘self-governing’.

One of the advantages given for using cryptocurrencies is that they are not regulated in the same way as fiat currencies but are ‘self-governing’. This can be construed as a positive in some ways but, just as easily, as a negative aspect. The creator(s) of Bitcoin, for example, remain anonymous and all cryptocurrencies must be stored, controlled and processed by ‘someone’, don’t they? If these anonymous controllers are untraceable, then surely this makes cryptocurrency a very risky proposition.

There are a few other statements, that appear to contradict each other, e.g. the author claims that the code for Bitcoins ‘can only exist in one place at one time and are impossible to falsify’ but, it had previously been stated that transaction data is not stored on any one system or computer, but on millions of computers simultaneously.

After telling us how great cryptocurrencies are, the author then details the shortcomings of each and even warns investors away from many of the newly created ones (bandwagon jumpers?) that don’t meet certain

criteria. There is a section which describes useful investment strategies and these are interesting and worthy of note in themselves because they can be applied to any types of investment.

One fifth of the book is given over to countering the anticipated counter-arguments that the author must have heard or read many times regarding investing in cryptocurrencies. This reminded me of my first year as an undergraduate, where the first chapter of the Accounting textbook we were assigned was dedicated entirely to explaining just ‘Why accounting is not boring.’ Quite. A few psychological devices are employed in an effort to persuade the doubters, i.e. by saying that those who hold alternative views regarding cryptocurrencies do so because they don’t understand the crypto market or are intimidated by it or have prejudices based on fiction (investor-shaming?). It may or may not be relevant to note that the author is also a hypno-psychotherapist. What needs to be added to the list of reasons for not jumping on the cryptocurrency train, of course, is the fact that, not so long ago, many people will have been miss-sold mortgages, PPI and so on by financial advisers and probably suffered financial hardship because of standard banking practices and the actions of fund managers, Bankers (with a capital ‘B’), and companies stealing pension funds etc., not forgetting those who got stung by the bursting of the dot-com bubble.

The author is actually quite even-handed in his discussion of the pros and cons of some of the arguments and rightly points out that, although volatile markets are where many people lose money, they are also where the potential for the biggest profits are to be found. It is a question of where to invest, how much and when. And then, of course, comes the usual financial-adviser caveat that ‘although I have shown you how to invest in this <insert investment

opportunity> and it will definitely increase in value, don’t blame me if it doesn’t because investment returns can go down as well as up’. Any advice or brokering fees would be long-gone by then of course.

A cynical person may suggest that this book is just an elaborate marketing tool that is being used to promote the author’s website at

www.thecryptoprof.com

(which is presumably a side-project), set up in order to sell this book as well as provide (unspecified) brokering services that are unrelated to his normal brokering/trading activities? The author states that ‘Cryptocurrencies are one of the most exciting inventions the world has ever witnessed.’ Presumably just below post-its and paperclips in the top ten?

In summary, this is actually an interesting, thought-provoking book and the idea of a universally accepted currency that can be transferred and traded by everyone without the need for expensive, inefficient third parties has a certain appeal. There are some fascinating graphs and calculator tools on the website, which are fun to have a play with, and, who knows, maybe there is something in the wildly optimistic predictions given? By all means have a flutter, if you are someone who likes a little gamble now and then (it may be an interesting little experiment). If you do decide to participate then this book would be a useful introductory read but I would think more than twice before moving all of your pension pot into cryptocurrencies just yet.

Steve Dulson was a Chartered Geologist for 20 years but now has his own bookkeeping practice. He is also an ad hoc proofreader for an online company, mainly technical papers written by overseas authors, and he and his partner have a partnership selling embroidery thread.



Uncommon Knowledge: The Economist Explains edited by Tom Standage. Profile for *The Economist*, 2019, pp [9], 261. ISBN: pbk. 9781788163323, e-book 9781782835981.

Reviewed by Ray Ward

I seem to be making a habit of reviewing books purporting to tell us things we don't know, like *The Hidden Half* by Michael Blastland (*Skeptical Intelligencer* 22:3, Autumn 2019) and *Factfulness* by Hans Rosling and others (22:4, Winter 2019). This one isn't quite in the same category, being a miscellany of brief pieces on a great variety of subjects (or, to quote the back cover, 'a cornucopia of surprising information to delight even the most curious brain'), divided into sections on 'little-known explanations', 'particular proclivities', 'oddities and commodities', 'love, sex and marriage', employment, 'economical, with the truth', laws and justice, health, death and disease, environmental matters, and science and technology.

The introduction says the book is a compendium of explanations, having in common that they are uncommon, in two senses: rare, infrequently encountered, things that few people are aware of or know about; and exceptional or extraordinary - tempting me to enumerate the things I *did* know, like (to take an example from the introduction) the far side of the Moon isn't always dark, something which, it says, most people would be surprised to hear, along with: the global suicide rate is falling; most refugees don't live in camps; and carrots were not originally orange.

It would be impossible to comment on all 120 or so very varied items, so I will confine myself to ones I found remarkable.

As a space buff I found the explanation of who owns what in space and the discussion of space junk interesting.

Another subject of interest to me was why most countries drive on the right, countries' experience of switching, and the false belief that, in

this as in many other things, Britain is almost alone. As the book says, 58 countries drive on the left, not all comparatively small in population or (as is also believed) former British colonies. Five of the most populous countries in the world, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Japan, drive on the left. The last two were never British colonies, and neither was Thailand, which also drives on the left.

When governments were required to pay coca farmers who switched to other crops, some began planting coca so they could get compensation for giving it up.

The discussion of 'Why treason cases are so common in Africa' reminded me of the verse: 'Treason never prosper./ What's the reason?/ For if it prosper/ None dare call it treason.' - or, as the book says, 'Touchy presidents portray critics as enemies of the state.'

Melting ice is opening up previously inaccessible sea lanes in the Northern Sea Route through the Russian Arctic.

The entry on Japan's large amounts of plutonium is marred by a reference to the 'Fukushima disaster'. As Rosling, says (see my review), no-one died of radiation; however, thousands were unnecessarily evacuated and many older people died as a result of the disruption and stress - disastrous, indeed, but not what the book means.

Did you know, or care, that there was a world shortage of vanilla, or a rise in houseplants?

The discussion of whether the Caspian Sea is a sea or a lake reminds me that I long wondered why Lake Superior was considered the largest lake

when a glance at a map showed the Caspian was far larger and also landlocked. When it was divided only between the Soviet Union and Iran it was considered a lake, but it is now bordered by five countries, and some say the UN Law of the Sea applies.

Mandarin Chinese, we are told, has gender stereotypes, reminding me that Bill Bryson, in his marvellous book about English, *Mother Tongue*, says that the characters for 'two women' mean *gossip*, and 'three women' mean *quarrel*. Changes in attitudes to sexual harassment (#MeToo and all that), and the appalling persistence of child marriages in Africa, are also interestingly discussed. And the section on why few nurses are men illustrates how much things have changed: I was reminded that well within living memory, publishers were bringing out separate books entitled *Careers for Boys* and *Careers for Girls*. Other entries on similar sex role themes ask if gender quotas are good for business and discuss the slow progress towards gender parity in the sciences.

Why is Japan, one of the rich world's most homogenous countries, admitting more foreign workers, despite previous concerns that outsiders would bring crime, damage societal practices, and the Japanese would be unable to communicate with them? But the population is ageing and shrinking...

Do 'sin taxes' on goods deemed socially undesirable - tobacco, alcohol, etc. - work?

The last time Australia had a recession the Soviet Union existed, the world wide web didn't. But it has a political malaise, and the Prime Ministership has become a revolving door - the last full term was in 2004-7. And that was written, of course, before the current incumbent, Scott Morrison, got into trouble over his response to the

disastrous bush fires - the statement that wildfires are in decline may now look decidedly odd to Australians....

American Supreme Court justices serve long terms - arguably good for independence, but when a vacancy occurs presidents choose replacements reflecting their ideological preferences, hoping their influence will last long into the future.

When governments were required to pay coca farmers who switched to other crops, some began planting coca so they could get compensation for giving it up - a classic case of a perverse incentive

and the law of unintended consequences!

Some Muslim countries have *zina* laws, branding women for having had illicit sexual relations even if they were raped.

There is evidence of a strong association between rainfall patterns and Roman emperors' duration in power: less rain reduced crop yields, leading to shortages and eventually starvation for frontier soldiers, who were therefore more likely to mutiny and assassinate the emperor.

The remarkable safety of air travel is exemplified by the fact that one is more

likely to choke to death on a pretzel or drown in the bath than die in a plane crash.

There is far more to this book than I could possibly comment on: it makes a fascinating miscellany, helped by a good index.

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.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

OF INTEREST

SKEPTICISM, SCIENCE AND RATIONALITY (GENERAL)

Sense About Science

Keep visiting the Sense About Science website for new developments see (Politics and Social Policy below).

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

Good Thinking

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

<http://goodthinkingsociety.org/>

Science and uncertainty

Newspaper articles on uncertainty in science in the context of the coronavirus pandemic, by Jim Al-Khalili.

<http://tinyurl.com/yc7eb3kq>

Pre-prints

See paper: 'Comparing quality of reporting between preprints and peer-reviewed articles in the biomedical literature'.

<http://tinyurl.com/symbblx>

Websites of interest

And: An online course in recognising and challenging bullshit. 'The world is awash in bullshit. Politicians are unconstrained by facts. Science is conducted by press release. Higher

education rewards bullshit over analytic thought. Startup culture elevates bullshit to high art. Advertisers wink conspiratorially and invite us to join them in seeing through all the bullshit — and take advantage of our lowered guard to bombard us with bullshit of the second order. The majority of administrative activity, whether in private business or the public sphere, seems to be little more than a sophisticated exercise in the combinatorial reassembly of bullshit. We're sick of it. It's time to do something, and as educators, one constructive thing we know how to do is to teach people. So, the aim of this course is to help students navigate the bullshit-rich modern environment by identifying bullshit, seeing through it, and combating it with effective analysis and argument.' At:

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

Also: Skeptoid have announcing a new online community for skeptics: Skeptoid Discord.

'Our Discord channel is the live, online community for Skeptoid members to chat with each other, and with us. Discord is an all-in-one voice and text chat that's free, secure, and works on both your desktop and mobile

device. Get Discord here. This is a private channel for Skeptoid members only. To gain access to it, you first need to create a free Skeptoid account, or sign into to your existing account.' At: <https://skeptoid.com/discord/join.php> Meanwhile: 'MonsterTalk has been promoting science and critical thinking since 2009. We use monsters as a springboard to talk about a variety of monster topics. We're skeptical of the existence of monsters, but we want to understand the mysterious experiences people report.' At:

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

And: 'The Skeptical Studies Curriculum Resource Center is a comprehensive, free repository of resources for teaching students how to think skeptically. This Center contains a selection of books, reading lists, course syllabi, in-class exercises, PowerPoint presentations, student projects, papers, and videos that you may download and use in your own classes.' At:

<https://www.skeptoid.com/skepticism-101/>

What's more: There's some really interesting things going on in the world of skepticism down under (including an online convention in October): The

Newsletter of Australian Skeptics Inc. is now freely available online at:

<https://www.skeptics.com.au/>.

5G

‘Your (*New Scientist*) 5G guide: Will we all benefit from super-quick mobile internet?’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/yb9hae5r>

MEDICINE

The Nightingale Collaboration

Keep visiting the Nightingale Collaboration website. If you have not already done so, why not sign up for free delivery of their electronic newsletter?

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

Website of interest

Realistic Medicine (Scotland): ‘One of the main aims of Realistic Medicine is for people using healthcare services and their families to feel empowered to discuss their treatment fully with healthcare professionals, including the possibility that a suggested treatment might come with side effects – or even negative outcomes. Everyone should feel able to ask their healthcare professional why they’ve suggested a test, treatment or procedure, and all decisions about a person’s care should be made jointly between the individual and their healthcare team. “By 2025, everyone who provides healthcare in Scotland will demonstrate their professionalism through the approaches, behaviours and attitudes of Realistic Medicine” (Dr Catherine Calderwood, Chief Medical Officer).’

<https://www.realisticmedicine.scot/>
and

<https://tinyurl.com/ydbmn32m>

Science-based medicine

‘Pseudoscience, denialism, fake news, and disinformation about health are a bigger problem than ever, thanks to social media. As doctors and scientists join lay defenders of science on social media, will they be willing to pay the price in terms of harassment? Or will they decide it’s not worth the hassle? And what about our fellow docs who think that it’s beneath them to debunk

quackery, that it is so easy as to be not worth their effort?’

<https://tinyurl.com/r95u6q7>

Fraud in medical research

Video presentation: ‘Dishonesty and scientific fraud is sadly not confined to pre-clinical medicine. Dr Peter Wilmshurst, a consultant cardiologist from the UK, recounts his experience as a whistle-blower and his role in exposing a number of fraudulent clinical trials. These include campaigning to ban the dangerous cardiac inotrope amrinone and revealing the fraudulent misrepresentation of clinical trial data of NMT Medical’s PFO closure device - a stand for which he was repeatedly and unsuccessfully sued. His experiences, along with the case of the British Chiropractic Association v Singh, have been cited as catalysts for the UK’s libel reform campaign, leading to the Defamation Act 2013 - a victory for the right of all clinical and basic scientists to free speech.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/y88y7tvv>

And: ‘Data Integrity of 35 Randomised Controlled Trials in Women’ Health’: ‘While updating a systematic review on the topic of ovulation induction, we observed unusual similarities in a number of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) published by two authors from the same institute in the same disease spectrum in a short period of time. We therefore undertook a focused analysis of the data integrity of all RCTs published by the two authors. ... Analysis of the baseline characteristics of the trials indicated that their distribution was unlikely to be the result of proper randomisation. The procedures demonstrated in this paper may help to assess data integrity in future attempts to verify the authenticity of published RCTs.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/y7ts5ov4>

Covid-19

More than a fifth of people believe that the coronavirus crisis is a hoax, new research suggests. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/y8wx32k>

So, see: The psychology behind why people believe coronavirus conspiracy theories. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/ydczdn98>

And: ‘On January 31, 1890, the European edition of the New York Herald ran an item suggesting that the electric light was somehow responsible for a global influenza outbreak. After all, “the disease has raged chiefly in towns where the electric light is in common use,” the article noted, and went on to note that the disease “has everywhere attacked telegraph employees.”’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/ya7nszse>

Also: ‘Covid-19: the psychology of conspiracy theories – podcast. With false information linking the coronavirus to 5G telecoms or Chinese labs being widely shared on social media, Ian Sample speaks to social psychologist Dr Daniel Jolley about why the pandemic is such fertile ground for conspiracy theories.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/y7p4wwza>

And: Strange beliefs, fake news and blame in public crises: from the Great plague to covid-19. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/y7s43ymv>

But: Does debunking work? ‘One of the defining characteristics of this pandemic has been the spread of misinformation. Indeed, the World Health Organization famously called the crisis not just a pandemic, but also an “infodemic.” Why and how misinformation spreads and has an impact on behaviours and beliefs is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. And there is an emerging rich academic literature on misinformation, particularly in the context of social media. Here, I focus on two relatively narrow questions: is debunking an effective strategy and, if so, what kind of counter-messaging is most effective? While the data remains complex and, at times, contradictory, there is little doubt that efforts to correct misinformation are worthwhile. In fact, fighting the spread of misinformation should be viewed as vitally important health and science policy priority.’

<https://osf.io/5uy2f/>

Meanwhile: ‘Standing in his warmly-lit living room, the popular UFO conspiracy theorist David Wilcock was telling his YouTube Live audience that the “Illuminati Deep State” was responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic and that he knew the secrets of how to save humanity from the crisis. More than 20,000 people were watching; hundreds of dollars in donations began rolling in via YouTube Superchat. The video now has more than a million views. Just over a week later, Wilcock’s comrade in arms, Corey Goode, posted a video claiming, nonsensically, that according to briefings he has received from government insiders, the new coronavirus was engineered as a “biological weapon from an American university” and smuggled into China by a student in order to act as a population control tool. He concluded by stating that he wasn’t sure if his source was totally accurate.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/y7pl344w>

5G

Rory Cellan-Jones has been exposing the rather bizarre takeover of Glastonbury Town by 5G conspiracy theorists. The council published a report that called for an ending of 5G rollout. Several members of the working group that looked into the safety of 5G complained that the group had been taken over “by anti-5G activists and “spiritual healers”. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/yddro53b>

Meanwhile: ‘Trading Standards officers are seeking to halt sales of a device that has been claimed to offer protection against the supposed dangers of 5G via use of quantum technology. Cyber-security experts say the £339 5GBioShield appears to no more than a basic USB drive.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/ybs5k9vo>

Also From BBC Radio’s File on 4: The 5G con that could make you sick: ‘Some people think that 5G can make you sick, and there are scientists who say they can prove that it’s true. But could stoking these fears actually be damaging people’s health?’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/yb5og9eh>

Autism

‘In a large population-based multinational cohort study including more than 2 million individuals, 22,156 of whom were diagnosed with ASD, the heritability of autism spectrum disorder was estimated to be approximately 80%, with possible modest differences in the sources of autism spectrum disorder risk replicated across countries. ... The variation in the occurrence of autism spectrum disorder in the population is mostly owing to inherited genetic influences, with no support for contribution from maternal effects.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/y4gwn293>

And: ‘A recent study of the communication technique rapid prompting method (RPM; a.k.a. spelling to communicate) in a prestigious journal bears the bold title “Eye-Tracking Reveals Agency in Assisted Autistic Communication.” Unfortunately, the study does nothing of the kind. It does, however, reveal the lengths to which proponents of this unsubstantiated communication method are willing to go to avoid the simple tests that would actually prove it works.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/y7ndmlzo>

Vaccination

‘Measles outbreaks may occur as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, officials say, because some vaccination programmes are having to be delayed. may not get immunised on time. There have been several large outbreaks in countries across Europe where MMR vaccine uptake has been low. The UK has already lost its measles-free status, because of rising cases of the potentially deadly infection.’

<http://tinyurl.com/s94zqho>

Homeopathy

From a *Times* editorial entitled ‘Junk Medicine’: ‘Medical experts have condemned homeopaths they accuse of giving false hope to coronavirus victims by offering bogus treatments. Across the country, hundreds of homeopathic practitioners have been identified using the pandemic to drive sales of “remedies” and consultations. *The*

Times built a database together with the Good Thinking Society, a pro-science charity, to identify practitioners selling virus-related products and services. The investigation uncovered a wide range of examples that experts say could place lives at risk...’

‘...The supposed discipline of homeopathy retains its place in public life not because scientific researchers see a place for it but, in part at least, it enjoys high profile patronage. The Prince of Wales has urged that “science and homeopathy must work in harmony”, which is a bit like calling for an alliance of locksmiths and burglars.’

<http://tinyurl.com/yauxono>

‘What Doctors Don’t Tell You’

‘Today, we learned that the editors of Get Well – the rebranded What Doctors Don’t Tell You magazine – have decided to withdraw it from the shelves of retailers across the UK, so it will in future only be sold on a subscription-only model. What Doctors Don’t Tell You has been notorious for years as a source of misleading health claims, ranging from the dubious to the downright dangerous.’

<https://tinyurl.com/y8zhlfm>

Cancer quackery

‘The founder of a company jailed for selling a so-called cancer cure faces the confiscation of £1.4m in assets. David Noakes, of Waldershare near Dover, illegally made and distributed unlicensed substance, GcMAF globally. His company Immuno Biotech, in Guernsey on the Channel Islands, made millions of pounds online, Southwark Crown Court heard. He will lose his aircraft, boat, Aston Martin, Rolls Royce and UK and Guernsey bank accounts, the judge ruled.’

<https://tinyurl.com/y7jyeawd>

PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHIATRY

Antidepressants

‘A study of websites offering advice about antidepressants has found widespread misinformation, and widespread backing by drug companies. As people are flocking in record

numbers to get their medical advice online, thanks to the coronavirus, it is time to expose the risks.’

<http://tinyurl.com/r9z6h6b>

Memory

‘Back in 2018 a team of Australian researchers presented a novel font called Sans Forgetica, with the claim that it helps enhance memory. A team of UK and New Zealand researchers put the font to the test, and in a newly published peer-reviewed article reveal the font, while certainly difficult to read, may not boost memory after all.’

<https://tinyurl.com/y7kzfdup>

Lucid dreaming

‘Reality has plenty of exit-hatches: strong drugs, streamed television, certain corners of social media. But the most immersive reality-dissolver might be lucid dreaming, wherein the dreamer recognizes they’re dreaming and proceeds to reshape their dreamscape per their own specifications. A slight disreputableness clings to the phenomenon—it sounds like a schoolyard fiction, the kind of thing a kid would make up to impress his friends. But there are thousands who claim to experience them regularly, and countless guides online purporting to teach you how to achieve them. So is lucid dreaming real? And—if it is—what’s the science behind it? To find out, for this week’s Giz Asks we reached out to a number of experts in the interrelated fields of sleeping and dreaming.’

<https://tinyurl.com/y7mj29mf>

Forecasters

‘Accurate forecasters tend to update their beliefs in small, frequent steps. Small-increment updating is a valid signal of early accuracy. Propensity to update rather than confirm beliefs predicts improvement over time.’ See research paper at:

<http://tinyurl.com/udh63m3>

CONSPIRACY THEORIES

(These are just a tiny sample of recent reports: see also ‘5G’ and ‘Covid-19’ in the MEDICINE section—Ed.)

‘We consider the significance of belief in conspiracy theories for political ideologies. Although there is no marked ideological asymmetry in conspiracy belief, research indicates that conspiracy theories may play a powerful role in ideological processes. In particular, they are associated with ideological extremism, distrust of rival ideological camps, populist distrust of mainstream politics, and ideological grievances. The ‘conspiracy mindset’ characterizes the ideological significance of conspiracy belief, and is associated with measuring conspiracy belief by means of abstract propositions associated with aversion and distrust of powerful groups. We suggest that this approach does not pay sufficient attention to the nonrational character of specific conspiracy beliefs and thus runs the risk of mischaracterizing them, and mischaracterizing their ideological implications.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/tzy2dr4>

Likewise: Since COVID-19 appeared, we’ve seen a lot of false cures, strange beliefs and fake news, so much so that the World Health Organisation has declared an ‘infodemic’. Throughout history, we’ve seen similar responses when people are facing new dangers they can’t control and from which the authorities can offer little protection. This is only natural: we’re prepared to accept them because they restore a sense of control and certainty when we feel anxious and powerless. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/y7s43ymv>

Holocaust denial

‘Michael Shermer gives a remote lecture on Holocaust Denial that anyone can watch for free. In this lecture on Holocaust Denial, Dr Michael Shermer employs the methods of science to history, showing how we can determine truth about the past. Many scholars in the humanities and social sciences do not consider history to be a science. Instead, they treat it as a field of

competing narrative stories, no one of which has a superior claim to truth values than any others. But as Dr Shermer replies to this assertion, are we to understand that those who assert that the Holocaust never happened have equal standing to those who assert that it did? Of course not! It is here where most cultural relativists get off the relativity train, acknowledging that, in fact, we can establish certain facts about the past, no less than we can about the present.

<https://tinyurl.com/ycqcze4a>

RELIGION AND CULTS

Religion and science

From Chris French: ‘Last September, Deborah Hyde and I co-ordinated an event featuring Richard Dawkins in conversation with Ricky Gervais hosted by Richard Wiseman at Troxy in London, at which Ricky received the 2019 Richard Dawkins Award from the Center for Inquiry. CFI campaigns to remove the influence of religion in science education and public policy, and to eliminate the stigma that surrounds atheism and non-belief. The Richard Dawkins Award has been presented annually since 2003. Past winners have included philosopher and cognitive scientist Daniel Dennett, activist and feminist Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and actor and writer Stephen Fry. A film of the event, co-produced by Deborah and myself, is now available.’ At:

<https://centerforinquiry.org/ricky-gervais-video/>

POLITICS AND SOCIAL POLICY

SAGE and transparency

‘Help Sense About Science in their campaign for transparency. “We have written to the Prime Minister, to Select Committees and to key officials to challenge the secrecy about SAGE membership and reports. It led to some concessions and partial publication, but the evidence behind policies – on schools, quarantine, 2m distancing, economic trade-offs, mental health – remains opaque. We don’t know what’s being used or how it’s being reasoned.

We have moved others to make the case and we are now in the final stages of a transparency review of the evidence used in the first two phases of coronavirus policies, which the government is aware of.” Sense about Science would value your comments on this. You can submit these at:

<https://senseaboutscience.org/transparency-matters/>

Nudge theory

‘Nudge theory is a poor substitute for hard science in matters of life or death: Behavioural economics is being abused by politicians as a justification for flawed policies over the coronavirus outbreak.’

<https://tinyurl.com/y7q5ene4>

Online disinformation

Video recording of the Parliamentary Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Subcommittee on Online Harms and Disinformation, Thursday 4 June 2020.

<https://tinyurl.com/ydbjxvg6>

EDUCATION

Evolution

‘At a time when misinformation seems to be ascendant, a decades-long effort

aided by the scientific community is bearing fruit. Results published on 10 June show that the proportion of US secondary-school biology teachers who present creationism as a scientifically valid alternative to evolution fell from 32% in 2007 to 18% in 2019 (E. Plutzer et al. *Evo. Edu. Outreach* 13, 14; 2020). And the amount of class time devoted to human evolution shot up by almost 90%.’

<https://tinyurl.com/y7qp9vyt>

‘Conversion therapy’

‘Millions Of Taxpayer Dollars Are Going To Schools That Push Conversion Therapy. A HuffPost investigation has found schools in voucher programs that list “counseling” as discipline for LGBTQ students. The counseling, a form of conversion therapy, can be seriously harmful.’

<https://tinyurl.com/y9bmf77>

MISCELLANEOUS

UFOs

‘A “ghostbuster” and paranormal researcher has weighed in on what an unidentified flying object which left a vapour trail over Bath was. Luke

Cradock, of Bradford on Avon, posted a video of something that he said looked like it was slowly falling in the area of Bath/Yate. He said the white vapour trail then changed to thick black smoke and claimed a friend of his saw the same thing from London. Hayley Stevens, who researches paranormal claims and phenomena, put forward her own theory as to what it was.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y8cebclf>

Meanwhile: ‘In episode 7 of UFOLORE, our hosts speak to Professor Chris French, a British psychologist who specialises in the psychology of paranormal beliefs. The trio discuss everything from French’s work as the head of the University of London’s Anomalistic psychology research unit to his study of alien abduction experiences.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/yccclfct>

Ghosts

BBC Radio 4 - One to One, Selina Scott talks to ghostbuster Hayley Stevens (who does not believe in ghosts).

<https://tinyurl.com/yaokx4jj>

UPCOMING EVENTS

Owing to the coronavirus pandemic there are no upcoming live meetings to be announced here. However, currently the internet is awash with streamed events and podcasts of interest and importance to skeptics. Special mention should be made of Skeptics in the Pub Online, which currently has an excellent

programme of online talks on Thursday evenings. See:

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

Conway Hall is likewise hosting a programme of online presentations that often have a skeptical flavour:

<https://tinyurl.com/y7dmgktl>

As announced earlier, the Australian Skeptics are holding their annual convention online in October. See:

<https://www.skeptics.com.au/>

LOGIC AND INTUITION: ANSWERS

Does the glove change hands?

Yes. With both hands palm-down, bring the corresponding fingertips of the hands towards each other. Now imagine peeling off a glove on your right hand and transferring it inside out onto your left hand. It fits!

One man and his cane

The man puts the cane in a thin rectangular box, positioning it diagonally (corner-to-corner). A box of less than 13ft may be used for this purpose but its maximum length can only be 12ft. So what will be the minimum *width* of the box?

The answer is given by Pythagoras's Theorem, namely the square root of the difference in the squares of the length of the cane (13ft) and the box (12ft). This is the square root of 169 minus 144. So the width of the box must be 5ft.

Now, suppose the rule is that no luggage is allowed on board that exceeds 12ft x 4ft. What can the man do about that?

The answer to this will be in the next issue.

A note on impractical solutions

Your reaction to the answers to this puzzle is probably that there is no way

that anyone would be allowed on a bus carrying a box of such dimensions. The solution is only a mathematical one. I can still remember our school maths teacher talking about this very subject. I can't recall the example she used but it was something like 'If one man can dig a grave in one hour how long will it take three men? In practice the answer is unlikely to be 20 minutes: they would simply be getting in each other's way! At an even earlier age we used to tease each other with this puzzle: Ten crows are sitting in a line along the top of a fence. The farmer shoots one of them. How many will be left on the fence?

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 or email:

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