

# THE SKEPTICAL INTELLIGENCER

The Quarterly Magazine of ASKE  
THE ASSOCIATION FOR SKEPTICAL ENQUIRY  
Vol 23, 2020, Number 3 (Autumn)



*Incorporating the Skeptical Adversaria: the ASKE Newsletter*

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*Edited by Michael Heap*

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### Editor's Announcement

ASKE's *Skeptical Intelligencer* is widely circulated electronically to skeptical groups and individuals across the globe. Formal and informal articles of interest to skeptics are welcome from people of all disciplines and backgrounds. Details about house style are available from the Editor. We also welcome writers who would like to contribute a regular column - e.g. an 'On the Fringe' feature.



## FROM THE ASKE CHAIR

### Michael Heap

#### The Integrity of Scientific Research

'80,000 Hours' is a website offering careers advice, which has recently featured a 'psychology replication quiz' on one of its pages (*note 1*). As the compilers explain:

*Depending on how long you want to play, we'll describe 10, 15 or 21 recent findings [in social psychology] published in the world's top journals Nature and Science - and you'll have to guess whether a repeat/ replication of the same experiment, with a larger sample size, got the same result.*

They go on to say:

*Before starting this project - which was published in Nature in August 2018 - the people who organised these 21 replications asked expert psychologists and gamblers to predict which results would hold up. We'll show you how you compare to their performance - and other people who have taken this quiz - at the end!*

They provide a clue for anyone doing the quiz, namely:

*The fraction of experiments that replicated was between 35% and 65%.*

The unreliability of research findings that have been published in respected scientific journals and books is now recognised as a major problem, and psychology is no exception. Traditionally scientists have not been interested in repeating experiments that have already been published by others, and journal editors have discouraged this by their lack of enthusiasm for publishing such research. Where a failure to replicate is announced it is usually because the authors have modified the original experimental procedure to test whether the reported findings were related to an uncontrolled artefact. Also, journals tend not to publish a failure to obtain significant results unless, for example, the purpose of the research was to investigate a contentious and, as yet, unproven claim

(e.g. that certain cognitive exercises enhance one's intelligence).

For many years now there has been mounting pressure on academics to increase their rate of research publications in the learned literature, and indices of their success have been devised and monitored—e.g. the number of the papers they have authored or co-authored that appear in peer-reviewed journals, the citation rate of their papers in other articles, and their success in having their work published in a journal of high prestige—e.g. *Lancet* or *Nature*.

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***It is no secret, and no surprise, that academics have hit on ingenious ploys to enhance their research performance indicators.***

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It is no secret, and no surprise, that academics have hit on ingenious ploys to enhance their research performance indicators—viz multiple-authored papers, multiple papers reporting different aspects of the same research, and arranging reciprocal citing of papers with one's colleagues. It is also likely that the need to publish research influences what kind of research is undertaken. In ideal terms, one should be drawn to an area of investigation where there is confusion, uncertainty and gaps in knowledge (and I mean knowledge that is of some import): the excitement of making a significant, even if small, contribution is what drives the enterprise. *Not* obtaining the predicted results is not inconsequential but positive findings are a bonus—a great outcome—as is any ensuing recognition in one's specialism. But nowadays, all too often it seems that it is the tail that is wagging the dog: the need for recognition drives the research. Consequently, at least it appears to me, there is a preference for the kind of

research that is convenient and easy to undertake.

As stated earlier, the unreliability of too much scientific research has attracted increasing attention over the last few years and several books have been devoted to the subject (*note 2*). The latest was published this July and is by Dr Stuart Ritchie, a psychologist and neuroscientist at the Institute of Psychiatry in London (*note 3*). In the words of the publisher's blurb:

*While the scientific method will always be our best and only way of knowing about the world, in reality the current system of funding and publishing science not only fails to safeguard against scientists' inescapable biases and foibles, it actively encourages them. Many widely accepted and highly influential theories and claims – about 'priming' and 'growth mindset', sleep and nutrition, genes and the microbiome, as well as a host of drugs, allergies and therapies – turn out to be based on unreliable, exaggerated and even fraudulent papers. We can trace their influence in everything from austerity economics to the anti-vaccination movement, and occasionally count the cost of them in human lives.*

ASKE has been unable to obtain a review copy of this but if anyone does read it, a review or even some brief feedback would be welcome for inclusion in a future issue.

#### Notes

1. <https://80000hours.org/psychology-replication-quiz/>
2. A recent example is *The Illusion of Evidence-Based Medicine: Exposing the crisis of credibility in clinical research* by Jon Jureidini & Leemon B. McHenry, Wakefield, 2020.
3. *Science Fictions: Exposing Fraud, bias, Negligence and Hype in Science*, Vintage publishers.

#### We are Martians

Forgive me for indulging in a bit of nostalgia. The date was Tuesday

January 27<sup>th</sup>, 1959 and it was the start of another day at Junior school. There was a buzz of excitement amongst all the lads as we gathered waiting for the school bell to be rung. On the previous evening, the last episode of *Quatermass and the Pit*, serialised on BBC TV from December to January, had been shown. The plot revolved around the discovery of an alien spaceship that had landed on Earth millions of years previously and was discovered to have come from Mars. All my pals were animatedly chatting about it except me—my family didn't have a television at the time (*pass me the tissues—Ed.*). Especially vocal was Arthur. 'We're all Martians!' he announced; 'We all come from Mars!' Everyone agreed, including me. Arthur was a bit of an expert on this kind of

'it's unbelievable but it's true' information. I have another clear memory of him standing in front of us all with his hands one foot apart and proclaiming, 'A spider's thread is stronger than steel this thick. I don't know why, but it's true'. I had read about this and I knew Arthur had not got it quite right. I didn't say anything. Anyway, he might have been right about us all being descended from Martians. At least, this possibility has recently been announced by astronomer Professor Martin Ward at Durham University.

### ***The Skeptic (UK)***

Great news from *The Skeptic*, 'the UK's longest-running publication offering skeptical analysis of pseudoscience, conspiracy theory and claims of the paranormal. Founded in 1987, the magazine is now edited by Michael Marshall, Project Director of the Good Thinking Society, along with an editorial team from the Merseyside Skeptics Society. *The Skeptic* is supported by the Good Thinking Society.' Take a look at the newly revamped: website at:

<https://www.skeptic.org.uk/>.

Amongst other material of interest is the first of a two-part article by Claire Klingenberg entitled 'The Development of the Skeptic Movement'.



## LOGIC AND INTUITION

### **One man and his cane: Answer**

Recall the puzzle in the previous issue. '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?' The answer is that he puts the cane in a thin rectangular box 12ft x 5ft. The question then asked was what can the man do if no luggage is allowed

on board that exceeds 12ft x 4ft.? Here is the answer:

You now rely on 3 dimensions. Place the cane along the 3-dimensional diagonal inside a rectangular box 12ft long, 4ft wide and 3ft deep. You'll need to recall your school geometry to work this out.

### **The last man alive**

The last man alive sits alone in his room contemplating his fate. There is a knock on the door. Why is he not surprised?

### **The princess's birthday present**

Once upon a time there was a great king who, on her birthday, planned to give his daughter a fabulous and priceless

diamond. But he also ordered his jeweller to make eight identical replicas, none of any great value. The only difference was that the expensive diamond weighed slightly more than the others, which all weighed the same. He then presented the nine diamonds to the princess, plus a pair of balance scales (no weights), his instructions being that she was to choose only one of the diamonds after making just two weighings. Is it possible for her to identify the expensive diamond?

Answers on page 20



## 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).

### European Medicines Agency

More from Till Bruckner (see last issues): ‘Numerous clinical trials involving children are missing results from the European trial registry, data released by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) shows. According to an email from EMA dated 26 June 2020, “the total number of trials with due results is now below 5900, of which less than 380 are trials involving paediatric subjects.”’

<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 again about Covid-19, with an interview with ‘Hungarian researcher and virologist Gábor Kemenesi. He is a research fellow at the Virological Research Group within the Szentágotthai Research Centre of the University of Pécs in Hungary’.



## MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

### ‘More or Less’

With so much misreporting, misinformation and deliberate deception swilling around in the media, notably concerning the coronavirus pandemic, it’s gratifying that there are easily accessible sources dedicated to exposing those erroneous claims that receive such attention, and presenting the public with the best available evidence. Amongst these is BBC Radio 4’s ‘More or Less’, created in 2001 and now having three series every year of six episodes each. The programme specialises in correcting the misreporting, misunderstanding and misuse of statistical information by the media, politicians, conspiracy theorists, and so on. A useful example is their fact-checking of government misinformation on the daily statistics for testing COVID-19 infections.

The episode broadcast during the last week in August (*note 1*) featured, amongst other things, two important medical issues of topical interest. The first of these was the use of

convalescent plasma therapy (CPT), i.e. treating COVID-19 patients with the plasma of recovered patients. The presenter, Tim Harford, reported that President Donald Trump had complained on Twitter that the US Food & Drug Administration (FDA) was deliberately hampering the efforts of drug companies to test vaccines and treatments until after the Presidential election on November 3<sup>rd</sup> (‘they are part of the deep state’). He tagged the name of the Commissioner of the FDA in his tweet. Lo and behold, the next day the Commissioner, Dr Stephen Hahn, appeared with Mr Trump at a press conference in the White House at which the President proclaimed that he was making a ‘truly historic announcement’ in the battle against ‘the China virus’, namely that the FDA had announced the emergency use of CPT for COVID-19 patients, a treatment that had been shown to be very effective and would ‘save countless lives’. Mr Trump informed the world that CPT had been proven ‘to reduce mortality by 35%’.

The truth is that there is yet insufficient evidence that CPT is an effective treatment for COVID-19 because randomised controlled trials have not been completed. The observational data from the Mayo Clinic, presented in a preview paper, indicate that if there *is* a reduction in mortality it is not the case that, as Dr Hahn so ineptly stated, 35 patients out of 100 with COVID-19 could be saved from dying. The death rate for patients treated with high-antibody CPT was 8.9% and that for low-antibody CPT was 13.7% within a period of 7 days, a difference of less than 5%.

Following a furious backlash from the medical profession, Dr Hahn has humbly apologised for his mistake (*note 2*). Has Donald Trump? (*Don’t ask stupid questions—Ed.*)

The second topic of interest featured in the ‘More or Less’ episode was one raised by Professor Susan Bewley in the last ‘Medicine on the Fringe’, namely the advisability of routine screening for breast cancer. In England, women aged

between 50 and 70 are automatically invited for screening every 3 years but there are doubts about whether the benefits outweigh the disadvantages, notably those due to the relatively high number of false positives and the risk of overdiagnosis (i.e. true positives which would have caused no problems if left undetected and therefore untreated). The programme reported that on August 12<sup>th</sup> the results of a controlled trial of mammographic screening on younger women had been announced in the *Lancet* (note 3). The trial involved 23 breast-screening units across Great Britain. Women aged 39–41 years were randomly assigned to yearly mammographic screening up to the age of 48 or to standard care with no screening until aged 50. A total of 160,000 women were involved in the trial between 1990, and 1997, with an average follow-up period of 23 years.

The results of the trial were somewhat equivocal. There was some evidence that fewer women in the

screening group died of breast cancer, but there was no group difference in rate of mortality overall. So it is not possible to say ‘screening saved lives’. Perhaps this failure to detect a difference in all-cause mortality relates to the relatively low incidence of death due to breast cancer (7%). This also accounts for why the finding of a 25% reduction in the risk of dying from breast cancer sounds less impressive when translated as a reduction of 1 death in a thousand women screened (the reduction for women over 50 is 5 according to ‘More or Less’). This may or may not justify the lowering of the age for routine screening; it depends on whether or not you believe that the money and resources devoted to this could save more lives if directed elsewhere. A factor to consider here is the false positive rate which was 180 for every 1000 women screened.

Finally, Tim Harford himself has had to confess to a bit of misinformation (unintended) on COVID-19. At the

beginning of September it was announced in the *Mirror*:

*An economist claims the threat of coronavirus in England is about as risky as taking a bath - with figures showing the chance of dying from the disease each day is around one in two million.*

Other tabloids reported likewise. But he’d slipped up and it’s not true. The figure he gave was the *annual* risk of dying in the bath.

#### Notes

1. <https://tinyurl.com/y3lypfa5>
2. <https://tinyurl.com/y2m9zodo>
3. Duffy, S.W. et al (2020) Effect of mammographic screening from age 40 years on breast cancer mortality (UK Age trial): final results of a randomised, controlled trial. *Lancet*, **21**, Issue 9, 1165-1172. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/y5cexlm6>.



## LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

In this instalment I will focus upon recent claims regarding written languages, written texts and scripts (by no means exhaustively; I have many more such cases up my sleeve!).

### More about hieroglyphs!

Last time I commented on Douglas Petrovich’s claims about the relationship between Egyptian hieroglyphs and the Hebrew abjad (consonantal alphabet). As I remarked, non-mainstream interpretations of hieroglyphs are legion. Previously I have discussed Legesse Allyn’s ideas about hieroglyphs, Ethiopian languages and written Ancient Greek; there is yet more to say about Allyn’s claims (in due course). More such claims are discussed in my 2013 book *Strange Linguistics*. I turn here to two other proposals in this area, not dealt with in my book.

Firstly: Thomas O. Mills (*note 1*) has argued that the traditional creation story of the Hopi people in Arizona not only provides a sound explanation of why Hopi ancestors chose to settle there but also furnishes an aid to interpreting the murals and most relevantly the hieroglyphic symbols of Ancient Egypt. In a second book (*note 2*) he claims to have used his knowledge of the Hopi Ceremonial Cycles to find ‘ancient east’ at a number of unexplained ancient sites around the world, in particular linking Hopi ideas with the zodiacal bas-relief found at Dendera in Egypt (important but not now generally regarded as mysterious [*note 3*]) and with other Egyptian sites, and also with Stonehenge and other important sites. His interpretations are transparently speculative (*note 4*).

As has become common in such works, Mills interprets tribal myths and legends in literal historical terms, treating them as veridical; and he also embraces Charles Hapgood’s (debunked) notions about a polar shift in historic times (*note 5*), arguing that another such shift may be imminent and that major technological developments will be required in order to prevent or survive this event. He further suggests that the Moon was placed in its ‘perfect’ orbit in order to protect humanity.

A second, arguably less dramatic but still highly suspect group of claims, summarised by the indefatigable Jason Colavito (*note 6*), involves the maverick Dutch scholar Fred Woudhuizen, who claims to have deciphered various hitherto mysterious texts, revealing surprising confirmation of (mainly Greek) mythological narratives (*note*

7). He reads the Phaistos Disk (which I have repeatedly discussed in this forum and in *Strange Linguistics*) as a letter in Luwian (which as I have remarked in this forum may be the same language as the uninstantiated Trojan, or a close relative), and holds that the still mysterious Etruscan language is related to Luwian and reflects Luwian colonisation extending as far as Italy. Colavito is not alone in finding Woudhuizen's arguments unconvincing.

Most relevantly in this present context, Woudhuizen also makes claims about 'Cretan hieroglyphics'. These hieroglyphs represent a pre-linear phase of writing in pre-classical Crete; the scholarly consensus is that they remain undeciphered. However, Woudhuizen believes that he himself can read the script. The characters, he holds, are a mix of (surprise!?) Egyptian hieroglyphs, locally-developed hieroglyphs and symbols shared with the slightly later Linear A (apparently syllabic) script (itself undeciphered); and the language represented is (surprise, surprise!) Luwian!

Like many such proposals, Woudhuizen's reading of the characters involves huge amounts of arbitrariness and assumes unreasonable amounts of variability; his proposal is effectively untestable and cannot be taken seriously.

In amongst all this conjecture, Woudhuizen identifies the word *Athunu* in one text which he believes refers to the central Aegean, and proclaims (giving no specific evidence) that this word refers to Plato's Atlantis. This relates to the oft-encountered theory that the destruction of Atlantis as described was in fact the volcanic destruction of the central Aegean island of Thera/Santorini in C16 BCE and the ensuing tsunami. Of course, many other theories have been proposed, locating Atlantis all around the world. But in any case it appears most likely that the entire Atlantis story was very largely invented by Plato.

Luwian is something of a favoured language on the fringe and amongst the mavericks; Woudhuizen is in the

company here of such as Eberhard Zangger (who, as I have mentioned in this forum, also holds that Troy was Atlantis) and James Mellaart.

No doubt I will have occasion to discuss more such claims in the future!

### **'A previously unknown writing and communication tradition in West Africa'**

The largely non-mainstream 'Afrocentrist' tradition includes various attempts to argue that pre-colonial Black Africa (outside Ethiopia) was more literate than is normally held. This tendency is seen even in some relatively sober works such as Safi Mafundikwa's 2004 book *Afrikan Alphabets* (which I have discussed in this forum; note the highly exaggerated criticisms levelled by 'Celeste' at my Amazon review). Some of the systems discussed by Mafundikwa are not true scripts but are instead semiotic systems not representing specific languages or their words, or even simply art or at best matters of graphic design; and there is also a degree of conceptual confusion.

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### ***Many other theories have been proposed, locating Atlantis all around the world. But ... it appears most likely that the entire Atlantis story was very largely invented by Plato.***

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David Maranz (*note 8*) reports the discovery of a previously unknown writing and communication tradition in West Africa, specifically in Mali and Senegal. Maranz holds a PhD in International Development and has worked in Cameroon and elsewhere with SIL International (formerly the Summer Institute of Linguistics). SIL is an American Christian organisation which studies less-documented languages (very ably) and seeks to promote the use of these languages, in writing systems of their devising, across a wide range of domains, and specifically to make the Bible available in all languages. Some of the linguists who work for SIL are adherents of

creationist interpretations of human history and indeed of 'creationist linguistics'. One such linguist is Kevin May, who upholds the Tower of Babel story (see my forthcoming comments in 'Linguists (And Others) Who Should Know Better' in this forum). The religious stance of SIL is not necessarily relevant here but it is worth noting.

Maranz's own focus is primarily non-linguistic; but he has taken it upon himself to advance these linguistic claims, apparently initially developed by the Malian writer and ethnologist Amadou Hampâté Bâ, who died in 1991.

AHB discussed a system of sixteen marks used to mark cattle (applied with red-hot irons) and having religious meanings within a conceptual system known as Raampa; the marks are also found written on materials such as leaves, rocks, wooden slates, etc. The system has fallen increasingly out of use because of Islamicisation, and two of the sixteen marks were reported 'missing'. The fourteen marks known to AHB possess names in the Saafi language, and also (according to AHB) glosses (word-forms) in Saafi, indicating that the system is in fact logographic (one word per character) and thus qualifies as a linguistic writing system.

Maranz and his colleagues reportedly found instances of the missing two marks and of many others, yielding a total of over 400 mark-types. Some marks are said to be known more widely than others, but the system as a whole is reported as understood by speakers of various member-languages of two distinct 'language families' of West Africa. Presumably the word-forms associated with the various marks as glosses, and maybe also the mark-names (but see below), would vary according to the language used.

Maranz calls the marks 'pictographs', but this term seems to indicate a higher degree of non-arbitrariness than actually obtains (several of the symbols appear abstract). He also suggests that they could alternatively be regarded as ideograms, but this would imply that they represent

concepts rather than words – which might make sense if they could indeed represent the notions in question cross-linguistically. (But it is possible that Maranz is using *ideogram* here instead of *logogram*, a common amateur error.)

Maranz also reports that some informants proposed **phonetic** readings of the marks; he believes that these informants were confused, but it would be of use to know the exact phonetic forms proposed (and in particular which **language** was involved, in each such case). At another point in the document Maranz refers to oral use of the system, with the spoken forms of the Saafi mark-names (not the glosses) corresponding with the marks. Elsewhere the marks are presented in sequences corresponding with sentences, which implies word-order and hence (potentially language-specific) syntax. This entire discussion appears confused; it is not clear how the case should be interpreted.

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***One of their favourite scripts is Ogam (aka Ogham), a script of much-debated ultimate origin used mainly to write Irish Gaelic in M1 CE.***

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Working in the usual impressionistic way, Maranz compares the marks with characters from other systems, identifying Linear A (Crete) as having the closest fit. A major problem here is that (as Maranz acknowledges) Linear A has no agreed decipherment (see above); as far as the putative **origins** of the Saafi system are concerned, we are comparing two unknowns! And Maranz himself gives an altogether wrong date for Linear A, 700-500 BCE (it was in fact used almost a millennium earlier); and he mistakenly equates the script with the Late Phoenician abjad (by definition, not a syllabary), for which this date is more reasonable. This ‘error’ is apparently associated with an attempt to relate the Saafi system to ancient reports of Phoenician exploratory expeditions along the West African coast.

Overall, it is a pity that Maranz has not recruited professional linguistic help with this potentially very interesting case.

**More ‘mysterious’ writing:  
ancient Ogam (supposedly) found  
in America**

Gary Vey is a member of the ‘Viewzone’ group which has long promoted the idea that ancient inscriptions (definite or putative) and various genres of apparently **non-linguistic** symbols found around the world together exemplify a ‘world alphabet’ which was used between 8,000 and 4,000 years BP – much earlier than the earliest known alphabets, and for the most part earlier than **any** known writing system. (Viewzone once complained to my Head of Department at Monash University in Melbourne that I continued to reply critically to their emails instead of accepting that they were right or at least ‘agreeing to differ’, as if such issues could never be resolved rationally, and shutting up!) One of their favourite scripts is Ogam (aka Ogham), a script of much-debated ultimate origin used mainly to write Irish Gaelic in M1 CE but ‘found’ by Barry Fell and other non-mainstream ‘epigraphists’ in ‘inscriptions’ in North America and around the world. Ogam characters involve straight vertical and horizontal lines, and it is not difficult, if one is so inclined, to ‘see’ the script – sometimes in otherwise unknown variant forms – in short sequences of non-Ogam writing or indeed in non-linguistic material.

Online, Vey (*note 9*) rehearses parts of the Ogam origin debate in a tendentious and less-than-expert manner, and endorses the highly non-mainstream ideas of Edo Nyland (*note 10*), according to whom most longer words of most known languages are derived from sequences of ancient disyllabic morphemes now best displayed in Basque; he goes on to interpret allegedly mysterious Ogam inscriptions in these terms. In fact, almost all of these inscriptions which are clearly genuine are comfortably read as Gaelic – and none of these were

found in North America. Then (*note 11*), invoking in his support the late Bill McGlone (actually one of the most astute and rational among the epigraphists), Vey ascribes (Nyland-style) a Basque origin to the actual word *ogam*, glosses one particular non-Ogam inscription in Colorado (if indeed it is an inscription; the symbols may be artistic rather than linguistic) as being in ‘Celtic’ (there is, of course, no one such language; and Basque itself is **not** Celtic) and as referring to the Sun, and reads an accompanying line of quasi-Ogam in similar terms (not as Gaelic). Etc., etc. In this latter text Vey wrongly describes Ogam as a **language** (a common conceptual error).

Vey displays more serious conceptual confusion when he supports his non-Gaelic readings of Ogam texts or ‘texts’ by stating that the syntax of Gaelic in no way lends itself to being written in Ogam. This is badly confused. A given script may represent the **phonology** (sound-system) of a given language well or badly, or may deal with its **morphology** (the structure of complex words) well or badly. For example, the Roman Alphabet represents the phonology of Turkish, with its rich and highly-structured vowel system, much better than did the formerly-used Arabic script, taken from an unrelated language with relatively few vowel phonemes. And the logographic Chinese script works very well for the Chinese language with its ‘isolating’ morphology (each word normally constitutes a single morpheme) – and its very frequent homophony (two or more unconnected words pronounced the same; alphabetic scripts, especially if systematically phonemic, struggle to deal with pervasive homophony) – whereas such scripts would not cope easily with the often irregular ‘synthetic’ morphologies of languages such as Latin. But scripts **cannot** be seen as better or worse in respect of **syntax** (clause-level grammar). In scripts of all types, each entire word can be spelled out, using one or more characters, and these characters or character-sequences can be ordered in whatever way is required

for the syntax of a given language (verbs at the beginnings of sentences in Welsh but at the ends in Japanese, etc., etc.). Ogam represents Gaelic phonology and morphology quite adequately, and naturally deals with Gaelic syntax as well as any otherwise suitable script would. (Is the term *syntax* perhaps being misused here?)

As a matter of fact, languages **can** sometimes cope well with less than optimal scripts. Better-educated Turkish-speakers did cope with their Arabic-based script (used for religious reasons) for centuries. Archaic Greek was written in ‘linear’ syllabaries such as Linear B, originally used to write unrelated languages; these scripts had no resources for representing some important aspects of Greek phonology and thereby (much to the confusion of some fringe writers!) featured considerable amounts of homography (two or more words pronounced differently but spelled the same). The native users of these scripts clearly managed, presumably relying on the syntax and on context. The Japanese writing system, derived in phases over centuries from the Chinese system developed for an altogether dissimilar language, appears fiendishly complex/difficult and often arbitrary to foreign learners and has generated a huge linguistic literature; but it is readily acquired by young native-speakers, and (despite certain specific issues, such as the pronouncing of unfamiliar written placenames) literacy levels in Japan are very high.

As far as reading as opposed to writing is concerned, the continued existence of such systems can be explained in part by the high level of redundancy in natural language, which is estimated at around 50%; this is well illustrated by language games such as the well-known game in which English texts spelled without the vowel-letters are normally intelligible.

Nevertheless, some writing systems do suit some phonologies or morphologies better than others, and where circumstances encourage change this can occur, as in the case of Turkish.

I will again have more to say later about North American epigraphics and such.

### **An ally of Allyn? Or maybe not!**

Since 2017 I have been discussing in this forum the highly implausible claims of Legesse Allyn regarding (a) Egyptian hieroglyphs, which are supposedly to be read as representing the Ethiopian languages Amharic and Tigrinya, and (b) a wide range of words in various modern languages which are allegedly derived from these Ethiopian languages.

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### ***The continued existence of such systems can be explained in part by the high level of redundancy in natural language, which is estimated at around 50%.***

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Recently I came upon the online work (some of it dating from 2020) of a writer who now calls himself Damien Marie AtHope (*note 12*). AtHope has written a self-help poetry book, is an ‘axiological atheist’ (the word *axiological* here refers to the theory of values, notably in the context of ethics/metaethics), espouses strongly anti-religious views in this context, endorses ‘deep-feminist’ and pro-LGBT agendas, and has a keen interest in controversies regarding early humanity.

AtHope presents an apparently (cautiously) supportive dialogue between Allyn and himself about proposed interviews – but intersplices this with extracts from my own critiques of Allyn in this present forum (suitably acknowledged). His own comments are rather sparse and it is not obvious whether or not he would accept my criticisms of Allyn’s material. In the course of his exchanges with AtHope as represented here, Allyn himself rehearses many of his own ideas and his criticisms of the mainstream.

Where he does speak with his own voice, AtHope appears (to my altogether unprofessional eye)

knowledgeable about evolutionary human genetics (haplogroups, etc.); I would much welcome expert comment on this aspect of his material. On the other hand, he displays some naivety and over-confidence in handling specifically linguistic matters.

Most notably, AtHope appears to confuse the early history of written language with that of language itself, including spoken (or signed) language, which must have existed during a long pre-literate phase. He urges that the origin of language is to be found in symbolic representations from around 100,000 BP and subsequent ‘proto-writing’ starting from as early as 44,000 BP (all of which mainstream scholars would regard as non-linguistic – ‘rock art’, etc.). Compare the ideas of the Viewzone group mentioned above, more modest but still regarded as highly suspect on the basis of the evidence.

It hardly needs to be said that nothing can be known about the earliest forms of language itself from purported texts which are very probably non-linguistic in character. (If some such texts ever come to be regarded as linguistic **and** are deciphered, at least in part, things will of course be different.) AtHope is clearly intelligent and widely-read, but if he wishes to contribute to serious discussion of language matters *per se* he must improve his grasp of the discipline.

### **The Rohonc Codex**

The Rohonc Codex, sometimes compared with the much-better-known Voynich Manuscript, represents yet another controversy linked with Hungary and its somewhat mysterious national language. The RC was apparently discovered in Hungary in early C19; it is of unknown date.

Like the VM, the RC is a text (448 pages) in an unknown writing system, with 87 accompanying varied illustrations, some of them religious in character. The system appears to be syllabic or even logographic; the number of character-types is much too high for an alphabet. The ductus appears to be right-to-left, which is in fact also typical of the Old Hungarian alphabetic



script (readers may recall that the Yarmouth Rune Stone in Nova Scotia has been ‘read’ right-to-left as Hungarian!).

Predictably it has been suggested that the text is a hoax (as has also been claimed for the VM!). Among those who take it seriously, there have been various attempts at translation. Despite the apparently non-alphabetic character of the script, some of the characters have been likened to Old Hungarian script, and Hungarian readings have naturally been proposed. Others have identified it as representing an unidentified form of early Romance (echoes of Gerard Cheshire on the VM!); still others as Hindi; etc., etc. Most of the work on the RC is transparently non-mainstream in character.

There is in fact an extensive literature on the RC, but it is mostly in

Hungarian. Recently the non-mainstream-history website Ancient Origins featured the RC, and their text (*note 13*) includes various observations on the document. The matter might eventually attract the interest of professional linguists well versed in the relevant languages, which would be very welcome.

#### Notes

1. Mills, Thomas O. (2009) *The Book Of Truth A New Perspective on the Hopi Creation Story*. Morrisville, NC: lulu.com.
2. Mills, Thomas O. (2014) *Stonehenge - If this was East*. Scotts Valley, NC: lulu.com.
3. Readers might start at <https://tinyurl.com/y6osxsm4>.
4. On both books, see <https://tinyurl.com/yyc4llxl>.

5. Hapgood, Charles (1958) *Earth's Shifting Crust: A Key to some Basic Problems of Earth Science*. Pantheon (re-published, 2015), and other works.
6. <https://tinyurl.com/y6t9bs8l>.
7. Best, Jan & Woudhuizen, Fred (1988) eds, *Ancient Scripts from Crete and Cyprus*. Leiden, New York, Copenhagen and Cologne: E.J. Brill; Best, Jan and Woudhuizen, Fred (1989) *Lost Languages from the Mediterranean*. Leiden: E.J. Brill.
8. <https://tinyurl.com/y64xoa7t>; <https://tinyurl.com/yy322nb6>.
9. <http://viewzone2.com/ogam222.html>.
10. Nyland, Edo (2001) *Linguistic Archaeology: An Introduction*. Victoria, BC: Trafford Publishing.
11. <http://viewzone2.com/ogam.html>.
12. <https://tinyurl.com/y8xca3dq>; <https://tinyurl.com/y4gsq9nu>; <https://tinyurl.com/yyczl3f7>.
13. <https://tinyurl.com/y6fxmvbr>.

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## REVIEWS AND COMMENTARIES



**From A to Zinc: Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Vitamins** by Master J, July 2020. <https://originalmcw.sendibbble.com/A-to-Zinc>.

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### Reviewed by Richard Rawlins

After emigrating from Hungary to the US, Ehrich Weisz changed his name to Houdini. ‘Fay Presto’ is not her natal name. Marion Morrison renamed himself John Wayne, known as ‘Duke’ after his dog. Nominative reassignment is common in show business, but scientists deal with reality as best they may, and the identity and credentials of those who publish their findings or opinions is critical for critique of their work. ‘Master J’ is strangely coy about his identity, and this distracts from the value of his contributions to sceptical analysis of false or exaggerated claims.

‘Strange’ because he is clearly visible in his YouTube videos which amusingly and effectively debunk many false healthcare claims. No doubt his friends and family know who he is, so

why the subterfuge? Perhaps because he is riding two horses—as a debunker and as a magician. Me too!

J, who admits to being a mentalist, and his associate ‘Karen’ (said to be a ‘qualified doctor’, though of what is not stated, and the claim may itself simply be a throwaway gag), offer a series of videos on vitamins and supplements which will amuse those who like the bantering style common amongst many YouTube contributions. There is a lot of valuable science here, but the style of presentation might irritate those who want to grip the issue more seriously. As is the case for so many YouTube productions, and magicians, J might have benefitted from the services of a director. Nevertheless, that which is

discussed will interest those who are interested (*see note 1*).

J calls out the son of the founder of Vitabiotics—after 50 years of selling vitamins there is still no substantial evidence to back up their claims. Their CEO, Tej Lalvani, is now a ‘Dragon’ on TV’s *Dragon’s Den*. When interviewing a candidate seeking investment who conceded in respect to his supplements: ‘There isn’t any scientific evidence behind it’, all Mr Lalvani could do was comment: ‘Oo, I don’t know about that...’, and went on to admit ‘there is no clinical evidence...’—which is not what the candidate had said—he had said ‘scientific’. Master J sagaciously points out the subtle change of the word ‘scientific’ to ‘clinical’. But Mr Lalvani

is selling supplements, so he would be imaginative with language, wouldn't he?

J is also offering an e-book (normal price £19.99), free at present, so hurry! *From A to Zinc. Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Vitamins.* Master J, July 2020 (note 2).

Herein are chapters on all the principal vitamins (and one mineral), peddled by the scamists, each providing an overview, comments on toxicity - and jokes.

In offering a review, I have tried to come up with my own description (*honest, Mr Editor*), but to guide readers, I can do no better than quote from J's own Foreword:

*I fear this book may be a 'perfect storm' of conflicting style and content, which is uniquely designed to suit next to no one.*

*On the one hand, for those who are only after all the facts and information they can eat, in a kind of "learn all you can buffet" [and this book has all of that] there is I'm afraid a lot of*

*silliness thrown in too. And those just here for the fun, dare I say comedy, will be left cold with all the knowledge that is herein contained.*

*But within the Venn Diagram of those two groups, there is a small intersection. And living in that intersection there maybe be one or two of you lovely little readers. And for you, this book is perfect. If you are one of those beautiful freaks that are here for both the stupid and the serious... then you are "one of us"... and should subscribe to our YouTube Channel.*

Horses for courses. The silliness will annoy some, stimulate others. I enjoyed the book more on a second reading when the style jarred less—and by the third, I was laughing. On a fourth reading, I jotted down some jokes that I will plagiarise!

J might have done better to have ridden one horse—silly or scientific—but readers should take a deep breath and go with his flow. And Karen's. Who is, of course, a Karen.

Clearly based on credible research of the literature and insightful analysis of the various claims, J seems to be a client of the snake oil salesmen himself. Perhaps it takes one to know one. His review of each vitamin (and zinc) is a very helpful addition to the practical sceptic's database. And yes, many jokes are funny. Perhaps an acquired taste. As are supplements. Particularly garlic.

An apple a day keeps the doctor away—but eat garlic—and everyone will stay away. As they should be so doing right now in any case—and amusing themselves with J's contribution to the sum total of human understanding. Enjoy.

#### Notes

<https://youtu.be/dbqOl0suShk>

<https://originalmcw.sendible.com/A-to-Zinc>

*Richard Rawlins is and orthopaedic surgeon, author of Real Secrets of Alternative Medicine, and member of The Magic Circle.*

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**Tickbox: How it is taking Control of our Money, our Health, our Lives, and How to Fight Back** by David Boyle. New York: Little, Brown and Company, January 2020.

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## Reviewed by Peter Bryant

The word 'Tickbox' generally has negative connotations. In his book, David Boyle argues that these negatives are not just surface-level issues of individuals being incompetent or negligent with their responsibilities. Rather, tickbox is an approach to modern life which causes powerful ideological problems which dehumanise society.

Today, tickboxes are everywhere, from tax reports, surveys, insurance documents and workplace assessments. We interact with 'artificially intelligent' systems on a daily basis that are unable to comprehend any aspect of human experience. The proponents of tickbox argue that the methodology is a simple

idea designed to condense reality (via data) into a quantifiable (and, therefore, analytical) state. The problem starts with who is designing and completing the tickbox(s) and what they are ultimately intended to assess – the experiences of human beings.

Boyle argues that a tickbox approach seeks to quantify the world into discreet but inhumane units. This is reasonable for some circumstances (such as an electronic meter reading), but completely inappropriate for others ('Should the UK remain a member of the EU or leave the EU?'). Complex human issues do not boil down to a simple binary or numerically based response to be analysed by an

algorithm. For example, immigration systems do not allow the option for individuals born overseas but who have never had a passport to apply for one. The system does not care that the individual behind the data has legally lived, worked, and contributed to their country for fifty years. According to tickbox, this individual is an illegal immigrant because the system cannot accept their data. Case closed. Ask anyone with a shred of human compassion and they will rightly diagnose the problem as a system error.

A tickbox mentality actively removes subjectivity from everything to make life as objective as possible. In the majority of circumstances, argues

Boyle, going through this analogue-to-digital conversion leaves a lot to be desired. Tickboxes have invaded almost every industry from mental health (the DSM-V[*note 1*], which provides 365 discreet psychological issues, with a tickbox for each symptom) and telephone help lines from NHS 111 (NHS pathways) to communicating with your bank, ranking university league tables, and even buying groceries through a self-service checkout. The modern world has a fetish for the tickbox which is assumed to be more efficient than alternatives. Boyle challenges these assumptions throughout his book by arguing for smaller organisations (such as schools or government departments) with a focus on being more humanistic.

For Boyle, the ruthless efficiency of tickbox comes at an extremely high price. Just as *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* would intrinsically be a lot more difficult without the four suggested possible answers, a tickbox approach attempts to assist the quantifier in distilling their subjective experience into pre-selected categories of best-fit. None of these categories are usually as accurate as a free or open response. Categorisation usually drastically oversimplifies the process of data collection leading to meaningless data (at best) and drastically wrong data at worst. If the system does not cater to your exact individual circumstances, then you are merely an alien who is incapable of being understood. This is not a case of bad research design (although attempts have been made that would at least lessen some issues), but a fault with the whole tickbox system. The system gives the impression of concrete and reliable data to highly subjective experiences.

The tickbox system is widely adopted by businesses and organisations attempting to manage and

improve their products and services via our feedback. Today, it seems that we cannot move for surveys asking us about our experiences. *Did you enjoy your visit to our Accident & Emergency department today? (Yes, No) How likely would you be to recommend us to your friends? (1-10)*. The latter is a real question asked by Plymouth NHS Trust to patients since July 2013. The results have consistently been over 90% which is impressive if you forget the pointlessness of the question to affect anything. What is the difference between an 8 or a 7? Do deceased patients fill out the survey too (presumably putting a 1)?

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***Rather than the adage of ‘what gets measured, gets managed’, Goodheart’s law ensures that whatever gets measured, gets manipulated.***

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Boyle has lots of example of the failure of a tickbox approach such as when applying for travel to the USA through the visa waiver programme. During the process would-be travellers are asked *Do you seek to engage in terrorist activities, espionage, sabotage, or genocide?*. The question, as I am sure you will agree, is redundant since anyone who is idiotic enough to say ‘yes’ to this should expect to be denied entry (and probably arrested). The value in this question is not in the answer, but the liability it reduces on governmental system behind the visa waiver programme. If a terrorist atrocity occurs after the form has been completed, the government can honestly put their hands up and claim ‘they told us they were not terrorists’.

Similar to the Heisenberg uncertainty principle in the domain of physics, tickbox approaches are also

riddled with observer effects making their output unreliable at best and completely wrong at worst. Rather than the adage of ‘what gets measured, gets managed’, Goodheart’s law ensures that whatever gets measured, gets manipulated. Specifically, if an outcome measure (more sales, lower wait times, higher exam scores) becomes a target, it fails to be an accurate measure because humans exploit the system to massage the figures for their own gain (usually unconsciously). On paper, they are providing an exemplary service when there are usually serious issues being ignored or exacerbated.

At the end of the book, Boyle provides a twelve-step approach to counter the tickbox mentality which he refers to as ‘Tockbox’. Some of his recommendations are to avoid providing feedback on a scale or avoid the institutions that appear at the top of league tables. Ultimately, he argues that human relationships and interaction are the antidote to tickbox. It is somewhat ironic that *Tickbox* was published in January 2020—before human interaction was itself tickboxed due to COVID-19. Time will tell whether the extreme change in human interaction will make the issues surrounding tickbox systems clearer.

#### **Notes**

1. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association, Version 5.

*Peter Bryant is a former musician (percussion) and a UKCP accredited hypno-psychotherapist and currently directs a private equity fund specialising in cryptocurrency investments (InCrypto Wealth LLP). He is the author of Crypto Profit (reviewed in the last issue) and lives in Winchester, UK..*



**Giving The Devil His Due: Reflections of a Scientific Humanist** by Michael Shermer (Chapman University, US Skeptics). Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp x + 358.

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## Reviewed by Mark Newbrook

This book is a compilation of the esteemed skeptical polymath Michael Shermer's thoughts and observations over recent years (in a range of articles and essays, reproduced here in combination with new material) on a number of skeptical, scientific and philosophical topics.

The title of the book – referring to the need to treat one's opponents' positions fairly – applies most directly to the first of its five parts ('The Advocatus Diaboli: Reflections on Free Thought and Free Speech'; pp 1-78). Shermer's title (which is echoed to the exclusion of his other main themes in the short preface) is thus arguably somewhat misleading. The remaining four parts of the book deal respectively with 'Homo Religiosus: Reflections on God and Religion', 'Deferred Dreams: Reflections on Politics and Society', 'Scientia Humanitatis: Reflections on Scientific Humanism', and 'Transcendent Thinkers: Reflections on Controversial Intellectuals'. Shermer's byline thus gives a better indication of the (considerably wider) scope of the work as a whole. But, as Shermer sets out on pp 10-12, all these later parts do relate systematically to Part I, and they refer back to it as required; the integrity of the work *per se* is not diminished.

The book is in my view outstanding and most important. It is too large and dense with ideas to be comprehensively reviewed in this forum, but I will try to deal with the most salient points. I add here my own observations where they appear centrally relevant.

In Part I, Shermer commences with the familiar 'liberal' notion that speech can be curtailed or censored only where it does actual harm (as where one shouts 'Fire!' in a crowded venue when there is no fire, encourages lawless violence in a genuinely liberal polity, libels people, etc.); he notes that most

instances where speech **has** been curtailed or censored do not meet this condition. There are, of course, 'borderline cases'; but libertarians such as Shermer (and most skeptics) hold that even bare tolerance for 'different' voices has very often been denied too readily, for the convenience of political or religious authorities concerned to protect their power and their image as guardians of the truth.

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***Scholarly near-total consensus, where it exists, should be respected, but not so far as to silence dissenters (whether such dissenters are themselves scholarly or not).***

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Here and elsewhere in the book, Shermer invokes various earlier thinkers who urged in this context that even 'the Devil' must be given his due, notably John Milton, Baruch Spinoza, Thomas Paine, John Stuart Mill, Thomas More as portrayed by Robert Bolt, and Christopher Hitchens. With all of these, he argues that even almost certainly false claims, where not palpably harmful, warrant a hearing (though not necessarily respectful attention or for instance 'equal time' in the classroom). The ethical and theoretical upshots of **denying** them a hearing are too severe to be contemplated. Scholarly near-total consensus, where it exists, should be respected, but not so far as to silence dissenters (whether such dissenters are themselves scholarly or not). Indeed, dissenters could sometimes conceivably be right, at least in part; and, if denied exposure for their views (right or wrong), they might seek to deny it to others if the tables should (even if illegitimately) be turned. Even the

combatting of outright evil is not well served, in the long run, by the suppression of disagreement *per se*.

This maxim applies especially to active skeptics, who overtly (and rightly) focus upon the need for clear academic consensus to be respected, and who deliberately engage with notions and theories which are too 'far-out' to be discussed in mainstream academia.

On pp 7-8 Shermer sets out ten specific arguments to this effect; this section is especially deserving of attention. As Part I proceeds, he instantiates tellingly with the legal proscription of Holocaust Denial in some countries, and with the now-common banning from university campuses of visiting speakers such as Milo Yiannopoulos who are deemed 'racist', 'sexist', 'fascist', etc.. He also exemplifies with the persecution as 'X-phobic' (under the guise of 'empowering' the hitherto-oppressed) of academics such as Jordan Peterson (discussed at greater length in Part V) who – admittedly often 'provocatively' – uphold now-unpopular views of such matters. And he refers to laws interpreting 'hate speech' in terms of perception (no matter how unreasonable) on the part of 'victims' and draconically proscribing it (he cites a seriously over-the-top application of this notion in New South Wales).

One further key area where freedom of enquiry has historically been limited and (especially in the southern United States and in Islamic countries) is still limited to a degree involves the protection not of 'trendy' world-views as in the cases just mentioned but instead of conservative religious stances. This applies especially in the context of religious condemnation of evolutionary theory, which some would not permit to be taught in schools, or at

any rate would permit only alongside 'creationist' positions of one type or another (including 'Intelligent Design'), presented in that context (with an eye on the 'trendy' notion that 'diversity' per se is overwhelmingly important; see further below) as the 'other side' of a genuine scientific controversy. This occurs despite the fact that as an overall paradigm evolution in reality has (at present) **no** serious scientifically-grounded competition as an account of the development of life on Earth.

On pp 44-63, Shermer deals specifically with this issue, which is of particular concern to skeptics and indeed to all scientists because it so directly involves science education; he rehearses the egregious weaknesses of the creationist position. He also points out that opponents of evolution (despite also presenting their stances as science-based) often seek popular support by tendentiously invoking arguments involving religion and morality, asserting for instance that if humans have arisen by way of evolution (without any guidance from God) there is no real basis for morality. Immorality and amorality, and indeed the breakdown of civilisation, are thus encouraged by the acceptance of evolutionary theory, and if evolution is real human life is, in fact, to be deemed meaningless. But this simply does not hold up. Meta-ethics is in fact a complex set of issues, and in response Shermer engages with his critics such as George Ellis and goes back as far as David Hume (pp 103, 236-243, etc.) in examining the always controversial ontological status and aetiology of ethical notions, and the upshots of these considerations for both private and public morality. This, indeed, furnishes Part IV of the book (pp 221-265) with its core.

It should be noted in context that thinkers of more recent date than Hume, such as the philosophers Ayn Rand and Sam Harris (p 241, etc.), the psychologist & linguist Steven Pinker and indeed Shermer himself, have proposed non-theistic (often science-based) (quasi-) objectivist accounts of ethics. These accounts have assuredly

been assailed, but some of them remain at least arguable. Many philosophers would also urge that (as Bertrand Russell most succinctly argued) there can be **no** logically-valid link between religious interpretations of the universe on the one hand and meta-ethical theory on the other. Morality may really be problematic for atheists, for instance if there are in fact no genuine specifically moral principles (comparable with the abstract truths of mathematics) as is proposed by Pinker (quoted here on p 239) – but it is also philosophically problematic for believers (of which fact many believers appear unaware). And the idea (often expressed by naïve believers) that the godless neither can be sure of what is morally good or bad, nor (lacking any fear of a vengeful god) have any reason to do good, is obviously risible. Indeed, even Christian believers, with their 'sacred' text to rely on, can disagree among themselves on some key ethical issues, for instance on whether and in what circumstances abortion is permitted (see further below).

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***There are actually some 45 million Americans who declare if prompted (at least in anonymous surveys) that they have no religion!***

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Of course, even if we have free will (as many scientists would nowadays deny), we clearly have little choice about what we **believe**; we cannot normally simply choose to change our real beliefs out of psychological convenience or fear of an avenging deity. The moralistic fulminations of evangelical/fundamentalist Christians are thus inept, unless such people disingenuously hold that their omniscient god will be impressed by people merely **pretending** to accept his existence or his moral strictures.

In addition, 'meanings' can obviously be **developed** for individual lives by those living them – which can well be seen as preferable to their being imposed by a creator deity on

thoughtful beings who did not choose to exist.

Shermer is here echoing some points which he makes back in Part II (pp 81-126), which commences with the point that (despite the much-flaunted and constitutionally-central 'separation of church and state') the United States is, at a public level, much the most heavily and overtly religious (conservative Christian) nation in the developed world. (This is not to say that Shermer does not respect the more thoughtful Christian believers; he makes it explicit that he does, notably on pp 88-90 where he provides factual evidence of their intelligence and good will.) Previously in this forum I have discussed other works, some of them indeed written by believers, which make this same point, and I will not belabour the general issue here. But Shermer does highlight the fact that there is a decidedly theocratic tone to much American politicking, which at times resembles the Islam-dominated discourse of the leaders of countries such as Iran. In *The Handmaid's Tale* the Canadian Margaret Atwood envisages a further-future polity in which 'Gilead', the religious-extremist successor to the United States, is in fact explicitly likened to Iran. Highly restrictive attitudes to abortion in particular run deep in the American South (as in Gilead!). This is an issue where rational debate is clearly legitimate and necessary.

Another such matter involves the commonly-heard extreme negative American attitudes to atheism ('an atheist cannot be a good American'; 'I could never vote for an atheist', etc.). It has been said that in some conservative circles in the South being an outspoken atheist is even more socially awkward (to say the least) than being openly gay! But (not that even a tiny atheist minority could not claim equal rights, including the right to free speech on the subject) there are actually some 45 million Americans who declare if prompted (at least in anonymous surveys) that they have no religion!

Shermer offers some novel perspectives on religion in the United

States, notably in discussing (pp 93-102) the case of Scientology, a ‘new religion’ with tax-exempt profits from sales of the otherwise unavailable details of its doctrines (many of which resemble science-fiction scenarios), members in alarmingly high places, a hatred for mainstream psychiatry and an institutionalised fierce determination to forestall criticism. Some of those who campaign **against** Scientology (often former Scientologists) themselves appear hysterical and vindictive, perhaps in reaction; but they are not generally regarded as rabidly anti-religious, probably because the status of Scientology as a religion is itself generally perceived as dubious.

Shermer goes on (pp 103-109) to discuss the question of whether or not the universe (as opposed to individual creatures) has a purpose. Obviously, religious believers urge that it does, but as in the case of the (assigned) meaning of life there seems no reason to accept this position unless one already accepts a theistic world-view. At the end of Part II (pp 110-126) Shermer considers the question of why the universe exists at all; again, the issue is much more complex than many believers imagine.

Part III (pp 129-217) deals with identity politics, ‘intersectionality theory’ and tribal divisiveness, which Shermer sees as inverting Martin Luther King’s dream of an America which could celebrate different cultures (etc.) but not at the cost of common purpose and individual freedom. It does have to be noted that gross differences in access to power and resources can largely nullify the advantage of abstract freedoms as far as the disadvantaged are concerned; in the UK, the musician and activist Billy Bragg has been prominent of late in making this point. But of course this was not what King hoped for in 1963; indeed, he specifically wanted his children and other young & future Americans to be judged (in any respect) not by their skin-colour but by the content of their character. Shermer, in my view reasonably, decries the recent ‘twisting’ of this vision into a tribalist model of society based not only on divisions of ‘race’ (often confused with

ethnic culture or indeed with religion, even at an official level) but also on divisions of gender identity, sexual orientation, religion *per se*, disability and any other feature by which people can be classified.

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***Public scholarly criticism of the prevailing tribalist viewpoint has become so awkward in some circles that new publication outlets have had to be developed where this is encouraged.***

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Among others, various scholars have fallen foul of the drive towards tribal identity. For example, the classicist Mary Lefkowitz, known for her opposition to unhistorical Afrocentrist claims regarding Egypt, was accused in that context of ‘hindering diversity’. Some of Lefkowitz’s faculty superiors declared themselves uninterested in historical truth, apparently adhering to the exaggeratedly postmodernist (and relativist) notion (brilliantly exposed by Alan Sokal in his 1996 hoax and its aftermath) that truth in a given case is not only multi-faceted (as of course it may well be) but is in fact inherently group-specific and hence can appear to be (but should not be seen as being) self-confounding and therefore incoherent. And identifying tribalist claims as plain wrong or even as doubtful has become fraught. I myself was discouraged (unsuccessfully!) from pointing out in comment that a dogmatically-captioned art-work by Lubaina Himid endorsed the clearly false Afrocentric idea that the Carthaginians were black Africans.

As well as attacking careful scholars like Lefkowitz who **do** respect the truth, tribalists have sought to minimise the significance of viewpoints arrived at on an individual level, often suggesting that everyone is so enmeshed in tribal thought-patterns (as Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf urged on a linguistic front) that the entire notion that individuals can break free of such

structures is invalid; if we imagine that we are independent thinkers, we are simply blinkered and mistaken.

A further feature of the tribalist approach to culture involves accusations of ‘appropriation’ (or worse) directed at anyone who produces art, music etc. involving a cultural framework different from ‘their own’. Robert Boyers also highlights this in his 2019 book *The Tyranny of Virtue* (one of a series of recent books arguing along the same lines as Shermer’s). Examples abound. The white American artist Dana Schutz met with vicious opprobrium for her sensitive and honest attempt to portray a historic racist (anti-black) atrocity in her 2016 painting ‘Open Casket’; critics such as Parker Bright and Hannah Black tried to obstruct viewing of the work in a gallery and even called for its destruction (to its credit, the gallery supported Schutz). Aboriginal groups in Australia have been taken to task for adopting the art forms of other tribes or learning their languages, even out of solidarity or tribute; traditional taboos of this kind have been reinforced in the modern situation. And Maddy Prior, the leader of the long-running English folk-rock band Steeleye Span, announced openly at a concert I attended that the band would not now ‘dare’ to adopt songs with an obvious Scottish flavour and setting, as they did in the 1970s (their best known such song is their then-acclaimed version of ‘Cam Ye O’er Frae France?’; they did in fact perform this, slightly apologetically, on the occasion in question). The well-informed sharing of culture and the expression of solidarity are thus discouraged (*note 1*).

Later in Part III (pp 136-137), Shermer returns to the question of tribalism, drawing attention to cases where corporate bodies and even universities have not only censored the actual expression of unwelcome views but have also urged or indeed required their employees to undergo ‘sensitivity training’ on the assumption (sometimes grounded in a few tendentiously interpreted incidents) that the behaviour of non-minority people (especially

heterosexual white ‘cis-males’) will inevitably be negatively influenced by unconscious tribal biases, leading to frequent acts to be interpreted in terms of ‘micro-aggression’.

Public scholarly criticism of the prevailing tribalist viewpoint has become so awkward in some circles that new publication outlets have had to be developed where this is encouraged; Shermer refers in particular to the web-journal *Quillette*, which began in 2017-18.

Shermer continues this section of his book with a discussion of the case for ‘classical liberalism’, the idea that individual freedom, including especially ‘viewpoint diversity’, is of overwhelming importance (‘if it harms no-one, do as you will’, as pagans have it – and ‘be free to express your views’). Shermer, like many skeptics including the well-known stage magicians Penn & Teller, is himself politically a classical-liberal aka libertarian (‘fiscally conservative but socially liberal’); the nearest British equivalent is perhaps the C18-19 Whiggism of John Stuart Mill and the like, which is no longer represented in the mainstream of UK politics. Libertarianism has been identified as anarchism modified by justified pessimism about the altruism and self-organisational ability of most humans! Shermer refers briefly to anarchism, including the treatments of the matter in the science-fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin (notably in her award-winning 1974 novel *The Dispossessed*) and Kim Stanley Robinson (pp 152-153).

Some of the specific policies which libertarians advocate do bear close examination; one such is their limited enthusiasm for gun control (a much hotter issue in the United States than in Europe, because of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment to the US Constitution and the proliferation of firearms); even classical-liberals advocate **some** gun control, but they disagree among themselves as to the specifics. Shermer deals with the gun-control issue in detail, on pp 159-197; he is concerned to argue from the facts.

Another relevant issue, which Shermer does not discuss systematically, is that of government welfare systems, often perceived in conservative American circles as tending towards socialism and therefore unwelcome. Many classical-liberals, favouring minimal government and low taxes and believing that their policies would lead to near-full employment, call for a much-reduced welfare system.

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***Shermer opposes the  
sometimes-encountered  
skeptical tendency to make fun  
of intellectually weaker  
‘fringers’ rather than to tackle  
the more intellectually serious  
(and often much more  
dangerous) opposition.***

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In Part V of the book (pp 269-327), Shermer helpfully surveys five currently prominent thinkers: three (the late Paul Kurtz, the late Christopher Hitchens, and Richard Dawkins) who clearly count in this context as skeptics, one (Jordan Peterson) who as noted excites the interest of skeptics as a highly controversial thinker (and a test of one’s commitment to free speech!), and one (Graham Hancock) who is one of the most prominent straightforwardly non-mainstream thinkers (chiefly as an advocate of the reality of a very early ‘lost civilisation’ on Earth).

Kurtz was for long the ‘grey eminence’ of organised American skepticism. He had been the leading founder of CSICOP (later CSI), and he regarded skepticism (in ‘our’ sense of the term) as a crucial element of the ‘modernist’ view of the world. This viewpoint, which is rooted in science and (despite occasional lapses into scientism) in analytical philosophy, grew out of the C17-18 Western ‘Enlightenment’ to become a system of ideas and methods which is self-critical and subject to change as required but can be seen as universally valid in principle.

Hitchens was an outspoken and highly intelligent atheist, but (like some

other such thinkers) he was accused of covertly giving ground to theism late in life or even of having been converted, like the philosopher Anthony Flew. On the basis of his own acquaintance with Hitchens and his reading of the man’s works, Shermer ably rebuts these claims, noting that, for instance, Hitchens was honest about those peripheral features of Christianity which (like Shermer himself) he did enjoy (some religious music, cathedral architecture, etc.); and he pays tribute to Hitchens’ sagacity and his lively personality.

Dawkins has become known for debunking creationism and the entire notion of a benevolent creator deity. Along with others such as the late Carl Sagan, he has urged the perception of the universe as full of wonder (inviting responses which might be deemed ‘spiritual’ in a non-theistic sense) but also (*pace* John Keats, Walt Whitman and others) as amenable to rational investigation (freed from the considerations of ‘faith’) which can **heighten** one’s sense of awe. Although philosophy *per se* is perhaps not his strongest area, he has combatted the philosophical arguments of his many theistic detractors (such as Alister McGrath) more than ably. He is cited here in addition as critiquing ‘trendy’ but obscure and suspect notions such as ‘conscious evolution’.

Shermer’s discussion of the controversial Peterson is many-sided and repays careful reading; it involves references to other scholars (such as Laura Kipnis) who have advanced similar cases. Shermer does draw attention to Peterson’s sporadic overstating of his case.

Hancock is largely ignored by mainstream archaeologists and historians, partly because he refuses to include counter-evidence in his own presentations and sees himself as an advocate rather than an investigator; but he **has** been extensively critiqued by suitably-informed skeptics. As long as such critics do not call for him to be silenced (as opposed to being denied academic publication because his material is judged to be of poor quality),

their responses surely appear eminently defensible. And they do not call for silencing, or even give the impression of doing so; reactions to such writers have become more judicious since the days of Immanuel Velikovsky!

Shermer opposes the sometimes-encountered skeptical tendency to make fun of intellectually weaker ‘fringers’ rather than to tackle the more intellectually serious (and often much more dangerous) opposition; on p 91 he deftly quotes Carl Sagan on this front.

In various places, Shermer assumes the truth of notions which are in fact still in doubt, for example in accepting the currently favoured view (illegitimately invoked in the meta-ethical context by William Lane Craig as cited here on p 108) that the universe will come to an end eventually. And in such a book there are inevitably other specific statements which even the most sympathetic reader might question or indeed oppose. But such cases in no way detract from the enormous significance and value of this book.

## Note

1. As an example of a recent (2019) text proclaiming that the asserted importance of free speech/expression is grounded in white supremacy (including a reference to Schutz’s painting), see

<https://tinyurl.com/y3sru7xh>. More generally, there are many tracts displaying stridently extreme interpretations of these issues; see for instance <https://tinyurl.com/y48zmz55>.

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## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### OF INTEREST

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

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

Keep visiting the Sense About Science website for new developments.

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

##### **Good Thinking**

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

<http://goodthinkingsociety.org/>

##### **Scams generally**

Twelve unbelievable stories of scams and schemes: ‘Con artists have been scamming and scheming since ancient times. And yet every generation seems to bring a new bag of tricks, inspired by the latest app, platform, or pandemic there is to exploit. Take a careful step into our collection of great features about capers and frauds, and uncover some prudent advice on how to avoid becoming an unsuspecting sucker.’

<https://tinyurl.com/y2mb64ap>

##### **Algorithms**

‘How Amazon puts misinformation at the top of your reading list: It’s a truism that we live in a “digital age”. It would be more accurate to say that we live in an algorithmically curated era – that is, a period when many of our choices and

perceptions are shaped by machine-learning algorithms that nudge us in directions favoured by those who employ the programmers who write the necessary code.’

<https://tinyurl.com/y2mb64ap>

##### **Annual Ockham Award**

‘Since 2012, The Skeptic (*UK*) has had the pleasure of awarding the Ockham Awards – our annual awards celebrating the very best work from within the skeptical community. The awards were founded because we wanted to draw attention to those people who work hard to get a great message out. The Ockhams recognise the effort and time that have gone into the community’s favourite campaigns, activism, blogs, podcasts, and outstanding contributors to the skeptical cause. I am pleased to announce that nominations for the 2020 Ockham Awards are now open!’

<https://tinyurl.com/yyvfr5xp>

#### 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/>

##### **Medical Devices Safety Review**

The Independent Medicines and Medical Devices Safety Review, chaired by Baroness Julia Cumberlege, has published its report ‘First do no Harm’. ‘The three areas we were asked to explore, Primodos, sodium valproate and pelvic mesh, were new to us so we travelled the country, not only England but Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. We met and listened to over 700 people, mostly women, often accompanied by their partners, other family members and sometimes their children. We are indebted to all of them. Their dignity and courage in telling us intimate and harrowing details of their damaged lives has made a great and lasting impression on us.’

<https://tinyurl.com/yxgmc7uh>

##### **Dentistry**

‘How evidence-based is dentistry anyway? From evidence-based dentistry to evidence-based practice.’ *BMJ* article at:

<https://tinyurl.com/y4ga5yqz>

##### **Medical research**

‘While their ads are prevalent, drug companies and medical journals will remain uneasy bedfellows.’

‘The role of medical journals is again in the spotlight after The Lancet



and the New England Journal of Medicine retracted studies that raised alarms about the safety of experimental Covid-19 treatments.’

<https://tinyurl.com/y3rvfek2>

### **Stem cell therapy**

‘How do you separate scientifically sound stem cell therapies from scams?’

<https://tinyurl.com/y58ou6ng>

### **Wellness**

“Wellness”, like its signature vague branding, has a loose, unfixed meaning. It can describe the pursuit of greater stability. It can mean a \$4.2tn, high-growth industry of products and services from goat yoga to health boutiques to Gwyneth Paltrow’s Goop jade vaginal eggs. It can indicate a never-ending burden for women – the rebranding of “having it all” for 2010s consumer feminism. The gauzy, overused umbrella of wellness now encompasses a vast universe of practices, products and refashioned belief systems, with varying risks and scientific grounding, which have surged in popularity over the last decade on social media and internet forums. (Un)well, a six-part Netflix docuseries, delves into this murk of wellness – sometimes promising, sometimes scammy, occasionally dangerous – to examine this expansive, lucrative web of wellness, and the confusing sludge of information online.’

<https://tinyurl.com/y2u9esuv>

### **Cancer Quackery**

‘Sean Walsh was 20 when he found out his cancer was back. He’d been in remission for less than two years and was determined that this time round, he would not have conventional treatment. He turned down chemotherapy in the hope that he could cure his Hodgkin’s Lymphoma through an alternative approach, including a vegan diet, cannabis oil and coffee enemas. Throughout his treatment he used controversial thermography scans to monitor his progress, and was convinced he was getting better. Journalist Layla Wright followed Sean’s journey on social media as he attempted to heal himself, and for a

while, it seemed to be working. He raised thousands of pounds to fund his treatment, and beat the doctor’s prognosis. But in January 2019 Sean died, and his family believe alternative treatments cost him his life.’ BBC broadcast at:

<https://tinyurl.com/yyqph19d>

Meanwhile: The government may intervene to curb dangerous ‘cancer cure’ propaganda. ‘Ministers discuss expanding Cancer Act to police medically unproven procedures and bring in tighter regulations on social media’ (*Daily Telegraph*). At:

<https://tinyurl.com/y6qb8d97>

### **Homeopathy**

‘Coming up short: Journal retracts penis enlargement paper after realizing it was homeopathy. Over the objection of all of the authors, a journal has retracted an article on a homeopathic approach to penis enlargement and virility after deciding that the putative remedy wasn’t potent enough for the task at hand’ (*The subjects were rats, by the way—Ed.*). At:

<https://tinyurl.com/ycfv76l4>

And: ‘The Professional Standards Authority (PSA) is to review the accreditation of the Society of Homoeopaths after the society’s professional standards chief was accused of having promoted anti-vaccination messages online.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/yym9alz>

Also: ‘Russia’s Commission against Pseudoscience has called for the Health Ministry to ban homeopathy; however, the psychological effect of the medicine will continue to ensure its popularity, expert in pharmaceutical economics Roland Cash told Sputnik.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/y8lxf8hb>

Meanwhile: ‘A public health journal will be retracting a paper that argued for the adoption of homeopathy in the fight against the coronavirus pandemic, according to the editor in chief.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/yxtz88jq>

### **Vitamin supplements**

‘Are your vitamin pills killing you? A humorous look at fake claims and discredited research. ‘This is a video

about The UK’s No. 1 Vitamin Company who said its claims (for its Vitabiotics ‘Immunece’ tablets) had been proven in a ‘ground-breaking trial.’

<https://tinyurl.com/y8ewjwl2>

### **Vaccination**

‘Africa has been declared free from wild polio by the independent body, the Africa Regional Certification Commission. Polio usually affects children under five, sometimes leading to irreversible paralysis. Death can occur when breathing muscles are affected. Twenty-five years ago thousands of children in Africa were paralysed by the virus. The disease is now only found in Afghanistan and Pakistan. There is no cure but the polio vaccine protects children for life.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/y4n8sfek>

Also: Dominic Lawson: ‘To win the war on Covid-19 we must inoculate Britain against the crazy anti-vaxxers.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/ybn8lzeh>

And from Brian Deer, who exposed Andrew Wakefield: ‘Almost three years into my investigation of Andrew Wakefield, the now-disgraced former medical researcher who claimed that vaccines cause autism, Wendy Stephen stepped into my life. It was June 2006 and she introduced herself in a 600-word email as the mother of a vaccine-injured child. She told me that in 1991, her baby daughter had received the three-in-one MMR jab against measles, mumps and rubella and lost all hearing in one ear. This was a rare and recognised side-effect of two brands of MMR that were discontinued in Britain the year after Wendy’s daughter got her shot.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/yyvxj8rq>

### **Nasal spray**

A poster ad for Vicks First Defence nasal spray, seen in a London Underground train in October 2019, made unwarranted health claims according to the Advertising Standards Authority. Three complainants, who believed that the ad implied that the nasal spray could prevent or treat a cold,

had challenged whether it was misleading and could be substantiated. The ad must not appear again in its current form. The ASA told Procter & Gamble (Health & Beauty Care) Ltd that ‘any future claims in their advertising for Vicks First Defence Nasal spray should not state or imply that it could be used for the complete elimination of cold symptoms, unless they held sufficient evidence to support that claim’.

<https://tinyurl.com/y7ro63tg>

### Medical disinformation

‘Disinformation on medical matters has become an increasing public health concern. Public engagement by scientists, clinicians and patient advocates can contribute towards public understanding of medicine. However, depth of feeling on many issues (notably vaccination and cancer) can lead to adverse reactions for those communicating medical science, including vexatious interactions and targeted campaigns ... Those engaging in public outreach of medical science are vulnerable to negative repercussions, and we suggest guidelines for professional bodies and organisations to remedy some of these impacts on front-line members.’

<https://tinyurl.com/yykk736n>

*Meanwhile, on Covid-19 conspiracy theories:*

‘As several U.S. states try to enforce the wearing of face-coverings in an attempt to stop the spread of the coronavirus, there are some people who are refusing to do this. One of the newest conspiracies being touted as an excuse for this is that wearing masks can result in ‘hypercapnia’ or carbon dioxide toxicity. Except, with all reasonable face coverings ranging from surgical masks, to home-made face coverings and N95 filtered masks, this simply does not happen.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/yygk4ww7>

And: ‘Another one doing the rounds via social media on memes, tweets and Facebook posts is a claim that wearing a mask will “lower the immune system”.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/y3r2d6uv>

### Covid-19

‘The coronavirus pandemic has seen a rise in harmful and misleading conspiracy theories, mostly spreading online. To address this trend, the European Commission and UNESCO are publicising a set of ten educational infographics helping citizens identify, debunk and counter conspiracy theories.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/y57sdcjs>

‘Annie Lennox has called out Madonna for sharing a debunked coronavirus conspiracy theory on social media. On Tuesday, the Like A Prayer singer shared a video of false claims, previously supported by Donald Trump, that hydroxychloroquine is an effective treatment for Covid-19. In her post, which has since been hidden by Instagram for containing false information, Madonna called controversial US-based doctor Stella Immanuel – who appears in the video – her “hero”.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/y2ec6osq>

See also YouTube video ‘COVID: Where Science Goes to Die’. A balanced critique of scientists (with the help of politicians and the media) during the pandemic. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/y4u3mf9t>

### The Under Armour T-Shirt

‘An advert for a long-sleeve T-shirt has been banned for making “misleading” claims that it could improve the wearer’s athletic performance.’

<https://tinyurl.com/y4zj6o45>

## PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHIATRY

### Psychiatry

‘The Movement Against Psychiatry: The contentious debate of whether to fix—or completely overthrow—the way we treat mental illness ... Anti-psychiatry was originally a largely academic tendency in the 1960s and 1970s, but today lives on in various forms.’

<https://tinyurl.com/y59vwu23>

### Gender identity

Marcus Evans, one of the governors of The Tavistock and Portman NHS

Foundation Trust resigned in February 2019, after accusing its management of having an ‘overvalued belief’ in the expertise of its Gender Identity Development Service (GIDS) ‘which is used to dismiss challenge and examination.’ He speaks on this subject in a video released on 26.7.20 titled ‘Psychiatry sits on a knife-edge’.

<https://tinyurl.com/yyj92kaj>

### Superstition

‘Martin Perry has spent years coaching sportsmen and women to build confidence and handle the psychological demands of their game. Here, he delves into the popular, very personal and often secretive sporting superstitions - regularly noted, but rarely discussed. Along the way, Martin discovers superstitions can reveal as much about the mindset of the player, as about what it takes to emerge victorious when the competition is fierce and the stakes are high.’ BBC broadcast at:

<https://tinyurl.com/y42w3rhr>

### Sleep paralysis

Podcast: ‘Throughout human history, across different cultures, people have told tales about supernatural visitations during the night. We now know that these stories refer to a condition known as sleep paralysis, a hybrid sleep/wake state whereby our muscles are largely paralysed but our brain ‘wakes up’. Today we speak to psychology professor Christopher French about this common, and often frightening sleep disorder – how its symptoms manifest, the fascinating cross-cultural background and some strategies to help manage and cope with sleep paralysis.’

<https://tinyurl.com/yy5m9zk5>

### False memory

The September Newsletter of the British False Memory Society has now been published. Topics include the Carol Myers case, Bryn Estyn care home and Stephen Messham, Carl Beech, confirmation bias in counselling and psychotherapy, and the difficulty in making complaints against individual therapists.

<https://bfms.org.uk/>

## CONSPIRACY THEORIES

(See also *Covid-19 under MEDICINE*)

### General

‘Conspiracy theories attempt to explain events as the secretive plots of powerful people. While conspiracy theories are not typically supported by evidence, this doesn’t stop them from blossoming. Conspiracy theories damage society in a number of ways. To help minimise these harmful effects, The Conspiracy Theory Handbook, by Stephan Lewandowsky and John Cook, explains why conspiracy theories are so popular, how to identify the traits of conspiratorial thinking, and what are effective response strategies.’

<https://tinyurl.com/ydfxa9a4>

### 5G conspiracy theory

‘How Covid-19 triggered the spread of a 5G conspiracy theory, firing it into mainstream British life and inspiring a new generation of believers.’ BBC broadcast at:

<https://tinyurl.com/y8mp3y9>

### Alex Jones

Meanwhile: ‘Conspiracy theorist Alex Jones’s record of losing legal battles remained unblemished this week when the Connecticut Supreme Court denied three separate motions in a defamation lawsuit filed against him by Sandy Hook families. The case stems from Jones’ oft-repeated and false claims that the Sandy Hook mass shooting was a hoax constructed by the media using “crisis actors” as part of some sort of sidelong effort to promote an anti-Second Amendment narrative.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/y3u9pqcv>

## RELIGION AND CULTS

### Gay conversion therapy

‘The Miseducation of Cameron Post, a moving new film based on the story of a teenage girl sent to a “gay conversion” summer camp to “pray away the gay” took me right back to a small Colorado town in 2014. That’s when I underwent “therapy” with the aim of making me straight. I went undercover to report and expose this vile practice, and judging

from my experience the film is hauntingly accurate.’

<https://tinyurl.com/yacqmjrn>

### The Kingdom Church, London

‘The Charity Commission has opened a statutory inquiry into The Kingdom Church GB (charity number 1137370) in South London over concerns about the charity’s management. The regulator first opened a regulatory case into the charity after media reports that it was selling a ‘plague protection kit’ which it was claimed would cure and protect against the Covid-19 virus. This led to liaison with Southwark Council which had opened a Trading Standards investigation into the sale of the kits. Since then, the Commission has examined the charity’s records, revealing concerns about its finances.’

<https://tinyurl.com/y2wrfy3x>

## EDUCATION

### Steiner schools

‘Parents of pupils at a Steiner school have dropped a legal challenge against Ofsted after a damning report led to its closure. Wynstones School, near Gloucester, shut in January after inspectors said pupils were “at risk of serious harm”. In a Facebook post, the parents said their legal team had advised them their case would “be very hard to fight”. Ofsted said it co-operated in every way with the court but added its evidence was “overwhelming”.’

<https://tinyurl.com/y94cwmwy>

## MISCELLANEOUS

### Ghosts, etc.

YouTube: ‘Looking over the latest in a long line of bad ghost pictures’. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/y324r5ta>

Also: Chances are that by now you have seen the viral news stories about the ghostly figure of a woman dressed in a long, flowing white dress caught on CCTV. Claimed to be a full-bodied apparition, the ghost was caught mysteriously walking through a building site in Birmingham at about 2am on August 18th and people are split about whether or not it is a real ghost. Adam Lees of Limited Security is on

record saying that the motion sensor camera issued an alert to their security system that something was moving in front of the camera, and when security staff arrived minutes later, they found nobody on site. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/yxqmrgnu>

And from Hayley Stevens: ‘I’ve recently revamped the Ghost Research Resources section of my blog. This includes updates to the “Ghost Science” guides which cover fundamental topics that I think ghost researchers should know about. There is also a guide to developing an ethical code of conduct which is something often overlooked by ghost researchers. ... I have created a new resource called ‘Do No Harm: A Guide to Paranormal Eye-Witnesses and Mental Health’. The idea for this resource came to mind back in June when I saw a Twitter poll run by ghost hunter, Greg Newkirk, in which he asked his followers to indicate what they’d do if presented with someone who appeared to have self-harmed while claiming to hear voices. The options?

<https://tinyurl.com/y4nt29g>

### Poltergeists

Review of *Poltergeist! A New Investigation into Destructive Haunting* by John Fraser (reviewer Hayley Stevens): ‘In this book, Fraser makes an exploration of historic and contemporary Poltergeist cases to try and understand what Poltergeist phenomena actually is and how it could be established and studied further. The issue is that while doing this, Fraser relies on conjecture, logical fallacies, and irrational pattern-seeking to form his arguments, while outright rejecting methods that would help investigation to remain objective. The definition of poltergeists seems to be all encompassing and very little is clearly defined.’

<https://tinyurl.com/y4nzhoag>

### Paranormal phenomena

Hayley Stevens ‘The Pros and Cons of Filming Paranormal Encounters.’

<https://tinyurl.com/y5tofoon>

## 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/y7dmgk1l>

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

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

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## LOGIC AND INTUITION: ANSWERS

### **The last man alive**

There was still at least one surviving woman.

### **The princess's birthday present**

The princess divides the nine diamonds into three sets of three. She weighs two of the sets against each other. She chooses the heavier set, unless they are both the same, in which case she

chooses the third set. She then weighs two of the three diamonds in the chosen set against each other and selects the heavier one, unless they both weigh the same, in which case she chooses the third diamond.

### **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:

[m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk)

email: [aske1@talktalk.net](mailto:aske1@talktalk.net)  
website: <<http://www.aske-skeptics.org.uk>>