

THE SKEPTICAL INTELLIGENCER

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Incorporating the Skeptical Adversaria: the ASKE Newsletter

Edited by Michael Heap

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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, as is any correspondence.

[How about a trip to Vienna in September 2022?](#)

The European Council for Skeptical Organisations, in conjunction with the Austrian Skeptics, is hosting the 19th European Skeptics Congress in Vienna from September 9-11, 2022. Keep you eye on the ESCO congress webpage at:

<https://www.ecso.org/esc2022/>



FROM THE ASKE CHAIR

Michael Heap

Generating and believing bull****

A few weeks ago my early morning blues were blown away when I read in the *Times* (6.11.21) an account (*note 1*) of a glorious piece of research conducted on a topic of growing interest in the media and even academia (*note 2*), namely bull**** or BS (being of the old school, I still can't allow myself to give it its full title): how we can define and recognise it, why people (including you and me) are so ready to believe it, and how we can, collectively and individually, counter it. No doubt this research has been stimulated by the appearance of much BS in social media. An additional interest has been how we can generate it for ourselves, most recently by artificial intelligence.

The research in question (not yet peer-reviewed) specifically targeted something that has come to be known as pseudo-profound bull-s**** (PPBS). In their abstract the authors state:

In two experiments (N = 571) we examined the influence of speakers' admirability on meaning-seeking and wise reasoning in response to pseudo-profound bullshit. In both studies, statements that sounded superficially impressive but lacked intent to communicate meaning generated meaning-seeking, but only when delivered by high admirability speakers (e.g., the Dalai Lama) as compared to low admirability speakers (e.g., Kim Kardashian). The effect of speakers' admirability on meaning-seeking was unique to pseudo-profound bullshit statements and was absent for mundane (Study 1) and motivational (Study 2) statements. In Study 2, participants also engaged in wiser reasoning for pseudo-profound bullshit (vs. motivational) statements and did more so when speakers were high in admirability.

So, for example, a person confronted with the PPBS statement 'Our minds extend across space and time as waves in

the ocean of one mind' may be more inclined to judge it as wise and meaningful if it is attributed Michelle Obama than to Justin Bieber (neither in fact said it). The tendency, which is discussed in less academic language in various sources (see, e.g., *note 3*), is known as 'the guru effect' and a Google search will yield numerous academic papers on this subject.

At least one other critic disagreed, remarking that the painting looked as if an ape had done it, which was indeed the case.

None of this is to say that those admired for their wisdom and sagacity are not beyond uttering PPBS themselves. But the statements used in the above study were the output of two online facilities for this purpose, namely the New-Age Bullshit Generator (*note 4*) and the Random Deepak Chopra Quote Generator (*note 5*).

There are other artificial (as opposed to real-live) PPBS generators to be found online, some for specific domains such as finance and business, postmodernism, and art criticism (all easily found by a Google search). One that I think would be very useful, and which I haven't yet found online, is a politicians' answer generator (PAG). The main use of this would be interviewing politicians on radio and television. The output in response to each question could be read by an actor, leaving the politician to get on with the work they are doing, whether this be for the benefit of the nation or in pursuit of their own financial interests.

All this brings to mind those occasions when 'experts' have been hoaxed into accepting PPBS as the genuine thing, the most famous example being the article "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity" by

physics professor Alan Sokal which, despite being complete nonsense, was published in 1996 in *Social Text*, an academic journal of postmodern cultural studies. However, hoaxes along these lines are not restricted to academic literature. In 1964, Ake Axelsson, a Swedish journalist, submitted four paintings to a famous art gallery in Gothenburg by 'an avant-garde' artist named Pierre Brassau. Many critics were impressed, including a certain Rolf Anderberg who opined, 'Pierre Brassau paints with powerful strokes, but also with clear determination. His brush strokes twist with furious fastidiousness. Pierre is an artist who performs with the delicacy of a ballet dancer.' However at least one other critic disagreed, remarking that the painting looked as if an ape had done it, which was indeed the case. There are other examples of this (*notes 6*).

The guru effect appears to be a special instance of the more general phenomenon that whether we accept or how we judge a statement, claim, or opinion can depend greatly on how we feel about its source (an identified person or, for instance, a newspaper). Years ago I read an account of a parliamentary debate in which an MP on the government benches gave a positive appraisal of some aspects of the country's economic situation, only to be jeered and booed at by opposition MPs. The MP then informed the House that he was quoting exactly what one of the opposition front-bench MPs had said in a speech the previous week. Ouch!

Just recently (*note 7*) the instigator of a conspiracy theory that birds are really drone replicas built by the US intelligence service to spy on the public, which has caused mass protests, has now announced that he made the whole thing up. Thus we have an example of a hoax conspiracy theory (I leave it to the logicians to sort this one out).

And finally, I can't resist mentioning my all-time favourite hoaxer, an American by the name of Alan Abel, aka

G. Clifford Prout. His most famous hoax claim was that he was president of an organization called the Society for Indecency to Naked Animals (S.I.N.A.). He opined that naked animals were ‘destroying the moral integrity of our great nation’, and campaigned to have them clothed in pants and dresses. He attracted thousands of followers and I vaguely recall that he raised an appreciable amount of money, some in the form of legacies left by people in their wills. I remember an interview he gave on British television in the 1960s, in which

he expressed outrage when he was introduced to a cow with no clothes on. My memory is also of him producing a pair of pants that he had designed for frog. And he ended the interview by singing an anthem he had composed for his organisation. But that’s not all: according to one account (*note 7*) amongst the 30 ‘high-profile’ hoaxes he perpetrated over 60 years was his convincing the press that he had the world’s smallest penis.

Notes

1. Kara-Yakoubian1, M et al. (2021) Hidden wisdom or pseudo-profound bullshit? The effect of speaker admirability. Prior to peer review at: <https://tinyurl.com/y2bkfnth>.
2. The University of Washington now offers a short course entitled ‘Calling Bullshit’. <https://tinyurl.com/3t8ebxxf>
3. <https://tinyurl.com/2p8vyznu>
4. <https://sebpearce.com/bullshit/>
5. <http://wisdomofchopra.com/>
6. <https://tinyurl.com/6txrssun>
7. <https://tinyurl.com/bddx3hk9>



LOGIC AND INTUITION

A barrel half full

You have a regular-shaped open-topped barrel which you have roughly half filled but you want it to be exactly half full. How can you check this without using any measuring device or indeed any other implement?

A barrel emptied

If Alex can drink one barrel of beer in 6 days, and Kevin can drink one barrel of beer in 12 days, how long will it take them to drink one barrel of beer together?

Through a mirror

Binita is standing in front of a vertical mirror while trying on a new sari, but she can’t see the lower part of her body. She steps backwards so she can see her image in full. Will she?



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/>

Find out what is happening on the skeptical scene throughout Europe by visiting this site. Their special Christmas podcast, as usual, covers a multitude of diverse topics. Also check the Events Calendar for Europe at:

https://theesp.eu/events_in_europe

The 19th European Skeptics Congress, Vienna 2022

See the announcement on the front page of this issue.

A reminder that all the thought-provoking talks and lectures delivered at the 18th ESC can now be viewed on

YouTube. For the link, visit <http://www.ecso.org/>.

Dutch Skeptics win in defamation case

<https://skepp.be/en>

From SKEPP, the Belgian skeptics society: ‘It has taken quite some time but today the Appeals Court in Belgium judged that free speech and well-founded criticism are more important than the perceived wrongs of the commercial organization being criticized. The claim of our adversaries was soundly rejected by the court On December 9 the Appeals Court in Belgium soundly rejected the claims as unfounded of Carl Van de Velde against our authors Patrick Vermeren and Bart Van de Ven. ‘Our authors wrote a skeptical article in the Belgian SKEPP magazine about two companies active

in the field of human resources that use dubious theories such as NLP (Neurolinguistic Programming) and characterization of people based on their skull (phrenology) and physiognomy (interpretation of outward

appearance, in this case of face and hair). One of the two companies discussed in the article was the Carl Van de Velde Training Institute....Bart and Patrick have - based on careful research of multiple sources - criticized the

content of the pseudo-scientific master classes as well as the marketing tricks Van de Velde uses to attract participants.’



MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

Traditional Chinese Medicine

In the field of medicine, those who strongly oppose treatments and procedures that are unsupported by current scientific knowledge and clinical research must weigh up the advantages to the public of outlawing such practices against the undesirability of curtailing people’s freedom of choice. On the whole, the public do not appear so ill-disposed to alternative medicines and procedures; some popular ones, such as homeopathy, are not harmful when taken alongside conventional treatment (which may have its own risks and adverse side-effects); they may have placebo value; and some of them, such as those involving massage, relaxation and exercise, are experienced as pleasurable and, while not being curative, may be of some physical and psychological benefit, such as stress reduction. The most potent arguments against these practices and in favour of restrictive legislation is the risks—many unknown—that some of the supposed remedies carry; the adverse and even fatal consequences when people are persuaded to rely entirely on these; and the money they waste when they undergo such treatments.

Most recently there has been increasing recognition of another undesirable consequence of some alternative medicines, namely the destructive effects of their procurement on biodiversity. I refer specifically to traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), on which I penned a piece for ‘Medicine on the Fringe’ in the *Skeptical Intelligencer*, Vol 22 (4) 2019 (*note 1*).

I noted then that TCM is a huge industry in China and, while largely unsupported by medical science, commands the support of the Chinese government. So no chance for arguments about evidence-based practice there. As I also commented, TCM includes the use of animal products. Amongst the items I observed on my visit to a Chinese market were dried centipedes and snakes, turtle shells, bits of hedgehog, and dried deer penises and seahorses, both of which are touted as aphrodisiacs.

TCM products containing animal parts are openly available for sale in retail outlets in Africa.

The growing popularity of these products (related to the remarkable rise of the affluence of Chinese people) has led to serious depletion amongst some species, notably the seahorse as well as the rhinoceros, pangolin and the donkey (gelatin extracted from donkey hooves and skin is an important ingredient in TCM). Not only that, but their procurement often entails wholesale cruelty to the animals involved. One of the vilest practices is the extraction of bile from the gall bladders of live sun bears and Asiatic black bears (*note 2*).

There are now reports of a disturbing escalation of these trends. In November, the London-based Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) reported that China is promoting the growth of TCM clinics across Africa

as part of its ‘Belt and Road’ political strategy, and systematically destroying its biodiversity (leopards are another species targeted).

Key findings of EIA report include the following:

- TCM is gaining ground in Africa, with an increasing number of African governments entering into official agreements with the Government of China to support TCM development;
- TCM is being further endorsed under national laws in certain African countries, as seen in Namibia and South Africa;
- TCM products containing animal parts are openly available for sale in retail outlets in Africa;
- The COVID-19 pandemic has enabled the Chinese Government to strengthen its promotion of TCM in Africa;
- There is an urgent need to address the risks posed by popularising TCM in Africa, notably resulting from the expansion of TCM pharmaceutical companies targeting traditional African medicine (TAfM) and TCM consumers.

Trust in science

There is at least some encouraging news from the Wellcome Global Monitor (*note 4*) which, when coronavirus cases were surging towards the end of 2020, conducted a survey of public opinion in 113 countries and territories. More than 119,000 people were asked about ‘the impact of the pandemic on their lives, whether they supported their government’s participation in global

efforts to prevent future diseases, and how they viewed their government's handling of scientific advice around Covid-19'.

The survey found that 'People's trust in science and scientists has increased. Globally, those who said they trust scientists "a lot" rose from 34% in 2018 to 43% by the end of 2020. These increases were highest among those who indicated they know "some" or "not much/ nothing at all" about science.' On the down side, 'People are not sure that their governments value scientific advice. World leaders need to listen and show that they share public confidence in the role of science in solving health challenges fairly for everyone.' And sadly, the pandemic has

had a disproportionate impact on low-income countries and people with low incomes across all countries.

The science of sugar

'The Sweet and Sticky Science of Sugar' is the title of a recent article on McGill University's Office of Science and Society's website (*note 5*). This is a good source of up-to-date information of interest to skeptics and one conclusion of this particular article that caught my eye supports something that has long been suspected by certain nutritional scientists, namely that there is no reliable association between sugar intake and hyperactivity in children ('functional reactive hypoglycemia' to give it its grand title). Researchers have

found sugar to have no more effect (and possibly even less effect) on children's activity level than placebo. Perhaps the belief in an association has to do with the possibility that children tend to consume sugary drinks when they are in situations that encourage excessive activity, such as birthday parties.

Notes

1. <https://tinyurl.com/b2jrsc6>
2. <https://tinyurl.com/rtpemgh>
3. 'Lethal Remedy: How the promotion of some traditional Chinese medicine in Africa poses a major threat': at <https://tinyurl.com/4fzfsjn9>.
4. <https://tinyurl.com/3ket7sku>
5. <https://tinyurl.com/52c3cswz>



LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

Landspeak: Science, English and the languages of Canada and Ireland

In mid-March 2021 there was staged an online event with the name 'Landspeak', involving Canadian First Nations and Gaelic-speaking Irish representatives (*note 1*). It was 'a series of free online talks, workshops, events, and activities, seeking to build connections through explorations in culture, sport, creativity, language, and the environment'. Landspeak was presented by the Ireland-Canada University Foundation, the Centre for Creative Writing and Oral Culture at the University of Manitoba, and two centres at University College, Dublin.

While admirable, the event became quite 'heavy' from a skeptical/modernist viewpoint. The Canadian and Irish speakers were naturally very proud of their traditional languages, in which they are fluent, and eager to conserve and promote them along with the associated cultures and their relationships with their lands. No-one, least of all an erstwhile sociolinguist like me, could reasonably object to this, and indeed we linguists celebrate such

enterprise. And being steeped in local language and culture need not prevent one from being also proficient in the ways of the modern world (as manifested in these people's grasp of the technology which enabled Landspeak itself) or in languages of wider communication such as English. Almost all contemporary users of these languages are bicultural and bilingual.

Being steeped in local language and culture need not prevent one from being also proficient in the ways of the modern world.

But the increasing foregrounding of negative aspects of colonial history has cast English and 'western' activities/thought-patterns such as writing and science in a **negative** light. There were manifestations of this in Landspeak, notably from some in the chat who argued for instance that 'the supremacy of the written language and especially English language separated us from the sacredness of the land and

world and distorted our view of all our relationships'. In this context there were echoes of Lynne Kelly's contentious theory (put forth in her book, which I reviewed in this forum) of the development of human society out of the long early pre-literate phase – featuring huge roles for knowledge preserved in memory and for intimate connections with the landscape – into the supposedly much less satisfactory current situation where literacy has come to dominate. Note also the extreme, confused and ill-founded notions of decriers of (alphabetic) literacy such as Leonard Shlain, which have been widely embraced by readers who know even less of these matters.

Obviously, a situation where local languages (not only speech but also in written forms, some of them recently devised) were really thriving again and providing ready links to ecological and traditional entities (less readily expressed in contemporary English, French etc.) would be welcome; but this would not have to be at the expense of international scientific (and philosophical) culture, expressed principally in writing in languages of

wider communication. It would obviously be unwise to **reject** these latter modes of thought, as some participants appeared to consider reasonable/justified.

Even more controversially, it was also suggested during Landspeak that local superstitions, beliefs about spirits, etc., as expressed in say Irish Gaelic terminology, are actually veridical, i.e. that science is **mistaken** in seeing itself as having ‘moved on’ from such notions to a more accurate world-view. This position closely resembles the ‘science denial/ fallism’ now being promoted in places like South Africa. One chatter referenced Vine Deloria, who (as I have previously noted) adopted an anti-science standpoint in the context of the American/Canadian Pacific-North-West (Native American origins, Kennewick Man, etc.). Deloria took a view similar to that of some Australian Aboriginal people also seen talking online who proclaim ‘we were always here’ on the basis of local ‘dreamtime’ myths, against all the scientific evidence. In contrast, as an Aboriginal elder (**not** expressing hostility) observed in conversation with the Australian anthropologist Josephine Flood, ‘whitefella im got **no** dreamin’. Rephrased in non-Aboriginal terms, this is true for most of us (white or non-white) modernist **scholars**, at any rate – and, while we can learn much more from traditional societies about their worlds than we once believed, traditional ‘dreaming’ is hardly what we ourselves need for our own specific scientific and other modernist purposes. See further below.

Even within England this kind of consideration can easily become one-sidedly anti-modernist. For example, the excellent Wessex folk-rock band Show Of Hands (see especially their powerful song ‘Roots’) urge the revival of English traditions and local identity (national and regional); they feel that contemporary English people lose out in this respect by comparison with ‘Celtic’ and originally migrant communities in the UK. This program in itself is by no means disturbing; but the band sometimes give the impression

that they think that anything which is modern and **non**-local (perhaps even science, which is necessarily cross-cultural) is thereby of less significance.

Native American pre-history: facts and traditions

In September 2021, media outlets reported the discovery of evidence that human footprints in New Mexico were made 23,000 years BP – some 10,000 years earlier than many archaeologists had believed humans arrived in the New World (*note 2.*) (At one time dates as early as 33,000 BP had been suggested for some sites, but the evidence for these dates had ultimately been found lacking. The nature of ‘artefacts’ discovered in Mexico in 2020, allegedly involving similar very early dates, has now been disputed: the observed phenomena may be wholly natural [*note 3.*]) The journalist Nick Martin proclaimed that the New Mexico finding endorsed local Native American traditions, and that it was ‘an indictment of [mainstream scholarship] that this Indigenous truth was ignored by non-Indigenous archaeologists for so long’.

It is misleading of Martin to suggest that ‘Indigenous findings ... and voices continue to be ignored, even when they are proved correct’.

But what exactly do these traditions say? Well, the claim quoted by Martin is simply ‘We have been here since time immemorial’. Such statements have been made in various other Native American contexts, for example in the Pacific North-West (see above). Taken literally, they are simply false. *Homo sapiens* came to the Americas in a **late** stage of its drawn-out diaspora from its African origin. 40,000 years ago, there were, to all appearances, no people at all in the New World. And if ‘time immemorial’ here has only a general reference (‘many generations ago’) and thereby includes these new dates, why does it not also include the more recent but still ancient dates

previously proposed? Understood in this sense, the claim is too vague to be assessed.

Martin states: ‘This truth – this *fact* – is enshrined through our stories’. But (provisional) archaeological and historical ‘truths’ are not established through local stories, which are certainly interesting and relevant in this context but are sometimes found to be mistaken – and in this instance are vague. The word *fact*, in particular, is being tendentiously misused here. (But is it a silver lining that Martin apparently **believes** in facts, unlike many these days whose postmodernism tends to out-and-out relativism? Or is this notion being introduced as a facilitator for the ‘cancelling’ of mainstream views?) And it is misleading of Martin to suggest that ‘Indigenous **findings** [MN: a worse than tendentious use of this word, reminiscent of the Afrocentrist use of the word *philosophy* to refer to local cosmological myths, etc.] and voices continue to be ignored, even when they are proved correct’. Where they **are** ‘proved’ correct, as may well eventuate here, the ideas involved will surely **not** be ignored.

In addition, modernist scholars will not be willing to accept positions such as ‘aboriginal’ world views which, as one of Martin’s sources states, ‘assume that human action [including academic study] ... must be located in an ethical spiritual context as well as its physical and social situation’ or the view that ‘working in Indigenous contexts may require researchers to start from a subjective position rather than the objectivity that academia often prizes’. Understanding and respecting local traditions (and behaving ethically) is one thing; incorporating associated spiritualistic or subjective notions into scientific analysis is quite another.

All this is not to deny that some previous mainstream theories of early human settlement of the Americas may have been in part grounded in racist assumptions. Neither does it obviate the important point that

Native American **participation** in such studies has generally been conspicuous by its (near-)absence.

It is not clear to me how the truth of any quasi-historical narrative could be demonstrated ‘through our bodies, and through our natural relatives’, as Martin suggests.

Input to these issues from my own domain of linguistics is largely speculative, because none of the ancient communities in question was literate. This also deprives us of access to ancient historical and cultural information, as opposed to current beliefs.

Austin Osman Spare, Walter Benjamin & associates: a novel ‘take’ on language

Viktor Wynd, who runs the remarkable Museum of Curiosities in Hackney, London, stages online talks on a range of mystical and mysterious topics. On 17/10/21 the speaker was Michael Staley, and the topic was the life, work and legacy of Austin Osman Spare (1886-1956), who was primarily an artist with a focus upon the occult (*note 4*).

Spare developed a magico-religious philosophy called the Zos Kia Cultus. He early rejected the Christianity in which he had been raised and instead based his notions upon those of Theosophy and other oriental belief-systems. Spare used the word *Zos* to refer to the human body and elsewhere as a name for himself, and – although he himself wrote little about the background to his ideas and much is disputed – it appears that he was fascinated by the rarity in English of the letter Z (which is in fact readily explained in terms of Latin and Greek). He invented or adopted/adapted various other words with occult significance.

Spare was especially interested in ‘sigils’: symbols with special significance in magical paradigms, said to be non-arbitrary and often astrological or cabalistic in character. He developed the written forms of sigils by condensing letters of the alphabet into diagrammatic ‘glyphs of desire’,

representing thoughts but integrated into postural practices (*note 5*)

Ball for his part wrote a poem called ‘Gadji beri bimba’ using a mixture of invented words, many of them apparently based (unsystematically) on words in a range of genuine languages.

Spare’s thinking about written forms may have been influenced by Hugo Ball’s contemporary conception of words as complex magical images (*note 6*). Another source may have been the German author Walter Benjamin’s highly non-standard view that ‘mediation’, as involved in the ‘magical’ immediacy of mental communication, is the fundamental problem of linguistic theory (!) and the primary ‘problem of language’ (*note 7*).

Benjamin held that, like artistic activity, the use of language is not predominantly a matter of communication. This is similar to the Chomskyan position that language is essentially a means of self-expression rather than communication. But according to Benjamin even the practice of **translation** is not essentially to do with communication with readers unschooled in the source language. He argues, indeed, that a translation should not aim at communicating the meaning of the original because the communication of its content is not essential to appreciation of the translation (eh?) (*note 8*).

Benjamin also held that in every language (taken as a whole) ‘one and the same thing is meant’; he used the term ‘pure language’ to express this notion. Linguists, aware as they are of linguistic diversity, or even non-linguists who have learned languages not closely related to their first languages, will find this difficult to accept – even without taking into account cultural and conceptual differences involving words which find no precise translation-equivalents. Linguistically-aware philosophers will agree.

And where **individual words** are concerned Benjamin himself, in apparent self-contradiction, urged that even precise translation-equivalents ‘mean’ differently in different languages. He treated as significant even cases where the sounds (but not the meaning) of a shorter word are quite by chance contained within a longer, unrelated word in Language A but where this is not the case for the equivalent words in Language B (and of course such phenomena are **almost always** language-specific). Thus the English word *bread* includes the phonological form (but not the meaning) of the shorter word *red*, whereas the French equivalent *pain* does not contain any French form meaning ‘red’. But users of languages are not consciously aware of such points unless they are brought to their attention; and to my knowledge no linguist has reported usage or behaviour suggestive of awareness of them at **any** level, except where deliberate punning is in question.

Ball for his part wrote a poem called ‘Gadji beri bimba’ using a mixture of invented words, many of them apparently based (unsystematically) on words in a range of genuine languages.

Obviously all this is very far from the focus and the stances of mainstream linguistics, and it illustrates how thinkers with quite other concerns can arrive at ‘different’ notions in this area – most of which are unlikely to interest linguists proper who are not active skeptics, even where they warrant attention in other respects.

Artefacts, populations, languages, perceptions: Ancient and modern Egypt (with a glance at Australia)

The Chau Chak Wing Museum at the University of Sydney offers online lectures on historical and archaeological topics. On 28/10/21 the talk was on ‘Your Ancient Egypt: Their Living Egypt’s Dispersed Heritage’; the speaker was the Egyptian archaeologist Heba Abd el Gawad.

The speaker argued forcefully not principally for the return of Ancient Egyptian artefacts from museums in

‘western’ nations (including former colonisers) – a now very familiar theme – but rather for a change to the current perceptions of ‘western’ archaeologists and Egyptologists, which she identified as still ‘colonialist’.

As has become the norm, no-one challenged any of the speaker’s claims or stances in chat. Because the base for these sessions is in Australia, the chat was initially populated with the currently more-or-less obligatory (and not **altogether** unreasonable) acknowledgments of Aboriginal custodianship of the parts of Australia where the organisers and prominent attenders are based. Some of these included exaggerated statements such as ‘this always was Aboriginal land’. (How can we be **certain** that there were no earlier human inhabitants? And at one time there were no humans at all in Australia, or indeed on Earth.) This kind of performance sets an anti-colonial tone for such sessions. In this context it would have taken some courage to dispute any statements made by the speaker. Actually, I myself might have done this, but insufficient time was allowed.

The currently ‘hot’ question of where ancient artefacts – especially those regarded as of world cultural significance – should be preserved and displayed is obviously complex, and the best solutions will differ from case to case and will alter as circumstances change. For example, some countries still lack the necessary museum infrastructure. But a factor more relevant here involves the relationship between the ancient cultures in question and the current cultures and politics in the areas where these flourished. While the speaker – in a manner typical of recent discussion – emphasised the **perceptions** of these matters on the part of modern Egyptian people (which she urged must be respected), the **fact** is that in the case of Egypt the connection between artefacts and living people is essentially only geographical. Even if some Ancient Egyptian DNA persists in the contemporary Egyptian population, and even though the artefacts are of great **interest** to many modern

Egyptians (as they are to others), the territory has undergone repeated incursions and cultural changes over the centuries, and modern Egypt is a predominantly Muslim, predominantly Arabic-speaking country. The artefacts are thus only very indirectly relevant to the current Egyptian population. And they are not seen in ‘western’ countries as culturally associated with modern Egypt – and in particular they are (rightly) not seen as connected with Islam (whatever feelings might be aroused by perceived connections with Islam, generally or in the context of modern Egypt).

The section of the modern Egyptian population which shares the most with Ancient Egypt is the Christian community.

This does not mean that modern people in the countries in question can legitimately be excluded from discussions of such matters – even though in some cases (such as that of Egypt) it is tendentious to refer to ‘source communities’ as opposed to ‘source countries’. Well-informed local input should obviously be factored in.

It might also be pointed out that the section of the modern Egyptian population which shares the most with Ancient Egypt is the Christian community, through its liturgical use of the Coptic language, a form of Late Egyptian. (As a linguist will emphasise, Coptic does not resemble Arabic, and it is written in a completely different script.) But at various times, including under Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1954-70 and indeed more recently, the Egyptian Christian population has suffered from discrimination practised by the Muslim Egyptian authorities.

I suggest that the Egyptian situation should be seen as similar to the situation involving pre-English artefacts and structures found in England, which are rightly not regarded by the well-informed as **being** English – perhaps rather ‘British’ on a very broad cross-

millennial perspective understood to include the once more widespread Welsh, the now-vanished Picts, etc. Similarly, the Turks know that their ancestors arrived quite recently in what is now Turkey and, while impressed by pre-Turkish artefacts and structures in their country and very concerned to preserve them, do not attempt to claim ‘ownership’ of them.

Additional points raised by the speaker included the matter of the treatment of human remains. But, again, any human remains found in an Ancient Egyptian context are unlikely to be connected with the current Egyptian population. Compare how certain Maori groups seeking to block the archaeological study of some old graves in New Zealand have based their actions on claims to the effect that the burials are Maori, which in this case is a *prima facie* more plausible scenario (although fringe thinkers who believe in pre-Polynesian settlement continue to argue, claiming that the observable surface features do not **look** like Maori artefacts).

It was also suggested that the organisation and signage within museums in the UK (etc.) often reflect racist and inaccurate attitudes towards Ancient Egypt. For example, in the World Museum, Liverpool there is a division between ‘Ancient Egypt’ and ‘World Cultures’, which the speaker regarded as indicative of prejudice. But this division actually reflects the fact that the museum’s prized Egyptian collection is considerably larger than its collections for other ancient cultures, which are accordingly grouped together. There is no racism here, and no question of treating Egyptian material as in any way ‘different’.

Animals and language revisited

In Chapter 8 of my 2013 book *Strange Linguistics* I discussed many claims to the effect that some non-human animals have communication systems similar in complexity and flexibility to human language; that is to say, not **merely** communication systems but genuine (if very differently structured and realised) languages. Claims of this kind continue

to arise. As before, not all of the researchers in question display adequate awareness of the criteria which distinguish human language from all other previously discovered communication systems – syntax, ‘double-articulation’ into morphemes and phonemes or the equivalent, reference to entities not present, etc. – but some do, at least in some respects. Karsten Brensing, while wrongly suggesting that mainstream linguistic thought identifies ‘word’-level semantics as species-specific, has more relevantly invoked Japanese findings to the effect that great tits use at least one (rudimentary) aspect of syntax: significant ‘word’-order. And Michael Bronstein and others have argued that the evidence suggests that some cetaceans meet a number of the criteria. Indeed, they look forward to a near future in which humans will be able to learn cetacean systems and converse with their users (*note 9*). But even if cetaceans do have languages we will

need to study their phonation and structures in much more detail first.

On another front, a new, ambitious directory of elephant behaviour and vocalisations ‘offers amazing insights into their minds and culture’. Joyce Poole and Petter Granli run a project called ‘Elephant Voices’; their ideas are available on their ‘Elephant Ethnogram’. Poole (who has a long-running, well-informed but also emotional interest in elephants) states: ‘I know they say really complicated things, and I think they “talk” a lot about us – about humans – and how they should respond to us’. But as far as hard, persuasively analysed data are concerned the elephant ‘dictionary’ presented here appears to be mainly that. The evidence for syntax and other key features, which would lead to an elephant **grammar**, remains marginal (*note 10*).

And a team of researchers studied 165 dogs and their owners and found that the animals responded to between

15 and 215 words and (perhaps more significantly) phrases (sequences of words). But animal responses may be variously interpreted. Furthermore, phrases *per se* do not **always** manifest syntax, and in general it is not indicated that the dogs studied understood phrases other than holistically (*note 11*).

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5. <https://tinyurl.com/yckjt7ne>
6. Start from:
<https://tinyurl.com/2p8jwjk4>
7. Start from:
<https://tinyurl.com/4jjudrs8>
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11. <https://tinyurl.com/bdd68zk4>.

FREE EXPRESSION



Topics in this session are concerned with the current debate on what is permissible to say and write in the public domain, as well as more general issues such as ‘cultural sensitivity’, and ‘identity politics’. Contributions, including comments on featured articles, are very welcome.

GRIEVANCE AND ‘CYNICAL CULTURE’: THE PROVOCATIVE WORK OF HELEN PLUCKROSE

Mark Newbrook

Helen Pluckrose is a British author and cultural writer known for critiques of the currently popular extreme versions of ‘social justice’ (‘Critical Social Justice’/‘Identity Politics’, often importing ‘Cancel Culture’ etc), and of the (parallel, associated) attacks on the status of science and rationality. She has an undergraduate background in literature and a postgraduate background in cultural studies.

CSJ/ Identity Politics involves the postmodernist notion that by way of racism, sexism and other prejudices some identifiable groups of people

(females, gays, trans people, non-whites, etc) continue to be systematically disadvantaged and their ideas disparaged or ignored, to their unjustified political, social and psychological detriment. The familiar assumption of the neutrality and universal significance of current mainstream political and social institutions and of modernist belief systems such as science (or even mathematics and logic) disguises or denies these systematic biases and is thus culpably misleading and harmful.

Because of her hostility to CSJ, Pluckrose is involved in the promotion of liberal ethics (British sense of *liberal*). She has founded Counterweight, a ‘non-partisan, grassroots movement advocating for liberal concepts of social justice’, to ‘help individuals resist the imposition of CSJ on their day-to-day-lives’.

Pluckrose first came to prominence by way of the ‘Grievance Studies Affair’, aka ‘Sokal Squared’. In 2017–18, taking her lead from Alan Sokal’s famous 1996 hoax (in turn inspired by the work of Paul Gross and Norman

Levitt), Pluckrose, together with James Lindsay and Peter Boghossian, wrote 20 fake papers (under assumed names) using fashionable CSJ jargon to argue for ridiculous conclusions, and sought to have them placed in high-profile peer-reviewed journals in sociology and in ‘trendy’ fields including fat studies, gender studies and queer studies. Some of the papers were blatantly inspired by Sokal but this was often missed.

Fat studies was chosen as an exemplar of new-fangled bodies of CSJ work in which the positive aspects of the lives of those who suffer from disabilities or less than optimal physical or psychological conditions are emphasised and the disabilities themselves, even in cases where they are avoidable, are treated as not genuinely damaging; attempts to remedy them are regarded as discriminatory. Other exemplars which have recently become prominent are the claims that deafness, dyslexia etc should be seen as ‘gifts’ and fostered (the ‘Glad To Be Disabled Syndrome’?). For example, in mid-2021 Princess Beatrice (UK) stated that it would be a ‘gift’ if her then unborn baby had dyslexia. (Naturally, to express alarm at such extreme positions is not to deny that some advantages – e.g. different perspectives on language – may genuinely arise from such conditions.)

A currently prominent aspect of gender/ queer studies which presents an obvious target in this respect is the tendency to offer unqualified support to people (including very young people) who identify as transgendered or non-binary/ gender-queer, even in cases where they still count as being of their birth sex/gender by all observable criteria. Any suggestion that such a person might be ‘going through a phase’ (encouraged by what is now a strong pro-trans movement) and should take a while to decide on possibly irreversible physical changes is liable to be deemed ‘transphobic’. In fact, this tendency has brought some trans activists into conflict with representatives of other hitherto oppressed groups, for example lesbian writers who argue that some

young women who are really self-discovering lesbians are now being ‘badgered’ into seeing themselves as destined to become heterosexual males instead. More generally, there has been conflict between trans advocates and groups of cis-women concerned about e.g. biological males who still appear male but self-identify as female and seek to use female public toilets, or who seek to compete in women’s sports.

Some of the papers appeared downright silly (e.g. ‘Human Reaction to Rape Culture and Queer Performativity at Urban Dog Parks in Portland, Oregon’).

In October 2018 PLB made their experiment public. By that stage, seven of their articles had been accepted for publication and seven more were still going through various stages of the review process. Only six had been rejected. Unlike Sokal’s 1996 paper, which had been eagerly and naively accepted by the editors of the journal in question, the papers that were published in this case had gone through peer-review.

Some of the papers appeared downright silly (e.g. ‘Human Reaction to Rape Culture and Queer Performativity at Urban Dog Parks in Portland, Oregon’). Others appeared sinister, e.g. ‘Rubbing One Out: Defining Metasexual Violence of Objectification Through Non-consensual Masturbation’, which argues that men who masturbate while thinking about a woman without her consent are already perpetrators of sexual violence. Actually, since most women who are the objects of male masturbatory fantasies never become aware of this fact, it cannot even be held that fear (even unjustified fear) is generated by such actions (admittedly arguably unsavoury, but private), let alone actual violence. The scope of terms such as *violence* has been confusingly extended by CSJ.

More generally, the possibility of fear and/ or offence being generated is made much of by CSJ advocates, who hold that members of hitherto oppressed groups (women, trans people, gay people, adherents of minority religions such as [in the UK] Islam, etc) have the right to be protected from being frightened or offended, even when this is not the intent at all, e.g. where the views espoused by such groups are being subjected to unbiased academic criticism, which thus becomes a target of ‘Cancel Culture’ (see below). (Elsewhere I have discussed this as it applies to Islam.)

The fact that papers such as those written by PLB were published or even seriously considered for publication plainly brings the fields in question into disrepute.

The effects of this affair were not ALL salutary. Some ‘conservatives’ who are hostile to some of the findings of current science (e.g. on climate change) and are uninterested in injustices in society have used Sokal Squared to smear **all** academics as biased culture warriors. This is a grotesquely over-the-top and unfair interpretation of the incident. For example, the fake papers fared much better in journals of more recently-developed, already suspect ‘disciplines’ such as race, gender, and identity studies; whereas all of the papers submitted to journals in the established, better controlled discipline of sociology were rejected.

On the other hand, some promoters of race, gender, and identity studies etc. characterised Sokal Squared as ‘a coordinated attack from the right’ or the like. This misrepresents PLB’s left-leaning classical-liberal political stances; it also misses the point that their political opinions were not what was in question here but rather the clear fact that the papers were deliberately written to be nonsensical but nevertheless were accepted, or at least taken seriously, by supposedly scholarly journals. (CSJ often treats the supposedly biased motivations of writers as more important than the content of their material.)

It is suggested that PLB were able to pull off a such a massive version of the well-known Sokal Affair 22 years later precisely because entire journals and university departments have since been taken over by academics who are so committed to CSJ, Identity Politics and associated activism that they will publish/ embrace almost anything, however exaggerated or absurd, if it serves their political agenda. Some sections of the mass media and some university administrations have also been drawn into this mind-set.

Many academics with these inclinations also seek to deny platforms to speakers (even academic speakers) arguing for other positions (e.g., supporting classical-liberalism or mainstream science against new-left thought or ‘trendy’ nonsense), and to deny publication to works of this nature – and in particular to works which are overtly critical of their own ideas. This is what has come to be called ‘Cancel Culture’, in which mainstream science, historiography, analytical philosophy etc are treated as, at best, alternative non-rational viewpoints (similar to religions or the traditional ideas of pre-scientific peoples), and often as importing racist, sexist or other prejudiced notions, forming parts of a world-view which not only **developed** mainly in ‘the West’ (as it did – though not exclusively) but is implicated in racial and other biases which are current in the ‘western’ communities in question. On this account, the modernist world-view is thus **not** of universal significance or genuinely welcoming of people from all backgrounds as is urged by practitioners of science, by ‘western’ philosophers of science, and indeed by members of the world skeptical movement who critique many ‘alternative’ ideas as irrational and contrary to empirical evidence.

Supposedly, such mainstream ideas are so damagingly biased that they should be suppressed – often, not even admitted to discussion. Calls for the free

exchange of ideas (previously regarded as central to the intellectual enterprise) are dismissed as inherently philosophically biased and indeed discriminatory.

Some ‘cancellers’ differ so deeply from the mainstream as to deny the very importance of empirical evidence or reasoning.

Some ‘cancellers’ differ so deeply from the mainstream as to deny the very importance of empirical evidence or reasoning, and thus seek to overthrow current science, philosophy etc as entire institutions and to start again from scratch, treating ‘non-western’ mythical accounts of the universe, uncorroborated intuitions, etc. as reliable foundations for learning. They are often also opposed to the idea that thoughts (whether or not coherent or justifiable) may be individual in character, not rooted in groups to which the individuals in question (supposedly) belong (and thus not reflecting group biases etc.). Individualism, where it is recognised as genuinely existing, is sometimes actually given labels such as ‘toxic’. We take or should take our identity from the groups to which we belong. Some such thinkers are also inclined to dismiss the apparatus of scholarly reference to the existing literature as itself a feature of ‘western’ bias against traditional (often orally-communicated) knowledge or ‘knowledge’.

Perhaps alarmingly, even some younger skeptics appear to be moving in these directions (see my earlier comments in this forum).

Linguists such as me have taken a specific interest in the fact that much of the bias and worse imported in mainstream discourse is predictably said to be communicated by choice of usage.

In 2020 Pluckrose and Lindsay released a hard-hitting but scholarly book entitled *Cynical Theories* attacking CSJ excesses, and began a programme of public speaking aimed at drawing attention to what they saw as the urgency of seeking to reverse these trends. The book is one of a group of recent books arguing against these tendencies; it is arguably the leading current work in this domain. Unlike some of the other books in this group, it has attracted rather few hostile reviews manifesting a serious degree of coherence (some of those opposed to it may have preferred not to draw attention to it).

It must be stressed that PLB are aware of genuine biases and of ensuing discrimination. Whether or not one accepts PLB’s position as justified in large part: contrary to what some critics suggest, there is no question of trying to justify racist or sexist practices, assumptions, slurs, etc.

By way of an unfortunate coda: in September 2021 Peter Boghossian resigned from his position at Portland State University. He declared that university administrators had continuously limited free speech and had favoured ‘Critical Social Justice’/ ‘Identity Politics’ viewpoints. Boghossian is a sad loss to his employer; in addition to his involvement with Pluckrose, he taught a Science & Pseudoscience course and a critical thinking class, and in order to spur critical discussion he hosted a variety of guest lecturers promoting contentious viewpoints – many of them of a ‘fringe’ character.

Mark Newbrook has an MA and PhD in linguistics from 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).



CONTRIBUTED ARTICLES

THE MANY Rs OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE (*CONTINUED*)

Michael Heap

My 'From the ASKE Chair' contribution in the last issue of the *Intelligencer* provoked some constructive criticism from one reader which I am sure will have occurred to others. Recall that I mentioned two examples of convicted murderers, one of whom was released on licence in 2021 while release of the other was due for consideration by the Parole Board. Neither has been reported as showing remorse and the latter has not revealed the whereabouts of the victim's body. Naturally these circumstances continue to cause great distress and hurt for the victims' families. (In fact the first of these convicts, the double-murderer and rapist Colin Pitchfork, has since been recalled to prison for allegedly approaching two women while out walking.) In my article I questioned why lack of remorse is not taken more seriously by the Parole Board when considering whether someone serving a life sentence is eligible for release.

The case of the second murderer, Stuart Campbell, is problematic because, like some convicted persons, he continues to protest his innocence. If he is being truthful, how can he reveal the whereabouts of the victim's body? Here is what our reader, Mike Griffiths, has to say:

I would like to query some of the things that you say in your leading article. You say it is a bad thing for "there to be great disparity between, on the one hand, how the Criminal Justice System deals with suspected and convicted criminals and, on the other, what the public believe and expect should be done." One of the things you seem to agree with is "Helen's Law", which makes it more difficult for murderers to be released

if they do not disclose the location of the victim's body.

I would like to remind you that it is possible for people to be wrongly convicted. In fact, most skeptics are familiar with the Innocence Project (note 1—Ed.), which has identified many wrongful convictions through DNA evidence. There must be many other wrongful convictions where the innocent convict does not have the benefit of such evidence.

It seems to me that someone who is wrongly convicted is in a Kafka-esque situation. They cannot say where the body is, because they have no idea. They cannot express remorse for their crime because they did not commit one. And because of that, they are likely not to be allowed on offending behaviour courses. Taken together, these reduce their chance of being given parole. They are even likely not to get the prison privileges accorded to someone who admits their guilt.

See for example (note 2—Ed.).

Everything that Mike says is true (note 3). And this does indeed raise the question what, if parole boards were to pay greater heed to remorsefulness and the feelings of the victims and families when considering a prisoner's release, they should do if the applicant continues to proclaim his innocence and hence shows no remorse? Is he to be treated more favourably than a prisoner who accepts their guilt but also shows no remorse? Is he to be accorded the same favour as one accepting their guilt and showing remorse? If the answer to either of these is yes, then the Parole Board would be implicitly acknowledging that the prisoner's conviction may be unsafe; yet this may still not be the case. This is hardly going

to be allowed to happen. So on this basis it would be problematic for parole boards as a general rule to put a premium on any applicant's expression of remorse or otherwise, as I have suggested.

On 90 occasions the CCRC initially refused to refer a case to the appeal court but did so after fresh applications were made.

Concerning miscarriages of justice and their correction (here I am speaking of offending in general), improvements are needed in two stages of the process. The first is the prosecution of defendants, where all too often wrongful convictions result from unreliable eye-witness accounts, false confessions, dubious expert-witness evidence, 'official misconduct', etc. The second is the fallibility of the Criminal Case Review Commission (CCRC) set up in 1997 to assess the eligibility of claims of false conviction for consideration by the Appeal Court. An investigation by the *Times* newspaper in April this year revealed that 'On 90 occasions the CCRC initially refused to refer a case to the appeal court but did so after fresh applications were made. Of these, 58 led to the quashing of convictions'.

Postscript

Several very recent announcements are of relevance here. After serving 17 years in jail and following a review of the medical evidence and a retrial, Gary Walker has been cleared of murdering his girlfriend in 2003 (note 5). While in the US, after spending 16 years in prison, Anthony Broadwater, has been

cleared of raping award-winning author Alice Sebold, following exposure of police misconduct at the time of his arrest (*note 6*). And Nizamodeen Hosein, 75, one of the two brothers convicted of the murder of Muriel McKay in 1969, is reported to have finally revealed the whereabouts of her body; he was released from prison after 20 years, still protesting his innocence,

and has since lived in Trinidad (*note 7*). His decision appears not to have been made out of any consideration for the feelings of his victim's family but his wish to prepare himself to 'meet his Maker'.

Notes

1. <https://innocenceproject.org/>
2. <https://tinyurl.com/p8njfxck>

3. For further study of the issue of wrongful convictions see the Miscarriages of Justice Registry at <https://tinyurl.com/5mzhk8j4>.
4. <https://tinyurl.com/8t47cfu5>
5. <https://tinyurl.com/bdbujpv4>
6. <https://tinyurl.com/y9jthhxd>
7. <https://tinyurl.com/mry9u24v>

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REHABILITATION IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

Michael Heap

The focus of my 'From the ASKE Chair' article in the previous issue of the *Intelligencer* was remorse as experienced or exhibited by people convicted of criminal offences, with some reference to regret, retribution and recompense, and mentioning, on the way, rehabilitation and reoffending (or recidivism). This time I'd like to say a little more about rehabilitation.

Not all sentences given by the criminal courts have rehabilitation as a goal but, along with deterrence, removal of the opportunity to reoffend (albeit usually temporary), and the desire of victims of crime and society at large for offenders to be punished accordingly, the oft-stated aim of sending an offender to prison is *rehabilitation*. This implies that while they are confined, efforts are made to assist the convicted person to act in a prosocial and responsible manner and desist from reoffending when they are back in the community.

Education and occupational skills training are examples of such activities, and these make sense, as acquiring paid work can itself deter recidivism (*note 1*). But there are also a range of 'treatments' that inmates may undertake with prison staff that more directly address offending behaviour (*note 2*; many of these are also available in the community). These are mainly conducted in groups and are largely based on the principles of cognitive behaviour therapy. Problems targeted

include drug and alcohol abuse, violence (both general and domestic), sexual offending, and extremism, as well as more general areas related to offending (e.g. problem solving, 'thinking skills', and healthy relationships).

I shall not attempt to review research on outcomes here. What research there is on offender behaviour programmes in prison suggests that they do help to reduce reconviction rates following release (*note 3*). There are some obvious problems, though, with this kind of research—e.g. biases in the selection of candidates for treatment and the fact that *reoffending* rates are likely to be higher than *reconviction* rates, since the former include unreported, undetected and unsolved crimes.

Prisoners on their release usually find themselves in the same environment in which they committed their offence.

One area of offender treatment that has so far failed to convincingly demonstrate its effectiveness is that undertaken by those convicted of sexual crimes. In June 2017 the UK Ministry of Justice published an evaluation of the Core Sex Offender Treatment Programme, which concluded that it was ineffective and even might have led to increased offending post-discharge

(*note 4*). The programme was replaced by two new courses, Horizon and Kaisden, that target areas of concern which were not addressed in the original programmes; in addition, offenders who maintain their innocence are allowed to undertake the courses (see article above).

One difficulty with running offender behaviour courses in prison is that the environment in which the participants are contained is not only drastically different to normal life but is itself highly toxic and not conducive to prosocial behaviour and mental wellbeing. Another is that prisoners on their release usually find themselves in the same environment in which they committed their offence, with all its stresses and inducements to reoffend.

I have previously illustrated the first of these points (*note 4*) with reference to an inmate, a man in his 30s, who was serving a life sentence for murdering his girlfriend and who had an upcoming parole board hearing which would consider his transfer to open prison. The decision of the prison psychologist was that before his transfer could be considered, he should undergo a Healthy Relationships Programme with other inmates in the prison, run by her and her colleague.

In my independent psychologists report I queried the wisdom of this, since the man had already undertaken numerous offender treatment courses which, although supposedly addressing

different issues, he found to be very repetitive in their content. But more than this, I wondered whether it would not be more sensible if he undertook the proposed course when he was in an environment, such as an open prison, which offered him more opportunity to have friendships and more closer relationships? Surely his learning about how to have healthy relationships would be considerably enhanced in such circumstances—as it is for any of us in ordinary life? (See note 5). As it was, my arguments coincided with those of the lay member of this man's parole board but to no avail (note 6).

The line of thinking that I have pursued here is by no means idiosyncratic and there is a school of thought that questions the idea that prisons, as they presently stand, are fit places to even attempt to rehabilitate offenders by treatment programmes. The metaphor we might use is that of a garage. Your car develops problems (misbehaves itself) and has to be taken off the road and placed in a garage where expert mechanics put it right and send it off, roadworthy once more. But a prison can't approach this ideal if it itself is psychologically damaging to those incarcerated there.

This point was made in two years ago by Sir Martin Narey, former Director General of the Prison Service. He maintained that:

Research to establish a causal link between rehabilitation and reduced reoffending is lacking and short courses cannot fix problems caused by difficult childhoods. Instead, the best the prison estate can offer prisoners is an environment where they are treated with 'decency and dignity. Decent prisons in which prisoners are respected seem to provide a foundation for prisoner self-growth. Indecent, unsafe prisons allow no such growth and further damage those who have to survive there (note 7).

But perhaps the ideal answer is to have decent prisons with good education and training opportunities and evidence-based rehabilitation programmes.

Notes

1. According to a recent government publication, a third of businesses are now experiencing recruitment problems, while currently only 17% of ex-offenders manage to get a job within a year of release. Hence there is interest on all sides in recruiting released

offenders, who are up to 9% less likely to reoffend if they obtain paid employment.

2. <https://tinyurl.com/2w56tdf5>

3. See, for example:-

<https://tinyurl.com/2yv7a8d>.

4. See 'From the ASKE Chair', *Skeptical Intelligencer*, Vol 22, Summer 2018:-

<https://tinyurl.com/3pdkp25w>

5. You may be thinking that the last relationship this man had had was with his victim. Not so. In one of the prisons in which he had been incarcerated he had pursued a clandestine relationship with a female member of staff—a psychologist in fact. This was taken as a black mark against his character, to be addressed by further rehabilitative work.

6. The Healthy Relationships Programme was a new initiative and had yet to have Home Office approval. Cynically, but realistically, I feel confident in saying that the main reason for the recommendation that the inmate should undergo this is that the prison psychologist and her colleague had recently attended a training course in 'delivering' the programme.

7. <https://tinyurl.com/xxsa5k8>

REVIEWS AND COMMENTARIES



Creator and Creators: Co-Creation with Nature - A Synthesis of Spiritual Philosophy and Science by Roza Riaikkenen & Margarita Riaikkenen, Axis Mundi Books, 2018 (but more recently foregrounded).

Reviewed by Mark Newbrook

This book purports to explain the esoteric and exoteric mechanisms that supposedly lead to the manifestation of life as we know it. On the basis of personal experience and the synthesis of spiritual philosophy and modern scientific discoveries, the authors (mother & daughter) develop new

explanations of the nature of Matter, Time, Gravitational Waves, Dark Energy, etc. They also claim to have solved the creation-evolution nexus by providing an esoteric cyclic theory involving the two positions.

Naturally the book expresses a viewpoint very far from any skeptical

position. More importantly, the tone is too dogmatic and didactic; the ideas involving spiritual entities are presented with little argumentation or evidence (similar to some recent material promoting 'esoteric astrology'). The reader is apparently invited to accept the ideas as authoritative. Very few people

who are not already convinced that such ideas are largely valid will be persuaded by this material.

The work also exemplifies the common tendency to cite scientific findings in support of such positions when this is not really justified (or at least would be disavowed by the actual scientists in question). Whether this is because of genuine (tendentious?) misunderstanding of the science or of deliberate misconstrual varies from case to case. For example, I think Hawking is being misread here. The authors are on firmer ground when they reference those scientists and philosophers of science who do endorse metaphysical positions similar to theirs (Bohm, McTaggart, etc). More specifically, I think it is tendentious to regard e.g. the wave/particle nexus, the uncertainty principle, the notion of ‘vibration’ as understood by scientists, etc, as ‘esoteric’ or as supporting these ideas.

In addition some of the criticism of the scientific approach appears exaggerated. For example, the various sciences are **not** normally conceived as

separated from each other as R&R suggest occurs, only as differentiated. And science is unabashed if it cannot immediately resolve an issue. Science is essentially method, not findings. The (provisional) findings alter constantly and are often disputed (even the method may alter in face of philosophical or practical issues). Acknowledging that we do not know something **yet** does not imply taking the pessimistic view that we (probably) cannot ever know it (by scientific means); such a (provisional) conclusion, if arrived at, would be issue-specific.

The question of consciousness is of course generally perceived as especially major and requiring a solution; but it is not clear that any such solution must involve spiritual notions, specifically, and it is premature to suggest that mainstream non-spiritual science should give up on the case. I am not sure what precisely is meant by R&R when they locate consciousness at the quantum level.

Some of the positions advanced appear extreme, e.g. the idea that

metaphysics as a discipline is certain & exact, the view that matter itself arises **from** consciousness, various other specific ideas advanced in particular chapters, etc. I do not think that invoking Blavatsky helps, either, though a Theosophist would presumably disagree about that. And in my view it is not adequately argued here that the field of science is in **need** of metaphysical explanations, or that there is a need to seek a purpose for the existence of the world or of individual beings. It also seems to me that the attempt to unite creation and evolution (Chapter 4) is inadequately grounded and may indeed involve a mistaken view of the mainstream conception of evolution.

I could list some further issues, but I think the point is made.

The above criticisms were conveyed to R&R, but their view was that I had failed to address their main points, and they tried to put the ball back into my court!

ANNOUNCEMENTS

OF INTEREST

| |
|---|
| SKEPTICISM, SCIENCE AND RATIONALITY (GENERAL) |
|---|

Sense About Science

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

Dr Elisabeth Bik, has been awarded the 2021 John Maddox Prize for outstanding work exposing widespread threats to research integrity in scientific papers.

<https://tinyurl.com/4nt2fbuc>

Good Thinking

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

<http://goodthinkingsociety.org/>

Websites of general interest

Intelligent Speculation: ‘Intelligent Speculation’s mission is to teach as many as possible how to become a critical thinker that makes better decisions.’ At:

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

And: ‘Thinking Is Power was created by Melanie Trecek-King to teach critical thinking in an accessible and (hopefully) entertaining way. If you want to learn how to save money, make better decisions, and avoid being fooled or harmed, this site is for you!’ At:

<https://thinkingispower.com/>

Also: McGill University’s Office of Science and Society has too many articles of interest to skeptics to report them separately here (except for a couple later), so why not place this link in your Favourites list?

<https://www.mcgill.ca/oss/people>

Science book

‘Comedian Robin Ince quickly abandoned science at school, bored by a fog of dull lessons and intimidated by the barrage of equations. But, 20 years later, he fell in love and he now presents one of the world’s most popular science podcasts. ... In this erudite and witty book, Robin reveals why scientific

wonder isn't just for the professionals. Filled with interviews featuring astronauts, comedians, teachers, quantum physicists, neuroscientists and more - as well as charting Robin's own journey with science - *The Importance of Being Interested* explores why many wrongly think of the discipline as distant and difficult. From the glorious appeal of the stars above to why scientific curiosity can encourage much needed intellectual humility, this optimistic and profound book will leave you filled with a thirst for intellectual adventure.'

<https://tinyurl.com/yc6hmf4r>

Critical thinking

'How to think about weird things. From discs in the sky to faces in toast, learn to weigh evidence sceptically without becoming a closed-minded naysayer.' By Stephen Law. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/373mcd2e>

And: 'People choose whether to seek or avoid information about their health, finances and personal traits based on how they think it will make them feel, how useful it is, and if it relates to things they think about often.' At:

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

Also: '20 Cognitive Biases That Screw Up Your Decisions.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/5n6r2btj>

Science misinformation, etc., general

A perspective from India: 'Why are Bogus Pseudo Sciences like Astrology so Appealing?: Weeks into the worst pandemic in the modern era, something even more disastrous happened—Indian moms started forcing haldi dudh (turmeric milk) down kids' throats, huddled masses started chanting "Go Corona", while others took shots of cow urine. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/arpt2usd>

And from Canada: 'We're in the middle of an "infodemic"', warned Timothy Caulfield recently at an Office of Dietary Supplements seminar about current falsehoods surrounding Covid-19 and other misinformation circulating in the media. Medical professionals and organizations must stand up for quality

information, said Caulfield, Canada research chair in health law and policy, professor in the faculty of law and School of Public Health and research director of the Health Law Institute at the University of Alberta. Over time, harmless-sounding terms like "immune-boosting" have normalized misinformation, he said. Such language is often associated with healthy behaviors, such as exercise, sleep and a balanced diet, creating a "health halo" effect. Those pushing immune-boosting misinformation use scientific jargon to give credibility to bunk, a practice Caulfield calls "scienceploitation.'" At:

<https://tinyurl.com/m69s52a8>

Also: 'In the era of "publish or perish," research results that disprove the hypothesis tested often go unpublished. In this special issue on the "Null Hypothesis" of the Journal of Neuromuscular Diseases investigators illustrate the importance and value of sharing well-conducted studies with negative or irreproducible results.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/y64b4ucv>

Meanwhile: 'Hundreds of articles published in peer-reviewed journals are being retracted after scammers exploited the processes for publishing special issues to get poor-quality papers - sometimes consisting of complete gibberish - into established journals. In some cases, fraudsters posed as scientists and offered to guest-edit issues that they then filled with sham papers.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/mupwpbfb>

And: For contrarian doctors anchored to their ideas and sheltered from their consequences, it's easier to erase 1,000 dead children, ignore overwhelmed pediatricians, and disparage an effective vaccine than to consider they could have been wrong. How sad. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/y7rme4ek>

It gets worse: 'Most biomedical research is flawed. The Biased Outcome reporting Guidelines for Underwhelming Studies (BOGUS) initiative fills a real gap in the multitude of existing guidelines. Representing a vast effort undertaken by a single individual with multiple opinions over

seven days of productive pandemic procrastination, the guidelines are a first for "precision reporting" of underwhelming studies, and underscore ways of reporting underdeveloped methods and underachieving efforts. These guidelines will allow authors to better underemphasise limitations, underestimate bias, and undervalue their readers without underselling their work.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/5n6rukru>

Also: '9 Ways to Know if Health Info is Actually Junk Science.' ... 'Science misinformation is now being spewed and shared at record rates. This is the second story in our 4-part Junk Science series that gets to the root of why it's happening and what you can do about it. To go deeper, check out: [Part 1: The Golden Age of Junk Science Is Killing Us](#); [Part 3: The Best \(and Worst\) Places to Find Reputable Health Information](#); and [Part 4: What You Can Say to Pull Someone Out of a Junk Science Rabbit Hole](#).' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/2mzyt8bx>

And: 'This post is ... about the tools we use to bring some sense to the medical literature – and ways in which casual readers, and even seasoned professionals, can be misled. I want to summarize some of the methods used to compile and summarize evidence, and the approaches that can be used to reduce biases and improve the quality of our conclusions and decisions about our health. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/2p8jes9t>

And: 'Debunking highly prevalent health misinformation using audio dramas delivered by WhatsApp: evidence from a randomised controlled trial in Sierra Leone.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/72zn5w7s>

Also: 'Some men suffer from premature ejaculation. Press releases and media reports of scientific studies often suffer from premature enthusiasm. Here are some examples.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/4c925cez>

Science communication

'Some people hold beliefs that are opposed to overwhelming scientific evidence. Such misperceptions can be

harmful to both personal and societal well-being. Communicating scientific consensus has been found to be effective in eliciting scientifically accurate beliefs, but it is unclear whether it is also effective in correcting false beliefs. Here, we show that a strategy that boosts people's understanding of and ability to identify scientific consensus can help to correct misperceptions.'

<https://tinyurl.com/yhpr2tsz>

The paranormal

'Regardless of our childhoods, we all grew up hearing ghost stories in one way or another. Fantastical fantasy films, religious antidotes, fairytale fables — they all delve into the world of the paranormal or psychic, and inadvertently ended up playing a major role in the development of our beliefs. So, what exactly is the world of the paranormal? As we enter the Halloween season, and the cumulative excitement for all things that go bump in the night grows, I find myself asking why exactly these ghost stories mean so much to us as a society.'

<https://tinyurl.com/vp9xtx4s>

Spooky History

'The world of the haunted and historic. Bringing you weekly looks into the world of the spooky, the strange and the supernaturally weird.' (e.g. very interesting account of the Pied Piper of Hamelin.)

Climate change

'The fossil fuel industry has perpetrated a multi-decade, multibillion dollar disinformation, propaganda and lobbying campaign to delay climate action by confusing the public and policymakers about the climate crisis and its solutions. This has involved a remarkable array of advertisements — with headlines ranging from "Lies they tell our children" to "Oil pumps life" — seeking to convince the public that the climate crisis is not real, not human-made, not serious and not solvable. The campaign continues to this day.'

<https://tinyurl.com/2afb8skx>

MEDICINE

Medical science misinformation, etc., general

See 'Science misinformation, etc., general' above.

Cancer quackery

'Many of us may dream of ditching our current jobs and doing something new. Some of us might even make that happen, joining The Great Resignation. But few will make a career change quite as dramatic as single mum Calista Macgillivray, 40, who went from a cancer research scientist to a psychic energy healer. After becoming disillusioned with her work, in 2006 Calista ditched the lab to study reiki. She now specialises in using 'angel and unicorn energy' (*Are you being serious?—Ed.*), and has shared her methods with over 1,000 teachers worldwide.'

<https://tinyurl.com/d47davj3>

Overprescribing

'A UK Government-commissioned review 'estimates 10% of items dispensed in primary care are overprescribed with 15% of people taking 5 or more medicines a day, increasing the risk of adverse effects. Around 1 in 5 hospital admissions in over-65s are caused by the adverse effects of medicines. Ministers accept all recommendations including introducing a new national clinical director for prescribing, increased use of social prescribing and better handovers between hospitals and the community.'

<https://tinyurl.com/4n6r9tss>

'Big Pharma'

'The ability of the pharmaceutical industry to influence healthcare policy and decision making through gifts and payments is well established in the UK and around the world. Allowing these channels of influence to continue without sufficient scrutiny undermines the integrity of the UK health system and risks private interests to be put above patients.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/2p2te9xy>

Also see: 'Inside Purdue Pharma's Multimillion-Dollar Payouts to Politicians and Pill-Pushers.'

<https://tinyurl.com/4mmunme9>

Patient testimonials

That glowing patient testimonial may not be what it seems. 'People receiving medical treatment shouldn't have to drum up new business for their doctors—it's time to hold the industry to a higher standard.'

<https://tinyurl.com/yc4c4yhe>

Sports science

'Nicholas B. Tiller confronts the claims behind the products and the evidence behind the claims.'

<https://tinyurl.com/hybfefhjs>

Vaccination

And from the Daily Mail, 25.09.2008: 'Catholic school bans girls from having cervical cancer jabs over fears it might "promote sexual promiscuity". Monsignor John Allen of St Monica's RC High School in Bury, Greater Manchester, said: "Morally it seems to be a sticking plaster response. Parents must consider the knock-on effect of encouraging sexual promiscuity."' At:

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

But from the Daily Mail, 04.11.2021: 'Cervical cancer has been virtually eradicated in young women because of the HPV vaccine's 'remarkable' success, a major study has found. Cases of the disease have plummeted by 87 per cent as a result of the NHS vaccine programme. Among women now in their twenties — the first generation to get the jab — cases have now dropped from about 50 per year to just five.'

<https://tinyurl.com/5dvet5c>

Flouridation

'Fluoridescience.org is dedicated to balanced reviews of fluoride studies and communicating the qualities and summaries of the scientific evidence for professional communities that may engage in patient care and/or public health services. The primary goal is to provide them with the best information available regarding the use of fluoride by offering topic summaries, critical appraisals, commentaries that are developed and reviewed by a group of

experts, and interview videos of prominent scientists in the field.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/2p96mdu3>

And: Michael Marshall interviews Joy Warren, from Fluoride Free Alliance UK, whose current petition to Parliament to ban water fluoridation has more than 35,000 signatures. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/2p84rf9w>

Meanwhile: ‘Calgarians vote to bring fluoride back into drinking water. 62% wanted to bring it back, while 38% voted no.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/yhxxwxu7>

And in New Zealand: The government has passed a fluoridation bill that shifts the power of a local authority to introduce fluoride into town supplies to the Director-General of Health. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/2y6wrdsu>

Paolo Macchiarini

‘As the Nobel Assembly at Sweden’s Karolinska Institute announced Monday morning that David Julius of the University of California, San Francisco, and Ardem Patapoutian of the Scripps Research Institute in La Jolla, Calif., won the 2021 Nobel Prize in medicine or physiology, the institute has yet to fully acknowledge its culpability in lethal, experimental procedures conducted by transplant surgeon Paolo Macchiarini and is still trying to discredit the four whistleblowers who exposed them.’

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

Food allergy and intolerance

‘Science and pseudoscience of food allergy and intolerance testing.’

<https://tinyurl.com/yc3jp3cc>

Homeopathy

From the Australian Skeptics Newsletter: ‘An interesting story on (*Mexico’s National Homeopathic Hospital*) a 130-year-old institution (the only such hospital in Latin America). And not only the hospital, but the National School of Medicine & Homeopathy, part of the government-funded National Polytechnic Institute, and the Directorate of Traditional Medicine, again government-funded and developing COVID prevention and care strategies using herbalism,

acupuncture and ... of course ... homeopathy. Needless to say, the author of this piece is not impressed.’

At:

<https://tinyurl.com/2xpsudw5>

Also: ‘Last year a review into pharmacy in Australia recommended homeopathic products be banned from sale in chemist shops across the country. This was a sensible recommendation, given pharmacists are trusted scientists in the community and science tells us homeopathic products simply don’t work. In the government’s recent response to this review they “noted” the concerns of the reviewer, and have chosen not to adopt it. Here’s why that is a mistake.’

<https://tinyurl.com/28r4648k>

Healthy eating

Relax and Enjoy Your Food by Craig Good. ‘In a world where we are constantly bombarded with scary advice about what to eat and what not to eat, this book is a delightful breath of fresh air and common sense. Craig Good explains why we should stop obsessing about food choices; and why, instead of following anyone’s idea of a diet, we should learn to simply enjoy eating a variety of foods. He cuts to the essence of this complicated subject and tells his story in a conversational tone with flashes of laugh-out-loud humor. And it’s all solidly based on good science. What more could you ask for?’ (*Harriet Hall, reviewer*)

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

Integrative medicine

‘The integrative health wave shows both irrational and dangerous tendencies. In particular, it is a serious mistake for science-based institutions - such as a publicly funded university - to embrace the idea of integrative health, at least as it is now understood.’

<https://tinyurl.com/tmt4kr2j>

Traditional Chinese Medicine

‘Norges Bank Investment Management (NBIM) has decided to exclude four Chinese companies due to what is described as an unacceptable risk that the companies contribute to serious environmental damage, Norway’s giant

sovereign wealth Fund states. These companies are engaged in traditional Chinese medicine, and also use parts from endangered species in production, such as pangolins, musk deer and leopards.’

<https://tinyurl.com/444p2em3>

From the *New Indian Express*: On a tip-off the district police had a major catch of the inter-district thieves who were involved in transporting 67 kg pangolin scales from a dhaba near Harihar on Shivamogga road on Wednesday... Police sources said that pangolins are trafficked by poachers all over the world due to their highly coveted scales which are used in traditional Chinese medicine. ‘This illegal trade makes them vulnerable to extinction,’ he said.’

<https://tinyurl.com/hxvuhs5m>

Saunas

‘The Finnish sauna is thought to be great for health, but can the alleged benefits stand the heat of scrutiny?’

<https://tinyurl.com/y9stpm5w>

Radioactive 5G pendants

‘The Dutch authority for nuclear safety and radiation protection (ANVS) had to issue a warning to consumers about ten products they found contain low levels of radioactive material. These products include the Energy Armor sleeping mask, the “Quantum Pendant”, and the Magnetix Smiley Kids Bracelet with negative ions.’

<https://tinyurl.com/bddjjisu>

Radon

In most of the world, inhaling radon for pain relief sounds like a bizarre idea. In some places, though, it’s so accepted that it’s prescribed by doctors and covered by health insurance. And I have no idea how to talk about it. Thanks to the team at the Radonstollen in Bad Kreuznach: you can find out more about them at <https://www.acuradon.com>.

<https://tinyurl.com/yju2r4kj>

Foot patches

‘Unhappy feet: Cleansing foot patch claims are toxic tosh.’ A widely shared video claims that sleeping with herb-infused patches on the soles of your feet will rid the body of harmful toxins.

<https://tinyurl.com/2ve8mzpk>

Foam rolling

‘Many physically active people get muscle pain after exercise, known as “delayed onset muscle soreness” or DOMS. Foam rolling has emerged as a popular means of alleviating delayed onset muscle soreness and stiff muscles. You’re likely to find foam rollers in any gym, or you may have one yourself, and many people swear by using them before and after exercise. But what does the science say?’

<https://tinyurl.com/vsyr5buw>

Green tea

‘Two Harrisburg University of Science and Technology alumni and a professor examined the evidence that exists regarding the therapeutic efficacy of green tea extracts as an anti-infective. The study results indicate that currently, there is no conclusive evidence that green tea extract is appropriate to treat any infectious disease (including COVID-19).

<https://tinyurl.com/2p9553bc>

PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHIATRY

ADHD

‘No child deserves a dumbed down label and a daily amphetamine habit.’ Website critical of this diagnosis.

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

Antidepressants

Remaining on antidepressants long-term reduces the risk of a relapse, but many people are able to come off them safely. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/sz37ye8>

However: ‘Millions of people take antidepressants each day, but a major new review of the data brings up some concerns with how the drugs are currently prescribed. In fact, when taken over long periods for mild and moderate depression, antidepressants may be doing patients more harm than good, the review explains’. At:

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

Exercise and mental health

‘Throughout the pandemic and lockdown, a lot of attention and emphasis was placed on exercise, and

keeping fit. Countless people insist that it’s a key facet of good mental health. But, is it? Can regular exercise really be such a potent benefit to Mental Health? (*It all depends, just try it and see—Ed.*) If so, why? If not, what’s the deal there? And can it end up doing more harm than good?’

<https://tinyurl.com/6uvsc5n>

Sleep paralysis

Talk by Chris French at:

<https://tinyurl.com/68ecmv6e3>

False memory

‘Does the phenomenon of false memory challenge the justice system?’ Featured in Radio 4’s ‘Law in Action’ in November; still available for listening at:

<https://tinyurl.com/2nt5u7z5>

RELIGION

Possession and exorcism

From ‘Monster Talk’: ‘Blake, Karen, and Matt talk about the history and concepts of possession and exorcism and then Karen and Matt discuss the exorcisms they have witnessed first-hand.’

<https://tinyurl.com/e2e9e35c>

POLITICS AND PUBLIC POLICY

Eugenics

Coming February 2022: A new book from Adam Rutherford *Control: The Dark History and Controlling Present of Eugenics*.

<https://smarturl.it/RutherfordControl>

MISCELLANEOUS

UFOs, ghosts and other unusual sightings

‘Ghost hunters who use science reveal what other paranormal investigators get wrong. ... Not all people who choose to investigate the paranormal are believers. Some employ the scientific method and critical thinking to get to the bottom of suspected ghost cases. Kenny Biddle is one such person.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/36w5yak5>

See also: ‘A brief examination of the science behind ghost hunting’ at:

<https://tinyurl.com/53tzm6pp>

And: In October and November of this year, BBC Radio 4 ran a series called ‘Uncanny’ which investigated mysterious sightings such as ghosts and UFOs. They are available to listen to again or download at:

<https://tinyurl.com/ubbmasra>

See also: ‘Panic-buying aliens were among the online quips after a strange cone-shaped light was seen in the night skies above north east Wales. Scores of people witnessed the soundless light hovering overhead, descending slowly and, in some cases, “shooting off northwards”. “Space ship, deffo,” said one person. ... The object was soon revealed to be an Atlas V rocket, carrying Nasa’s Landsat-9 satellite, which launched from Vandenberg Space Force Base, USA, just after 7pm last Monday. Some two hours later it performed a reversing manoeuvre, releasing glowing clouds of vapour.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/3m55zhfa>

And: ‘Fact Check: What Does Science Have to Say About Ghosts? Is there room for the supernatural in science?’

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

And: Chris French was interviewed for the American Psychological Association’s “Speaking of Psychology” podcast on “Ghosts, ouija boards and ESP” at:

<https://tinyurl.com/4r9yw8vx>

Meanwhile: Podcast by 1A on ‘exploring belief in ghosts’ including an interview with Chris French at:

<https://tinyurl.com/23zce33w>

Likewise, by Teen Vogue on alleged rise in ghostly encounters during COVID lockdowns, with interview with Chris French, at:

<https://tinyurl.com/jhurkj6e>

And: Podcast on ‘talking to ghosts’ featuring an interview with...er...Chris French at:

<https://tinyurl.com/yuuxv24s>

‘Science vs hoax — Guess who’s winning the UFO credibility wars over pseudoscience.’

<https://tinyurl.com/32wzfk8>

UPCOMING EVENTS

Some events of interest to skeptics are now being presented live (in some cases with the option of viewing online). Most Skeptics in the Pub meetings have yet to resume but Skeptics in the Pub Online still has an excellent programme of online talks on Thursday evenings. See:

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

Conway Hall

Conway Hall is hosting live and online presentations that often have a skeptical flavour.

<https://tinyurl.com/y7dmgkjl>

The Science of Suggestion & Suggestibility

This is a series of online seminars that aims to bring together researchers and clinicians studying the science and application of suggestion and individual differences in the capacity to respond to suggestion. People from all disciplines

are welcome to attend. The November and December seminars were on the topic of placebo. The first one was not recorded but the second one, 'Harnessing the Placebo Effect Without Deception' by Prof. Irving Kirsch, is available for listening. The January talk is at 5 pm on Thursday 18th and is titled 'The role of phenomenological control in experience'. The speaker is Prof Zoltan Dienes of the School of Psychology, University of Sussex.

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

LOGIC AND INTUITION: ANSWERS

A barrel half full

Simply tip the barrel on its side until the top of the water is touching the rim. It will be exactly half full if the water at the bottom is at the join between the base and the side. If it is above the base, the barrel is more than half full; if some of the base is showing, the barrel is less than half full.

A barrel emptied

In 4 days, Alex will have drunk $\frac{4}{6}$ th (i.e. $\frac{2}{3}$ rd) of the beer and Kevin will have drunk $\frac{4}{12}$ th (i.e. $\frac{1}{3}$ rd) of the beer. So after 4 days all the beer will have been drunk.

Through a mirror

If the mirror is truly vertical Shahida will see no more of herself by stepping backwards. The image she sees of herself, as with her image of the mirror itself, will simply be smaller.

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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