

THE SKEPTICAL INTELLIGENCER

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Incorporating the Skeptical Adversaria: the ASKE Newsletter

Edited by Michael Heap

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FROM THE ASKE CHAIR

Michael Heap

The ASKE website

Constrained by my (slowly improving) IT skills, I have now refurbished the ASKE website at <http://www.aske-skeptics.org.uk/>. This is still a work in progress and there is material to be added and replaced (and will be regularly). ASKE members are welcome to be involved in this.

Conspiracy theories, fake news and misinformation

It is interesting to witness how, over the last 20 years or so, conspiracy theories, fake news and misinformation generally have risen to the top of the skeptic agenda. These are not new phenomena, but their escalation has no doubt been fuelled by the growth of the internet, in particular social media, digital technology that has hugely facilitated important areas of activity of everyday life, both desirable and undesirable. Political leaders, notably the current US President, have also played an active role; the Covid-19 pandemic and, in the UK, the Brexit referendum and its repercussions have also had their catalytic effects. To compound this unhappy state of affairs, we may throw onto the heap the growing realisation that too much research reported in our academic journals is unreliable to the point of being useless or worse, as well as ‘the replication crisis’, the failure to reproduce existing research findings—some influential, others of little consequence.

But do not despair! The fightback has been gathering momentum for some time and maybe 2021 will be the year the tide really started to turn; the departure, willing or assisted, of Mr Trump from the White House in January will be more than symbolic in this respect (*note 1*). The social media corporations have accepted some responsibility for content. Also, there is much on the internet about the growing dangers of misinformation and an abundance of fact-checking websites

have been established in countries across the world (*notes 2 & 3*).

The need is to ensure that the public in general are mindful that there is a lot of blatantly false and ultimately quite dangerous information ‘out there’, much of it only serving the interests and perverted needs and prejudices of those promulgating this nonsense. People also need to be able to distinguish the dubious from the genuine.

I would especially commend Matthew Syed of the Sunday Times who this year began writing a regular column for that newspaper.

It is gratifying that television and the national press (which in the past, and even now, has not covered itself in glory when it comes to disseminating ‘the truth’) are now much more cognisant of these issues. I restrict my reading of the national press to the *Times* and, on Sunday, the *Sunday Times* and the *Observer* so I can only really speak for these ‘posh’ newspapers, but of all the newspapers I know of, in my opinion the first two of these make the best reading for skeptics. I would especially commend Matthew Syed of the *Sunday Times* who this year began writing a regular column for that newspaper. He is definitely ‘one of us’ and extremely well-informed. You can find his column online (*note 4*) but to read it in full you have to subscribe (you can have a free trial first). David Aaronovitch, who, amongst other topics, writes on conspiracy theories (*note 5*) and has spoken at several Skeptics in the Pub venues, is a frequent contributor, as is Max Hastings who is extremely knowledgeable on military and political history, and well-balanced. Likewise, the business and economic correspondents, notably David Smith (*notes 6 & 7*), who writes from an

evidence-based perspective. (*Can I have my cheque now Mr Murdoch?*)

On 28.11.20, the *Times* colour magazine included an article on Lyric Jain, ‘the 25-year-old from Staffordshire taking on the world of fake news and conspiracy theories’. Three years ago, Mr Jain set up a fact-checking company called Logically (*note 8*):

It is a for-profit social enterprise with around 30 investigators and fact checkers working in its office in Brighouse, West Yorkshire, and 40 in India. As well as the scrutiny it undertakes for governments and companies, it runs a website and offers a browser extension that rates other sites’ credibility. It also has an app, which presents fact-checked news stories and flags up others “FALSE”.

The following day, the *Observer* ran a feature in the ‘Science Tech’ section of their ‘New Review’ entitled ‘How to deal with a conspiracy theorist’ which is accessible online (*note 9*). It is written by David Robson, who has just had a book published on the subject (*note 10*). The author of the article lists ‘five ways to spot the holes in the logic’. Definitely worth reading.

Also, have a listen to the Full Fact Podcast of 19.10.20 entitled ‘The History of Misinformation’ (*note 11*):

We often think of misinformation as a modern problem. But its roots go back thousands of years. In this episode we explore the history of false information and track how it has developed into the ‘fake news’ climate we see today.

Finally, if you like games have a look at Go Viral! (*note 12*) This is an online game developed by Dr Sander van der Linden and colleagues at the University of Cambridge aimed at ‘vaccinating’ people against fake news and conspiracy theories about Covid-19. The game puts the player in the shoes of someone spreading

misinformation online and illustrates some of the common ploys. Dr van der Linden is quoted in the December 2020 issue of the *Psychologist* (the monthly periodical of the British Psychological Society) saying:

The WHO has included the game in its mailing list and on their website and we recorded a video with the United Nations which they posted on their feed as well. At the end of the day, we are trying to help governments and international institutions combat fake news more effectively so it's been great to see a real appetite for more evidence-based communications.

I gave it a try but found I am not nerdy enough to fully understand what

is going on. Maybe younger or more tech-savvy players will be better placed to get more out of it.

The game was discussed on BBC Radio's 'Digital Planet' on 20.10.20 (note 13). Incidentally, their broadcast on 3.11.11 is entitled 'Who is most susceptible to fake news?' (note 14).

Notes

1. Also, a good uptake of the Covid-19 vaccination should take the wind out of the sails of anti-vaccination campaigners.

2. <https://guides.lib.berkeley.edu/fake-news>

3. <https://tinyurl.com/qn3fxxr>

4. <https://tinyurl.com/ybrvtey7>

5. *Voodoo Histories: How Conspiracy Theory has Shaped Modern History* by David Aaronovitch, Penguin, 2010.

6. <https://tinyurl.com/yb8ep451>

7. I recommend as an introduction to economics, his book *Free Lunch: Easily Digestible Economics* (2nd edition) Profile Books, 2012.

8. <https://www.logically.ai/>

9. <https://tinyurl.com/y32fnovm>

10. *The Intelligence Trap: How to Revolutionise your Thinking and Make Wiser Decisions*, Hodder & Stoughton.

11. <https://tinyurl.com/yx9xaddr>

12. <https://www.goviralgame.com/en/play>

13. <https://tinyurl.com/y8fs2j3d>

14. <https://tinyurl.com/yym78hje>



LOGIC AND INTUITION

Another coin-tossing game

Back in January, I described the following gambling game. Someone starts tossing a coin repeatedly after you and your (only) opponent have each chosen a sequence of three consecutive outcomes—e.g. heads, tails, tails (HTT). The winner is the one whose sequence comes up first. Then you have another go, and so on. The only condition is that, under the pretence of generosity, you insist on giving your opponent 'an advantage': they choose their sequence first.

There is an easy-to-remember rule which, if you follow each time, will almost certainly guarantee you a profit over a series of trials. You are still likely to make a profit if your opponent insists on alternating who has the first choice,

so long as they remain naïve about the rule.

Now suppose you have to choose a sequence of two, not three, tosses? I am grateful to Jon Scaife for sending me this version of the puzzle:

Someone tosses a coin after you have chosen the sequence HH and your opponent, TH. After just one toss who is more likely to win? Whenever a game is won the game starts again. If you keep to the same sequences, over a large number of games who will win the most? And is there any chance that neither of you will win?

The stupid girl

I found this nice puzzle in a book recently and would like to give an

acknowledgement but can't now find it! Here goes.

It's Christmas and a posh lady is having her hair coiffured in a high street salon. She says to the hairdresser, 'Do you see that bedraggled little girl out there? She is just plain stupid. Every time I see her I say to her, "I'll give you a 2 pound coin or two 50 pence coins—which do you want?"' And she always says, "Ooh! I'll have the two 50 pence coins please!". She's the stupidest child I know.'

Later that day, the hairdresser spots the girl and asks her why she always chooses two 50 pence coins. What do you think was this 'stupid girl's' reply?

Answers on page 18.



THE EUROPEAN SCENE

European Council for Skeptics Organisations

Address: Arheilger Weg 11, 64380 Roßdorf, Germany

Website: <http://www.ecso.org/> (which has an email contact facility)

Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/skeptics.eu/>

ECSO also has a Twitter handle, @SkepticsEurope.

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

The ESP - European Skeptics Podcast



Building a bridge for skeptics

<http://theesp.eu/>

As of December 18: ‘This week we talk about the alt-med and antivaxxers who have been visible on TV and how a town in Austria had to change its rather unfortunate name. We celebrate the anniversary of the Hungarian Skeptics and then we get into the news.’

From Studiekring voor de Kritische Evaluatie van Pseudowetenschap en het Paranormale (the Belgian skeptical society)

‘May I bring this call for help from your Belgian colleagues of SKEPP to your attention? Two of our authors are being sued by a multimillionaire business “coach” with deep pockets. Some of you received a mail from me about this two weeks ago. In the meantime we have updated our website to make the information and fundraiser page easier to access in English and French. Please find the call for help and fundraiser page here:’

<https://tinyurl.com/ydey7sl4>

See also ‘Patrick Vermeren’ on page 16 of this issue.



MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

Informed choice

From ‘MD’ (aka Phil Hammond) in *Private Eye*, 18 December 2020, headed ‘Brains needs BRAUNS’:

Informed choice for any medical intervention requires BRAUNS. You need to know and understand the Benefits, Risks, Alternatives, Unknowns, what if I did Nothing?, and Safety net if something goes wrong.

Thermography

Michael Marshall (‘Marsh’) of the Good Thinking Society (*note 1*) and Catherine de Jong of the Dutch Society against Quackery are pursuing an initiative concerning misleading claims for, and misuse of, thermography. As a starter, Marsh has arranged an article written by an expert on the subject which will be on the European Council for Skeptical Organisations (ECSO; *note 2*) website in due course. They are

keen to hear from individuals and relevant groups throughout Europe (*note 3*).

Fertility treatments

‘An All-Consuming Problem? How to Protect Patients in the Fertility Market’ is ‘A free-to-attend online event about consumer protection for fertility patients, taking place from 5.30pm-7pm (GMT) on Thursday 14 January 2021 (*note 4*). All are welcome. To attend/participate via the web, please register here. The UK Government’s Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) has recently raised concerns about aspects of the fertility sector, including “add-on” treatments and the (mis)representation of success rates (*see Medicine on the Fringe in the ‘Skeptical Intelligence’, Winter 2018 issue*). The CMA is now consulting on draft guidance for the fertility sector, in order to help clinics understand and comply

with their obligations under consumer law. This event will discuss the CMA’s draft guidance, and will explore what consumer law means for the way fertility clinics price, offer and advertise their treatments.’

Biomedical & Health Research

A new website (*note 5*) has been constructed by researchers in health and medicine in this country and abroad with the title ‘Improve Biomedical & Health Research’. According to the website:

Every year, around US\$200 billion (£150 billion) is spent globally on health research. Meanwhile, millions of people volunteer their time to be participants in health studies. Despite all the resources that go into creating medical research, though, there is a glaring issue—almost all of that time and money achieves nothing. In fact,

about 85% of all research is simply wasted.

This is a pretty shocking claim, against which some of the traditional targets of skeptical campaigning (e.g. the prescribing of homeopathy in the National Health Service) might appear of minor consequence (*note 6*). In fact, for the past few years serious concerns about the quality and validity of much of mainstream scientific research have been raised by prominent individuals and organisations, as has been reported in this and previous issues of the *Intelligencer*.

The authors of the website (S.H. Bradley et al) have published a paper in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* entitled ‘Reducing bias and improving transparency in medical research: a critical overview of the problems, progress and suggested next steps’ (*note 7*). They make three recommendations to improve transparency and mitigate bias:

- (1) mandatory registration of interests by those involved in research;
- (2) that journals support the ‘registered reports’ publication format; and
- (3) that comprehensive study documentation for all publicly funded research be made available on a

World Health Organization research repository.

They suggest that achieving such measures requires ‘a broad-based campaign which mobilises public opinion’ and on their website you are invited to sign a Declaration to improve biomedical research.

Pseudoscience in Medicine

Among scientists and health personnel, 2,750 individuals from 44 countries have joined the first international manifesto against pseudo-sciences in health. The manifesto has been organized by 11 associations in an international collaboration and is written in 11 languages. This is the initiative of the Spanish group ‘Association to Protect the Sick from Pseudoscientific Therapies’ (*note 8*).

Traditional Chinese Medicine

The iniquities of Traditional Chinese Medicine were aired in ‘Medicine on the Fringe’ in the Winter 2019 issue of the *Intelligencer*. It is gratifying to read that

Public attitudes in China have shifted substantially to favor stricter regulations on the wildlife trade and a willingness to stop consuming wildlife, researchers reported recently in the Chinese Journal Biodiversity Science. Conserv-

ationists in China are optimistic that increased attention on wildlife consumption since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic will boost national efforts to prioritize biodiversity conservation. The coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, thought to arise from wild bats sold in a meat and produce marketplace, spotlighted the public health risks of China’s rampant and often illegal wildlife trade (from Mongabay—see notes 9 & 10).

Notes

1. <https://goodthinkingsociety.org>
2. <https://www.ecso.org>
3. marsh@goodthinkingsociety.org
4. <https://tinyurl.com/y7pqnar2>
5. <https://www.improvehealthresearch.com/>
6. <https://tinyurl.com/ycnw45ok>
7. <https://tinyurl.com/y2m9ftbx>
8. <https://tinyurl.com/y52rqe5p>
9. <https://tinyurl.com/yaf3y47g>
10. ‘Mongabay is a nonprofit environmental science and conservation news platform that produces original reporting in English, Indonesian, Spanish, and Brazilian Portuguese by leveraging over 500 correspondents in some 70 countries. We are dedicated to evidence-driven objective journalism.’



LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

Pseudo-authority in historical linguistics: Stevens on Indo-European

It is not unheard-of for writers qualified in other disciplines to pronounce on linguistic matters, often without any acknowledgment (in extreme cases, apparently without even any realisation) that their ideas would be disputed by the professionals. A while ago I pointed out in this forum that even polymaths such as Stephen Fry (in his 2011 book/series *Planet Word*) can make contentious or simply mistaken claims as they move

into disciplines with which they are less familiar.

Christopher Stevens is no Fry but he has expertise in some domains, notably popular movies and autism (he is involved in autism advocacy). As far as linguistics is concerned, however, Stevens is clearly an amateur; but, equally clearly, he regards himself as entitled to educate others about the origins of the Indo-European languages and their words. I thank Christopher Guest (Victorian Skeptics) for bringing Stevens’ work to my attention and for

sharing his own insightful comments on the work.

Stevens’ book is titled *Written in Stone: A Journey through the Stone Age and the Origins of Modern Language* (Pegasus Books, 2015) (*note 1*) In his nine-page Introduction, he demonstrates that he has read up on the history of historical linguistics, but the works he summarises are all from C18-19, except for those of Eric Partridge (a highly qualified and heavily published literature scholar and lexicographer but an amateur in respect of linguistic

theory) and Joseph T. Shipley, a near-fringe lexicographer. Shipley's ideas are in fact associated with those of Isaac Mozeson and other (mostly extreme) non-mainstream Hebraicists as discussed by me in this forum and in my 2013 book *Strange Linguistics*. Elsewhere in his Introduction Stevens provides a basic account of Indo-European and links between the histories of IE languages and the associated cultures. But here he displays little knowledge of mainstream C20-21 linguistics. And outside this Introduction he has little to say about the **generalities** of the discipline; the rest of the book (255 pages) is organised lexically, predominantly in a series of chapters each devoted to sets of specific proposed 'Stone Age Words' with imitated spellings beginning with the letters of the Roman Alphabet in their standard ordering, which Stevens presents as known rather than conjectured. (The structure of the book reminds one of Legesse Allyn's displays equating hieroglyphically-written forms and words in a range of modern languages, with even less argumentation.) And Stevens has little to say about grammar, which is central to historical linguistic studies.

Stevens' proposed ancestral IE forms are all monosyllables, which is **not** a standard viewpoint. (See Chapter 2 of my book on other non-standard theories involving monosyllabic ancestor-forms.) He also holds that many of them involve sound-symbolism or indeed onomatopoeia, and in fact he starts with *pu*, which he states was an ancestral word meaning 'excrete' or 'excrement' and was in origin a vocalised gesture of disgust. It is not clear how he can be so confident about such things, even in cases where his etymologies themselves are at least arguable. And there is more than a hint here of the long-outmoded notion that Proto-IE (and other languages of that era) were 'primitive'.

Occasionally Stevens appears more sophisticated; for instance, he proposes/reports reconstructed ancestral forms with initial *bh-* but none with *b-*, reflecting the striking fact

(which he does not make explicit even when he has the opportunity, on p 14; maybe he is not consciously aware of it) that unaspirated /b/ appears to have been rare in early IE.

Stevens' work, especially in its audiobook version, has been reviewed quite extensively online, with various further criticisms. Reviewers note that he suggests that IE languages became dominant because they were simpler and more flexible (there is no reason to accept this notion, and it has actually informed racist interpretations of ancient and indeed of more recent history); that many of the monosyllabic forms which he identifies are clearly simply syllables (mostly in English) with a wide range of meanings or with none at all (they are parts of morphemes, not themselves morphemes); that he makes various specific outright errors, such as the etymology he proposes for the word *Aryan* (I have my own list!); and that he talks as if nothing can be said about language prior to Proto-IE (which long post-dated any general 'Proto-World').

***There is more than a hint here
of the long-outmoded notion
that Proto-IE (and other
languages of that era) were
'primitive'.***

As one reviewer rightly says, the book gives linguistics a bad name. It is correct about some specific matters, but it should **not** be regarded as in any way authoritative.

Carthaginian runes?

The linguist Robert Mailhammer argued in 2019-20 (*note 2*) that Germanic (including Scandinavian) words for many culturally important items and concepts are the result of close contact in M1 BCE between the early Germanic peoples and the Carthaginian Empire, originally founded by the Phoenicians and centred in what is now Tunisia. The language of Carthage, Punic, was descended from Phoenician and was thus a Semitic language rather similar to Hebrew;

because of the shortage of written texts in Punic, Mailhammer often uses Hebrew forms. But the equations posited between culturally important Semitic words and semantically close early Germanic words (chosen here because they seem to have no Indo-European etymologies) are not especially numerous and appear unsystematic. Mailhammer also argues for the transfer of grammatical features from Punic to Germanic (the best case here involves morphophonological patterns involving the vowel-systems) and for Punic sources for some of the Germanic runic letter-forms (I do not find these equations as persuasive as do some reviewers, but there is a case to be made) (*note 3*).

This case illustrates well the fact that competent linguists can advance proposals which convince some but not all of their colleagues. But if Mailhammer is even arguably right there is obviously scope for considerable revision to mainstream views about ancient history, without going as far as the massive revisions proposed on the fringe.

Interestingly, Mailhammer's colleague in this enterprise was Theo Vennemann, another professional linguist who has previously actually argued for Semitic 'substrata' in Celtic (and in English, by way of further transfer) (*note 4*) – and has indeed also proposed Semitic-Germanic-Celtic links on his own account, notably in a volume entitled *Europa Vasconica-Europa Semitica* (Berlin, 2003) comprising 27 of his essays. Given the Phoenician-Carthaginian propensities for seafaring and colonisation, such theories are by no means historically implausible. But one might have expected more substantial archaeological (maybe even textual) evidence of such voyaging. And most other historical linguists have not been convinced by the specifically linguistic evidence presented by Vennemann in respect of Celtic; see *note 5* for a critical review of his 2003 book. This evidence appears marginal at best; much of it is 'typological' and does not involve specific forms.

At a more ‘popular’ level Ahmed & Ibrahim Ali have also argued for Semitic substrata in Celtic (*note 6*); but their case is considerably weaker than Vennemann’s.

Notes

1. There is a 2014 edition with a different by-line: *An entertaining time-travelling jaunt through the Stone Age origins of our modern-day language*; this version makes explicit Stevens’

(excessively) heavy focus upon English in respect of modern IE usage.

2. *The Carthaginian North: Semitic influence on early Germanic: A linguistic and cultural study* (John Benjamins, Amsterdam, 2019); see also <https://tinyurl.com/y4yw2cmv>.

3. For one review (by Bev Thurber), see <https://tinyurl.com/y2p9zzam>.

4. Theo Vennemann, ‘Atlantis Semitica: Structural contact features in Celtic and English’, in *Historical*

Linguistics 1999: Selected Papers from the 14th International Conference on Historical Linguistics, Vancouver, 9-13 August 1999 (*Current Issues in Linguistic Theory*, 215), ed. Laurel Brinton (John Benjamins, Amsterdam, 2001), pp. 351-369.

5. <https://tinyurl.com/yy5j8ej6>.

6. Ahmed Ali and Ibrahim Ali, *Pre-Celtic Languages: The African Substratum Theory* (Punite Books, Cardiff, 1995).



CONTRIBUTED ARTICLES

SKEPTICISM, RACISM, SCIENCE, SEMANTICS AND MORE – RECENT CONTROVERSIES

Mark Newbrook

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

Kavin Senapathy on Skeptics in the Pub

For a number of years, the American scholar Kavin Senapathy has been a member of the CSI community in the USA, publishing in *Skeptical Inquirer* and involving herself in various issues. But she has found much to criticise in contemporary skepticism, which she regards as insufficiently open to the influence of females and of members of traditionally disadvantaged minorities, and in fact as covertly white-/‘cis-male’-supremacist. She seeks to discourage (or indeed ‘cancel’; see below) the foregrounding of positions which she sees as specific to skeptics from these latter backgrounds.

In 2020 the Center for Inquiry (the transnational umbrella organisation which includes CSI) decided that it had had enough of Senapathy’s attacks on the movement, which it regards as flying in the face of the evidence. CFI accordingly terminated its association with Senapathy (while eventually

retaining her posts on its site). Senapathy then issued further comments, altogether rejecting CFI’s analysis of the situation and again accusing CFI/CSI of displaying prejudice (*note 1*).

Diversity of viewpoint, while confusing to some outsiders and maybe uncongenial for some individual skeptics, is obviously a key aspect of the skeptical enterprise.

On 2/7/20, Senapathy was the speaker on the online UK-based Skeptics in the Pub series; her topic was ‘What CSI Can Teach Skeptics About White Supremacy’, and she rehearsed her views on the topic in a forthright manner.

It cannot be denied that until relatively recently white males were numerically and structurally dominant in the skeptical world, a situation which

has changed but which needs to change more – possibly leading to appreciably greater diversity of attitudes and beliefs (although if Senapathy prevailed there might rather be a **shift** in respect of which attitudes and beliefs were deemed acceptable, with current ideas now marginalised or worse). And of course there can be no objection to thinkers from non-white/‘cis-male’ backgrounds such as Senapathy (or indeed anyone else) **disagreeing** with some specific attitudes and beliefs which have been popular in C20-21 skepticism. For example, her very negative assessment of Richard Dawkins (see also below) must be considered alongside the strong (but not, of course, uncritical) support with which Dawkins’ thinking has been received in the skeptical world. The more such differences exist, the less of a united front can be presented by organised skepticism; but diversity of viewpoint, while confusing to some outsiders and maybe uncongenial for

some individual skeptics, is obviously a key aspect of the skeptical enterprise.

The real issues here are rather: (a) Senapathy's dismissal of the modernism which lies at the heart of skepticism, and (b) her dogmatic didacticism. As far as (a) is concerned, her approach is reminiscent of the postmodernist side of the 'Science Wars' of the 1990s. On this occasion she made the familiar points in support of postmodernist revisionism; but (again as usual) she overstated their force. For example, she attacked a 'straw man' version of modernist science incorporating a higher degree of philosophically unsophisticated scientism than normally obtains, and also appeared to suggest that science claims to be 'infallible' (it does not; its provisional 'conclusions' frequently change in response to new evidence or argumentation) and only purports to be objective and apolitical (it actually succeeds in these enterprises to a considerable degree, especially at the stage of data testing); etc.

In addition, Senapathy perhaps needs to be reminded that good scientists will rigorously test **all** hypotheses, including both their own and those proposed by 'tribally'-minded or indeed **any** representatives of hitherto oppressed populations; fair treatment must not become 'politically-correct' protection from scrutiny.

And Senapathy denied the existence of non-racist thinking; she holds that all positions are either racist or anti-racist. Apart from marginal matters involving diversity of choice in respect of the questions to be asked, I cannot see how this applies to the 'hard' sciences, or even to my own discipline of (general or skeptical) historical linguistics. This discipline relates to linguistic forms used by human beings and to their meanings, and its authoritative findings **can** be used to debunk racist (or other irrational) positions (and indeed it can be **misused** by racists); but *per se* it has nothing to do with matters of race.

One of the most striking of Senapathy's several more specific points which appear at least dubious or overstated involved her attack on

Richard Dawkins for stating (clearly correctly) that criticising Islamic ideas is not itself indicative of racism.

Re (b) above: Senapathy spoke as if it is a plain fact that CSI is only at an early stage of a path to what she thinks is a better state, and talked repeatedly of the need for CSI and other skeptical organisations to 'learn lessons' from her, presenting herself as possessed of superior ('woke'?) understanding of these issues. Despite her references to opening up discourse, there was no evidence that she would engage those dissenting from her ideas in genuine debate. Again, this is not how skepticism works or (in my view) should work.

It is to the credit of Skeptics in the Pub that they invited a partly hostile figure such as Senapathy to speak.

It is to the credit of Skeptics in the Pub that they invited a partly hostile figure such as Senapathy to speak. But I hope that less experienced listeners were not cowed by her exaggerated self-confidence and dogmatism.

Rowling, Atwood, Rushdie, Chomsky, Obama, Todd and many more stand up for viewpoint diversity – but others think otherwise!

In marked contrast with thinkers such as Senapathy, the authors J.K. Rowling, Margaret Atwood and Salman Rushdie and other prominent identities such as Noam Chomsky were among 152 public figures who in the same month criticised 'Cancel Culture', the practice of seeking to suppress non-'trendy' viewpoints and regarding them as based on white supremacism, 'transphobia' and the like (*note 2*).

Rowling was at the time being lambasted for her forthright expression of her own highly non-'trendy' attitudes to the question of trans identity. She presents herself as **non-transphobic** but as an advocate of the rights of 'cis-women'. This is in part a reaction to claims made by some extreme trans

advocates (and dissected in a new book by Gad Saad which I will be reviewing in this forum), for example the claim that physiological features and capabilities traditionally regarded as gender-specific (genitalia-types, even the propensity to menstruate, etc.) should in fact be regarded as simply shared between the sexes. This view is based on the familiar fact that some people who have suffered from gender dysphoria have (not unreasonably) chosen to undergo the relevant surgery now that it is available – although at the present state of development this effects only a **partial** reassignment of physical gender – and on the more recently foregrounded fact that some people choose to **identify** as the opposite gender without undergoing any physical changes at all. Rowling (with Saad) certainly has a point here, though it must be said that she does appear quite strident at times in this context and might have used more measured wording.

In the same vein as Rowling et al., former US president Barack Obama (quoted here) challenged 'woke' culture in 2019, arguing that calling people out on social media is not a good way of bringing about change. He said: 'I get a sense among certain young people on social media that the way of making change is to be as judgemental as possible about other people'. And even if change does arise from behaviour of this kind such change is not necessarily such as should be welcomed. (It should be noted, however, that Obama himself once urged in quite strong words that criticism of Islam be muted!)

These announcements have been challenged by some 'younger thinkers' claiming that their apparently restrictive practices merely represent attempts at the rectification of past wrongs rather than intellectual bullying – but not persuasively arguing that they do not also amount to bullying and the suppression of opposing opinions even when these are expressed without slurs or discriminatory language

Others, including some of the well-known actors in the movies based on Rowling's 'Harry Potter' series, joined

in the criticism of Rowling, focusing especially on her alleged transphobia. But later in 2020 a group of 58 prominent media personalities including Ian McEwan, Griff Rhys Jones, Frances Barber, Tom Stoppard, Alexander Armstrong, Ben Miller and James Dreyfus signed an open letter in Rowling's support. Her actions have evidently divided the thoughtful world.

Meanwhile, the Oxford academic Selina Todd had been 'no-platformed' by the Oxford International Women's Festival, at which she had been due to speak, after pressure from trans activists who objected to her 'offensive' version of feminist thought and regarded her and a group to which she belongs as 'transphobic' (which they deny). In response, Todd decried the increasing tendency on the 'new left' to refuse to engage in civilised debate (*note 3*).

For more on this set of issues, see my review of Michael Shermer's book *Giving the Devil his Due* in the last issue.

Israel Folau: the case rumbles on!

I refer readers to my piece in *The Skeptical Intelligence* 23:2 (2020), pp 7-9, about the controversial rugby league player and thinker Israel Folau.

Even before the enforced break in the 2020 Super League season, groups of British fans had demonstrated their hostility to Folau at matches. When the Catalans played at Hull FC (not the same club as Hull KR, mentioned in my earlier piece), some LGBT Hull supporters displayed banners proclaiming that they were not the imaginary people who Folau believed were Hell-bound but real people whose existence and feelings he must accept. While their rejection and dislike of Folau's views were wholly understandable, this comment was incoherent: they **are** among the people who according to Folau are doomed to Hell, and in my view they did their cause no service here.

And in the context of Folau's ideas an online debate developed regarding the meaning of a key New Testament Greek compound word of masculine

gender which has generally been understood as referring to an adult male homosexual: *arsenokoitēs*. The word is not found as such in pre-NT Greek; its hostile use by Paul in *1 Corinthians* is the earliest known. Etymologically this word would mean 'male' (of any age) + 'in bed' (for sex). A word's etymology is not the same thing as its current meaning, but if a compound word is newly-invented its meaning is obviously likely to be transparent. On the other hand, it must be remembered that in the Greek world the most common form of male-male sexual activity was 'paederasty', a form of what would now be deemed paedophilia, practised with or without the consent of the 'passive' partner (sometimes a willing teenaged lover, sometimes a slave or a prostitute). Perhaps **this** is what is being condemned, by Paul himself at any rate (*note 4*). The 'Gay Christian' website, which clearly has an 'axe to grind', simply states 'In ancient usage this word DID NOT refer to homosexuals' (their capitalisation) (*note 5*).

In the Greek world the most common form of male-male sexual activity was 'paederasty', a form of what would now be deemed paedophilia, practised with or without the consent of the 'passive' partner.

Over the summer, Folau's contract with the Catalans was renewed for 2021. The 2020 Super League season resumed on 2/8/20 (no crowds, so no spectator activity) at Headingley, Leeds. As the first part of a double-header, 2019 champions St Helens beat the Catalans 34-6. As a star, Folau was (successfully) targeted by the Saints. More relevantly, he alone did not kneel in honour of 'Black Lives Matter', apparently because he holds that one should kneel only to God. There were many comments on Twitter, going all three ways: Folau's conduct was again disgraceful and he was unwelcome in the game; Folau perhaps was making a

provocatively bad choice but it was **his** choice and had nothing to do with the game itself; Folau was right, at least on this particular point (this last, obviously, from committed Christians of certain hues). The Catalans' British coach stated that Folau was entitled to his personal choice. It was noted that he was no by no means the first sportsman to decline to kneel in this context (*note 6*).

Genocide, slavery and semantics

In July 2020 the well-known conservative but openly gay and pro-LGBT historian David Starkey was widely excoriated as a racist, dismissed from his jobs at two universities, deprived of previously-awarded honorary degrees, pressured into resigning from various intellectual bodies and disowned by his publishers, after stating that slavery cannot be considered genocide because 'otherwise there wouldn't be so many damn blacks in Africa or in Britain' (*note 7*). One of his critics, the historian David Olusoga, remarked: 'This is truly disgusting. And by the same ridiculous, twisted logic the Holocaust would not be counted as a genocide'. Starkey hurriedly apologised for his choice of words, but this was seen as 'too little, too late'.

What is striking about this case is the fact that (as a linguist will immediately notice) Starkey was actually correct about the meanings of these words. Firstly, slavery is not by definition (or even normally) a racist institution. Over the millennia many people have 'owned' slaves from the same ethnicities as themselves. Secondly, even when 'owners' and slaves are of different ethnicities, slavery is not normally a means to effect genocide. Indeed, if a population is a good source of slaves it is in the interest of the 'owners' to maintain it. New slaves have often been bred from existing slaves (this obviously became especially important in the American South after the C19 abolition of the slave trade), and even after unsuccessful slave-revolts the surviving slaves have

not always been slaughtered *en masse*. If slavery **had** constituted (largely effective) genocide, there would indeed be far fewer members of the targeted populations today.

Sometimes different slave-populations **are** deliberately assimilated to each other, for instance where slaves from different language backgrounds are mixed together and used for breeding, so as to discourage conspiracies to revolt. But this practice constitutes genocide only in a derived sense of the word (see below). And, when it was applied in the Americas, the slaves' general African identity was of course retained, albeit in dire circumstances.

The only way for Starkey's critics to justify their strictures about his word-use would be to **re-define** one or both of the key terms *slavery* and *genocide*, for instance by urging that suppression of a culture does count as genocide (even if no-one is actually killed). But they would struggle to have such tendentious linguistic manipulations accepted at large (although many supporters of 'Cancel Culture' **have** in fact persuaded some people to accept such changes, broadening the scope of terms such as *harm* and *violence* and thereby blurring important distinctions). And their comments would not then relate to Starkey's own intended meaning.

Starkey clearly **can** be taken to task for his use of the expletive word *damn*, which suggests derision or even hostility. And the term *blacks* is now considered offensive in this context; Starkey had no need to use it and thereby invite further opprobrium. But these valid points of criticism do not impugn his historical and conceptual point. The exaggerated attack on Starkey, including the destruction of his career, involves loose and inaccurate semantics; it looks to me like a knee-jerk reaction.

Olusoga's comment about the Holocaust appears especially off-target. Unless one accepts the worse-than-dubious arguments of Holocaust-deniers such as David Irving, the Holocaust clearly **was** an attempt at

genocide, at least as far as European Jews were concerned. Irving **has** tried to argue that there were so many surviving European Jewish people after the defeat of the Nazis that the Holocaust must have been at most a smaller-scale phenomenon; but a small-scale or partly unsuccessful attempt at genocide is still different in kind and differently motivated from an institution involving slavery.

When I played cricket with Tharoor in Singapore in 1982-84, he was sometimes heard to suggest that the game was the only genuinely good thing that the British had given to India!

Starkey aroused further opprobrium from Andrew Adonis and others by proclaiming the virtues of the British Empire (*note 8*). Adonis focuses upon the racist and oppressive policies of the East India Company, the force behind the initial establishment of British India; but the C19-20 British Raj was a different institution and clearly did do **some** good (it put down corrupt tyrannies, improved transport and medicine, etc.). On the other hand, Starkey's statements do appear one-sided, to say the least. Shashi Tharoor, who was at one time Under-Secretary General of the United Nations, sets out a powerful case against the Raj in his 2017 book *Inglorious Empire* (C. Hurst & Co, London). (When I played cricket with Tharoor in Singapore in 1982-84, he was sometimes heard to suggest that the game was the only genuinely good thing that the British had given to India! Of course, one **might** regard the English language as another valuable gift.)

Naturally we now deplore all cases of slavery and of genocide (even if it is naïve to expect people to have 'risen above' the attitudes of their times); but this does not excuse the fudging of meanings, weak argumentation or unfairness.

In October 2020 Starkey's situation appeared to have become even worse: the police began investigating him and

also Darren Grimes, a right-leaning journalist who had interviewed him on YouTube. It had been suggested that the two might have committed a 'public order offence'. The email notifying them of the investigation was sent c/o a think-tank to which they belong; the immediate recipients, perhaps understandably, thought at first that it was a hoax. However, after a few days the investigation was put on hold after a 'backlash' on social media in support of free speech. The future of the case remains uncertain.

During 2020 the comedian, novelist and television presenter David Baddiel became embroiled in issues involving (a) the expression of certain non-'trendy' views and (more specifically) (b) the inclusion in the OED of word-meanings now perceived as offensive, such as the use of *yid* ('Jew'; the word itself is widely regarded as offensive) with the sense 'supporter of Tottenham Hotspur Football Club' (regarded as 'the Jews' team' but obviously also supported by many non-Jews). See my recent piece in this forum on the role of dictionaries; more in due course on Baddiel.

D'Cruz on Skeptics on the Fringe
On 11/8/20 Carmen D'Cruz, the host of London Skeptics in the Pub, gave an online presentation as part of the 'Skeptics on the Fringe' series which was in some respects reminiscent of the online Skeptics in the Pub talk by Kavin Senapathy on 2/7/20 and in one specific respect (see below on rationality) went beyond Senapathy's comments. D'Cruz did not direct her comments as overtly at contemporary **skeptical** thought and practice as did Senapathy, but her choice of audience suggests that she thinks that active skeptics as well as others need to attend to such comments.

In *Giving the Devil his Due* Michael Shermer is concerned to defend modernist thought, including skepticism in 'our' sense, against criticisms of this kind. Shermer sees these criticisms as coming from **outside** the movement, as of course has usually been the case. But (unless we as a community actually come to be

persuaded by thinkers such as Senapathy and now D’Cruz) we might regard the apparently growing presence of these ideas **within** the movement as particularly alarming.

Like Senapathy, D’Cruz spoke in a didactic tone, apparently with the assumption that her view of the matters in question is undeniably correct and that she is in a position to ‘correct’ and ‘help’ others on these issues. Mainstream skeptics have traditionally adopted such a tone, if ever, only when dealing with fringe amateurs displaying minimal grasp of the relevant disciplines.

Here, D’Cruz focused upon the offence and distress which can be generated by the expression of views which many now consider to be racist. There are obviously parallels involving sexism and other prejudices. Of course, some people would argue that some such ideas do not in fact embody prejudice and that those who are dismayed by them are over-reacting. But D’Cruz is apparently aligned with the new tendency to identify racist speech (etc.) in terms of **perception** (no matter how unreasonable) on the part of ‘victims’. If one takes this view, non-prejudiced intent, even when ideas have been carefully considered and are carefully expressed, is no ‘excuse’, especially once one’s attention has been drawn to the feelings of one’s interlocutors (etc.) – when one should supposedly follow D’Cruz’s advice as to means of apologising and atoning for such misdeeds and engendering confidence that they will not be repeated. It goes without saying that many skeptics, following writers such as Frank Furedi, Salman Rushdie and Richard Dawkins, will find D’Cruz’s stance at the very least exaggerated here, holding that no-one, of whatever background, has the right to be protected from feeling offended by the expression of sincerely-held opinions.

This is **not** to say, of course, either that gratuitously or thoughtlessly offending people or making prejudiced assumptions about them (all of which is patently rude or worse) should be regarded as socially acceptable, or that

palpable racial **discrimination** and such can be justified. All skeptics will surely agree with D’Cruz in condemning such actions and any cultures which encourage them.

The most unsettling specific feature of D’Cruz’s position as expressed ... is her concern to avoid any focus on rationality as a core feature of the skeptical enterprise.

The most unsettling specific feature of D’Cruz’s position as expressed on 11/8/20 is her concern to avoid any focus on **rationality** as a core feature of the skeptical enterprise. In fact, she urges that the term itself be eschewed. This is reminiscent of the (not altogether unfair but clearly overblown) postmodernist idea that modernists identify thought as rational if it matches their own, not on the basis of genuine strength of argumentation. D’Cruz urges the foregrounding in skeptical discussions of ‘humanistic’ goals, in particular those involving emotion and especially the emotions of those who currently may be confronted with skeptical objections to their ideas (and perhaps, in their own minds, with disparagement of key aspects of their identities). This, in combination with D’Cruz’s general emphasis upon the perceptions of those who consider that they have specifically been the victims of racism and such, is in danger of sliding into the extreme postmodernist notion that the beliefs of hitherto oppressed groups should be shielded from rational criticism – and (according to some) should be regarded as **automatically** preferable to mainstream analyses. This is a viewpoint which upholders of rationality such as Alan Sokal (*note 9*) have rightly identified as irrational – and also as **contradicting** the otherwise (near-)relativist thrust of post-modernism, rendering incoherent the relevant brands of postmodernist thought.

If there really are philosophical issues with the notion of rationality – including disputes about the status of logical arguments – they should be **discussed** in the context of skepticism. Of course, such discussion might be difficult where some participants regard the very notion of rationality as spurious and tendentious or at least as valid only on a personal or group level. I have been in such discussions, all of which ended in grudging ‘agreements to differ’. The philosophical divergence ran too deep. And I myself do not understand how such differences could **ever** be resolved if appeals to rationality *per se* are ruled out.

The baleful effects of the rejection of rationality are well illustrated by the case of ‘Kennewick Man’, ancient human remains found in Washington State in 1996. Over the next twenty years various groups vied to claim possession of KM, but on the basis of traditional Native American tribal beliefs (often involving spiritual notions), fringe partisan claims to ancestral Pan-Pacific status (Polynesian, etc.), and modern Norse pagan notions, rather than on rational grounds. Even when scientific analysis finally demonstrated that KM was Native American (in 2017), it was not these rational findings which were invoked by the Umatilla people who took possession of the body and buried it in accordance with their traditional customs (thus preventing any further study). In fact, they stood by the wholly unscientific view that their people (supposedly including KM) had not migrated from the Old World via Beringia and/or along the Alaskan and Canadian coasts (as is more or less certainly the case) but had been in the area ‘since the dawn of time’. Their fringe-/maverick-scholar allies, notably Vine Deloria, had accused mainstream scholars of hidebound bias, lack of respect for traditional ideas and indeed racism, allegedly implicated in ‘orthodox’ positions on such matters (*note 10*).

D’Cruz listed topics in respect of which she found weaknesses in ‘skeptical’ discussion. However, most

of these topics involved ‘fringe’ denial of well-established mainstream positions (seriously harmful anthropogenic climate change, etc.), where the term *skepticism* has been ‘hi-jacked’ by often less-than-expert non-mainstream thinkers whom skeptics proper would instead label *deniers*. D’Cruz had little to say about genuine skepticism directed at influential but ill-founded non-mainstream ideas. Her treatment of this issue was arguably tendentious and perhaps disingenuous.

As well as race, D’Cruz referred to attitudes regarding transgender. As has become common, she describes gender as ascribed at birth as ‘assigned’. I have to say that I find this term misleading in context; it suggests that the ascription is (to a degree at least) arbitrary. But for the vast majority of neonates this is simply false; it is clearly determined by their physiology. Of course, there must be rational, ethical and sympathetic means of dealing with the small percentage of neonates who fall outside the standard binary classification. And as we now know there are considerably larger (though still not **very** large) minorities of children who will experience feelings of gender dysphoria (some from very young and in most cases permanently) and will mostly welcome encouragement and help in moving to a trans or non-binary gender identity. But these children cannot be identified at birth. If we consider it reasonable to classify ourselves by gender/sex in the first place, and to rear children in these terms (not necessarily in such a way as to impose stereotypes, certainly not so as to marginalise

minorities), we do need to bear all this in mind.

In the coming years ‘modernist’ skeptics may need to stand up more prominently in support of the core features of the movement: rationality, clarity of expression, support for free speech and fairness.

On the other hand, if we really were to decide that there is no need to classify ourselves by gender/sex, especially in binary terms, the physiology of neonates would become largely irrelevant. But we need to consider the huge social consequences of such a decision. These would go beyond details such as ‘unisex’ public toilets (which themselves would not be unproblematic, given that most people are heterosexual and that some are sexually undisciplined). They would presumably include the abolition of female-only sport, which would imply that very few women indeed could aspire to be champions (as is familiar, this issue arises in a ‘trans’ context, but it would be much more salient if people were no longer classified by gender). These are very major issues.

There is a very interesting article about the issue of transgender in sport in the 2020 edition of *Wisden’s Cricketers’ Almanack*.

Coda

All in all: I suggest that in the coming years ‘modernist’ skeptics may need to stand up more prominently in support of the core features of the movement:

rationality, clarity of expression, support for free speech and fairness.

Notes

1. For the exchange of views, see <https://centerforinquiry.org/reposting/> (CFI) and Senapathy herself at <https://tinyurl.com/y63t4lkj> and <https://tinyurl.com/y3pt5ytc>.

On Senapathy as a skeptic and a contributor to the *Skeptical Inquirer*, see for instance:

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

2. <https://tinyurl.com/yaqv6896>.

3. <https://tinyurl.com/u27yjb0>.

4. <https://tinyurl.com/y2m9c48f> and <https://tinyurl.com/y3q4zn9l>. (Note that some correspondents on this thread propose inaccurate etymologies.)

5. <https://tinyurl.com/yxoyhf5a>.

6. <https://tinyurl.com/y5u22ejw>; ‘Israel Folau: Catalans Dragons player not taking knee was “personal choice” - Steve McNamara’:

<https://tinyurl.com/y3a8nv23>.

7. <https://tinyurl.com/y9gm5jpw>.

Olusoga is cited in this piece.

8. <https://tinyurl.com/yxgt74gw>.

9. See for example:

<https://tinyurl.com/y2qdoddd>.

10. Deloria’s work in this area predates KM; his best-known book is *Red Earth, White Lies: Native Americans and the Myth of Scientific Fact* (Fulcrum Publishing, Golden, CO, 1995), which received strongly-worded skeptical criticism from writers such as John Whittaker and Michael Gordin. But he continued to agitate and publish until his death in 2005.

REVIEWS AND COMMENTARIES



Shaping Psychology: Perspectives on Legacy, Controversy and the Future of the Field by Tomasz Witkowski. Palgrave Macmillan (Springer Nature: Cham, Switzerland), 2020, pp332 + references.

Reviewed by Michael Heap

The author of this book, Tomasz Witkowski, is a psychologist and a founding member of the Polish Skeptics Club. He is the author of a previous book (*note 1*) criticising the status of academic and applied psychology, which I reviewed in the Spring 2017 issue of the *Skeptical Intelligence*. Prior to that he co-authored, with his colleague Maciej Zatonoski, another account of the numerous failings and scandals that have plagued psychology over the years (*note 2*). This was reviewed in the Autumn 2015 issue. In the present volume, Witkowski continues the theme in the form of interviews with experienced and eminent contributors to the field of psychology. Amongst the issues about which he is most concerned are the quality, utility and validity of much of the research being published nowadays; the ‘replication crisis’; the efficacy of many psychotherapeutic practices that psychologists seem willing to embrace; and the failure of psychologists to mount a sufficiently strong challenge to their psychiatric colleagues’ fetish for diagnostic labelling. However, the main content of most of the chapters is a discussion of the interviewee’s personal history and contribution to psychology over the course of their working lives.

A total of 15 individuals were interviewed. The author first approached a larger group (he tells us that he ‘placed significant stock on the 2002 ranking titled “The 100 most eminent psychologists of the 20th century”’) and those interviewed are the ones who agreed to participate. Consequently, the contributors are both author-selected (with the above assistance) and self-selected, meaning that on another occasion, with another

author, maybe a somewhat different sample would have emerged, with different interests, opinions and ideas about future trends and requirements. The author acknowledges this in his Introduction, but I think it fair to say that, overall, the picture that emerges from the book is quite representative of the discipline as a whole. Nevertheless, only four of the contributors are women. There is also the predictable American bias (inevitable if the content is to be representative).

Tomasz Witkowski proves to be an able interviewer, very knowledgeable and well informed about psychological and philosophical matters.

Several contributors will be familiar to skeptics. Elizabeth Loftus is amongst them. Many readers will be familiar with her influential work on the fallibility of memory, notably in relation to eyewitness testimony and ‘recovered memories’ of sexual abuse in childhood. Readers will be dismayed by the level of personal and professional abuse that Professor Loftus has had to endure (believe me, psychotherapists are not necessarily the most agreeable, rational, and well-adjusted of people). Another such contributor is the recently deceased (and much missed) Scott Lilienfeld, who was very thorough and prolific in his criticism of the psychotherapy industry (but gives due acknowledgement to those therapies that *are* evidence-based). Then there is our very own Susan Blackmore, known for her early zeal for investigating the paranormal, only eventually to

conclude that there appears to be nothing there to investigate. In her interview she focuses on her later work on consciousness and memes. Next we have Daniel Kahneman, one of the most influential psychologists of our time, celebrated by skeptics for his work on cognitive biases. Brian Nozec also agreed to participate; in 2013, he co-founded the Centre for Open Science and directs its Open Science Framework, an online service where scientists can preregister their research and other of activities, with a view to promoting higher standards. Finally, there is an interview with the very prolific science writer and author Carol Tavris. Despite not being a researcher at a university, she ‘figures on a list of the 50 greatest living psychologists’. Dr Tavris writes about skepticism generally and sex-differences and feminism in particular, and she pens the Gadfly column for the US *Skeptic*.

It is fair to say that if you are a seasoned skeptic you will probably be familiar with much of the factual content of the above chapters (though not necessarily the others) but you will be keen to hear the views of these people concerning the current status of academic and applied psychology and future developments (likely and desirable). This is true of all the interviewees and we also hear some interesting accounts of their personal lives and what drew them to their field of study. A common pattern across chapters is the confidence and even pride shown by each contributor in his or her chosen area of research, often coupled with criticism of those who have taken an alternative perspective. This is to be expected, as are the differing responses to questions about

what have been the most important contributions of psychology so far and what we should expect or wish for in the future. Cognitive neuroscience is a common theme when the latter question is asked. The interviewer also has a list of concerns about the present status of psychology, but the participants vary in the extent to which they share these concerns, some being more sanguine than the interviewer. I should mention that amongst the contributors not listed above, but one who will be familiar to many skeptics, is Noam Chomsky, not a psychologist of course but someone which has been of great influence in the field of psycholinguistics (he was a key figure when I undertook my BSc in Psychology 50 plus years ago). Chomsky's interview is interesting to me for his reticence as much as anything else. He was reluctant to be drawn on some of the controversies raised (with the exception of world politics and capitalism), sometimes remarking that he was not sufficiently informed to comment. Fair enough, I suppose.

Whilst nowadays there is no shortage of interviews of eminent people that are easily accessible on the internet, I think there is still much to be said for the medium of the written word for these purposes (*note 3*). The amount and diversity of the discussion that a book provokes is a measure of its success and I could certainly write many pages discussing matters raised by each of the interviewees and my own reactions. One thing *Shaping Psychology* does achieve, in my opinion, is that whatever the reader's

background, it gives him or her a very good, up-to-date insight into what is happening in academic psychology and applied psychology at the present time. It is very readable (there is one exception, which I shall not name or comment on here—I'll leave this to readers of the book) and any of the chapters is worth re-reading and studying in depth. Tomasz Witkowski proves to be an able interviewer, very knowledgeable and well informed about psychological and philosophical matters (I confess to doing the occasional Google search to understand a point that was being discussed, when I really ought to have known about it).

*Where is the wisdom we have
lost in knowledge?*

*Where is the knowledge we
have lost in information?*

T.S.Eliot

More than one of the contributors (e.g. Robert J. Sternberg, who has some useful things to say about intelligence) refer to 'wisdom' and the need for psychology to be informed and directed by this rarely-mentioned human faculty. Just recently I was reading a book, one chapter of which opened with a quotation from T.S. Eliot's, poem 'Chorus from the Rocks':

*Where is the wisdom we have lost in
knowledge?*

*Where is the knowledge we have lost
in information?*

We do indeed live in an age when, because technology enables us to gather and store so much information, this becomes an end in itself without regard to how much we need the information and how it is to be used to benefit us and the world in which we live. So I cannot help relating this quotation to the issues that are addressed in *Shaping Psychology* (and to research generally, education, the media—popular and academic—the internet, and many other facets of our lives).

I am very happy to recommend *Shaping Psychology* to readers of the *Skeptical Intelligencer*.

Notes

1. *Psychology Led Astray: Cargo Cult in Science and Therapy*. Tomasz Witkowski, Boca Raton, FL: BrownWalker Press, 2016.

2. *Psychology Gone Wrong: The Dark Sides of Science and Therapy*. Tomasz Witkowski & Maciej Zatonoski, Boca Raton FL: BrownWalker Press, 2015.

3. Coincidentally, I have just acquired a book that came out 27 years ago entitled *States of Mind: Conversations with Psychological Investigators*, edited by the late Jonathan Miller and published by the BBC (it is based on a TV series). There are 15 conversations with people who at that time had achieved some eminence in psychology. There is only one woman (Hanna Segal). It will be interesting to compare the contents with those of *Shaping Psychology*.

Michael Heap is a retired clinical and forensic psychologist.

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.



Seriously Curious: The Economist Explains: the Facts and Figures that Turn your World Upside Down edited by Tom Standage. Profile for *The Economist*, 2018, pp [9], 262. ISBN: pbk. 9781788161637, e-book 9781782834847.

Reviewed by Ray Ward

This was intended to be a double review of this book and *Uncommon Knowledge* by the same editor, but lockdown meant I was unable to finish it, so my review of that book alone was published in the Summer 2020 issue of the *Skeptical Intelligencer*. Like that book it is a miscellany of brief pieces on many subjects, having sections on unexpected explanations to stretch the mind, peculiar proclivities from around the world, love, sex and marriage, oddities of food and drink, 'economical, with the truth', science, health and the environment, getting technical, sport and leisure, words and wisdom and festivals and holidays demystified, from *The Economist's* output of explainers and daily charts. Like the other book it has about 120 very varied items and it would be impossible to comment on all, so I will again confine myself to those I found remarkable.

Polygamy, we are told, makes civil wars more likely. Wherever it is widely practised, turmoil tends to follow; the 20 most fragile states are all somewhat or very polygamous. Why? Rich men take multiple wives, and if the top 10% marry four women each, the bottom 30% cannot marry at all, often leaving them sexually frustrated and socially marginalised: in some societies a man is not considered adult until he has married and sired children. Unrest often follows.

If you were asked what is the most mined mineral, I doubt you would say sand, but it is: modern cities are built with, and often on, it, its use being mostly in concrete and asphalt. But, improbably, there is a shortage: desert sand is too smooth, and Dubai's Burj Khalifa, the tallest structure in the world and surrounded by sand, was built with sand from - Australia! Beach sand is better, and in Morocco and the

Caribbean, apparently, thieves are stripping beaches bare.

Only 3% of water is fresh, and, as President Kennedy said in 1961, if we could get fresh water from salt water cheaply it would dwarf any other scientific achievement.

The product most smuggled across the Sahara (by weight) is - pasta! - very cheap in north Africa, but fetching higher prices further south.

New Zealand's image as a quiet country is somewhat undermined by its having one of the highest gang membership rates in the world.

The 20 most fragile states are all somewhat or very polygamous. Why?

Of particular interest to ASKE is the depressing news that exorcism is booming in France. As with homeopathy, astrology, etc., any supposed benefit follows from customers' prior belief.

There is irony in the fact that east Africa's strongest democracy is the internationally unrecognised Somaliland.

Young Britons are committing less crime - but it's rather sad that one of the main reasons is greater security, burglar alarms, central locking etc. making stealing cars trickier, and better and smarter policing, rather than a reduction in actual criminal tendencies!

I was once asked in a quiz which African country has the largest population, and of course knew it was Nigeria. That is undoubtedly true, but this book tells us that nobody knows how many Nigerians there are. Parliamentary seats and government money are handed out to states based on population, giving an incentive to

inflate the figures, and the Christian-dominated south and Muslim-dominated north split also has an effect.

The news that the sperm-bank business is booming inspires some heavy humour: it has penetrated the ranks of big business, the flow hasn't kept up with demand.... More seriously, there are concerns about the morality of trading sex cells (or any bodily tissue) like any other product, and the need for testing for disease. But morally-driven policies on such matters are discriminatory and, in the age of e-shopping, ineffective. Shortages and higher prices may be driving customers to other sources, including a very dodgy international grey market.

When, on 13 January 2018, Hawaiians were told a ballistic missile was on its way visits to Pornhub plummeted - then rose to 48% above normal when it was revealed to be a false alarm!

Harvey Weinstein, #Me Too and all that was the tip of a very big iceberg, but opinions on acceptable male behaviour vary greatly by age, sex and nationality. Britain and Sweden are rated the least homophobic countries (45 of the 650 MPs elected in June 2017 were openly gay or bisexual, which, certainly to someone of my age, shows how much things have changed) - and the second most publicly gay region after London is rustic Devon! But, while Ireland has gone from having few openly gay figures to legalising same-sex marriage and an openly gay prime minister, attitudes to same-sex relationships vary greatly around the world.

Whatever else may be said about fracking, it appears to boost fertility, at any rate in America, where the boom boosted job opportunities for less-educated men, and better economic

prospects, it seems, mean higher fertility.

The other book discussed child marriage in Africa, but perhaps the most astonishing - and disturbing - item in this one is the revelation that it is still quite common in America: 27 states have no minimum age, and 207,000 minors were married in 2000-2015, of whom 985 were 14 and ten were just 12.

Some forms of food packaging can be good for the environment. A third of food is wasted, causing greenhouse gas emissions, but extending the life of food with vacuum packaging reduces the harm. Making packaging does indeed produce emissions, but they are less than those associated with food waste.

Ready for another astounding revelation? “[T]he simplest way to become extremely rich is by being born to rich parents”!

Women earn less than men, not because they are paid less than men for the same work, but because women outnumber men in lower-paid jobs such as secretarial and administrative roles, while men predominate in senior positions, and women also cluster in

occupations and industries paying lower remuneration overall. In the same roles at the same employers women earn 98% of the wages of men.

Wealth inequality is not new: it has been increasing since the Stone Age.

A point of particular relevance at the time of writing: some diseases are hard to eradicate!

(Child marriage) is still quite common in America: 27 states have no minimum age, and 207,000 minors were married in 2000-2015, of whom 985 were 14 and ten were just 12.

I recall reading, some time ago, that Tokyo had more telephones than Africa. So far as landlines are concerned that may still be true, but, this book tells us, mobiles have become commonplace, being more common than electricity in some places. Africa, it seems, has jumped over the landline era straight to the mobile age.

The book assesses the possibility of building a space elevator, as envisaged by Arthur C. Clarke (whom I met several times) in his novel *The Fountains of Paradise* (1979). Since geostationary satellites appear to hover over a fixed spot on the Earth’s surface, a permanent link is indeed feasible, but there are many problems: weather, oscillations, collisions with orbiting objects and, above all, finding a material capable of supporting its own weight over the vast distances required. The space elevator may come, but not for a quite a while.

And the estimate by a firm that 60% of e-mail is spam is belied by my inbox!

Like the other book, there is far more to this one than I could possibly comment on, and it too makes interesting reading, helped by a good index.

Ray Ward is a Chartered Librarian, has a degree in Politics, is retired after a career in library work, and is a Fellow of the British Interplanetary Society and a member of Mensa and many other bodies.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

OF INTEREST

<p>SKEPTICISM, SCIENCE AND RATIONALITY (GENERAL)</p>
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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/>

John Maddox Prize

‘The 2020 John Maddox Prize was awarded to Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), and Salim S. Abdool Karim, an infectious diseases

epidemiologist and director of the Centre for the AIDS Programme of Research in South Africa, in recognition of their exceptional communication of the complex and rapidly evolving science behind the COVID-19 pandemic. The judges awarded a further prize for communicating sound science at an early career stage to Anne Abbott, an Australian neurologist who persistently challenged the established treatment for carotid artery disease, with new evidence that showed the potential to avoid unnecessary surgical procedures. You can see the winners’ reactions and comments here:’

<https://tinyurl.com/y6uuhys8>

Patrick Vermeren

Patrick Vermeren is author of *A Skeptic’s HR Dictionary: The Ultimate Self-Defense Guide for CEOs, HR Professionals, I/O Students and Employees*. He was recently interviewed by the *Skeptical Inquirer*—see the write-up ‘Patrick Vermeren and his Fight against Woo’ ‘Patrick Vermeren is a Belgian skeptic, science writer, and expert in human resources. Along with his coauthor Bart Van de Ven, he was sued by a multimillionaire for a skeptical article about the multimillionaire’s claims about human resources (HR) and an analysis of his modus operandi.’

<https://tinyurl.com/y7mjtW83>

Science communication

‘Five rules for evidence communication: Avoid unwarranted certainty, neat narratives and partisan presentation; strive to inform, not persuade. From *Nature*.

<https://tinyurl.com/y39bplwj>

Anomalistic psychology

For those of you who were unable to register for Chris French’s talk to the Society for Psychical Research, here’s a message from the man himself:

‘If you wanted to see it but could not get a ticket, here is the link to the video recording:

<https://vimeo.com/483096281>.

‘I’m afraid that this is available for SPR Members (to view only) without charge and to non-members, on request, for a charge of £5. If you think it’s worth forking out, you need to contact Peter Johnson at the SPR to arrange payment and get the password:

secretary@spr.ac.uk.’

Details of the talk are as follows: ‘Following my retirement in October this year, I will be reflecting on the work of the Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit, founded in the year 2000. My talk will describe the reasons for founding the Unit and give some examples of its work, as well as considering the future prospects for anomalistic psychology and parapsychology.’

MEDICINE

(See also ‘*Medicine on the Fringe*’)

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

‘In this cross-sectional study using data from 2016 through 2018, 145 900 patients received an ICD (*implantable cardioverter defibrillator*) or CRT-D (*cardiac resynchronization therapy defibrillator*) by 4435 physicians using devices from 4 device manufacturers,

94% of whom received payments from device manufacturers. Patients were substantially more likely to receive devices made by the manufacturer that provided the highest total payment to the physician who performed an ICD implant than each other individual manufacturer (absolute differences in proportional use from the expected prevalence range, 14.5%-30.6%).’

<https://tinyurl.com/y6lt2j8j>

Charity Commission

The Charity Commission was established to ‘register and regulate charities in England and Wales, to ensure that the public can support charities with confidence’. How well is it doing its job? Read the blog ‘Selective Regulation’ by Les Rose at:

<https://tinyurl.com/yxm7q4hc>

Stem cell therapy

‘Despite a lack of evidence, Duke University is all-in on stem cells for autism, thanks to a billionaire benefactor and a highly dodgy for-profit Panama stem cell clinic. How did this come to be and what will be the outcome? Whatever the answers to these questions, it is clear that arrangements like the one between Duke University and The Stem Cell Institute are the dark(er) side of quackademic medicine.’

<https://tinyurl.com/y5ewj3zd>

Covid-19

‘The more certain someone is about covid-19, the less you should trust them. ... we are thinking of the many rational people with scientific credentials making assertive public pronouncements on covid-19 who seem to suggest there can be no legitimate grounds for disagreeing with them.’ *BMJ* article at:

<https://tinyurl.com/yxt98h54>

And: ‘We read with interest the article by Estella Ektorop, which describes the death threats received by Marcus Lacerda following a trial on chloroquine for COVID-19 in Brazil.1 We give Lacerda our full support and herein report our experience in France and Switzerland following publication of a meta-analysis2 on hydroxy-

chloroquine, with or without azithromycin, for COVID-19.

‘The meta-analysis included 11 932 participants treated with hydroxychloroquine, 8081 with hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin, and 12 930 patients in a control group. Hydroxychloroquine was not significantly associated with mortality: pooled relative risk (RR) was 0.83 (95% CI 0.65–1.06) across all 17 studies and 1.09 (0.97–1.24) across three randomised controlled trials. Hydroxychloroquine with azithromycin was associated with increased mortality (RR 1.27, 95% CI 1.04–1.54; seven studies).’ Read more on this at:

<https://tinyurl.com/y4nozjie>

‘Eat, Pray, Conspiracy: How the Wellness World Embraced QAnon: The first sign for Hala Khouri that something dangerous, if not exactly new, was spreading in her world of health practitioners was Plandemic, a viral video filled with misinformation and conspiracy theories about the spread of covid-19. Friends and acquaintances, all people that Khouri, a yoga instructor and founder of the activist collective Off the Mat Into the World, described as fellow spiritual travelers, shared the viral 26-minute video with her and urged her to watch. They believed that Plandemic was full of revealing truths....’

<https://tinyurl.com/yxmy35nz>

Chiropractic

‘It’s all about the cracking noise: the unlikely cult of the online chiropractor’. ‘In an age of back pain, chiropractors are the new social media influencers. But why do so many people want to watch them? And is the rise about more than an interest in good spine health?’

<https://tinyurl.com/y4eeqlns>

‘Brain Tonic’

‘A woman who sold a “brain tonic” online, claiming it could “reverse Alzheimer’s” has been found guilty of falsely claiming it could cure illness. Genevieve Flight, 43, claimed it could also treat other diseases including cancer, Gloucester Crown Court heard. Flight, formerly of Gloucester, was

found guilty by jury of a total of 12 charges related to misleading practice.’
<https://tinyurl.com/yayuaybp>

PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHIATRY

Hans J. Eysenck

‘Research misconduct complaints and institutional logics: The case of Hans Eysenck and the British Psychological Society’: Russell Craig, Anthony Pelosi, Dennis Tourish, October 28, 2020.

‘A formal complaint was lodged with the British Psychological Society in 1995 that alleged serious scientific misconduct by Hans J Eysenck. The complaint referred to research into the links between personality traits and the causes, prevention and treatment of cancer and heart disease. Using a framework of institutional logics, we criticise the Society’s decision not to

hear this complaint at a full disciplinary hearing. We urge the BPS to investigate this complaint afresh. We also support calls for the establishment of an independent National Research Integrity Ombudsperson to deal more effectively with allegations of research misconduct.’

<https://tinyurl.com/y3os2yjr>

Also see the 2019 paper by David Marks ‘The Hans Eysenck affair: Time to correct the scientific record’ at:

<https://tinyurl.com/y3trs4a3>

CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND MISINFORMATION

(See also Covid-19 under *MEDICINE* and ‘From the ASKE Chair’.)

General

‘Catspiracy: Recette pour une théorie du complot: This is a fake conspiracy video I’ve made with high school students during a workshop about

conspiracy theories and how easy it is to manipulate images through editing, in order to prove anything.’ In French with English subtitles (8+ minutes).

<https://vimeo.com/482278265>

Misinformation

‘We often think of misinformation as a modern problem. But its roots go back thousands of years. In this episode we explore the history of false information and track how it has developed into the ‘fake news’ climate we see today.’

Podcast at:

<https://tinyurl.com/yx9xaddr>

RELIGION AND CULTS

Intelligent design

‘Brazil’s government throw their weight behind Creationism and Intelligent Design.’

<https://tinyurl.com/y5u2sreu>

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 made of Skeptics in the Pub Online, which currently has an excellent programme of online talks on Thursday evenings. See:

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

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

<https://tinyurl.com/y7dmgktl>

LOGIC AND INTUITION: ANSWERS

Another coin-tossing game

First note that once T has been tossed your opponent (TH) must win—you (HH) cannot then win, since you need the first of your two Hs. Hence you only win when **the first two** tosses are H, a 1

in 4 chance. Therefore, your opponent has a 3 in 4 chance of winning unless, regardless of the outcome of the first toss, from the second toss onwards T is always tossed. In that case neither of you wins, but this is highly unlikely.

The stupid girl

The ‘stupid girl’ replies that as soon as the day comes when she chooses the 2 pound coin, the woman will stop offering her any more money.

About ASKE

Founded in 1997, ASKE is an association of people from all walks of life who wish to promote rational thinking and enquiry, particularly concerning unusual phenomena, and who are opposed to the proliferation and misuse of irrational and unscientific ideas and practices. This is our quarterly magazine and newsletter. To find out more, visit our website (address below).

If you share our ideas and concerns why not join ASKE for just £10 a year? You can subscribe on our website or email:

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