

# THE SKEPTICAL INTELLIGENCER

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THE ASSOCIATION FOR SKEPTICAL ENQUIRY  
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*Incorporating the Skeptical Adversaria: the ASKE Newsletter*

*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 mainstream and the maverick**

Back in the early 1980s I attended a talk by a gentleman who believed in the reality of telepathic communication. He first announced that there was indisputable evidence that telepathy is a fact of life and presented an uncritical review of this evidence, almost entirely anecdotal. He then outlined his theory of why telepathy is possible: we each have an unconscious mind (which for men he called George and for women, Georgina) and, by some medium as yet unknown to science, information can be communicated between each George and/or Georgina. He believed that this was the basis of spiritualism, rather than communication with the deceased. As far as I recall, the audience (which clearly included members of the public already sympathetic to his message) showed the speaker polite respect throughout both his talk and question time. I include myself here, being a late developer so far as my critical faculties were concerned.

The venue of the lecture was the University of Kent and the speaker was a Professor of Electronics (or Electrical Engineering or similar). Aha! I hear you say knowingly: the phenomenon of ‘the maverick expert’, the highly qualified individual who challenges the consensus of the specialists, often on matters outside his or her (*note 1*) area of expertise. Readers of Mark Newbrook’s contributions to the *Intelligencer* will be familiar with this phenomenon (also, ‘the maverick scholar’).

Mark has drawn on his expert knowledge of linguistics to contribute to an article in this issue of the *Intelligencer* on claims of reincarnation—i.e. reports by people who sincerely recall having had a previous existence. Reference is made in the article to a prominent scientist in this field, the late psychiatrist Professor Ian Stevenson. Professor Stevenson

devoted many years of meticulous research to this phenomenon, during which time he and his co-workers interviewed numerous claimants, including children in different parts of the world. The unit that he established at the University of Virginia is still functioning. Yet he is still often described as ‘a maverick’ and his findings are not taken seriously by most mainstream scientists, in particular psychologists and psychiatrists.

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***The maverick expert or non-expert will go to their grave still insisting they were right when all the evidence has shown otherwise.***

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Actually, ‘the maverick expert’ (or ‘scientist’) is a fuzzy concept. There are plenty of examples of experts who are, or were, considered to be mavericks in their day because they promoted ideas and theories in their own speciality that were considered highly implausible by their mainstream colleagues. Some such ‘mavericks’ are occasionally vindicated, but most are not (‘They all laughed at Newton/ Darwin/ Einstein/ .... didn’t they?’ is a common defence for any whacky idea). There are also scientists who create ructions both within *and* outside their discipline. One such character (*note 2*) was the astronomer Fred Hoyle, a stereotypical, thumbs-in-braces Yorkshireman (*check if you’re still allowed to say this—Ed.*) who was notorious not only for his hostility to the Big Bang Theory (a term he himself coined), favouring the discredited steady state theory, but also for his alternative theories of the evolution of the earliest forms of life, the causes of viral epidemics, and the origin of petroleum.

Often, the maverick expert turns out to have no expertise in any scientific discipline at all. Climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic have seen no

limit to the number of people—scientists and non-scientists alike—elbowing their way to the front of the stage to contest the findings and opinions of those who, unlike themselves, spend their lives studying the relevant evidence and testing their theories and predictions. But distinguishing the expert from the non-expert is not always clear-cut.

As with the case of Fred Hoyle and his steady state theory, you are unlikely to lose any money betting that the maverick expert or non-expert will go to their grave still insisting they were right when all the evidence has shown otherwise.

### **Expert opinion on sightings of UFOs and big cats**

Related to the above are news reports concerning common sightings of two anomalous phenomena, namely UFOs and the appearance of big cats, such as pumas and lynxes, in places where they are not meant to be. At the time of writing, the world is eagerly awaiting the publication of a US congressional report on UFOs, or ‘unexplained aerial phenomena’ (UAPs), featuring the opinions of top intelligence and military officials (see ‘Of Interest’ on UFOs in this issue). In 2020, the US Department of Defence declassified three videos of UAPs. In May, the influential CBS television programme ‘60 Minutes’ presented an alarming account of regular sightings of UAPs by the military (*note 4*). Most people in positions of authority have never taken seriously the idea that these are extra-terrestrial spacecraft, but just at the moment, informed and influential voices have been challenging the consensus (*note 5*).

Big cat sightings in the UK (mainly lynxes, pumas and leopards) have been reported in the media on a regular basis for decades. Google this topic at any time and you can guarantee you’ll find recent reports in the newspapers from all over the country. Animal experts are

skeptical that these are sightings of the real thing, but there are dissenters, including Rhoda Watkins (*note 6*) who has long experience tracking wildlife in different parts of the world and considers that there is definite evidence of large breeding populations of leopards and pumas across the UK (*note 7*).

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***One test of how seriously they are taken is what action is taken by the powers that be.***

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I recently learned that Australia has its own history of big cat sightings. Recently ‘a panther’ was reported to be roaming in Mitta Valley in Victoria (*Note 8*). As in the UK, there have been hundreds of such sightings reported in this location over the years but a 2012 study by the Victorian government found that it was almost certainly feral domestic cats that were being spotted.

**Not taking it seriously**

The reality is that the discourse concerning these claims and others like them, which if they were true would have far-reaching consequences for our lives and our understanding of the world, shows no inclination to move *forward*, but rather *around*. Year after year, decade after decade, the same stories are told, rarely, if ever, fading away, yet showing no evidence of significant progress, breakthroughs or resolution. Contrast science. Perhaps we need these stories in the same way we need entertainment and

diversion, the implicit message being they are not meant to be taken seriously. For, in reality, they aren’t.

One test of how seriously they are taken is what action is adopted by the powers that be. If, for example, animal experts genuinely considered that that there may be dangerous animals marauding the landscape wouldn’t the appropriate authorities be expressing concern about public safety and taking measures to warn and protect people? There appears to be very little of this (though most recently the MP for Delyn, Rob Roberts, following a spate of reports in North Wales, has written to the Welsh Environment Minister Lesley Griffiths expressing concern and it has been announced that the Welsh Government is to carry out an investigation [*note 9*]). Or how about public reactions to proposals to rewild parts of the countryside by, amongst other things, introducing big cats such as lynx, a move that has delighted some but alarmed others such as farmers anxious about the threat to their livestock. Surely if the authorities, not to mention farmers, took seriously the hundreds of sightings of these creatures, their message would be ‘Don’t bother, they’re already here!’ And, likewise, surely if experts in high places at least accepted as a real possibility the presence of spacecraft from alien worlds, wouldn’t sightings of them make headline news, a statement from our leaders, and the placing of our defence systems on some kind of alert? (*note 10*).

Professor Stevenson certainly took his beliefs in past lives seriously, and even considered that some of a person’s physical and psychological characteristics could be ‘inherited’ from their previous incarnation, thus providing, in addition to environment and genetics, a third factor contributing to interpersonal differences. Needless to say, I have never come across any mention of this in academic and clinical psychology and psychiatry. As for the forensic domain—I leave the possible applications of Professor Stevenson’s claim to your imagination.

**Notes**

1. Nearly all the ones that come to my mind are men.
2. These people are often called ‘contrarians’. Google ‘the psychology of the contrarian’ for further study.
3. <https://tinyurl.com/sw2h7vjc>
4. <https://tinyurl.com/m9crdcd>
5. In this connection, a noted maverick in the past was the psychiatrist John Mack, famous for taking seriously the idea of abduction by extra-terrestrials.
6. <https://www.rhodawatkins.com/>
7. <https://tinyurl.com/jwrnphmw>
8. <https://tinyurl.com/e285u2fz>
9. <https://tinyurl.com/287x7r5z>
10. In fairness, the congressional report on UFOs, which came out since writing this article, does not dismiss outright the idea that some UFOs (UAPs) are extraterrestrial in origin—see: <https://tinyurl.com/uxrtabh4>.



## LOGIC AND INTUITION

### Which medicine?

The puzzle in the Spring issue of the *Intelligencer* provoked some interesting correspondence from a reader and his statistician colleague, challenging the solution that was given and the reasoning behind it. Recall the puzzle:

‘Two medicines have been developed, A and B, but they have not so far been tested. A was administered to 3 patients, and all survived. B was administered to 8 patients of whom 7 survived. Should you unfortunately contract the disease, which medicine would you choose?’

The answer (which I have now discovered in the puzzle’s online source) compared the performance of each medicine with that expected by chance and concluded that medicine B was, on the basis of the very limited evidence, much more effective than A. However, from the correspondence it appears that the solution requires a Bayesian comparison of the two medicines. By this method the conclusion is the same but not so dramatically in favour of medicine B.

It does require a high level of statistical expertise to understand this, so many thanks to our reader and his colleague for their attention to this.

### Uninteresting numbers and a completely useless piece of information

When I first saw this next puzzle I was reminded of something a mathematician wrote in a book that I read many years ago. The book was all about mathematically ‘interesting’ numbers (integers) starting from 1 and working upwards to an extremely high number. Of course, the author didn’t include all the numbers in between but he said that you could find something interesting about *every* number: there are no numbers that are of no mathematical interest whatsoever. He presented a logical argument for making this assertion, but to be honest I wasn’t convinced. What was his argument? Before you think about this, there may be a clue to the answer in the next puzzle.

A man once offered a prize of £10,000 to anyone who could provide him with a piece of information that was entirely useless. Soon afterwards he withdrew the offer. Why?

This answer is not too difficult to fathom but the author’s answer to the puzzle about uninteresting numbers is less easy to discern and, as I say, I think it is flawed. The mathematician reasoned as follows: If there *is* a set of numbers that are completely

uninteresting then we could immediately remove the lowest one from the set, since this is interesting because it is the lowest uninteresting number. From the remaining set we again choose the lowest number for the same reason, and so on and on.

I’m not a logician, but it seems to me that once you’ve identified and removed the lowest uninteresting number from the set of all uninteresting numbers, you can’t then identify *another* number as the lowest uninteresting number. There can’t be more than one of them!

The answer to the ‘useless information’ puzzle is of course that any information that wins the prize must, by that fact alone, be useful.

### A mathematical trick

Impress your friends with this mathematical trick. Tell them to type three digits into their calculator and multiple this number by 91. Now ask them for the last three digits displayed on their calculator. You then tell them their original three-digit number.

Here’s what you do. Multiply by 11 the three-digit number they give you and announce the last three digits of the result. If you can do this in your head all the better. (One quick way is to put 0 on the end of this three-digit number and add the number this.)

### ASKE MEMBERS ANNOUNCEMENTS

All members of ASKE are welcome to make announcements, post requests, and advertise their services in the *Skeptical Intelligencer* and on the ASKE website free of any charge.

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Steve Dulson is a longstanding member of ASKE and contributor to the *Skeptical Intelligencer*. He says, ‘I can currently be best described as a Freelance Proofreader. I usually work on a price per 1000 words, because of the types of articles I usually receive, but would love to negotiate for larger manuscripts (such as a book). Being able to focus on a more substantial work, with a much smaller translation element to it, would be an absolute joy.’



## 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).

### Death of Eminent Astronomer and Skeptic

The death has been announced of Professor Cornelis ('Kees') de Jager shortly following his 100th birthday. Professor de Jager was a Dutch astronomer who specialized in predicting solar variation to assess the Sun's impact on future climate. He was a former director of the observatory at

Utrecht and from 1960 to 1986 was a professor at Utrecht University. In 1981, he became a founding member of the World Cultural Council. He was a fellow of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry and the first chairman of the Dutch skeptical society, Stichting Skepsis, from 1987 to 1998. He was also the first chairman of the European Council of Skeptical Organisations from 1994 to 2001.

### The ESP - European Skeptics Podcast



Building a bridge for skeptics

<http://theesp.eu/>

Find out what is happening on the skeptical scene throughout Europe by visiting this site. The latest podcast (July 2<sup>nd</sup>), as usual, covers a multitude of diverse topics. Also check the Events Calendar for Europe at:

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

### The pharmaceutical industry in Europe

The online journal *Health Policy* has recently published a paper entitled 'Pharmaceutical industry self-regulation and non-transparency: country and company level analysis of payments to healthcare professionals in seven European countries'. This paper analyses a new European database of drug industry payments to healthcare professionals and describes itself as the 'first international comparison of self-regulation and payment transparency with company-level data'. It reports that there are significant differences between countries and between companies in payment transparency and a general lack of payment transparency associated with self-regulation. It recommends that Europe should move towards obligatory disclosure of payments in a public database.

<https://tinyurl.com/2ntr6zmr>



## MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

As a rule, we are inclined to feel uncomfortable in a world where, in significant numbers, other people do not share our ways of thinking, our values, and our beliefs about life. Accordingly, we try to change the world (or wish the world would change) in ways that would ease our discomfort. When we do so, we need to be careful that we are motivated by our sincere belief that the world itself will thereby be a better and safer place in general and not merely a more comfortable place for ourselves.

Those of us who self-identify as skeptics are part of a larger population who feel uncomfortable in a world where the beliefs, opinions, decisions and actions of many people do not

appear to be based on a rational and unprejudiced consideration of the available evidence. On the other hand, it is evident that stable and healthy societies tend to be those that accept and tolerate a wide range of beliefs and activities amongst the populace, even those that fall into the above category. Hence there is often much debate about when and where lines must be drawn and freedoms curtailed.

It was reported recently (*note 1*) that the father of an 11-year-old girl with leukaemia lost his appeal in the High Court to allow his daughter to receive 'natural therapies' such as homeopathy and ozone gas, rather than conventional chemotherapy and antibody treatment.

The father believed that chemotherapy was not the only way to treat his daughter and there were many alternative treatments he wanted to try in order to avoid her suffering chemotherapy side-effects. The Court ruled that there was no evidence that any of these alternative therapies would benefit the child, who would very likely die within weeks if she did not receive the prescribed evidence-based treatment.

Where is the line to be drawn? Some people believe that parents should be free to decide what treatment, if any, their children should be given when they are ill (e.g. rejection of blood transfusion by certain religious groups)



or to prevent them becoming ill (e.g. rejection of vaccination). These decisions are often based on lack of information, misinformation and misguided thinking (e.g. the father who refused MMR vaccination for his two children as he didn't want to 'put them at risk'; likewise some people's attitude to COVID vaccination). It's annoying and frustrating to us when people think and act in clearly irrational and irresponsible ways, especially under the influence of others similarly inclined. But there's more to it in the above case: a child's life hangs in the balance. No child should be deprived of potentially life-saving treatment for the wrong reasons; for comparison, we would not allow a parent to send their 6-year-old child alone to the shops across a busy main road.

So how do we decide where to draw the line? I feel that we skeptics can sometimes become too aggressive and over-involved in our campaigns and protestations against irrational and unscientific or pseudoscientific claims and practices. This is my reaction when, for instance, I read accounts of surveys bemoaning the fact that many people still believe in astrology and spiritualism, or the existence of ghosts and extraterrestrial visitors, or the biblical story of creation. I would be happier if this were not so, but I should try not think any the less of people who hold such beliefs and perhaps even celebrate the fact that we live in a society in which such diversity of ideas and is able to flourish.

Dare I say the same about alternative medicine? For sure, it's largely based on magical thinking and has little effect beyond placebo. But the placebo value of any treatment is not to be ignored. Perhaps the proliferation of 'alternative remedies' in our society is telling us that it they do play some kind of beneficial role and we should ease up a little on our efforts to have them outlawed altogether (if this were possible anyway) which may have unpredictable negative consequences.

My own view is that strictly confining our National Health Service to the administration of conventional, scientifically-based medicine and 'alternative remedies' to the private sector might potentiate any hypothetical beneficial role of the latter. For one thing, the person who opts for alternative medicine is taking some responsibility for their treatment, which in itself is not a bad thing ('These pills the doctor has given me are useless—I'm going to try homeopathy/ acupuncture/ herbal medicine/ etc.'). I'm not *happy* about this, but shouldn't I ask myself how much my wishing things were different is to do with my need to alleviate *my* discomfort rather than my concern for the suffering of others?

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***Perhaps the proliferation of 'alternative remedies' in our society is telling us that it they do play some kind of beneficial role.***

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Something that can help me address this question is to consider whether my concern with alternative medicine is in proportion to how I feel about shortcomings and dubious, not to say scandalous, practices in mainstream medicine. Shouldn't the skeptical community—let alone little me—be spending more time and energy on the latter, rather than the low-hanging, but less consequential fruit offered by alternative therapists? What about the over-prescription of antibiotics, antidepressants and painkillers (including the 'opioid crisis'); the egregious practices of pharmaceutical companies; and the questionable reliability and utility of much medical research?

In fact, it is gratifying that there *are* individuals and organisations, well-respected by skeptics, who have risen to this challenge without neglecting the iniquities of quack medicine. The campaigning charity HealthWatch-UK is worthy of mention in this respect. Despite being an organisation of

orthodox medical practitioners and allied professionals, they are not shy of questioning and criticising mainstream ideas and procedures.

A glance at their recent Spring 2021 Newsletter (*note 2*) bears this out. The 'News in Brief' section contains a wide range of critical commentaries on topics almost exclusive to mainstream practice. There is also a review of evidence for the health benefits of consuming fermented food, with a skeptical conclusion concerning recent interest in their value for COVID-19 patients. A feature on the over-prescribing of antidepressants follows, which informs us that 'They are prescribed for about 12% of the population in both the UK and the US' and 'In England the number of antidepressant prescriptions doubled between 2008 and 2018 despite the fact that the pills are now off patent'. Then we have an article, the contents of which surely justify its title 'Error and Fraud: The Dark Side of Biomedical Research'. The final contribution is a rejoinder to an existing scientific paper questioning the efficacy of the orthodontic practice of fitting children with braces. (The author defends this with evidence from his own practice). Compare all of this, and much more, with how the Alice-in-Wonderland alternative medical industry conducts itself, whereby everyone wins and all must have prizes—the Dodo verdict'.

So let's keep insisting that the public remain aware that alternative medicines having no scientific basis and are no better than placebos, and that it is not appropriate that they are funded by our NHS. But let us also be mindful of the much more serious problems with mainstream medicine, such as overprescribing, unnecessary testing and treatment, research fraud and malpractice, and expensive and questionable ancillary procedures—the so-called 'add-ons'.

**Notes**

1. <https://tinyurl.com/9jv78sfc>
2. <https://tinyurl.com/3x6r25yw>



## LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

### Invisible linguists

Last time I discussed various cases where literature scholars and others, seemingly untutored in linguistics, have presumed to comment as if authoritatively on potentially empirical aspects of language which lie within the domain of linguistics. I have recently come upon a number of other pronouncements of this kind. For instance, on 24/1/21 there was an online session associated with Conway Hall in London called ‘The Words That Move Us’, involving various speakers with an interest in language – but no linguists. The material was interesting and included some unusual topics such as biases in vocabulary involving the various human senses, but the discussion overtly favoured lay (as opposed to technical) ideas, personal or subjective responses to language, and notions specifically associated with minority cultures and their languages – as opposed to the (apparently unfamiliar) universalising concepts arising out of the 235-year-old tradition of scientific linguistics. When I politely introduced mainstream linguistic ideas in the chat, I met with a naïve but pseudo-authoritative challenge: a dogmatic statement of a claim about the alleged musical origins of language which **might** be true but is by no means regarded as demonstrated. Non-specialists often focus upon analyses which they like and which are **not impossible**, without much concern as to how likely it is that they are **correct**. And then a question which I asked (politely) and repeated about an obscure but provocative-sounding comment about animal communication was determinedly ignored. By the end I felt invisible!

Vis-à-vis this last point: non-linguists often suggest with an air of authority that it is ‘speciesist’ of linguists to restrict the term *language* to **human** language (spoken, signed or

written). As I have remarked before, the definition of the notion of ‘language’ used by linguists involves the presence of the key features of double-articulation, syntax, etc – none of which are found in any known variety of non-human animal communication or indeed in ‘paralinguistic’ human behaviour such as ‘body language’. Most non-linguists are not consciously aware of double-articulation, know little about syntax, etc.; when they discuss language they typically work with broader definitions. Much of the apparent disagreement on this specific front arises from this difference of usage.

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***Non-specialists often focus upon analyses which they like and which are not impossible, without much concern as to how likely it is that they are correct.***

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### ‘Language’ and its allegedly wider significance

Another example of the term *language* and associated terms such as *grammar* being used (arguably misleadingly) in broader senses involves the ascription of such terms to types of human mental activity which – while important, and structured to a degree – do not manifest the finely detailed structure of language itself or do not communicate meanings at the relevant level of specificity. Beginning students sometimes refer to ‘the language of music’ and are surprised to hear that linguists would not talk in these terms. As I have previously remarked, even the philologist J.R.R. Tolkien talked (rather vaguely) of ‘grammars of myth’ and such.

Another kind of extension involves the notion of a ‘language of correspondences’, invoked in commentary on the work of the

eccentric philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) by the modern scholar Gary Lachman [*note 1*]. (Lachman is well known for his work on Russian occultism and even better known as a founding member of the hugely successful rock band Blondie.) Swedenborg proclaimed a doctrine of ‘correspondences’ between entities on different planes of existence, for example on the spiritual and the natural planes of the mind; this facilitates, as required, allusion or indirect reference on the one hand and esoteric exegesis on the other. He himself used an expression which translates as ‘the language of correspondences’ and made often quasi-metaphorical use of the same or of associated words to refer to allegedly corresponding entities on the various planes. Indeed, he held that such extended usage is of very long-standing, maintaining for instance that the Bible was never intended to be taken purely or even primarily in a literal sense but rather as referring to entities and situations on esoteric planes. Lachman re-uses Swedenborg’s expression and thus invites his audiences to interpret Swedenborgian thought as in large part a matter of linguistic items said to be properly interpreted in multiple ways.

This arguably excessive focus on linguistic aspects of ontology is reminiscent of Benjamin Lee Whorf’s more clearly dubious practice of attributing more to the linguistic domain than might be judged reasonable; for instance, in interpreting **any** public behaviour as semantic (rather than involuntary, semiotic-but-not-linguistic, etc), and thus, by implication, as (quasi)-linguistic, or in treating the verbalising of a thought as more important than the thought itself. If a baby develops a habit of vomiting when she feels ill (as if she needs to!), this is seen as **semantic** (attention-seeking) behaviour. A light-bulb was thoughtlessly covered over with a thick

garment and later switched on at the wall; still later, the need to switch off the unseen light was not noted (it had been surmised that it was defective), the garment continued to heat up and a fire eventuated; but for BLW the cause was not the caretaker's mistaken **thought** but rather his (doubtless silent) **verbalisation** 'There is no second light here needing to be switched off [and therefore I can safely switch off the main light, lock up and leave]'. (This

interpretation might suggest a behaviouristic stance – but where such verbalisations **are** silent there are still no observable data to be so interpreted!)

In fact, as I have noted before, **many** scholars, especially mavericks, ascribe greater significance to their own disciplines than reasoning and evidence will actually support.

Given the obvious barriers to knowing what very early languages were actually like, it is interesting that

the esteemed philologist John Chadwick was a follower of Swedenborg, who thought he knew about such things through mystical means.

#### Note

1. Lachman's latest book on the subject is *Introducing Swedenborg: Correspondences* (Swedenborg Society, London; 2021).



## CONTRIBUTED ARTICLES

### PAST LIVES AND XENOGLOSSIA

Michael Heap and Mark Newbrook

In March this year, the website Vice.com featured an article by Rebecca Nathanson entitled 'The Hard Science of Reincarnation' (*note 1*) which summarises research that has been conducted on children who appear aware of having had a previous existence, along with two previously documented individual cases.

The most prominent amongst those who have seriously studied this phenomenon is the late Canadian-born American psychiatrist Professor Ian Stevenson, who is remembered for his prolific accounts of children from various parts of the world who demonstrated possible evidence of a past life. Amongst other things, he reported that some of the physical and psychological characteristics of these children were 'inherited' from their previous incarnation, thus providing, in addition to environment and genetics, a third factor contributing to individual differences. His critics considered that his findings were flawed on several counts. The Wikipedia entry for Professor Stevenson summarises these and Professor Christopher French provides his own comments in Ms Nathanson's article.

For the purposes of furthering his work at the University of Virginia,

Professor Stevenson established what eventually became the Division of Perceptual Studies, 'a highly productive university-based research group devoted to the investigation of phenomena that challenge mainstream scientific paradigms regarding the nature of the mind/brain relationship'. Reports of children (and adults) claiming previous incarnations continue to be collected and investigated, as described by Ms Nathanson.

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(Professor Stevenson) reported  
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psychological characteristics  
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incarnation.***

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Chris French himself is well-known in the skeptical world and some readers may have seen him in a television documentary about reincarnation claims by children of Druse families in Lebanon in 1998. He has since given lectures on this topic at venues including Skeptics in the Pub—well worth attending. On the programme itself he gave a fair but

skeptical assessment of what he had witnessed when visiting Lebanon, and those attending his lectures (which include sufficient video footage to enable the audience to arrive at their own conclusions) would probably be in agreement with his opinions.

#### Past-life regression

I am mainly familiar with the phenomenon of memories of previous existences from reports and publications concerning past-life regression, usually using hypnosis. I have done little work on this myself. I wrote about this topic in 2012 in Vol 15 (1) of the *Skeptical Intelligencer* and what follows is a slightly amended version of what I said then.

The earliest example of this use of hypnosis of which skeptics may be aware is the case of 'Bridey Murphy' in the 1950s in Colorado (*The Search for Bridey Murphy* by Morey Bernstein, 1956). Housewife Virginia Tighe was hypnotically regressed to before her birth and gave a vivid account of life as a 19<sup>th</sup> century Irishwoman born 'Bridey Murphy' who, at the age of 17, married a barrister called Sean Brian McCarthy and moved from Cork to Belfast. No evidence was found that this woman actually existed, but Ms Tighe herself had Irish



roots and an Irish immigrant named Bridie Murphy Corkell had lived across the street from her in her childhood. The most likely conclusion is that the ‘past life’ was a fantasy constructed by Ms Tighe, which incorporated material known to her in her existing life.

My earliest memory of encountering the subject of past-life regression is my reading about it in one of the Sunday newspapers (I think it was the *People*), around my early teens in the 1960s. The only thing I remember is that it was claimed that a woman was hypnotically regressed to a previous incarnation and started speaking perfect French, despite having never spoken the language in her existing life.

This stuck in my mind (for many years I was inclined to believe everything I read in the papers) until my next encounter with the phenomenon, which was an account of ‘the Bloxham tapes’ in the 1970s. Hypnotherapist Arnall Bloxham, who practised in Wales, made over 400 recordings of past-life hypnotic regressions. The *Sunday Times* did a series about this and a programme appeared on BBC television produced by Jeffrey Iverson, who also wrote a best-selling paperback called *More Lives than One? The Evidence of the Remarkable Bloxham Tapes* (1976). I recall watching the BBC programme and reading both the *Sunday Times* articles and Mr Iverson’s book with great interest. And it is indeed an interesting phenomenon, one certainly worthy of research, if only because of the profound experiences that some subjects do report. However, by that stage, while still wanting to believe in the authenticity of past-life regression, I was becoming more wary of paranormal explanations, and more interested in accounts grounded in mainstream cognitive and social psychology. One consideration, whose significance I did not fully grasp at the time, was the fact that Mr Iverson reported in detail only a handful of cases from over 400 of Mr Bloxham’s subjects whose regressions he recorded. These regressions were vivid, detailed, and full of historical information. In contrast, he observes that the lives described by many of the remaining subjects were mundane and unremarkable. If we merely assume

some random distribution amongst the attributes that contribute to ‘a convincing case’, then chance alone may play a significant role in the remarkableness of the small fraction of cases deliberately selected (‘cherry-picked’) for having those attributes.

The late Nicholas Spanos, Professor of Psychology at Carlton University in Ottawa, reported that around 40% of hypnotically suggestible subjects could be induced to experience a ‘previous life’ (see *Multiple Identities & False Memories: A Sociocognitive Perspective*, Washington: American Psychological Association, 1996). Though often very vivid and elaborate, they are best described as constructed fantasies generated by the person’s expectations and beliefs and those conveyed by the experimenter, sometimes augmented by material to which the subject has had prior exposure (e.g. from historical books or films). It is likely, in my opinion, that extra credence is given to the authenticity of these fantasies by the commonly-held belief that past-lives arise because the person has been ‘put into a trance state’ that has some very unusual properties. It is in fact unnecessary to posit this special state of mind to explain or even elicit these supposed ‘past lives’. Equipped with the requisite imaginative skills, beliefs and expectations, and with sufficient preparation to feel committed to the task in hand and become absorbed in their inner world, a person is likely to have the experience of ‘reliving a past life’ without any of the trappings usually accompanying hypnosis.

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But what about those reported incidents of subjects regressed to a previous life and being able to speak fluently in the language of that person? Linguistics expert Mark Newbrook has

examined this claim and his comments follow.

### **Claims of xenoglossia**

Mark Newbrook

One important empirically-testable alleged phenomenon relevant to reincarnation is xenoglossia: cases of humans supposedly speaking and/or understanding languages which they have never learned – not in a trance, as if channelling or experiencing glossolalia, but as a second personality which emerges in everyday situations (and usually does not appear to command the language used by the speaker’s main personality). The material apparently emanates from ‘another part’ of the speaker’s own mind. In some reports of xenoglossia the command of the relevant ‘other’ language is reported as only passive (understanding speech or writing produced by others), or largely so, but in others active command (speaking or writing) is reported.

The psychiatrist Ian Stevenson claimed several cases of this kind as evidence of reincarnation. He regards the second language as having been acquired by normal means in a previous lifetime and as somehow having been transmitted into the mind of the new incarnation (*note 2*). Of course, this is a possible explanation **only** if reincarnation itself is a genuine phenomenon. If reincarnation is indeed the explanation for observed cases of xenoglossia, this has major consequences for world-views.

Many alleged cases of xenoglossia involve children. This would not be surprising if reincarnation really were in question; the ‘other’ language might be expected to manifest itself early in life.

Several writers on such matters, including Steven Rosen (*note 3*), have endorsed Stevenson’s interpretation of such cases, at least to a degree; and Ian Lawton examined the matter with some care, drawing no firm conclusions but **not** categorically rejecting Stevenson’s analysis, and critiquing some skeptical comments (*note 4*).

However, the professional linguist Sarah Thomason found that

Stevenson's reports of fluency and understanding were much exaggerated (note 5). The subject's command (active and passive) of the 'other' language is typically minimal and unimpressive, and could have been obtained from very limited studies which the subject might have forgotten ('cryptomnesia', a term coined by Théodore Flournoy - note 6).

One subject whose second persona supposedly spoke German failed to understand commonly-used idioms such as *Was gibt es nach dem Schlafen?* This literally means 'What happens after sleep?' but is used to mean 'What do you have for breakfast?'. The subject seemed to recognise only the word *Schlafen*, meaning 'sleep', and interpreted the question as an enquiry about where she slept. She gave a response of two unconstrued words, the second word being *Bettzimmer*, which is not in fact the normal German word for 'bedroom' as someone knowing only very elementary German might imagine. And although Stevenson suggests that this subject gave many responses in 'correct' German, a high percentage of these responses were 'Ja' ('yes') or 'Nein' ('no') – and, given that the purported previous life was that of a person unknown to history, it was not even possible to check whether or not each such response was factually accurate.

Most of the other responses given by this subject were nonsensical or were 'cop-out' standard answers meaning 'I don't understand' or 'I don't know'. None of the subject's responses suggested any more than a very basic knowledge of German.

In other cases, it emerges that the subject had in fact had sufficient exposure to the language in question (not always consciously) to account for the data. One such subject was 'unaccountably' able to rehearse expressions in Russian (without understanding). This subject had grown up in a flat separated by a thin wall from another flat occupied by a person who taught Russian from home.

In still other cases, the subject was familiar with a very closely related language. One subject's second persona

was supposed to be proficient (largely passively) in an Indic language - but the first language of her main persona was another Indic language, and the various members of this language sub-family share many features and vocabulary items.

In addition, Stevenson's own grasp of linguistics appears limited; he makes some conceptual errors, suggesting for instance that the usage of uneducated speakers of languages cannot be expected to manifest grammar (a folk-linguistic idea).

In some other such cases there is a mixture of contemporary usage and an attempt at archaic forms, usually in the same language; see for instance the case of the Bloxham Tapes, made under hypnosis and allegedly relating to past-life experiences (note 7). Some speakers recorded by Bloxham displayed a mixture of contemporary English and amateur attempts at early modern English usage (probably influenced by popular representations in fiction and/or in movies).

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In one more recent, rather extreme case cited by Benjamin Radford, it is reported (without convincing evidence) that a 13-year-old Croatian awoke from a one-day coma no longer able to speak her native language but instead communicating in German (note 8). Radford comments that such cases have at times been attributed to demonic possession – although reincarnation might still be adduced.

Some groups of religious believers also claim that they are able to understand languages which they have never learned, perhaps through reincarnation. This was reported in conversation with me by some followers of Subud in New Zealand. Unfortunately, these people were

uninterested in demonstrating the truth of their claims.

In addition to Thomason's work, there are various other skeptical treatments of xenoglossia (note 9).

**Notes**

1. <https://tinyurl.com/5fr76u2h>
2. Ian Stevenson, *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA, 1974); *Unlearned Language: New Studies in Xenoglossy* ((University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA, 1984).
3. Steven Rosen, *The Reincarnation Controversy: Uncovering the Truth in the World Religions* (Torchtlight Publishing, Badger, CA, 1997).
4. Ian Lawton, *The Big Book of the Soul*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Rational Spirituality Press, 2010), especially Chapter 3; available at <http://www.ianlawton.com/plr1.html> (accessed 18 February 2011).
5. Sarah Thomason 'Past tongues remembered?', *Skeptical Inquirer*, XI (1987), pp. 367-75. Summer, 1987 (re-printed in *The Hundredth Monkey and other Paradigms of the Paranormal*, ed. Kendrick Frazier (Prometheus Books, Buffalo, NY, 1991), pp. 85-94), and sources cited by Thomason; see also Thomason's 'Response to "Response to Past tongues remembered?"', *Skeptical Inquirer*, XII (1988), pp. 323-4; 'Almeder and xenoglossy', in Gordon Stein, ed., *The Encyclopedia of the Paranormal* (Prometheus Books, Amherst, NY, 1996), pp. 835-44; 'On reconstructing past contact situations', in *The Life of Language: Papers in Linguistics in Honor of William Bright*, eds. Jane H. Hill, P.J. Mistry and Lyle Campbell, (De Gruyter Mouton, Berlin, 1997), pp. 153-8; 'Do you remember your previous life's language in your present incarnation?', *American Speech*, 59 (1984), pp. 340-50. Thomason's 'response to a response' was to a very confused rejoinder to her original critique, Robert F. Almeder, 'Response to "Past Tongues Remembered?"', *Skeptical Inquirer*, XII (1988), pp. 321-3. For an online summary report on some of Thomason's conclusions, see:

<https://tinyurl.com/2tm83da5> (accessed 15 April 2021).

6. Robert Todd Carroll, *The Skeptic's Dictionary* (John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken, NJ):

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cryptomnesia>

(accessed 18 February 2011).

7. See for example D. Arnall Bloxham, *Who was Ann Ockenden?* (Neville Spearman, London, 1958); Jeffrey Iverson, *More Lives Than One? The*

*Evidence of the Remarkable Bloxham Tapes* (Macmillan, New York, 1977).

8. Benjamin Radford, 'Demonic Possession, Reincarnation and Xenoglossia', 23 April 2010), available at:

<https://tinyurl.com/3kn63jt3>

(accessed 21 May 2021). Compare the alleged sudden knowledge of Japanese displayed by some Filipina girls, reported by Darcy Fredericksen, letter in *Fortean Times*, 163 (2002), p. 55.

9. See for example Carroll, *Skeptic's Dictionary*, p. 411:

<http://www.skeptdic.com/bloxham.html>

<http://www.skeptdic.com/bridey>

<http://www.skeptdic.com/stevenson.html>,

<http://www.skeptdic.com/xenoglossy.html>

(all accessed 18 February 2011); also Nicholas P. Spanos and John F. Chaves, eds, *Multiple Identities and False Memories: A Sociocognitive Perspective* (American Psychological Association, Washington, DC, 1996), etc.

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## REVIEWS AND COMMENTARIES



### Why Rebel? A Politics Of Kindness: Presentation by Jay Griffiths, Conway Hall, London, April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

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#### Reviewed by Mark Newbrook

On 25/4/21, Jay Griffiths gave an online presentation titled 'Why Rebel? A Politics Of Kindness', as part of the 'Thinking On Sunday' series associated with Conway Hall in London (the well-known abode of humanists and such). Griffiths is a Manchester-born writer with a literature degree and a keen interest in matters of language, although language *per se* did not form the main focus of this particular talk.

Griffith's talk concerned the dire need which she perceives to shift public life and policy strongly in the direction of 'kindness' towards people and the natural environment (by way of acts of 'rebellion' against the *status quo*, as referenced in her title). This notion is, of course, very 'trendy' at present, and at this level of generality it would indeed be difficult to disagree with her thrust. But when Griffiths became more specific her discourse generated some major issues.

Firstly, Griffith's heavy focus upon the advantages of **metaphorical** imagining – which she regards as much more illuminating and helpful than more literal formulations of ideas – would, if applied across the board, result in the obstruction of the scientific

and logical modes of thinking which are essential to the modernist enterprise of making genuine advances in the understanding of the universe. In fact, Griffiths' pronouncements reminded me in places of the recent attacks on rationality by speakers such as Carmen D'Cruz (whom I discussed in this forum in 2020).

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***Metaphor is actually more significant in language than many appreciate, chiefly (but not solely) in the context of linguistic change.***

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Metaphor is actually more significant in language than many appreciate, chiefly (but not solely) in the context of linguistic change. Much usage which is at a given time perceived as literal was once overtly metaphorical ('dead metaphors'); an obvious example is *hard* meaning 'difficult'. Very probably, there is, or was at some stage, a metaphorical element in the meaning of most nouns, verbs, adjectives and idioms. But the deliberate, overt use of metaphor is reasonably regarded as unwelcome in

scholarly contexts, because it hinders shared awareness of **exactly** what is being claimed and therefore communal assessment of the claims being made. And, more generally, scholarly discourse, especially in the sciences and in analytical philosophy, cannot be heavily grounded in feelings, as Griffiths seems to urge in this context.

Neither should our ideas involving metaphorical extensions of key notions become parts of untenable quasi-mystical reinterpretations of the physical world. While there is every justification (and more) for nurturing and protecting the environment, there is no need to perceive the land or the entire planet as **actually** sentient, with all that this would imply. And when Griffiths perceptively identifies some metaphors such as *low* = 'inferior' or *soiled* = 'damaged' as unfortunate in this context, she should not go on to talk as if contemporary scientists and other modernists are hostile or indifferent to the land or the planet, still less as if they worship 'sky gods' **above** the Earth.

Griffith's main **political** target is 'liberalism', by which term she refers quite specifically to the view that individual liberty must be given

completely free rein, allowing amorally greedy capitalism and (because many such effects are long-term) wanton pollution. This is what others might describe as an extreme form of libertarianism, which in a more moderate form is the viewpoint of the American political party of that name which is supported by skeptics such as Penn & Teller.

But surely no thinking person (whatever their view of capitalism *per se*) would support **extreme** interpretations of liberalism/libertarianism. Although there may be legitimate risk-benefit considerations (as my brother, in his time deemed the most astute pest-controller in the UK, would emphasise), skeptics and such would certainly **not** endorse uncontrolled, environmentally damaging use of chemicals, etc. – or for that matter the suppression of indigenous cultures (see below). Our usual moral code is the ‘pagan’ principle: ‘Do as you will – as long as none are harmed thereby’; and ‘none’ here includes the whole human and natural environment.

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***One typical consequence of contemporary opposition to viewpoint diversity is the downplaying (or worse) of the status of mainstream science and of other manifestations of modernism.***

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In fact, many skeptics and other intellectuals in the UK would identify as ‘classical-liberals’, the stance which was endorsed by C19 thinkers such as J.S. Mill but which is no longer represented in the UK political mainstream. Classical-liberals are people who believe in individuals rather

than tribal groups, corporations or institutions, in free markets, in intellectual freedom and in minimal government, with all constraints on liberty justified to the hilt; they would perhaps be anarchists if they were more optimistic about human nature. Claims to the effect that even classical-liberalism would necessarily have often-missed negative upshots must be supported with argumentation.

Griffith, of course, endorses fairly heavy constraints on individual liberty. Promoting individual liberty is not itself a high priority for her, and she is much more focused upon curtailing the allegedly baleful effects of ‘excessive’ amounts of freedom on the ecology of the planet, on the well-being and lifestyles of indigenous populations (regarded as much more closely in touch with same) and on other already marginalised or oppressed groups. She does not appear to be interested in the positive aspects of individual freedom, including most notably viewpoint diversity; she appears to take the view, common in the ‘cancel-culture’ movement, that systematic inequalities create harmful biases in current manifestations of such diversity. One typical consequence of contemporary opposition to viewpoint diversity is the downplaying (or worse) of the status of mainstream science and of other manifestations of modernism. But any serious lessening of the status of science or reasoning would obviously threaten technological progress and more generally the extension of human knowledge. The very varied pre-scientific world-views of hitherto marginalised populations deserve respect as cultural manifestations but cannot **all** be factually correct and indeed are typically demonstrably **incorrect** when offered as alternatives to

scientific findings (whatever some tribal groups may believe, the Sun is **not** a hyena). As intimated, Griffiths does not seem to care much about this kind of consideration, to say the least.

Indeed, Griffiths appears not to allow much ground for legitimate disagreement with her own views, talking as if all people of goodwill and common sense will agree with her views once these are brought to their attention. She seems to think that those who really support opposing views are either stupidly blind to the negative upshots of their positions or simply evil, duplicitously labelling their ideas with terms such as *liberal* which (in the UK) have positive associations. Alternative views such as hers are apparently obstructed not by veridical awareness of any weaknesses they may have but entirely by the evil capitalist system. Obviously, we skeptics would fully endorse her right to express such views and have them discussed – but we would also claim the right to critique them (rationally) and to express our own views.

Interestingly, Griffiths endorses what ‘cancellers’ call *appropriation*, at least in cases where she herself embraces the notions involved. Of course, opposition to ‘appropriation’ is not actually implied by Griffith’s more general stance. In this respect she deserves commendation for thinking ‘outside the (cancel-culture) box’.

*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).*



## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### OF INTEREST

SKEPTICISM, SCIENCE  
AND RATIONALITY  
(GENERAL)

#### **Sense About Science**

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

#### **Good Thinking**

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

<http://goodthinkingsociety.org/>

#### **Magic and skepticism**

*The Conjuror's Conundrum* is a 'lively, personal book' by Jamy Ian Swiss, 'an activist for scientific skepticism for more than 35 years', who takes readers on a magical mystery tour of the longstanding connection between magic and skepticism. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/te8rfkmh>

And, 'Magic, Charlatanry, Skepticism': video recording made on 30.5.21 of a Science of Magic Association event with Chris French, Caroline Watt and Jamy Ian Swiss.' At:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P7gWQzC9Fqs>

#### **A new form of physics**

ASKE has received a communication from Brian K Fitzgibbon from Australia concerning his recently published book *Sentience Physics – and the 22 Proven Enigmas of Life that Science Denies Exist*. 'The book postulates the existence of a third form of physics concerned with life generally and human life in particular. The 22 enigmas that operate under Sentience Physics conditions range from the relatively innocuous such as hypnosis and acupuncture through more controversial such as faith healing and spontaneous remissions through to the out-and-out paranormal such as psychokinesis and poltergeists.' The announcement here is not an endorsement of the book, neither from a skeptical nor a scientific standpoint, but Mr Fitzgibbons has asked for skeptics to 'give it a fair go' and is offering an

Author's Introductory Discount of 20% on his website:

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

#### **Skeptoid Media**

From Brian Dunning of Skeptoid Media: 'It's hard to put a value on knowledge, but we wanted to let you know that Skeptoid Media does have an impact by teaching people how to use critical thinking to make more informed decisions. Please read our 2020 Annual Report and Impact Statement to learn more about how our supporters make a difference.'

<https://tinyurl.com/xdy2574r>

#### **Anti-science**

From *Scientific American*: 'Antiscience has emerged as a dominant and highly lethal force, and one that threatens global security, as much as do terrorism and nuclear proliferation. We must mount a counteroffensive and build new infrastructure to combat antiscience, just as we have for these other more widely recognized and established threats.'

<https://tinyurl.com/yuec5tkc>

#### **Fake science and pseudoscience**

'6 tips to help you detect fake science news.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/hxk9f7k>

And: Review of a recent book suggesting that, rather than scientific illiteracy, the adversarial nature of the scientific method might be partly to blame for pseudoscience's continued existence. (On the Fringe by Michael D Gordin: 'A fascinating exploration of the line between science and pseudoscience takes in anti-vaxxers, ufology and spoon-bending physicists at the CIA.') At:

<https://tinyurl.com/crhzm5c6>

Also: 'How to Spot Pseudoscience Online and IRL: 'From Bigfoot to the anti-vaccine movement, fringe theories are everywhere. Where do they come from?' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/4cwcs3w5>

Also: 'In the absence of any real evidence, US intelligence reports — typically shrouded in secrecy — are fueling a flurry of speculation over today's biggest scientific mysteries. Yet history has shown that intelligence agencies are not equipped to quickly solve scientific problems, and their findings look more likely to spark fear and confusion rather than crack any cases.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/3673xmr8>

#### **Retraction**

'A longtime whistleblower explains why he's spent more than a decade trying to get a paper retracted.'

<https://tinyurl.com/yhaew6s8>

#### **Richard Dawkins**

'The (*American Humanist Association*) Board has concluded that Richard Dawkins is no longer deserving of being honored by the AHA, and has voted to withdraw, effective immediately, the 1996 Humanist of the Year award.'

<https://tinyurl.com/kefhcfd8>

#### **Research integrity**

'Follow-up Bamlanivimab study (*treating COVID-19*) unmasks statistical chicanery': 'Whether or not you have any interest in bamlanivimab, you should read this post as an amusing example of shoddy statistics being published in top journals.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/225ptz3m>

And: 'This week, I was thrilled to read about the first well-documented case of explicit academic fraud in the artificial intelligence community. I hope that this is the beginning of a trend, and that other researchers will be inspired by their example and follow up by engaging in even more blatant forms of fraud in the future. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/ytjtwyj6>

Also: 'Last March, I shared my concerns about from the IHU-Méditerranée Infection (IHUMI)/ Aix-Marseille University (AMU) claiming that Hydroxychloroquine in comb-

ination with Azithromycin could reduce coronavirus viral loads faster than no treatment. Other papers by this group of researchers led by Professor Didier Raoult and/or his right-hand man Professor Eric Chabrière, also appear to contain problems, ranging from potentially duplicated images to ethical concerns. 'In this blog post I have gathered the papers by the Raoult and Chabrière group that have image concerns. This post is not an accusation of misconduct, but a compilation of the potential problems found in 22 different papers by this group. I welcome the authors removing any concerns by providing the original figures.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/fv9zwm42>

### **The New Age Bullshit Generator**

'Do you want to sell a New Age product and/or service? Tired of coming up with meaningless copy for your starry-eyed customers? Want to join the ranks of bestselling self-help authors? We can help. Click the Reionize electrons button at the top of the page to generate a full page of New Age poppycock. The inspiration for this idea came from watching philosophy debates involving Deepak Chopra.'

<https://sebpearce.com/bullshit/>

## MEDICINE

(See also 'Medicine on the Fringe'.)

### **Conflicts of interest in NHS commissioning**

'Local NHS Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs), the bodies responsible for 60% of the NHS budget in England, are hardwired with conflicts of interest that would not be tolerated in any other part of the public sector, according to new research by Transparency International UK. *Declare interests. Manage conflicts. Protect the NHS* finds that some £1.5 billion of public funds was paid to companies in which CCG board members had an interest in 2018/19 alone'.

<https://tinyurl.com/v77r8zpy>

### **Evidence-based medicine**

'The pandemic stress-tested the way the world produces evidence — and revealed all the flaws...

'The idea that medicine should be based on research and evidence is a surprisingly recent development. Many doctors practising today weren't taught too much about clinical trials in medical school. It was standard to offer advice largely on the basis of opinion and experience, which, in practice, often meant following the advice of the most senior physician in the room. (Today, this is sometimes called eminence-based medicine.)

'In 1969, a young physician called Iain Chalmers realized the lethal flaw in this approach when he worked in a Palestinian refugee camp in the Gaza Strip. Chalmers had been taught in medical school that young children with measles should not be treated with antibiotics unless it was certain that they had a secondary bacterial infection. He obediently withheld the drugs. But he found out later that what he'd been taught was wrong: six controlled clinical trials had shown that antibiotics given early to children with measles were effective at preventing serious bacterial infections. He knows that some children in his care died as a result, a tragedy that helped set him on a mission to put things right.'

<https://tinyurl.com/xmnt25r7>

### **COVID-19**

ASKE has received this offer from Dan Hall: 'It has been a rough year for us all, but after caring for my aging parents during the pandemic, I'm convinced senior citizens may have had the most difficult experience of anyone. From being in a high-risk age group for the virus, to being isolated from loved ones for an extended period of time, to being unsure of what will happen to their retirement expenses, the past several months have been emotionally, financially, and even physically draining for our elder population. I thought I could show my support to this population in a small (but hopefully meaningful) way by sending authoritative senior wellness sites like yours some information that will be helpful as we continue to ride out covid.'

Email the Editor (or ASKE) if you would like a copy of Mr Hall's information sheet.

Also, from Sense About Science: 'We have developed a short guide, Talking about COVID conspiracy theories, to help people have better conversations. This was part of a project led by Peter Knight at the University of Manchester, under the UKRI's COVID-19 funding, which included workshops with people who were either inclined to believe conspiracy theories or had been involved in difficult discussions about them. Our guide is a bit different as it delves into how people prefer to be engaged during these conversations and offers suggestions at how to have better, more constructive conversations on the topic. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/2y3j9va4>

Also: 'The rise of pseudoscientific Islamic cures in Iran: As Iran struggles to secure vaccines against COVID-19, clerics are pushing unproven remedies. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/xwk9h5j6>

Sadly: People in India are smearing cow dung over their bodies to ward off COVID-19 as second wave crisis worsens. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/vm2ebzj>

And: The Department of Telecommunications in India has warned people not to believe fake messages claiming 5G network and spread of COVID-19 are linked. The department points out that 5G network testing has not begun anywhere in India. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/27dsrhde>

Not to be outdone: A band of anti-5G activists left an area of Glastonbury without broadband after targeting what they mistakenly thought was a 5G transmitter but was actually a 5GHz broadband box. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/34fz7jyc>

Meanwhile: 'An Ofcom investigation has found that coronavirus coverage on the religious satellite television channel Loveworld breached broadcasting rules for a third time. During two episodes of a current affairs programme, Full Disclosure, presenters made a number

of materially misleading and potentially harmful statements about the coronavirus pandemic and vaccines, which were made without scientific or other credible basis, and which went without sufficient context or challenge.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/vs2xs39z>

And, from McGill University: ‘Early in the pandemic some research suggested a link between vitamin D deficiency and severe COVID-19 disease. Some contend that if we simply gave people vitamin D supplements, there would be no need for lockdowns, masks or vaccines because we would effectively eliminate coronavirus and its impact on our lives. If that were true, vitamin D would have saved us all a lot of pain and heartache. Unfortunately it is not.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/faf5fktp>

Still in Canada: ‘A conspiracy theorist has had his lawsuit against the government of British Columbia (BC), Canada, dropped by the courts. Makhani “Mak” Parhar was arrested in November 2020 and spent four days in jail for allegedly breaching the terms of a government COVID Quarantine Act. Police said he had “refused to comply” with the rules and had left his home despite being told to self-isolate. According to videos and statements made on his Facebook page, Parhar is a supporter of the flat Earth movement and critic of COVID regulations. ... Following his arrest, Parhar argued that he had been “kidnapped” and harmed and was looking for justice via “common law”. According to a BC court document (*we don’t want to hear any more of this story—Ed.*).’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/4skvbm8f>

### **Placebo and nocebo**

‘We hear very often about the benefits of auto-suggestion (a.k.a. placebos) in medicine, but much less about their risks and harms’ by Tomasz Witkowski on May 7, 2021.’

<https://tinyurl.com/wznxs5yb>

### **‘Alternative medicine’**

‘Adverse Events Linked to Pediatric “Alternative Medicine” in the Netherlands: A study out of the

Netherlands documented pediatric adverse events associated with complementary and alternative medicine over three years. Thankfully there weren’t a lot of kids harmed, but when there is no potential benefit from an intervention, even one is way too many.’

<https://tinyurl.com/ed553emx>

### **Cancer quackery**

‘Evidence lacking for use of vitamins for CVD, cancer prevention: The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) concludes that evidence is currently insufficient for determining the benefits and harms of most single or paired and multivitamin supplements but recommends against use of beta-carotene and vitamin E for prevention of cardiovascular disease (CVD) and cancer.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/5cfpbd26>

### **‘Energy medicine’**

‘An integrative health journal has retracted a 2019 paper two months after issuing an expression of concern about the article distancing itself from the work. The paper, which appeared in *Global Advances in Health and Medicine*, was a review of “energy medicine” by Christina Ross, of Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, N.C.’

<https://tinyurl.com/2zh8vfnh>

### **Weight-loss supplements**

‘Researchers have recently presented the results of the first global analysis in 19 years of clinical trials for weight loss supplements. Drawing on two literature reviews, they found insufficient evidence to warrant the recommendation of supplements for weight loss. The study’s authors drew their conclusions from 121 clinical trials involving nearly 10,000 participants.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/5sx25wkr>

And: ‘Most studies on dietary supplements or treatments for weight loss are flawed, scientists write in a new review.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/2mn3s72j>

### **Manual therapy**

‘MT (*manual therapy*) does not seem to have clinically relevant effect compared with ST (*sham treatment*). Similar effects were found with no treatment.’

<https://tinyurl.com/2mz4emse>

### **Homeopathy**

‘Undisputable evidence of scientific misconduct” by homeopaths.’ See account of this by the Nightingale Collaboration at:

<https://tinyurl.com/22psc62b>

And: ‘Fortunately NHS England isn’t wasting that much money on homeopathy prescriptions now - though still not zero (it’s over £20k)’. Latest figures at:

<https://tinyurl.com/u5r6rbri>

And: ‘A website for Liverpool Homeopathy,

[www.liverpoolhomeopathy.org](http://www.liverpoolhomeopathy.org)

seen on 15 September 2020, stated “Homeopathy is used throughout the world to keep healthy ... People in the UK have been using it to successfully help with migraine, anxiety, chronic pain, woman’s [sic] health issues, depression, eczema, chronic fatigue, asthma, IBS, rheumatoid arthritis, and many other conditions”.’ Read the outcome of a complaint by the Good Thinking Society. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/bxkbw6fj>

See also Oliver Kamm: *Clampdown on Bogus Science of Homeopathy in the Times*, 19.05.2021. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/3pdufb4>

And: ‘The Higher Administrative Court of Bremen has rejected as inadmissible the application for a judicial review by a Bremen physician against the deletion of the ‘HOMEOPATHY’-title from the further training regulations of the Bremen Medical Association (decision of June 2, 2021). Thus, the new regulation for postgraduate training of the Bremen Medical Association without the additional designation of homeopathy has been upheld.’

<https://tinyurl.com/dk4csmcf>

### **Spinal manipulation**

‘The purpose of this article is to discuss a literature review—a recent systematic review of nonmusculoskeletal dis-



orders—that demonstrates the potential for faulty conclusions and misguided policy implications, and to offer an alternate interpretation of the data using present models and criteria.

‘We participated in a chiropractic meeting (Global Summit) that aimed to perform a systematic review of the literature on the efficacy and effectiveness of mobilization or spinal manipulative therapy (SMT) for the primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention and treatment of nonmusculoskeletal disorders. After considering an early draft of the resulting manuscript, we identified points of concern and therefore declined authorship. The present article was developed to describe those concerns about the review and its conclusions.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/ed553emx>

And: ‘Given the limitations of the evidence, claims that spinal manipulative therapy is associated with changes in the immune system are premature and further clinical studies should be completed.’

<https://tinyurl.com/8r7cup5c>

### **Mysterious ailments**

‘Mysterious ailments are said to be more widespread among U.S. personnel: The Biden administration has begun more aggressively investigating episodes that left spies, diplomats, soldiers and others with brain injuries.

<https://tinyurl.com/5e3wjppv>

### **Supplements**

‘FDA’s “abundance of caution” should extend to supplements: It’s a weird system when an effective vaccine was suspended during a deadly pandemic for a maybe-one-in-a-million chance of blood clots, but you can get free two-day shipping on an elixir of elk antler velvet.’

<https://tinyurl.com/yxvkJ4z>

### **Gwyneth Paltrow**

‘Gwyneth Paltrow’s controversial health and wellness company Goop has been warned it could be shut down in the UK after failing to file its accounts. Goop was originally set up in Britain

when Ms Paltrow lived there with her ex-husband, Coldplay’s Chris Martin. But when they “consciously uncoupled” in 2014, she moved the headquarters of the brand to the US.’

<https://tinyurl.com/4a963vtc>

### **Abortion reversal**

‘UK women are being “used as guinea pigs” by “abortion reversal” doctors.’ ... openDemocracy investigation reveals spread of controversial treatment that claims to ‘reverse’ abortions, supported by US Christian Right.

<https://tinyurl.com/v9m8kea3>

### **Vaccination**

Anti-vax nurse struck off for claiming the pandemic is a hoax: From the Nursing Times 3.6.21: ‘The Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) has made the decision to permanently remove a conspiracy theorist and anti-vaxer Kate Shemirani from their register. A registered nurse, non-medical prescriber and aesthetic practitioner at the time, Ms Shemirani developed a cult-like following over the past year due to her controversial views on vaccinations and lockdown. She dubbed the current world health crisis a “scamdemic plandemic” in numerous YouTube videos before she was banned from the platform.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/fjhjys26>

Meanwhile: ‘People are claiming their COVID-19 vaccines are making them magnetic, and they’re out there in the digital world sticking stuff to themselves to prove it.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/b5438tz4>

### **Crowdsourcing for treatment effectiveness**

‘Some of the world’s most complex problems can only be solved by crowdsourcing. Understanding treatment effectiveness is one of them.’ ‘StuffThatWorks helps people learn which treatments work best for their condition using smart, AI-based crowdsourcing.’

<https://www.stuffthatworks.health/abou>  
[ut](https://www.stuffthatworks.health/abou)

### **Burping babies**

‘Though a seemingly worldwide practice, there is little plausibility and no evidence to support burping infants before, during, or after feeds. And it doesn’t have anything to do with SIDS.’

<https://tinyurl.com/yewd6vu5>

### **Flouridation**

‘Tap water fluoridation has been called one of the most successful public health interventions of all time by the CDC. It has all of the hallmarks of a good public health intervention; it’s cheap way to prevent tooth decay, it can benefit everyone regardless of access to healthcare, and best of all it doesn’t require any effort for people to take advantage of it. Unfortunately like all public health interventions, it sounds like you’re doing something bad when you take it out of context. Tap water fluoridation attracts no small amount of conspiracy theorists claiming public health advocates want to dump “toxic chemicals” in the water supply.’

<https://tinyurl.com/xjzuuxe2>

### **Yoga**

‘Back in December, 2020, Chief Scientist for the WHO Dr. Soumya Swaminathan tweeted about a study that suggested yoga helped improve various blood markers in people with diabetes. However, a major flaw prevents the study from being rigorous enough to believe its conclusions.’

<https://sciencebasedmedicine.org/the-yoga-rct/>

### **The Lancet**

‘How the Lancet lost our trust.’ ‘The Lancet is still going strong, but it exists in a very different system of academic journals than that of the 19th century.’

<https://tinyurl.com/3673xmr8>

## **CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND MISINFORMATION**

(see also *COVID-19 under 'Medicine'*)

### **Fake news**

‘The Great Moon Hoax of 1835: The Birth of Fake News? The Great Moon Hoax of 1835 was the most spectacular global news event of the year, despite it being a complete fabrication. Was it



satire gone wrong, or a cynical ploy to sell newspapers?’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/52pnpdz5>

And: Educative Interventions to Combat Misinformation ‘This study uses a field experiment in India to test the efficacy of a pedagogical intervention on respondents’ ability to identify misinformation during the 2019 elections (N = 1,224).’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/wfzjz2ac>

## PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHIATRY

### Open-mindedness

‘Where do you stand on pheasant shooting? Or single-religion schools? Or abortion? However you feel, your attitudes probably have a strong moral basis. This makes them especially resistant to change. And since anyone who holds an opposing view, based on their own moral stance, is unlikely to be easily swayed by your arguments, these kinds of disputes tend to lead to blow-outs within families and workplaces, as well, of course, as online. So, anything that can encourage people to be more open to at least thinking about an alternative point of view could be helpful, reasoned Mengran Xu and Richard E. Petty at The Ohio State University, US. And in a new paper in Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, they reveal a potentially promising method for doing just this.’

<https://tinyurl.com/59exnvt>

### Human vision

‘Seven Strange Quirks of Human Vision: It might be the best-studied of all our senses, but surprises about the way our vision works just keep on coming. Recent research has startling and also salutary lessons about how we see.’

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

### Autism

From Australia: ‘False hope: desperate families prey to ‘nonsense’ snake-oil treatments for autism: A parliamentary inquiry into autism has heard submissions about how debunked treatments are peddled as hope, but also

personal stories, and both break and warm hearts.’

<https://tinyurl.com/mrsea9wb>

### Mindfulness

‘Mindfulness’ for cancer patients: Has a popular trend gone too far?

<https://tinyurl.com/mnxp8nxf>

### Dunbar’s number

‘In a 1993 study, Robin Dunbar, a British anthropologist, theorized that humans could have no more than about 150 meaningful relationships, a measure that became known as Dunbar’s number. But researchers at Stockholm University published a paper last week calling that number into question, finding that people could have far more friends if they put in the effort.’

<https://tinyurl.com/389cv8hx>

### False memory

Lecture 17 (video) on Recent False memory research, for the course Trauma, Memory, and Law by Lawrence Petihis. ‘In this lecture I look at recent research, from 2020 and 2021, on false memories.’ See also previous lectures on this theme. At:

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

And from Chris French: ‘Prof Henry Otgaar gave an excellent overview of the “Revival of the Memory Wars” recently and it is now available on YouTube for you to watch’:

<https://tinyurl.com/yhct64nc>

### Personality

‘Are our personalities set in stone, or can we choose to change them? In this bonus episode, Matthew Warren talks to former Research Digest editor Christian Jarrett about his new book *Be Who You Want: Unlocking the Science of Personality Change*. Christian discusses the evidence-based methods you can use to alter your personality, whether you’re an introvert who wants to become the life of the party, or you simply wish you were a little more open to new experiences. He also explains how our personalities evolve over the course of our lifespans, even when we’re not consciously trying to change them, and ponders how they might be affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.’

<https://tinyurl.com/nf4e3v67>

### The Rorschach Ink Blot Test

‘Critical review of the use of the Rorschach in European courts’: ‘In relation to the admissibility of evidence obtained using projective personality tests arose in *F v. Bevéndorlási és Állampolgársági Hivatam* (2018). The Court of Justice of the European Union has held that an expert’s report can only be accepted if it is based on the international scientific community’s standards, but has refrained from stipulating what these standards are. It appears timely for European psychologists to decide what standards should be applied to determine whether or not a test is appropriate for psycholegal use. We propose standards and then apply them to the Rorschach because it was used in this case and is an exemplar of projective tests. We conclude that the Rorschach does not meet the proposed standards and that psychologists should abstain from using it in legal proceedings even in the absence of a clear judicial prohibition.’

<https://tinyurl.com/52hzfunz>

### Dunning-Kruger effect

‘The Dunning-Kruger effect is one of the most famous—and predictable—biases in human behavior. It posits that people who don’t understand a topic also lack sufficient knowledge to recognize that they don’t understand it. Instead, these people know just enough to convince themselves that they completely grasp the topic, with results ranging from hilarious to painful. Inspired by the widespread sharing of blatantly false news articles, a team of US-based researchers looked into whether Dunning-Kruger might be operating in the field of media literacy. Not surprisingly, people overestimate their ability to identify misleading news. But the details are complicated, and there’s no obvious route to overcoming this bias.’

<https://tinyurl.com/kbdzsvc2>

### ‘Race-norming’

From the US: ‘The NFL (*National Football League*) on Wednesday pledged to halt the use of “race-norming”, which assumed Black players started out with lower cognitive

function — in the \$1 billion settlement of brain injury claims and review past scores for any potential race bias. The practice made it harder for Black retirees to show a deficit and qualify for an award. The standards were created in the 1990s in hopes of offering more appropriate treatment to dementia patients, but critics faulted the way they were used to determine payouts in the NFL concussion case.’

<https://tinyurl.com/3pftn6sa>

## RELIGION

### Satanic panic

‘The truth about the Satanic Panic... and how it could happen again’: Skeptics in the Pub Online presentation by Chris French on 27.5.21. At:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5gly\\_woPI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5gly_woPI)

As above (but slightly longer) at Conway Hall, 10.5.21

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nU1DZ8UC5E>

### Scientology

‘Scientology’s Tale of Disgrace: I’ve watched every episode of the three seasons of Leah Remini: Scientology and the Aftermath (*see Wikipedia entry—Ed.*). This deep dive into Scientology’s history, precepts, abuses, and the personal travails of its adherents is worth your time. It’s an object lesson in gullibility, groupthink, and “you’ve got to be kidding me” supplication.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/ydzfr28u>

Meanwhile: ‘Australia’s charity regulator has been called on to investigate Scientology amid concerns it is abusing its not-for-profit status.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/4b3wejsz>

## EDUCATION

### Critical thinking

‘*There’s No Such Thing As The Tooth Fairy!*’ is a picture book based on the work of Harriet Hall. Please support our campaign to teach young children the importance of critical thinking and get this book out to as many UK primary schools as we can.’

<https://tinyurl.com/24t45ctr>

## POLITICS AND SOCIAL POLICY

‘The Biden administration announced Monday the formal launch of its Scientific Integrity Task Force which will review the federal government’s scientific policies to ensure they are free from inappropriate political influence. The 46 members come from across the federal government and will meet for the first time on Friday. The review comes after several former Trump administration officials have said they felt political pressures while doing their jobs during the pandemic.’

<https://tinyurl.com/nuwuk5nc>

## MISCELLANEOUS

### UFOs and aliens

(*See also ‘From the ASKE Chair’*)

‘The late Duke of Edinburgh subscribed to a magazine called “Flying Saucer Review” and had a library of books about extraterrestrial encounters.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/6bn3rhfk>

Out now: USA Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Preliminary Assessment: Unidentified Aerial Phenomena’. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/uxrtab4>

Also: ‘Those amazing Navy UFO videos may have down-to-earth explanations, skeptics contend. ... Crews on Navy warships have reported seeing unidentified aircraft similar to those captured on video.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/38puxyf4>

‘People in the UK do more internet searches about (*extra-terrestrial*) aliens than any other European country... and they’re dying to know what they look like!’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/p9yxpnrw>

Also: ‘Decades after flying saucers first captured Americans’ imaginations, Navy videos that defy explanation have sparked legitimate inquiries — some of them from senators.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/3k6xpyea>

And: ‘Contacting aliens could end all life on earth. Let’s stop trying.’ ‘Whatever the UFO report says, it’s time to set some rules for talking to extraterrestrials.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/ajum7cf6>

### Psychics

‘Psychics in conversation’: recording made on 7.6.21 and featuring Chris French, Michael Marsh and two ‘psychics’.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KlvaAnnKrnY>

### Ghosts

‘World’s 5 Most Haunted Places where you cannot Travel Alone: Interested in meeting ghosts? Then travel to these spooky places but don’t forget to take someone along.’ Includes the Isle of Wight. (*Some mistake surely—Ed.*)

<https://tinyurl.com/46fremw3>

## 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. 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 hosting online presentations that often have a skeptical flavour. Of interest are the following:

<https://tinyurl.com/y7dmgktl>

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