

# THE SKEPTICAL INTELLIGENCER

The Quarterly Magazine of ASKE,  
THE ASSOCIATION FOR SKEPTICAL ENQUIRY  
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To access a Word or pdf copy of this issue, please contact the Editor, Michael Heap ([m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk))

If you are an ASKE member in the UK and would like a paper copy, again email the Editor.



## FROM THE ASKE CHAIR

Michael Heap

### Politicians and statistics

In February, the Royal Statistical Society (RSS) reported the results of a poll they conducted on 101 UK MPs, who were asked three questions to test their statistical knowledge. Here are the questions; you might like to give your answer before looking at the correct answers given below.

1. If you toss a coin twice, what is the probability of getting two heads?
2. You roll a six-sided die; if the rolls are 1,3,4,1 and 6, what are the mean and mode values?
3. If you have taken a diagnostic test for a virus, what is the probability of having the virus when the false-positive rate (the proportion of those without the virus who get a positive result) is one in 1,000?

I ought to mention that there seems to be a bit of a problem with the reporting of the third question. On their website (*note 1*), the RSS gives the question as follows (*italics inserted*):

‘Suppose there was a diagnostic test for a virus. The false-positive rate (the proportion of people without the virus who get a positive result) is one in 1,000. You have taken the test *and tested positive*. What is the probability that *you* have the virus?’

They then provide the polling company’s webpage link (*note 2*) for ‘the full findings’ of the survey and this gives the third question as quoted at 3 above; this does not specify the result of your test.

### Answers and results

**Question 1.** Fifty-two per cent, of MPs gave the correct answer of 25%. This is a likely improvement from when the RSS polled MPs with the same question in 2011, when 40% of MPs gave the correct answer. Thirty-two per cent of MPs gave the incorrect answer of 50%, compared to 45% of MPs in the 2011 survey.

Too understand why the answer is 25% (1 in 4) consider that the sequence

of two tosses of a coin could be (T for tails, H for heads) TT, TH, HT or HH, all equally probable.

**Question 2.** Sixty-four per cent of respondents were able to identify that the mean value was 3, while 63% gave the correct answer of 1 for the mode.

To arrive at the mean value, you add up the numbers thrown (15) and divide by the number of throws (5). The mode is the number that appears most.

I don’t know how the MPs’ performance so far compares with that of the general adult population, but I think it’s pretty disappointing. At least our representatives might think twice next time they are tempted to disparage the educational attainments of today’s schoolchildren.

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***Our representatives might think twice next time they are tempted to disparage the educational attainments of today’s schoolchildren.***

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**Question 3.** Sixteen per cent of the MPs gave the correct answer that there was not enough information (which is correct for either version of the question). One essential piece of information is the prior probability of your having the virus when you took the test (i.e. the percentage of people in the general population who were affected at that time). The lower this is, the higher the false positive rate (*see note 3*).

This type of question foxes most people and we might be more forgiving of the poor performance of MPs, except that at the present time we would expect them to be more clued-up on such matters if they are empowered to make supposedly authoritative statements and decisions about how to handle the Covid pandemic (*note 4*).

### Ignorance or dishonesty?

Most people would probably accept that ignorance on the part of our politicians

is less of a fall from grace than dishonesty. Yet, though politicians have always lied, or at least deliberately distorted or concealed the truth, we still elect and re-elect them. Perhaps these days there are more people prepared to publicly call out our politicians for their dishonesty, and more opportunities—the Office for Statistics Regulation, fact-checking websites, BBC Radio 4’s ‘More or Less’, and so on (but beware of *false* fact-checking sites). Evens so, there seems to be more than a rumour running around that our present political leaders have a unusually strained relationship with the truth. Perhaps this is not surprising when, in his previous journalistic endeavours, the Prime Minister himself had a habit of making up stories, and indeed was once sacked as a newspaper columnist because of this.

As an example, consider the report mentioned in ‘Medicine on the Fringe’ in the Autumn 2021 *Skeptical Intelligencer* that the government, in its attempt to fulfil its promise to build 48 new hospitals, has redefined the term ‘new hospital’ to include any major refurbishment or new wing or unit at an existing NHS site (*note 5*). (More recently, we have had the ‘Partygate’ scandal and the redefinition of ‘a party’ as ‘a work event’ [*note 6*].) Another example of redefining what is being measured is provided by the annual crime figures for the year ending September 2021 which, on 31.1.22, Boris Johnson announced in the House of Commons showed that crime had **fallen** by 14% (*note 7*). Crime had in fact **risen** by 14%. Mr Johnson had redefined crime to exclude fraud, which had risen by 47%. This new definition of crime has the support of the Business Secretary Kwazir Kwartang, who said on television that ‘people are talking particularly about burglaries, about personal injury, about physical crimes (*note 8*). Next there is Mr Johnson’s boast about the UK having the fastest

growing economy of the G7 countries (or the major European economies). It depends what period you're looking at—the last two years, no; the last quarter, no; the last year, yes—but the UK economy had further to bounce back from as it had endured the deepest recession of any major developed economy. Next is our Prime Minister's repeated claim that the UK now had 430,000 more people in employment than before the pandemic. It didn't. Data from the Office for National

Statistics at the time showed the total number of people in employment was actually about 588,000 below the level just prior to the pandemic according to sources such as Full Fact (*note 9*). Mr Johnson and other ministers have redefined 'people in employment' by excluding the self-employed. There is yet more (*sorry, we've run out of space—Ed.*).

With so much disinformation and fake news swirling around, what hope is

there when we cannot even trust what our elected politicians are telling us?

#### Notes

1. <https://tinyurl.com/yckkdrz4>
2. <https://tinyurl.com/2wuasay9>
3. <https://tinyurl.com/2p86j58m>
4. <https://tinyurl.com/bdf8w32m>
5. <https://tinyurl.com/vmf595f3>
6. <https://tinyurl.com/bh75mau5>
7. <https://tinyurl.com/mr2kcpby>
8. <https://tinyurl.com/ytusr5f4>
9. <https://tinyurl.com/mwnrm23v>



## LOGIC AND INTUITION

### The soggy potato

I bought a 100 gram potato that is 99% water. How much will it weigh if I let it dry out to 98% water?

### The two urns

I show you 50 gold coins and 50 similar ones made of a valueless metal. You are to put all the coins into two urns, distributing them in any way you wish.

I shall then point to one of the urns at random and you can keep the first coin you pick from it (without looking). How do you distribute the coins?

*Answers on page 19.*



## 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/>  
EC SO also has a Twitter handle, @SkepticsEurope.

The EC SO 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 most recent podcast, as usual, covers a multitude of diverse topics including Russia and Ukraine. Also check the Events Calendar for Europe at:

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

### The 19<sup>th</sup> European Skeptics Congress, Vienna 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 your eye on the ESCO congress webpage at:

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

### Belgian Skeptics defamation case

<https://skepp.be/en>

In the last issue we reported that SKEPP, the Belgian skeptics society had succeeded in defeating a claim of defamation brought by two companies active in the field of human resources that advocated dubious theories and practices such as Neurolinguistic Programming and phrenology. A full account of this case, written by Patrick Vermeren, one of the authors who was sued, may be found at:

<https://tinyurl.com/358cwza3>

This is the English translation.



## MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

### HealthSense

In the summer issue of the *Intelligencer*, I sang the praises of HealthWatch, the UK charity established in the late 1980s to promote ‘Science and Integrity in Healthcare’. Over the years HealthWatch has consistently pursued its aims, campaigning against doubtful, unproven and fraudulent medical practices, whether mainstream or unorthodox. The charity has now found it necessary to change its name because ten years ago the government announced the launch of HealthWatch England, a facility whereby the public may provide feedback on NHS health and social care services. The result of this was that the staff of the original HealthWatch were overwhelmed by messages from the public intended for the government’s Healthwatch, which included highly sensitive medical details (see note 1). So now it is known as HealthSense.

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***‘The Gerson Support Group (GSG), a charity that has for years been promoting risky quack cancer cures, has finally admitted it had no evidence to support its bogus claims.’***

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The latest issue of the HealthSense Newsletter is now online. At the time of writing, it is the Winter 2021 issue (note 2) and features, amongst other things, the text of a presentation on Covid data by Christina Pagel from UCL, joint winner of the HealthWatch Award 2021. The page includes a link to a video recording of the talk.

### Gerson nutritional therapy

Recently, HealthSense has been involved in a successful two-year campaign to end the charitable status of

the Gerson Support Group. HealthSense (as HealthWatch) had complained to the Charity Commission that this organisation was actively promoting unproven treatment for cancer and other serious conditions. According to the Good Thinking website (note 3):

*(Gerson Therapy) is just one of many treatments suggested as an alternative cancer cure. Those who offer Gerson Therapy claim it is a natural treatment that allows the body to heal itself of disease, including the ability to rid oneself of cancer. A Gerson treatment regime typically consists of the hourly consumption of organic or raw juices, alongside extreme use of supplements and a daily schedule of up to five coffee enemas. However, examining the ideas behind Gerson Therapy shows it to be an ineffective, costly and expensive distraction from the use of real medicine.*

Details of the outcome of HealthSense’s campaign were reported in *Private Eye* (No. 1,568, 4-17 March, 2022) in an article headed ‘Quack Exit’, followed by another (‘Quack Down’) in the 18-31 March issue. According to *Private Eye*:

*The Gerson Support Group (GSG), a charity that has for years been promoting risky quack cancer cures, has finally admitted it had no evidence to support its bogus claims.*

The magazine also reports that the group had over £350,000 in newly acquired assets and this income is being distributed amongst other charities. These include ...

*... the London-based ‘Yes to Life’, which by spooky coincidence on its “unconventional therapies page” lists none other than Gerson therapy, described as “probably the best-known alternative approach to cancer treatment”.*

### Prince Charles

The above developments will be sad news indeed for our future king. According to a report by the *Guardian* in 2004 (note 4):

*Prince Charles has never made a secret of his love affair with alternative medicine. Now he has infuriated the medical profession by backing a controversial cancer treatment which involves taking daily coffee enemas and drinking litres of fruit juice instead of using drugs. Charles gave an enthusiastic endorsement last week to the Gerson Therapy, which eschews chemotherapy in favour of 13 fruit juices a day, coffee enemas and weekly injections of vitamins. Cancer specialists have told The Observer that there is no scientific basis for the theory and that it can be dangerous because patients who are seriously ill often come off their normal treatment to try something unproven which may leave them badly dehydrated.*

How apposite then that the title of Edzard’s Ernst’s latest book is *Charles the Alternative Prince*:

*Prince Charles has entertained a long-standing love affair with alternative medicine. This book describes his passion as it developed during the last 40 years. The Prince’s beliefs, opinions, and ambitions are critically assessed against the background of the scientific evidence.* (note 5).

### Notes

1. <https://tinyurl.com/2p9y5z9f>
2. <https://tinyurl.com/2judhytd>
3. <https://tinyurl.com/6vcaskkx>
4. <https://tinyurl.com/2p8je4c7>
5. <https://tinyurl.com/pr6hrca3>





## LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

### Gods and demons in the Greek Old Testament

A line from the book of *Isaiah*, as expressed in the Septuagint (the Greek version of the OT), appears to mean ‘they make offerings at the bases [of statues] to the gods **which do not exist**’ (*ha ouk estin*). The ‘gods’ mentioned here are pagan gods, perceived by some as evil ‘demons’ (real or imaginary) which the pagans worship in error.

Is the prophet stating, in a strictly monotheistic vein, that these entities do not exist at all? The Greek certainly suggests this interpretation; the verb in question is the normal verb meaning ‘be’ with a ‘complement’, as in ‘They are **demons**’, ‘They are **evil**’, etc., but when it has no complement, as in this example, it means ‘exist’ (a diversity of meaning which according to some created some philosophical confusion in the Greek world!). And the general view of God (Yahweh) among Jews and Christians (and Muslims) has, of course, been a monotheistic one. The 1<sup>st</sup> Commandment (often rendered as ‘You shall have no other gods before me’) and similar passages are read as implying that all other gods which some might worship (as opposed to e.g. the archangels) are simply unreal.

However, various Hebrew scholars have argued that many of these passages should actually be read as indicating or implying that these other gods do exist but are of inferior status and/or evil, and not deserving of worship; only Yahweh should be worshipped. This theological stance is known as ‘henotheism’. These Hebraicist scholars are not themselves committed to a henotheistic stance; they do not see themselves as bound by positions adumbrated in, say, the Pentateuch (although if some other believers – especially those who regard the ideas expressed in the Bible as incorrigible – were aware of this interpretation and accepted it they might feel inclined to revise their own stances). They are concerned here with

the early Jewish position on God, before monotheism took over. And they read the Greek of this verse in *Isaiah* (and some other passages using the same words) as agreeing with the henotheistic viewpoint which they hold is widely suggested in the Old Testament.

In cases of dissent as to the meaning of a passage in the Septuagint, one would normally examine the original Hebrew text. Unfortunately, in the case of the *Isaiah* passage the Hebrew version is absent.

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Of course, the Greek version of this sentence might conceivably be a misrepresentation of the substance or the import of the missing Hebrew. But if it is not, my Hellenist friends and I agree that it expresses a monotheistic, not a henotheistic, position. (The OT text as a whole, then, expresses at least two different theologies.) My Hebraicist contacts appear committed to a henotheistic interpretation of the OT, and have not been persuaded by my argument; but they are not themselves highly-trained Hellenists.

Another controversial claim involves a passage in the book of *Esther* where a name which occurs nowhere else (a ‘hapax’) has been read as the Hindu god-name *Krishna* by some thinkers marginal to the mainstream who regard some features of Judaism as having been transplanted from India – via the mediation of Zoroastrianism. (One such thinker is Brian Arthur Brown [note 1].) In this specific case the Hebrew original is available, but the issue involves the vowels, and the vowels of Biblical Hebrew were added

to the written version, long after these works were composed, by a group of scholars known as the Masoretes who were seeking to assist members of communities where Hebrew was no longer current as a spoken medium in understanding and pronouncing the language; it is thus not possible to confirm the original vowels of an otherwise unknown word.

However, both the Septuagint and the Latin Vulgate – while disagreeing on where the vowels should be located relative to the consonants – give the vowels in this word as *a*, *e* and *a*. (There are differences of detail between the various versions, including the King James English translation of 1611, regarding the consonants themselves. KJV represents the name as *Carshena*.) In contrast, the word *Krishna* has only two vowels (the Sanskrit form is actually *Kṛṣṇa* in which *-ṛ-* represents a syllabic/vocalic form of */r/*). The only match here involves the final *-a*, and the sharing of a very common vowel in a very characteristic position is not sufficient to establish any connection between these forms.

It is **not impossible** that this otherwise unknown Hebrew name is a ‘corruption’ of the name *Krishna*. But there is no positive linguistic reason to think so. And there is no positive evidence of a pattern of Hindu ideas spreading into Judaism via Zoroastrianism – of which this alleged equation might form part. Only someone committed to the revisionist idea that Zoroastrianism played a major role in linking the otherwise unconnected – and dissimilar – religions of India and Israel would think of advancing such a proposal.

### Typography and gender

This time last year I discussed Charles Nix’s presentation ‘How Type Drives Culture’. A new case involving typography is that of type designer Marie Boulanger, whose book *XX, XY: Sex, Letters and Stereotypes* (published

2021, initially in French) proclaims that typography is ‘a dangerous tool’ for reinforcing gendered stereotypes and bias in design. These stereotypes involve the attribution of masculine or feminine qualities to fonts: ‘bold and confident lettering is often associated with masculinity, while delicate and ornamental typography tends to be deemed feminine’. This leads to gender-targeting in marketing, etc. (Choices of colour and layout are also implicated here.) Boulanger describes her background work as ‘research’ but she writes as an artist and a feminist activist rather than as a psychologist (or psycholinguist), and hard empirical evidence is conspicuous by its scarcity.

This approach is not unusual in such work. I once began an examination (ultimately abortive) of the work of the feminist visual poet Thalia, whose work consists of a mixture of orthodox verbal expression and large-format non-iconic quasi-logographic/ ideographic symbols. Thalia claimed that women and men perceive non-iconic symbols of this kind very differently (categorically or nearly so), and that women – but not men – spontaneously understand them as referring holistically/ ideographically to key aspects of female life. But no real evidence was produced in support of Thalia’s position; one was merely invited to accept it as correct (*note 2*).

Boulanger’s material, perhaps predictably, attracted some scathing online comments, including the point that insofar as her thesis is valid it is platitudinously valid, but also numerous remarks along the line of ‘this must be one of the most overblown statements I have ever read’ and some sheer parody (‘I am trans-font’, etc.) (*note 3*).

### **Senzar**

When I lived in Melbourne (1990-2003) I used to frequent the Melbourne Theosophical Society’s amazing bookshop, a wonderful source of fringe material. (The main computer there was labelled AKASHIC RECORD!) Of late I have been attending online meetings of the Society, now occupying new premises. There is clearly still a sizeable receptive audience for their ideas,

outlandish as they seem to scientists and mainstream (pre)historians. Indeed, most who attend these meetings simply assume that the Theosophical account of humanity is correct.

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### ***The founder of Theosophy, H.P. Blavatsky, believed in the existence of a primordial Tibetan priestly language known as ‘Senzar’.***

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The founder of Theosophy, H.P. Blavatsky, believed in the existence of a primordial Tibetan priestly language known as ‘Senzar’, in which the ancient wisdom of all nations (ranging as far as the Americas and the lost Atlantis) was recorded. As she admitted, Senzar is altogether unknown to modern philologists, but she held that it dated back to the earlier ‘Root Races’ of humanity which figure in her bizarre and complex ‘evolutionary’ theories, and that in its day it was known to all ‘initiates’ of the inhabited and civilized world. It was still used and studied in C19 in the supposed secret communities of the Eastern adepts. The works written in Senzar included the histories of the archaic continents and races, and also prophecies of the future. They formed the ‘Stanzas of Dzyan’; Blavatsky’s book *The Secret Doctrine* was supposedly based on this work.

As far as writing was concerned, Senzar had an alphabet of its own and could also be represented in several other modes of writing ‘which partake more of the nature of ideographs than of syllables’. (This comment is confused: linguistic symbols representing words as wholes are logographs rather than ideographs, syllabic writing is different again from both alphabets and logographies, and true syllabaries are not current in the region in question.) Blavatsky never furnished details of Senzar writing sufficient to draw serious attention from linguists (*Note 4*).

As can be said for Theosophy as a whole, there appears to be no hard evidence of the very existence of

Senzar. But this does not deter the believers, who still hang on Blavatsky’s every word (‘we are told this’).

### **Pre-historic Hungarian?**

As I have noted previously in this forum, Hungarian is probably to be regarded as an outlying member of the Finno-Ugric branch of the Uralian language ‘family’ (Finnish, Estonian etc.); thus it is not Indo-European but is now geographically surrounded by IE languages. The mainstream view is that the Hungarians migrated into Eastern Europe from a base in Siberia around 500 CE. Because of this unusual situation, Hungarian and its writing systems have been the focus of much fringe linguistic attention.

One theme in this tradition is the idea that Hungarian has in fact been located in what is now Hungary for a much longer period; there was no ‘invasion’ in historic times. One claim which dates in the form I have accessed from 2008 and which is still circulating involves ancient runic and other allegedly linguistic signs dating from 15000-20000 BP and found in a cave in Bajót (Northern Hungary); they can allegedly be read as Hungarian. Other such groups of linguistic symbols are identified on the Tartaria Disc (7500-8200 BP) and in Tordos in what later became Hungarian-speaking Transylvania (6000-7000 BP). These symbols are likened to those identified in the context of the ‘Bosnian Pyramids’ and to those found far away at the mysterious site at Glozel in France. It is also claimed (anecdotally) that the runic script identified here is still known to some present-day Hungarians and is indeed well suited to the writing of modern Hungarian (*note 5*).

All this would imply not only the presence of a genuine writing system at a date long before the earliest known written language (Sumerian) but also unprecedented conservatism (a **very** slow rate of change) on the part of the Hungarian language. Over such a long period, a language would normally change so much that a script (of whatever structural type) devised at the earlier date would no longer be a good

'fit' for it. This set of claims would also call into question the Finno-Ugric identity of Hungarian **and** the established account of the history of runic script.

In the ensuing 14 years these claims have not been accepted in the mainstream, apparently because they have not been empirically substantiated. Of course, it is open to the advocates of such claims to produce convincing evidence. This would then constitute a most dramatic discovery.

### English

In 2020 I referred in this column to the 1989 spoof scientific piece by the science-fiction writer Poul Anderson called 'Uncleftish Beholding' (atomic

theory), written in an invented language with English grammar and largely Germanic-derived vocabulary. A more recent work of this kind is Paul Kingsnorth's successful 2014 debut novel *The Wake*, set in the aftermath of the 1066 Norman Conquest of England and written in a hybrid variety of English involving features of both Old and Modern English but no imported words or other features.

These two works are not aimed at promoting an actual reversion to a determinedly Germanic version of English, but as I noted in my earlier piece some writers (I discussed William Barnes and David Cowley; but there are quite a few more) have really sought (surely unrealistically) to move the

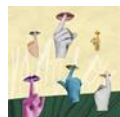
language in this direction. There is in fact a body of scholarship dealing with this group of new varieties of English, which have been collectively labelled 'Anglish' (*note 6*). And over the last year an online newsletter called *The Anglish Times* has been published, using no non-Germanic words (*note 7*).

### Notes

1. <https://tinyurl.com/3uyzmq3p>.
2. 'Thalia', *New & Selected Poems* (Melbourne, 1998).
3. <https://tinyurl.com/337h38ue>;  
<https://tinyurl.com/4cm8zker>.
4. See <https://tinyurl.com/2p8nsb24>.
5. <https://tinyurl.com/294m7eh3>.
6. Start at <https://tinyurl.com/3rz3eteu>.
7. <https://tinyurl.com/3226sum7>.

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## 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.*

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## MORE CANCELLING, MORE PC NONSENSE

Mark Newbrook

### Cancelled twice more - for 'irrelevance', then for writing a Russian word!

I refer to my piece 'Unbelief: A Response to U3A presentations on Religions'. Since that incident, I have been 'cancelled' twice more! Firstly: I listen to the LBC radio show *Mystery Hour* on Thursdays. The presenter, James O'Brien, invites questions & answers about any subject; he knows me now, as I often phone in with answers to questions about language, ancient history, etc. On 11/11/21, however, my attempted contribution on linguistic aspects of differing colour perceptions (adding to physiological & psychological points made by others) was rejected by his gatekeeper, who **incredibly** failed to see its relevance – despite my giving a couple of examples, including the fact that in Russian there are separate words for dark and light blue, generating different judgements

when people are asked 'which of these three colours is the odd one out?' or the like. I got the impression that she thought that all conversations or other exchanges, at least about colour, are between native speakers of the same language; therefore the issue will not arise! Never mind!

My third cancellation came on Facebook, on 19/11/21. I was mixing my Russian (written in Cyrillic script) in with English in some banter in the chat on an online talk attended by some Russian-speakers. All went well until I remarked 'or even *molodets*'. The noun *molodets* means something like 'good for you' (grammatically masculine but – like some other such Russian nouns – used gender-neutrally) and is used to express praise or congratulations. I noticed that this particular post did not appear; then I received a message saying that my words were unacceptable, with an invitation to

dispute the decision; when I acted on this invitation, I received a further message stating that Facebook's moderators were very busy and were unlikely to find the time to respond. And they did not. The rest of my Russian had been accepted. So: does *molodets* perhaps resemble some taboo word – in whatever language, presumably written in Cyrillic script – which is unknown to me? Or did Facebook wrongly view it as sexist ('erasing females'). There **are** mistaken claims on the web to the effect that it is gender-specific in reference. But I **was** talking to a bloke anyway! And maybe I am now crediting Facebook's machines and/or moderators with more knowledge than they have?

### Politically-correct nonsense on social media

On 15/12/21 I was in a Twitter exchange involving the status of

traditional Maori beliefs about the world, increasingly regarded in politically-correct circles in New Zealand as equally valid alternatives to scientific findings (and indeed often labelled ‘Maori Science’). One participant stated that it was racist even to write Maori words in the Roman alphabet used by the erstwhile colonial British civilisation. She urged that they be written in the ‘original written language’.

As I said, chipping in: ‘**What** written language?’! Unless we accept the hyper-diffusionist delusions of Barry Fell & Co. about Numidian script and such in NZ, the pre-colonial Maori were non-literate (like the rest of the

Polynesians, with the sole exception of Easter Island).

And, even if there **had** been a Maori writing system (still known today), it would be strange and unhelpful to use it in a body of text in English aimed at a largely non-Maori and indeed non-NZ audience. When we cite Hindi words we do not suddenly shift into Devanagari script; when we mention Russian words we do not suddenly shift into the Cyrillic alphabet. If we did such things, most readers would not be able to pronounce the words in question (even approximately) without a transliteration, which would surely defeat the object (or indeed able to interpret the words, unless a gloss were also provided, as is normally done).

This occurs only in contexts such as scholarly works on e.g. Ancient Greek, where the readers **can** be assumed to know both script and language.

The seriously politically-correct do now call NZ by its Maori name, *Aotearoa* (this word is in fact of relatively recent origin; NZ was unpopulated until c 1200 CE) – just as local forms have largely replaced the colonial-era names of Indian cities such as *Bombay*. But naturally writers of English, French etc. use Roman script when they mention these non-English names, or any other ‘foreign’ words.

My comment on Twitter might have drawn some flak, but the session shortly ended!



## CONTRIBUTED ARTICLES

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### THE BILLY MEIER UFO CASE UNDER THE MICROSCOPE: EXTRAORDINARY CLAIMS OF EXTRATERRESTRIAL CONTACT!

Anthony Wharton



**Billy Meier**

Eduard Albert ‘Billy’ Meier is an 85-year-old, one-and-a-half-armed, Swiss farmer. He was born in 1937 and he claims to have been in contact with extraterrestrials named the ‘Plejaren’ or, formerly known as, the ‘Pleiadians’.

His claims of extraterrestrial contact were first published in the late 1970s/early 1980s. What made Meier different from previous UFO con-tactees is that his photographs were of, what appeared to be, structured craft.

However, many people soon grew very suspicious of Meier’s claims due to the vast number (100s) of crystal clear, daylight photographs of the UFOs.

Eduard Albert Meier, commonly nicknamed ‘Billy’, is the founder of a UFO religion/ cult called FIGU and alleged contactee whose UFO photographs are claimed to show alien spacecraft. Meier claims to be in regular contact with extraterrestrial beings he calls the Plejaren. He also presented other material during the 1970s such as metal samples, sound recordings and film footage. Meier claims to be the seventh reincarnation after six prophets common to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: Enoch, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Immanuel (Jesus), and Mohammed.

Meier has been widely characterized as a fraud by skeptics and ufologists, who suggest that he used models and miniature trees to hoax photos claimed to show alien spacecraft.

For a closer look at the claims of Billy Meier and the UFO case itself, see *note 1*. Here you will find analysis, interviews and more interesting information about the Billy Meier UFO case, simply click on any photo to read the articles.

**Note**

1. <https://tinyurl.com/bdzk2ddb>

*Anthony Wharton has been researching the UFO phenomenon for over 20 years after experiencing several genuine UFO sightings throughout his life, Anthony has also spent 18 years thoroughly researching the claims of Eduard Albert ‘Billy’ Meier.*



## UNBELIEF: A RESPONSE TO U3A PRESENTATIONS ON RELIGIONS

Mark Newbrook

I am a member of the University of the Third Age (Furness Branch in South Cumbria). After attending a series of online national U3A presentations (developed by West Midlands U3A) on specific religions in 2021, I offered to give a corresponding presentation on Unbelief. Although I am convinced that my paper is a fair and reasonable account of unbelief (inevitably including some discussion of why unbelievers reject religion), it has, after some discussion, been ‘cancelled’: U3A say they will not allow me to present any such talk on their platform. Main reason given: they are determined to be ‘neutral’ and ‘unbiased’. But in fact they appear more interested in avoiding the creation of controversy or the giving of offence (however unjustified) by permitting even a careful, undogmatic, rational defence of irreligion.

Obviously U3A have the **right** to deny me access to their platforms; but it is most disheartening to see this suppression of one important band of opinion at the hands of an organisation calling itself a university. And U3A’s position is, in my view, unfair to non-religious positions and amounts to unjustified discrimination on specious grounds. Most religious believers have grown up with their religion as part of a culture; and one can explain the doctrines of any given religion and describe the associated cultural practices without referring to any contrary ideas (although of course if one religion is true all others are in fact false, at least to a degree, and the relevant arguments could be presented). But atheism is an essentially negative position (‘None of these gods exist’), and thus it is **impossible** to discuss atheism without stating why atheists – who typically did **not** grow up as atheists – have come to adopt their stance; in other words, to set out the weaknesses which they find in religions. This cannot reasonably be held against the atheist writer. Nevertheless, I worked very hard, and I

think successfully, to prevent the objections to religion which I reported (my own or those developed by others) from appearing dogmatic or wilfully offensive. (I might also have discussed the various philosophical objections to **atheism**, but this might have been judged too challenging in context.)

Here follows the text of my rejected talk:

### UNBELIEF

This presentation is about the ideas of thoughtful people who find themselves unable to embrace any religion or other spiritual belief system.

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*At the other extreme from agnosticism, there are atheists who believe that it is possible to prove that there is no god (‘strong’ atheism).*

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Some ‘unbelievers’ are in fact agnostics, unable to come to a reasoned conclusion as to whether there is a god or not, or in some cases convinced that it is impossible in principle to do this. Others might accept some kind of ‘spirituality’ as part of the metaphysical structure of the universe, but do not accept the idea of a personal god.

At the other extreme from agnosticism, there are atheists who believe that it is possible to **prove** that there is no god (‘strong’ atheism); this typically involves an alleged *reductio ad absurdum*, a demonstration that the concept of a god is self-confounding and that such a being cannot possibly exist. (This is the opposite of a view which some believers hold, to the effect that it can be demonstrated that God **does** exist.)

More ‘moderate’ atheists take the view that the notion of a god (in particular the Christian/Muslim god) is not necessarily self-confounding but is philosophically highly problematic. To them, it appears unreasonable to believe that such a being exists, or at least it

appears that on philosophical grounds it is much more **likely** that there is no god than that there is one.

Such atheists have no confidence in the ‘revealed’ religion of ‘sacred’ texts or in the teachings of ‘prophets’ or ‘gurus’, since they find that these sources contradict each other and, individually, offer no evidence in their favour that would persuade someone who was not already committed to the belief system in question.

Atheists of this type are open to new compelling evidence or argumentation which would challenge their viewpoint, but this is rarely presented, and in its absence they may be very confident in their unbelief.

As they do not believe that the existence of God has been **disproved**, atheists of this kind (which is to say most atheists) might alternatively be described as agnostics, but this would appear misleading. Most people who actually identify as agnostics take the view that they are undecided on this point, whereas those who identify as ‘moderate’ atheists are just as convinced that there is no god as they are in upholding their settled views (where they have settled views) on any other issue which is not completely resolved (for example on the issue of whether or not the Trojan War actually occurred or whether or not Bigfoot exists).

It should be noted that neither ‘strong’ nor ‘moderate’ atheism relies mainly on scientific evidence or reasoning. Although the failure of determined, well-directed searches for positive evidence of God might suggest that this being probably does not exist (and atheists can reasonably refer to this point), it remains possible that genuinely decisive evidence of the existence of God has somehow, for one reason or another, been overlooked – conceivably because the empirical upshots of the existence of God, although they might in fact be persuasive, might nevertheless be far

from obvious. The principal basis for both kinds of atheism is, rather, philosophical, not scientific. Few atheists are guilty either of ‘scientism’ (the illegitimate application of scientific methods in non-scientific domains) or of dogmatic, philosophically naïve reliance on the apparent absence of empirical evidence for the existence of a god.

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***Unfortunately, there are many contexts ... in which atheists are left out of consideration. This is partly because their beliefs are not associated with specific ethnic groups.***

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Thoughtful atheists clearly do not feel any need for faith (it is undoubtedly a mistake to regard serious atheism as ‘another faith’), nor for the psychological comforts provided by religious beliefs. Nevertheless, they may have positive worldviews, especially including a delight in upholding reasoning; they seek to develop rational, cheerful responses to awareness of human mortality and other arguably unpalatable aspects of the universe; and they typically believe strongly in behaving morally (see below).

Unfortunately, there are many contexts (including the 2021 West-Midlands U3A ‘Faiths’ programme, as well as many courses on Comparative Religion or the like) in which atheists are left out of consideration. This is partly because their beliefs are not associated with specific ethnic groups. Most atheists are among the minority who have come to reasoned (hopefully objective) decisions about what they believe. They have become atheists on their own, sometimes thereby rejecting religious beliefs associated with their ethnic groups or espoused by their families (and indeed sometimes becoming alienated from them). For very many people, in contrast, the faith that they follow depends on the community in which they were brought up and to which their family belongs.

Given this, many people are likely to adhere to their beliefs for reasons that a philosopher (etc) might judge less than persuasive. (I once had a Thai girlfriend who spoke two European languages and had a good degree but had never even thought of being anything other than a Theravada Buddhist.)

Many people in the skeptical and atheistic communities of thought have in fact struggled to deal with increasing inability/unwillingness to fit in with the communities in which they grew up, finding in the end that there is insufficient ground for compromise and ‘walking away’ from their background or familial ethnic faiths. As an Australian Aboriginal leader said to anthropologist Josephine Flood, they end up with no ‘dreaming’; and they do not want any (even if they are intellectually interested in religion and such). With rare exceptions, the ground for their beliefs is critical reasoning. (I myself was perhaps lucky in that I had nothing specific to ‘walk away from’.)

Because they have often rejected their background beliefs, and because they typically embrace libertarian political stances centred on personal freedom, many atheists are individualists. If they have any adherence or loyalty to a community, it is to the loose community of libertarians, skeptics and unbelievers which (like some religions) crosses the boundaries between ethnicities and countries. But this does not prevent them from standing up for the freedom of other people of goodwill (including believers) to live their lives in peace, to pursue their own agendas and not to be victimised or persecuted.

Another reason why atheism and similar views are sometimes left out of consideration is the fact that atheists inevitably seek to critique religious belief, whereas religious believers often avoid critiquing the religions espoused by others so as not to give offence (or so as to foster solidarity), and sometimes feel uncomfortable when unbelievers critique their own or others’ religious viewpoints. Upfront atheists can easily be perceived as impolite or the like.

In fact, atheists – unlike most believers engaging in the comparison of religions – are concerned with understanding religions mainly as a preliminary step enabling the **assessment** of where each religion does and does not hold up in respect of evidence and reasoning. They are philosophers of religion rather than sociologists of religion. This is because they are committed modernists, more specifically (as is said) ‘Children of the Enlightenment’. Naturally, full, definitive establishment of what really is correct will in some cases be very difficult, but that will not stop such thinkers from trying. If atheists and skeptics could not even begin to assess claims rationally, they would find little point in the enterprise other than mere description of the various positions and historical explanations of how they arose.

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***Some religious believers, especially in the USA and in Islamic countries, seem to think that atheists are bound to be immoral or amoral people.***

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Another reason why even-handed discussion of atheism is sometimes difficult to locate is that some religious believers, especially in the USA and in Islamic countries, seem to think that atheists are bound to be immoral or amoral people. But in fact, most philosophically-aware atheists would argue, on the basis of a strong logical argument, that there can be **no** genuine link between religion and morality: what God is reported to have said (even if he really exists) cannot determine what is morally good or bad, and he cannot legitimately expect obedience. Threats of divine punishment for disobedience to the commands of a god are even less acceptable. (There are other ethical objections to the behaviour of God as portrayed in the various religions.) Atheists hold that there are better and more coherent means of determining what is morally good or bad (even though this is a

philosophically complex area of thought), and that there are definitely better reasons for behaving morally.

Another objection to atheism is the idea that atheists are spiritually ‘blind’ in failing to notice the presence of ‘the divine’ in the world, experiencing no feelings of this kind. But atheists can respond that those who claim veridical awareness of ‘the divine’ are deluded; maybe they are mistaking unconscious aspects of their own minds for external spiritual presences. And what such people report as true of ‘the divine’ predictably varies greatly.

Naturally, atheists are skeptical of specific religious or religion-related claims, especially claims regarding empirical matters involving science or history. For example, skeptics and most other atheists do not accept that there is adequate reason to believe that the vimanas which feature in Hindu scriptures were genuine aircraft.

The overwhelming majority of atheists do not seek to suppress religious beliefs (even though some of them – such as Richard Dawkins – believe that religion does much more harm than good and that the world would be better without it), or to offend those who uphold such beliefs (deliberately or carelessly). But they do demand the right to criticise these

beliefs, just as they acknowledge the right of religious believers to criticise their own ideas.

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***The overwhelming majority of atheists do not seek to suppress religious beliefs ... or to offend those who uphold such beliefs.***

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Most atheists also hope that they can have friendly relations with thoughtful believers, including the exchange of ideas. (I myself publish in a journal where this goes on.) They may find interest and pleasure in religious literature, music, art, architecture, etc. And they are also happy to join with thoughtful religious people in performing works of charity, opposing manifest evil, opposing naïve and tendentious interpretations of key texts, opposing pseudo-scientific creationism and pseudo-history, etc.

Atheists also want to point out that religions with contrasting ideas cannot **all** be **altogether** correct. Different people may find that different beliefs make sense to them personally, and the truth about such matters is complex, multi-sided and of course often uncertain. But the truth obviously cannot be self-contradictory. Just as an

atheist and a believer cannot both be right, so Christianity and Hinduism – or even Christianity and Islam with their shared traditions – cannot both be right. For example, if Jesus (Isa) was only a prophet of God (although an important one), as Muslims believe, he cannot also have been the Son of God, as Christians believe. Even in the context of inter-faith cooperation and mutual tolerance, this point cannot be avoided.

Atheists can appreciate the inclusive tendencies in ecumenical versions of the various faiths. (I was impressed with a Quaker group I met who found some common ground with me.) But in the final analysis the gap between atheists and believers is unbridgeable, because atheists simply hold that all religions, for all their good points, are fundamentally mistaken about the universe.

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

### **Editor’s Announcement**

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

## REVIEWS AND COMMENTARIES



### **The Number Bias – How Numbers Lead and Mislead Us** by Sanne Blauw London: Sceptre. ISBN 9781529342734, 2020, pp 165.

#### Reviewed by Steve Dulson

The author, Sanne Blauw, is a Dutch journalist and self-confessed ‘numbers person’ who thinks it is about time that people understood the way in which numbers (more specifically statistics) are used to direct our thinking on important topics. Sometimes we even do it unwittingly to ourselves. The dust cover states ‘...behind every number is a story. Yet politicians, businesses and the media often forget this – or use it for their own gain.’ As a betting man, my money is on the latter.

This is a nice little book, written in a clear and engaging style. After the foreword and six juicy chapters comes a handy checklist, which sets out what to do if you are confronted by numbers in the media or research papers which require more scrutiny. There is also a detailed, well-referenced notes section for those who wish to delve further.

The first chapter takes things back to the very origins of the need for numbers and statistics and the ways in which their use has developed over time. Blauw gives some real-life examples, including the innovative graphical representation of statistics used by Florence Nightingale to encourage improvements in military hospital conditions and prevent avoidable deaths. Chapter 2 concentrates on the way statistics can be misunderstood and, even, deliberately misused in order to reinforce existing prejudices. The examples presented focus on the early research into IQ and skin colour and

touches on the real meaning of averages. I know the first question I always have when someone refers to an average is whether they mean the mode, median or mean? It amazes me how requesting such a simple clarification like that can completely throw a lot of people. The importance placed on reporting GDP (gross domestic product) is also interesting, given that it is a not-that-useful measure of an abstract concept.

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***‘Behind every number is a story. Yet politicians, businesses and the media often forget this – or use it for their own gain.’***

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The book then discusses polling questionnaires and how flaws in their wording can alter the real meaning of the results. Margins of error are also often not reported (or not understood) and this can render the results of some research absolutely meaningless. Numbers do not necessarily mean what they are proposed to mean, or we interpret them to mean, and some aspects of life are simply not measurable.

The discussion moves on to insidious marketing tactics (step forward the tobacco industry) and the tricky traps encountered by researchers who accidentally (or otherwise) confuse coincidence or correlation with causality. Again, this can be influenced

by what the researchers are being paid to prove or disprove before they even undertake the number-crunching. The manipulation of scales on graph axes can also be used to emphasise or down-play results and I am reminded of some of the presentations I have sat through with respect to Covid and climate change. ‘Next slide please...’

Big Data is discussed with respect to credit scores, including the tendency for algorithms to become self-reinforcing, potentially ruining the lives and prospects of people in the process: ‘The numbers that should have captured reality have replaced it.’ Numbers must be attached to words to have meaning and this is the core of what is being explained. In the same way that an elaborately decorated silver pistol is a thing of beauty when viewed displayed in a case, it is when somebody decides to pick it up and use it that all the problems start.

In summary, this is a worthwhile read which was particularly interesting to me, as a licensed bookkeeper and freelance proofreader (largely of scientific, technical papers). Some of the topics raised rang a number of different bells. Alarm bells!

*Steve Dulson was a Chartered Geologist for 20 years but is now a freelance proofreader and ICB bookkeeper. He actively supports all kinds of live music - preferably something loud and shouty.*



## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### OF INTEREST

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

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

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

Keep visiting the Sense About Science website for their latest projects.

##### **Good Thinking**

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

<https://goodthinkingsociety.org/>

##### **Skeptics UK**

Lots of information and articles of skeptical interest can be found here:

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

##### **Skeptics in the Pub Online Podcast**

'This is the podcast version of the Skeptics in the Pub Online live-streamed talks. We take the audio and give it to you in a nice easy podcast feed for you to listen at your pleasure. All of the talks are still available on our YouTube channel if you want to see any visuals/slides/etc. We release the live shows as we do them on the 2nd and 4th Thursday of each month and on weeks when there isn't a live show, we release an episode from the archive.'

##### **Website of general interest**

'Vulture Watch is about creating awareness of exploitation, irrationality, discrimination or misinformation. We delve into the motives of such vulturous activities and look at how we all can hold such behaviour accountable.'

<https://tinyurl.com/4mvz3mae>

##### **Misinformation, etc.**

'How to spot video and photo fakes as Russia invades Ukraine. A look at the techniques that journalists and other investigators use to verify whether images and videos are real and in accurate context.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/vcu8nppm>

And: '80 fact checkers around the world, including Full Fact, are publishing an open letter calling on YouTube to take effective action against disinformation and misinformation. The company has up until now largely escaped criticism despite fact checkers seeing problematic content daily on the platform.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/ydupu3jt>

Also: 'Twitter's Science Stars Fight Misinformation: COVID-19 has thrown science and scientists into the spotlight. Some have accepted the challenge, amassing hundreds of thousands of followers and using the ongoing pandemic as a "teachable moment."' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/47rtwdfs>

##### **Pseudoscience**

*Students Against Pseudoscience*: 'In this edition of Cambridge Spotlight, Christopher Cheng, Barty Wardell and Naomi van den Berg explain why pseudoscience can be such a threat to academia and personal lives, and introduces Students Against Pseudoscience: a Cambridge-based initiative targeting the issue.' At:

<https://www.varsity.co.uk/science/22753>

Also: 'Each year, the graduate students of UCSC's Science Communication Program research a different topic for the first GT issue of the new year. This year, with so much abuse and misuse of science floating around, especially on social media, we decided to take on the topic of pseudoscience. It's a wildly varied list of subjects, and whether they're fun and seemingly harmless, have implications for believers' pocketbooks, or are the basis for sinister conspiracy theories, it's edifying to know their scientific basis—or lack of one—and to consider why their popularity has endured.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/mry8s64u>

And: 'COVID spurred a slew of junk science. Here are the top 6 coronavirus related stories of 2021.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/2p9337z2>

##### **Anti-science and skepticism about science**

'Scientists under Attack: How health experts became targets on Facebook & Co.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/tew7ecvk>

'The reasons for science skepticism can be complex and founded on real concerns.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/hs3f3enj>

'How to Confront Anti-Science Sentiment: Reaching a science skeptic is not a matter of credentials; it's a matter of heart.'

<https://tinyurl.com/2p84zemk>

##### **Science research**

'The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has highlighted the limitations of the current scientific publication system, in which serious post-publication concerns are often addressed too slowly to be effective. In this Perspective, we offer suggestions to improve academia's willingness and ability to correct errors in an appropriate time frame.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/2p9pnbv2>

see also:

<https://tinyurl.com/2k75r9ra>

And: 'Evidence of Fabricated Data in a Vitamin C trial by Paul E Marik et al in CHEST'. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/5r67zcyn>

##### **Skeptical Comedy**

From Kevin Precious: 'I've stuck up a recording of my RS Teacher/ Skeptic-themed show. It was recorded at the Leicester Comedy Festival in 2019, and I would have continued with the idea, had not Covid intervened. I've sacrificed quality for atmosphere

somewhat, so it may benefit from a listen on headphones.

<https://tinyurl.com/ykand94b>

### **Cognitive Biases**

Anchoring bias: The cognitive bias that tripped us up during the pandemic.

<https://tinyurl.com/4284jm3r>

## MEDICINE

### **Science-based medicine**

'Quackademic medicine and the delusion of being "science-based": Last week, I was interviewed by the a reporter from the Georgetown student newsletter about its integrative medicine program. It got me to thinking how delusion that one's work is science-based can lead to collaborations with New Age "quantum" mystics like Deepak Chopra.'

<https://tinyurl.com/2p83azfn>

### **Website of medical interest**

The Skeptical Raptor: Science of vaccines, cancer, nutrition, evolution: 'This blog is all about chewing up bad science, anti-science, and pseudo-science'.

<https://tinyurl.com/3f6dchb3>

### **Medical misinformation**

'He's been called an "expert in quackery," but Timothy Caulfield, a Canada Research Chair in Health Law and Policy, Professor in the Faculty of Law and the School of Public Health, and Research Director of the Health Law Institute at the University of Alberta, prefers to be known as someone who "does a lot of research countering misinformation." Caulfield is the recipient of numerous academic and writing awards, a sought-after public speaker, host and co-producer of the award-winning documentary series *A User's Guide to Cheating Death*, and an author of several bestselling books, many of which debunk rampant misinformation, including *The Cure for Everything*, *The Vaccination Picture*, and *The Science of Celebrity...Or Is Gwyneth Paltrow Wrong About Everything?* He spoke to *Healthing* about how Canadians can figure out fact and fiction in a world full of fake news, why doctors who spread mis-

information are so dangerous and why speaking up matters.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/45x3sf3a>

'An Open Letter to Spotify: A call from the global scientific and medical communities to implement a misinformation policy.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/2p9935ds>

'With Amazon well on its way to overtaking Walmart as the top retailer in the world, it sadly makes sense that the E-commerce giant would be one of the largest purveyors of pseudoscience. Lax oversight of the products sold on Amazon's webpages allows for all sorts of nonsense to be marketed to consumers. Sure, one expects to find an array of homeopathy available, as well as all sorts of questionable books touting cancer cures, like *Proof for the Cancer-Fungus Connection*, *Raw Can Cure Cancer*, and *The Eggplant Cancer Cure*, but there are many more flabbergasting products for sale that are downright dumbfounding.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/bdh6pn54>

'Medical misinformation often isn't outright lies. It's more subtle than that. The most powerful forms of deception rely more on emotional manipulation and misdirection than outright lies.'

<https://tinyurl.com/yfjx6xtv>

### **Long Covid**

The vultures from the scam medical industries are circling patients suffering from Long Covid. 'Long Covid patients, in search of relief, turn to private company. A company called IncellDx says it can diagnose long Covid with a blood test. Critics say there's no science to back it up.'

<https://tinyurl.com/mr4cvpad>

### **Wellness**

'The law of the instrument suggests that the tool at hand when a problem presents itself seems like the right one to use. When all we have is a hammer, everything looks a bit more like a nail. So we pound it. And in the healthy living industry (aka wellness) we have quite a hammer. The market for healthy living is 1.5 trillion dollars, says McKinsey & Company. Everyone seems to have a product or service to

sell for this huge and growing market. With so much money in the mix, bias and conflicted interests are inevitable for the healthy living industry.'

<https://tinyurl.com/2p8xkf9x>

### **Stretching**

Do we really need to stretch? 'Static stretching is often seen as a sacrosanct pillar of fitness, but the scientific literature shows that this image has been significantly stretched out of proportion.'

<https://tinyurl.com/mr4cvpad>

### **Gender and Surgery**

A recent study revealed that female patients fare worse under the knife of male surgeons:

<https://tinyurl.com/3dapky2n>

But are there mundane reasons for this?

<https://tinyurl.com/2p93xrf5>

### **Covid**

'An international research team from universities including Chalmers University of Technology, Sweden, the University of Padua and the University of Udine in Italy, and the University of Vienna, Austria, has developed a new theoretical model to better assess the risks of spreading viruses such as COVID-19-with and without a face mask. The results show how the standard 'safe' distance of two meters does not always apply but varies greatly depending on a range of environmental factors, and that face masks can indeed play a crucial role.'

<https://tinyurl.com/2p9577wk>

Placebo (i.e. dummy) injections in Covid vaccination trials give a high rate of reported adverse effects.

<https://tinyurl.com/ycktb7mn>

### **Theranos**

'Elizabeth Holmes, founder of Theranos, has been found guilty on four of 11 charges of fraud, concluding a high-profile trial that captivated Silicon Valley and chronicled the missteps of the now-defunct blood testing startup. The jury found Holmes guilty of several charges - including conspiracy to defraud investors - following a dramatic day in which jurors said they remained deadlocked on three of the criminal counts she faced. Holmes founded the

company after dropping out of Stanford at 19 years old, promising a revolutionary technology that could run hundreds of health tests on just a drop of blood. But the company ultimately fell short of its ambitious pledge.'

<https://tinyurl.com/bdf995us>

### **Sugar and other Sweeteners**

'What's the difference between sugar, other natural sweeteners and artificial sweeteners? A food chemist explains sweet science.'

<https://tinyurl.com/2p84nhmt>

### **'Havana syndrome'**

'Most cases of a mysterious illness striking US officials dubbed "Havana syndrome" were not caused by a foreign power, CIA officials say. Since 2016, US diplomats around the world have reported symptoms sparking suggestions Russia, China or another adversary could be responsible. But a majority of 1,000 cases looked at by the CIA can be explained by stress or natural causes, officials say.'

<https://tinyurl.com/324ztc6j>

### **The Lightning Process**

'(Recently) a journal under the umbrella of the British Journal of General Practice published—and a day later unpublished—a laudatory piece about the Lightning Process from a Lightning Process practitioner. The author, Anna Chellamuthu, is also a GP at Royal Cornwall Hospital. She wrote that the controversial program combining neurolinguistic program (*sic*), osteopathy and life-coaching cured her daughter of ME/CFS and inspired her to train in the technique herself. The article in BJGP Life was called "Reflections on NICE, CFS/ME, and the Lightning Process." It functioned as both a tirade against the new ME/CFS guidelines from Britain's National Institute for Health and Care Excellence and an advertisement for an unproven commercial intervention. The new NICE guidelines, issued last October, explicitly advise against offering ME/CFS patients the Lightning Process.'

<https://tinyurl.com/mt7ejwnd>

### **Makena**

'American babies are at far higher risk of dying before their first birthdays than those in almost any other wealthy country. A big reason for those deaths, more than 21,000 each year, is that too many are born too soon. For more than a decade, a pharmaceutical company has said it holds the key to helping those infants: a drug called Makena, which is aimed at preventing premature birth. .... A recent large study "unequivocally failed to demonstrate" that Makena reduced the risk of preterm birth, agency scientists explained in a 2020 memo. They recommended it be taken off the market. The company has refused.'

<https://tinyurl.com/2p9he2ft>

### **Supplements**

'Most supplements touted for menopause aren't effective, experts say. Women struggling with the change of life often head to the supplements section of their pharmacy to deal with menopause symptoms like hot flashes and sleeplessness. But experts say they'd be better off going to their doctor and asking for clinically proven treatments rather than relying on an herbal remedy.'

<https://tinyurl.com/ypue27ec>

### **Collagen supplements for arthritis**

Researching collagen to help his achy knees, a statistician explores the painfully weak evidence.

<https://tinyurl.com/tp9hh7zj>

### **Intravenous vitamins**

'Trendy IV vitamin infusions don't work — and might be unsafe. Experts explain why.' 'In the past few years, intravenous vitamin treatments have exploded in popularity. Rundown customers are finding them as spalike "drip bars," or are booking house calls by concierge services. In either case, after an initial consultation, they'll be settled in a comfy chair with an IV line pumping the intravenous vitamin cocktail of their choice into their veins.'

<https://tinyurl.com/yc59a5yu>

### **Vitamin D**

In the *Lancet Diabetes & Endocrinology*, 'Rachel Neale and colleagues present their findings from D-Health, a population-based, double-blind, placebo-controlled vitamin D3 intervention trial in older Australian adults (n=21,315). It is the largest study to date to assess the effect of vitamin D supplementation on mortality as the primary outcome. No significant reduction in all-cause mortality or from cancer and cardiovascular disease was found.'

<https://tinyurl.com/ycktnvuy>

### **Traditional Chinese Medicine**

'Speaking about the dangerous effects that certain Chinese medicines carry, several questions are being raised on Traditional Chinese Medicines (TCM), their questionable clinical trials and lack of scientific evidence about their efficacy, reported ANI quoting sources. Reportedly, the detailed results of the trials of TCM are also not being published in public and the presence of toxins is not indicated on the packaging of TCM products due to lack of guidelines and required regulations.' Speaking about the dangerous effects that certain Chinese medicines carry, several questions are being raised on Traditional Chinese Medicines (TCM), their questionable clinical trials and lack of scientific evidence about their efficacy, reported ANI quoting sources. Reportedly, the detailed results of the trials of TCM are also not being published in public and the presence of toxins is not indicated on the packaging of TCM products due to lack of guidelines and required regulations.' Also, demand for TCM has sparked fears about the poaching of African endangered species.

<https://tinyurl.com/4xhzh9u8>

### **Ayurveda**

'The Kerala State Medical Council for Indian Systems of Medicine has served a notice on a liver-specialist doctor, who has been accused of 'defaming' Ayurveda and calling the traditional branch of medicine a "pseudoscience".'

<https://tinyurl.com/54kf4vzn>



### Herbal medicine

From Australia: 'Gold Coast company FuturePro Pty Ltd (FuturePro), trading as Inet Herbal, has pleaded guilty to seven breaches of the Therapeutic Goods Act 1989 (the Act) for the unlawful import, export, manufacture, supply, and advertising of herbal medicines with claims relating to the prevention and treatment of illnesses including various types of cancers. The Director of FuturePro, Mr Barnett, plead guilty to a further seven criminal charges, with a sentencing hearing set for 28 April 2022 at Southport Courthouse in Queensland. The therapeutic products, which were not included in the Australian Register of Therapeutic Goods (ARTG), were illegally advertised as medicines with high end claims, including the prevention and treatment of various forms of cancers along with other medical illnesses including some affecting the immune system, respiratory health, and heart health.'

<https://tinyurl.com/ttfwv73s>

### Homeopathy

'Research on homeopathy, a 200-year-old form of alternative medicine, is often biased to make it look more effective than it really is, according to a new study out this week. Homeopathy researchers routinely neglect to register the details of their clinical trials before they publish their results, and unregistered trials usually provide rosier results than registered ones, the study found. Over a third of registered homeopathy trials in the past two decades have also never been published, which can be a sign of burying unflattering findings.'

<https://tinyurl.com/ykbnsf99>

### DNA pseudoscience

'A subsidiary of Israeli AI company Cortica, called Corsight AI, claims it can create a model of a face using a person's DNA that can then be fed into a facial recognition system, a highly dubious - not to mention ethically fraught - claim that has experts calling foul.'

<https://tinyurl.com/2p93323h>

### Innovo

'An expensive pair of shorts ('Innovo') promises to cure bladder leaks by using electrical stimulation to produce pelvic floor contractions, essentially doing the Kegel exercises for you. The science is insufficient and the marketing is misleading.'

<https://tinyurl.com/2p897fae>

## PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHIATRY

### False memory

Chris French gives his opinion concerning a strange event that may be a case of false or distorted memory at:

<https://tinyurl.com/3vr89zs8>

You can still listen to Jim Al-Khalili's 'Life Scientific' interview with Dr Julia Shaw of UCL, on Radio 4, 22.02.22. Dr Shaw is well known for her research on the creation of false memories at:

<https://tinyurl.com/mrx5m9h9>

### Belief in misinformation

'Repetition can make even the most bizarre claims seem more true: The spread of misinformation over recent years poses huge dangers, and has so far proven extremely difficult to bring under control. Psychological research has revealed much of what brings people to believe false information, but the full picture is still far from complete, and new findings are bringing to light yet more factors that may maintain this problem. One example is the Truth-by-Repetition (TBR) effect—that repeating a statement increases how true it's perceived to be.' See website below for an account of recent research.

<https://tinyurl.com/2p89fz69>

## RELIGION

### Conversion therapy

'New Zealand has banned conversion practices, with near unanimity, after all but eight National party members voted in favour of the law. Conversion "therapy" refers to the practice, often by religious groups, of trying to cure people of their sexuality, gender expression or LGBTQI identity.'

<https://tinyurl.com/3jz457xd>

### Life after death

'Is there life after death? That's the million-dollar question. When the Bigelow Institute for Consciousness Studies in Nevada announced an essay contest in February 2021, they were raising the stakes in what is set to become one of the most significant controversies in modern science. The topic was the survival of consciousness after death, and founder Robert Bigelow put up US\$1 million in prize money, making it the monetary equivalent of the Nobel.' Results and discussion at:

<https://tinyurl.com/3xmp4j9b>

### Religious apparitions

Blake Smith, Karen Stollznow, and Matthew Baxter talk about many of the strange religious apparitions throughout history.

<https://tinyurl.com/3j79ab65>

### Misuse of charitable status?

'The National Secular Society has referred a Christian charity to the regulator after finding anti-vaccine and homophobic posts on its Facebook page. East Kilbride Christadelphians made dozens of posts on its Facebook page that may undermine public health messages, despite charities being required to serve a public benefit.'

<https://tinyurl.com/2yx2k86x>

## CONSPIRACY THEORIES

'Health and disease-related conspiracy theories pre-date modern governments and companies. In fact, they date all the way back to ancient times.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/yjvjbfrh>

And how an anti-vax conspiracy theorist changed his mind, with the help of Michael Marshall of the Good Thinking Society and Merseyside Skeptics helped change his mind. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/sz5aymbj>

'Covid vaccine and mask conspiracies succeed when they appeal to identity and ideology. Once a person feels part of a community or a movement, the adherence to a science-free, health misinformation position may begin to feel brave.'

<https://tinyurl.com/jk6jp4bp>



## MISCELLANEOUS

### Astrology

From Ivan Kelly to Chris French:

‘Hi Chris: I have updated our critique of ‘Contemporary Western Astrology’ and would like to send you the update (as of today). And you can pass it along to anyone who might be interested. The update includes ‘wrong charts’, ‘time twins and a section on Gauquelin. It can be found on ‘Ivan William Kelly, Research Gate’. Even that copy is a little dated since I’ve made some more updates (which I would have attached if I could).’

If you would like a copy of this extremely comprehensive (85-page) document and can’t download it from Research Gate, contact the Editor (MH).

<https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Ivan-Kelly-3>

### Psychics

#### *From the Australian Skeptics Newsletter*

‘The results of the Great Australian Psychic Prediction Project, a 12-year study by Australian Skeptics, have been released. An in-depth report has been published in the latest issue of *The Skeptic*. The project revealed that so-called psychics’ predictions are right only 11% of the time. And when something momentous or infamous happens, they are unlikely to have foreseen it.’ See a summary of the findings at:

<https://tinyurl.com/4u7xkx6>

‘The saga (both amusing and concerning) of someone who set themselves up as a Facebook psychic, the people who contacted her, the responses she gave, and the fake account set up in the name of her fake account. Plus the moral and ethical concern of doing this, even for just a few hours.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/bde6tk3n>

‘Vicky Baker investigates the stranger-than-fiction story of Lamar Keene, a renowned psychic who confessed to being part of an underground network he called the “psychic mafia”.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/5zymkk2p>

*Putin will become the ‘Lord of the World’ while Europe will become a ‘wasteland. All will thaw, as if ice, only one remain untouched—Vladimir’s glory, the glory of Russia. Nobody can stop Russia.* ‘After Russia invaded Ukraine, these alleged prophecies for the year 2022 attributed to Bulgarian blind seer Baba Vanga (1911–1996) went viral on social media, and were mentioned by mainline international media as well. Reportedly, they came from Russian poet and academic Valentin Mitrofanovich Sidorov (1932–1999), who interviewed Baba Vanga and devoted a book to her, whose most popular edition, heavily edited after his death, was published in 2009. Both Baba Vanga and Sidorov are interesting characters. However, the prophecies about 2022 and Putin defeating Europe are apocryphal. Sidorov’s writings

about Baba Vanga and other visionaries do include references to the glory and victories of Russia, but there are no special mentions of Putin’s activities in 2022.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/5252wmxt>

### UFOs

‘How Believers in the Paranormal Birthed the Pentagon’s New Hunt for UFOs’. ‘The Pentagon’s new office for what has been rebranded as unidentified aerial phenomena, or UAP, has deep roots in the paranormal. Underneath the Washington defense talk about threats from China and Russia, there is a conviction among advocates that the strange objects glimpsed by troops and military equipment are part of a mysterious phenomenon that stretches back decades or, perhaps, throughout human history.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/n246d755>

‘Why is Harvard University Astrophysicist Avi Loeb working with ardent UFO believers?’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/bdenyb7u>

From the Australian Skeptics: ‘For those interested in serious investigation of UFOs/UAPs, you might like to take a look at Fotocat. Since 2000, this has been a project owned and managed by Vicente-Juan Ballester Olmos, with the purpose of creating a catalogue of all world-wide UFO photo events. It is a very skeptical site, with in-depth assessments of claims both recent and historical.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/bd8zxa3c>

## UPCOMING EVENTS

A comprehensive calendar of skeptical events in Europe may be found at the website of the **European Skeptics Podcast**. Click on the tab ‘Events in Europe’ on the ESP website at:

<https://theesp.eu/>

### Skeptics in the Pub

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 in central London hosts live and online presentations of general interest that often have a skeptical

flavour. So keep an eye on their website:

<https://tinyurl.com/y7dmgktl>

Coming up:

### **Ambition and Deceit in the New Influencer Economy**

Sunday 10th April, 3:00 pm - 4:30 pm  
(hybrid event)

‘More than one-fifth of children want to become influencers and it’s easy to understand why. What if you could escape economic uncertainty by

winning the internet's attention? What if you could turn the adoration of your social media followers into a lucrative livelihood?

'But, as Symeon Brown explores in his searing exposé, the reality is much murkier. From IRL streamers in LA to Brazilian butt lifts, from sex workers on OnlyFans to fraudulent cryptocurrency schemes, these are the incredible stories that lurk behind the filtered selfies and gleaming smiles.' See:

<https://tinyurl.com/yp2why36>

### **European Skeptics Congress**

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 your eye on the ESCO congress webpage at: <https://www.ecso.org/esc2022/>

### **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.

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

### **Pint of Science**

'Pint of Science is a grassroots non-profit organisation that has grown astronomically over the few years since two people decided to share their

research in the pub. Although our mission has expanded, our core values remain the same: to provide a space for researchers and members of the public alike to come together, be curious, and chat about research in a relaxed environment outside of mysterious laboratories or daunting dark lecture theatres. We believe that everyone has a place at the table to discuss the research going on both on our doorsteps and far beyond. Our missions and visions are based around the people that matter most: our audience, volunteers, speakers, and our wider research community.' A full list of Pint of Science cities and countries can be found accessed at:

<https://pintofscience.co.uk/about/>

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## LOGIC AND INTUITION: ANSWERS

### **The soggy potato**

The original potato is 1% actual potato—i.e. 1 gram. After drying there is still only 1 gram of actual potato, which now comprises 2% of the weight.

So the weight of the whole potato now must be 50 grams..

### **The two urns**

If I put all the coins in one urn, my chance of picking a gold coin would be 1 in 4. If I put all 50 gold coins in one

urn and the fake 50 in the other urn my chance would be 1 in 2. If I put 1 gold coin in one urn and 49 gold and 50 fake coins in the other urn my chance would be almost 3 in 4, which is the best I can do.

## **About ASKE**

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

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

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

email: [askel@talktalk.net](mailto:askel@talktalk.net)

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