

# THE SKEPTICAL INTELLIGENCER

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THE ASSOCIATION FOR SKEPTICAL ENQUIRY  
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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

### Religion and Science

April 2022 saw the publication of a survey of opinions of the public and ‘experts’ on whether science and religion are compatible. Titled ‘Science and Religion: Moving away from the shallow end’, it was undertaken by Theos, ‘the UK’s leading religion and society think tank’, which has ‘a broad Christian basis’ (*note1*). The survey asked lots of questions and received many interesting answers. Like many such surveys, it does not provide a direct measure of how important for themselves the respondents consider the questions to be and how much time they spend thinking about them, but it is reasonable to conclude that the answer in both cases is not that much.

Overall the survey found that the British public are more likely to think that science and religion are incompatible (57%) than compatible (30%), though this is not the case for younger respondents. However, the difference is much reduced when the question addresses religion and specific areas of science, e.g. neuroscience, medical science, chemistry, psychology, geology and even cosmology; people are more likely to say that, on balance, knowledge derived from studying these disciplines does not make it harder to be religious. Similarly, the perception of incompatibility between ‘science and religion’ is greater than it is between, say, ‘science and Christianity’ or ‘science and Islam’. Moreover, the religious are no more antagonistic towards science itself than are the non-religious and, for example, only a small minority of people, religious or otherwise, reject evolution.

Clearly, science and religion come into conflict if we are to take religious texts such as the Bible and the Qur’an at their word and interpret them literally, the usual dispute being around the account of creation in the opening chapters of Genesis. But the survey

found that only 3% of those sampled said they thought the Bible is ‘the actual word of God and to be taken literally, word for word’, and only 3% thought the same of the Qur’an. An alternative way of understanding Genesis is to acknowledge that it is not a factual account of how the universe and life, including human life, came into being, but a story that contains profound truths, conflicts and dilemmas about the human world, and that requires careful study and debate to elucidate what these may be. All this would be lost from a literal interpretation. The devout reader may consider that whoever wrote the story was directly inspired by God, not so the non-believer.

The authors of the report may be correct in considering the science-versus-religion debate to be unduly narrow and sterile, largely ignored by most of the populace, and guaranteed to remain an unresolved bone of contention amongst those unable or unwilling to move from their entrenched positions. Perhaps, then, we should widen the debate to include the historicity of the narrative books of the Bible which, according to mainstream archaeologists and students of history, are in great part of doubtful authenticity.

As a Humanist, my own approach to these questions is to view the science-versus-religion debate in a wider context by replacing ‘science’ with ‘knowledge’ (i.e. all the knowledge that we have about our world up to the present moment). From the cradle onwards we—individually and collectively—are constantly accumulating information about our world, not just from our own experiences but by communication with others. This means that we are constantly having to update our ideas and understanding of the world, occasionally quite radically. However, we are often slow and reluctant to do this, preferring instead to hold onto our existing worldview, beliefs, opinions, attitudes, and so on.

I think it’s possible to consider scientific enquiry and discovery as an extension of this process. However, whereas at one time we could all share our observations and speculations about the natural world, the proportion of people who have the time and ability to participate in this enterprise has become progressively smaller, and these days is largely confined to those whom we generally call scientists and specifically the specialists in the increasingly multitudinous branches of science. This means that if most of us are to further our knowledge of the world in important ways, we have to rely increasingly on that acquired by scientists on our behalf. Nothing unusual about that: the never-ending process of learning from experiences of others is a major part of how we acquire knowledge in our everyday life.

Although the number of scientists who do not believe in God is proportionately higher than in the general population (*note 2*), the number who do so is sufficiently high to provide an empirical answer to the question ‘Is it possible to be a scientist and believe in God?’ *Real Science, Real Faith* (*note 3*) is a collection of essays by 17 scientists, (16 of them male!), eminent in their fields, who are each committed to their scientific discipline *and* are devoutly Christian.

An earlier example of such a scientist was the Belgian scientist Georges Lemaître, Professor of Physics at the Catholic University of Louvain and a Catholic priest who, in 1931, presented a scientific theory on the origin of the universe, proposing that it expanded from an initial point, which he called the ‘Primeval Atom’. This was initially greeted with skepticism but became the forerunner of the ‘Big Bang’ theory. Lemaître did not consider his theory to be incompatible with his religious beliefs, as for him they were parallel ways of understanding the world. Of course, going back further in

history, nearly every scientist the world over seemingly accepted the existence of God.

Lemaître's ease (and that of the contributors to *Real Science, Real Faith*) in reconciling scientific and religious belief contrasts with Charles Darwin's struggles on this front. In his early years, after becoming disillusioned with his medical training, he aspired to become a clergyman, studying at the University of Cambridge. But he was increasingly drawn to what was then called natural philosophy. His discoveries and his

theory of evolution of species by natural selection caused him to rethink his early religious beliefs, but it seems that his final position was quietly agnostic rather than aggressively antitheist like some of his supporters. The story of a deathbed reversion to his previous faith is untrue (see Wikipedia entry for Darwin).

In summary, we all tend to be slow to update our existing beliefs about the world (globally and at the local level) when confronted by incompatible evidence and information, especially those beliefs that are important for us

and that we value. Biblical literalists' denial of objectively-acquired knowledge and discoveries that contradict biblical accounts may be considered to be an example of this. But whilst this looms large in many parts of the world, it seems that it is not much of an issue amongst the British public.

#### Notes

1. <https://tinyurl.com/mry6xx6c>
2. E.g. <https://tinyurl.com/mr3dhex7>
3. R.J. Berry (Ed.) (2009) *Real Science, Real Faith*. Oxford: Monarch Books.



## LOGIC AND INTUITION

### Sums of consecutive number

If you like doodling with numbers and finding solutions to puzzles that require only the most basic maths that you learnt at school (plus the exercise of some simple logic), you'll enjoy these little challenges. You will also be able to amaze your friends with your numerical skills.

First think about the following problem: I ask you to find 3 consecutive

whole numbers (meaning, for example, 6, 7 and 8) whose sum is 102. Before you apply yourself to this problem you might want to ask me if there are indeed 3 consecutive numbers that add up to this total. Otherwise you would be wasting your time. My reply is that there is a simple way of finding out. So first work out what this is before you try to solve the problem.

Having solved the problem or looked up the answer, why not try this

little challenge. Are there any *general* rules for solving this kind of problem for any number of consecutive numbers (2, 3, 4, 5 ... etc.)? (You might try first with 2 consecutive numbers.) Once you have discovered what these very simple rules are you can then astonish your friends with the speed at which you answer any such problem they ask you to solve.

*Answer on page 20.*



## THE EUROPEAN SCENE

### European Council for Skeptics Organisations

Address: Arheilger Weg 11, 64380 Roßdorf, Germany

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

Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/skeptics.eu/>  
ECISO also has a Twitter handle, @SkepticsEurope.

The ECISO 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. See the list of charities supporting Ukraine and listen to their latest podcast, which as usual, covers a multitude of diverse topics. Also check the Events Calendar for Europe at:

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

### The 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. The deadline for early bird registration is now July 31<sup>st</sup>. Keep your eye on the ESCO congress webpage at:

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



## MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

### ‘Traditional Medicine’

Treatment that comes under the label ‘traditional medicine’ features regularly in the skeptical literature and has been covered numerous times in past issues of the *Skeptical Intelligencer*. Prominent amongst systems of medicine branded thus are traditional Chinese and traditional Indian medicine (*note 1*). A characteristic of both is the dearth of convincing evidential support for their efficacy and safety, neither of which is guaranteed by the fact of their usage being both geographically widespread and persistent over a large time scale.

In the Winter 2021 issue of the *Skeptical Intelligencer* I described the colonisation of the medical services in some African states by traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) and the catastrophic consequences for certain animal species, including the donkey. Since then, The Donkey Sanctuary has published a report (*note 2*) on the upsurge in the trafficking of donkeys for their body parts. The report estimates that ‘more than 4.8 million donkeys are trafficked and slaughtered for their skins each year. The donkeys suffer at every point of this process, from source to slaughter, under the brutal and inhumane conditions that are a hallmark of this industry. Even the most vulnerable donkeys, including pregnant mares, young foals, and the sick and

injured are taken and traded without consideration for their welfare or their pain’. The trafficking is fuelled by a rising demand for ejiao, a traditional Chinese remedy that uses donkey skins to produce a form of gelatine.

Meanwhile, again despite the lack of any convincing evidence of efficacy, The World Health Organization (WHO) and the Government of India have signed an agreement to establish the WHO Global Centre for Traditional Medicine (*note 3*). ‘This global knowledge centre for traditional medicine, supported by an investment of USD 250 million from the Government of India, aims to harness the potential of traditional medicine from across the world through modern science and technology to improve the health of people and the planet.’ And the North Korean government has instructed patients to use painkillers as well as unverified home remedies such as willow leaf tea to treat Covid-19. According to the state media, traditional medicines are ‘effective in prevention and cure of the malicious disease’, although no medical evidence exists for those claims. (*note 4*).

### Alternative Medicine Worldwide

William Russell, a leading provider of international health, life and income protection insurance, has compiled a list of common forms of alternative treatment according to their ‘popularity’

worldwide and a list of countries in which alternative treatments are most ‘popular’ (*note 5*). ‘Popularity’ is only measured by the number of Google searches (per 100,000 people in the case of the countries listed). By far the most ‘popular’ treatment is fasting, Canada is the top country for searches of all treatments, followed by the UK.

### Mainstream Medicine Worldwide

And yet...‘Most healthcare interventions tested in Cochrane Reviews are not effective according to high quality evidence: a systematic review and meta-analysis’ (*note 6*). OK, it’s 12% (mainly pharmacological) that are highly supported but another 30% are moderately supported. No ‘alternative’ treatments are highly supported.

### Notes

1. One rarely, if ever, comes across the promotion of traditional English/ Greek/ Iranian/ Nigerian, etc. medicine. These descriptions do not seem to have the same allure as those originating in the Far East.

2. <https://tinyurl.com/2p9xbwe9>

3. <https://tinyurl.com/4mf9kadd>

4. <https://tinyurl.com/bdh6p5xw>

5. <https://tinyurl.com/2tnysdmj>

6. <https://tinyurl.com/2tw8vxvk>

Also see Edzard Ernst at:

<https://tinyurl.com/5j5sk3w9>

### 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.



## LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

### Coelbren y Beirdd and Ogham: The Welsh epigraphic fringe (with more cancelling!)

The online series Art Unlocked presents a range of art galleries with brief surveys of their holdings. On 30/3/22 I watched one such presentation featuring the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth; the presenter was Morfudd Bevan. Bevan delivered a fine concise account of the art on display. Specifically, there was some reference to modern artwork inspired by claims regarding the supposedly medieval quasi-runic script Coelbren y Beirdd ('the Bardic Alphabet').

Nigel Pennick, Alan Wilson & Baram Blackett, Jim Michael and others have developed non-mainstream, often mystical notions involving scripts formerly or allegedly used to write Celtic languages – including Coelbren y Beirdd. It is claimed that Coelbren was employed by bards to communicate secret messages (using a wooden frame with sticks representing letter-strokes) in medieval times when writing in Welsh was suppressed. Jim Michael goes so far as to 'find' links between Coelbren and American 'inscriptions' as identified by Barry Fell and other 'epigraphists', suggesting for example that that the 'inscription' on one of the stone tablets from Bat Creek (Tennessee) is in Coelbren. But in fact Coelbren was evidently devised – as were many 'traditional' features of contemporary Welsh culture – by the C18-19 Welsh antiquarian and mystic Edward Williams ('Iolo Morganwg') as the supposed alphabetic system of the ancient Druids (parallel with the genuinely medieval Ogam/Ogham script of Ireland; see below), and was promoted after 1840 by his son, Taliesin Williams (*note 1*). It consists of twenty main letters and twenty others used to represent long vowels and the 'mutated' consonants characteristic of Welsh (and of Celtic generally). (For more on all

this, with references, see Chapter 4 of my 2013 book *Strange Linguistics*.)

In Q&A on the Art Unlocked talk, I asked a reasonable question: 'Are there not major issues surrounding the authenticity of Coelbren y Beirdd and other notions associated with Iolo Morganwg? (Note the comments of Ronald Hutton in particular.)'. This was the **only** Q&A question **not** answered; the facilitator skipped over it. Did the facilitator (presumably mainly an art expert) simply not know enough to dare to respond? Or was my question deemed too controversial or somehow anti-Welsh? (Shades of e.g. Ethiopians regarding any challenge to Ayele Bekerie's extreme notions about Ethiopic script as 'anti-Ethiopian' or even as racist!) I repeated my question in a message to the website, pointing out that I am myself partly Welsh, know some Welsh, obviously (from my comment) know something about the linguistics of Welsh, and admire Welsh culture – but on this occasion was blatantly ignored! I asked for comment. Perhaps predictably, I had no reply. Cancelled again! It seems that in some circles it is not now 'politically-correct' to challenge nationalistically or ethnically motivated nonsense! 'Hindering diversity', perhaps, something of which Mary Lefkowitz was accused (by her academic faculty!) when she objected to Afrocentrist misrepresentations of history.

More recently I happened upon an online presentation entitled 'Why Irish stones in Britain? Ogham stone translated using the Coelbren cipher and Welsh words' (*note 2*). This is produced by the father & son team John and Adam Griffiths. They focus upon stones found in the English West Country, written in the roman alphabet with Ogham inscriptions along the edges; most of these are standardly interpreted as associated with the substantial early-medieval Irish diaspora population in the area (not widely known of among

non-specialists). As usual the duo dismiss mainstream ideas without having achieved the required depth of understanding. By way of historical background, they (and their followers) cite Wilson & Blackett and other writers who propose highly non-mainstream accounts of Eurasian history.

Griffiths & Griffiths ask: 'If Ogham stones are supposed to be written in Irish - then how come they translate using Welsh?' But the stones 'translate using Welsh' only on the basis of highly tendentious interpretations of the roman texts and the duo's idea that Coelbren provides a cipher enabling the reading of the Ogham texts on such stones – and of the inscriptions on some coins standardly thought to be Irish – as Welsh.

The analysis involving Coelbren is not properly articulated in the material which I have seen. The duo issue vague comments such as 'a runic ... or a Coelbren-like accent to the letters' and proclaim unsupported speculative analyses and translations in Welsh terms of text in both scripts. They link all this with their position that there was a much more extensive Welsh presence in Ireland than is generally believed, and far less Irish settlement in Britain. Nationally motivated, again? But given the highly dubious status of Coelbren itself they would need to work much harder on that front!

The Griffiths pair receive online plaudits from fellow enthusiasts, some of whom unreasonably belittle mainstream thought on these matters. There are also some bizarre comments such as: 'Maybe Ogham isn't Irish or Welsh but the language of the first inhabitants of both islands, the off spring of Japeth that formed the Indo Aryan or Indo European peoples'. Firstly: Ogham is not itself a language! Secondly: reliance on the genealogies in *Genesis* simply will not do in this kind of context. Thirdly: both Irish and Welsh are Celtic languages and

therefore are themselves Indo-European. Fourthly: Indo-European is **only** a linguistic term and not an ethnic one. (So who were these ‘first inhabitants’?)

### **More on non-human languages and ‘languages’**

The latest proposal regarding sophisticated communication on the part of apes involves the claim that ‘chimpanzees have their own language’ (*note 3*). It is reported that some chimpanzee populations share up to 400 distinct phonological ‘words’ (with markedly non-human phonetics, of course), combining a small number of distinct phonological types – analogous to the phoneme systems of human language. This implies ‘double articulation’ (sounds combining to form words), a feature not hitherto demonstrably found in non-human communication systems.

Furthermore, ‘most vocal units emitted singly were also emitted in two-unit sequences (bigrams), which in turn were embedded into three-unit sequences (trigrams)’. Somewhat more speculatively, it is suggested that the chimpanzees might be able to generate **novel** ‘words’ – which would demonstrate creativity of a type not at all widely found outside human language. And, even more impressively (if confirmed), ‘the capacity to organize single units into structured sequences offers a versatile system potentially suitable for expansive meaning generation’. But, as the authors acknowledge, ‘further research must show to what extent these structural sequences signal predictable meanings’. The presence of two- or three-unit sequences is at least suggestive of syntax. Linguists (of whatever ‘school’) committed to the ‘species-specific’ interpretation of such capabilities will be anxiously awaiting further findings! (But if other species should in fact turn out to possess language in some sense, it would hardly be surprising if animals as closely related to us as chimpanzees were involved.)

Other mammals have also featured in recent proposals. Beth Brady argues that manatees ‘use vocalizations to convey all sorts of things ... they change the

pitch of the sound and the structure of the sound just a little bit to convey different meanings’ (*note 4*). This in itself would not **necessarily** imply ‘double articulation’, still less syntax; but it does go beyond earlier information about ‘manatee-talk’.

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### ***Non-mammals have been found to exhibit variety analogous to dialect or accent differences.***

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A while ago, the scientist Tecumseh Fitch was reporting on his work with seals, which are able to imitate human speech sounds to a surprising degree (*note 5*). Fitch clearly knows linguistics to a high level, and it appears that his conceptualisation and theorising are sound; but even some of the more scholarly summaries of this work arguably do not adequately distinguish between phonation (the production of [human-like] speech sounds – which a parrot can achieve) and spoken language itself. Fitch did not claim that seal communication manifests all the key features of human language; for instance, he did not hold that it displays recursiveness, double articulation, syntax etc., and indeed he upholds (or upheld, at that time) the standard view that such features are confined to human language.

There are more recent claims about ‘Hoover the [orphaned] talking seal’, who apparently started mimicking the sound of the voice of his adoptive human father. Similar feats are attributed to dogs. Often there is clear audio evidence. But, again, non-linguists’ reports of such feats very typically fail to distinguish between prowess in respect of phonation and linguistic ability. ‘The most gifted talking seal or dog would struggle to keep up a meaningful conversation for any length of time.’ Well, naturally! No evidence has been produced showing that these mammals actually **construe** even the shortest sequences (*note 6*).

Non-mammals have been found to exhibit variety analogous to dialect or accent differences. The Mexican tetra is

found in a number of dark caves – and it appears that the fish in each cave use clicks to communicate in distinct ways (*note 7*). It remains to be seen whether fish from different caves can communicate with each other. If this is not possible at all, this phenomenon might be analogous with differences between discrete **languages**. Either way, the findings are interesting. But of course it is not being suggested here that ‘tetra-talk’ is complex or flexible to the level of human language.

And even non-animals may have more complex communication systems than one might imagine! It has been suggested that electrical impulses exchanged by mycological organisms such as mushrooms (through long, underground filamentous structures called hyphae) could be similar to human language. It appears that fungi use this electrical ‘language’ to ‘share information about food or injury with distant parts of themselves, or with hyphae-connected partners such as trees’. More specifically, spikes in electrical output ‘often cluster[ed] into trains of activity, resembling vocabularies of up to 50 words’, and the distribution of these ‘fungal word lengths’ closely matches those of human languages (*note 8*). This last comment relates to the application of principles such as ‘Zipf’s Law’ to human language data.

Some expert commentators predictably consider that these mycological proposals are ‘overenthusiastic’. But no doubt the outcomes of further research will be reported in due course.

### **Ithkuil: an interesting conlang**

Ithkuil is an experimental constructed language created over a period of 45 years by John Quijada. As is not uncommon with the more sophisticated conlangs, it is said to have been designed to express the more profound levels of human cognition and categorisation (*note 9*). Quijada reacted to the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (which I have discussed previously in this forum; language determining thought) and also to Charles Fillmore’s ‘Case Grammar’,

one of a number of interesting post-Chomskyan generative models of syntax & morphology which was prominent in the 1970s. (Chomskysans themselves rejected Fillmore as one of the ‘Bad Guys’. It is not really clear why a conlanger should focus on CG as opposed to other alternative models of grammar.)

Some of the features of Ithkuil involve *a priori* philosophical analyses of the world and some involve logic; both of these characteristics are widespread in the world of conlangs. Quijada familiarised himself with unusual features found in many languages so as not to be biased in the direction of the more familiar languages. Nothing if not flexible, he later developed a new, related language, Ilaksh, in response to some early criticisms.

Quijada developed two distinct writing systems for his languages and composed a detailed grammar of Ithkuil which – despite the fact that he is not a professional linguist – displays considerable sophistication and only infrequently manifests outright oddities/misconceptions.

On conlangs generally, see Chapter 11 of my *Strange Linguistics* and follow up the references given there, especially to the outstanding work of linguist Alan Libert.

I thank Keith Kahn-Harris for drawing my attention to Ithkuil.

### ‘Translations’ of books which never existed

Edmond Szekely (1905-1979) was a Hungarian philologist/ linguist, philosopher, psychologist and vegetarian (*note 10*). One of his works is *The Essene Gospel of Peace*, which he claimed to be a translation (by him) of an ancient text which he supposedly discovered in the 1920s in the Vatican Library along with other obscure texts in Hebrew and Aramaic, the ancient languages of Palestine. He interpreted this text as endorsing vegetarianism and as seriously modifying the story of Jesus. Later he claimed that he had found an earlier (original?) version of part of the *Essene Gospel of Peace* at

Monte Cassino. He drew connections between these texts and the ‘Essene’ Dead Sea Scrolls (once these were published), and also connections with the Zoroastrian sacred text, the Avesta. (On links between Zoroastrianism and Judaism, see *Language On The Fringe* 56 in the last issue.)

The mainstream response to Szekely has been to the effect that there is no proof that the documents in question ever existed. The Monte Cassino library was destroyed during World War II, but there is apparently no trace of such documents in the Vatican or in other libraries which Szekely claimed to have used, or indeed evidence of his presence there. Of course, supporters of Szekely can argue that the truth has been suppressed (as has also been claimed in the case of the apocryphal Gospel of Barnabas which was allegedly stolen from the Vatican Library before being published in Italian and Spanish around 1600 and which appears to support an Islamic interpretation of the ministry of Jesus). It is difficult to prove that a given document is not to be found in a large library, still more difficult to prove that it was **never** there! You cannot normally show that there are no lions in the wood, only that despite your best efforts you have not found one!

Szekely was a serious scholar, but it certainly looks as if he was tempted by his enthusiasms into the outright invention of texts – a truly extreme and plainly immoral type of distortion! But at least the Hebrew and Aramaic languages themselves obviously exist! In contrast, H.P. Blavatsky’s *Senzar*, even if it did exist (unlikely), has left no veridical trace (again, see the last issue)!

### Sundries

A rider to ‘Gods And Demons’ from last time: if the ‘gods’ had been thought of as actual persons (even if evil and/or inferior to Yahweh) rather than as non-existent, one might have expected *hoi ouk estin* in the Greek (*hoi* = ‘who’, *ha* = ‘which’ [neuter gender])

On 9/3/22 I attended a ‘Heygo’ online event ‘Introduction To The Etruscans’, presented by my Italian friend Patrizia Blanquart. One ‘Jeff’ in the chat well

exemplified the common confusion of script and language. He expressed the ludicrously mistaken view that Semitic languages such as Biblical Hebrew ‘have no vowels’; this involves the general idea that a linguistic element not shown in **writing** – e.g., vowels in ‘unpointed’ Hebrew – is therefore not present at all.

Jeff also took the view that vowels and consonants do not even exist as such until they are **labelled** ‘vowels’ and ‘consonants’. Now of course terms such as *vowel* and *consonant* do not come to exist until basic linguistic analysis begins to occur – which implies a considerable degree of intellectual sophistication and the capacity for reflexivity (‘talking about talking’), is normally a function of literacy, and thus does not occur in pre-literate cultures. But entities can obviously exist before they are described or analysed! If the contrast between vowels and consonants holds up (as it does, with certain complexities), it holds up whether it is terminologically expressed or not. Jeff’s position resembles the extreme postmodernist view that ancient people could not possibly have died of diseases which were not understood or named in their times!

### Notes & references

1. On this, see especially Ronald Hutton, *Blood And Mistletoe: The History Of The Druids In Britain* (Yale University Press, 2009).
2. <https://tinyurl.com/yc72paam>
3. <https://tinyurl.com/yckndzz9>
4. <https://tinyurl.com/srp42hy6>
5. See for example W. T. Fitch, ‘Vocal production in nonhuman mammals: Implications for the evolution of speech’, in *The Evolution of Language: Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference*, 2000; for more on these matters, see Chapter 8 of my 2013 book *Strange Linguistics*.
6. <https://tinyurl.com/2fp65z47>
7. <https://tinyurl.com/24d3zf2f>
8. <https://tinyurl.com/3ked36n6>
9. <http://ithkuil.net/>;  
<https://tinyurl.com/55jeczdm>
10. <https://tinyurl.com/yckw5yxb>

## REVIEWS AND COMMENTARIES



**Charles, the Alternative Prince: An Unauthorised Biography** by Edzard Ernst. Exeter: Societas/Imprint Academic 2022. ISBN 9781788360708, pp. viii, 206.

Reviewed by Ray Ward

Edzard Ernst was our first Professor of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM), at the University of Exeter. But he became disillusioned, funding stopped, he was made redundant, and is now, in the words of Kendrick Frazier, Editor of the *Skeptical Inquirer*, ‘the most knowledgeable critic of so-called alternative medicine [which Ernst wittily calls SCAM] on the planet’, and has written very extensively on the subject. Here he discusses the heir to the throne’s frequently-expressed interest in and sympathy with CAM.

As John Diamond, the journalist who told of his experience with the throat cancer which eventually killed him and, like many such people, was deluged with ‘cures’, said in his posthumously-published book *Snake Oil and Other Preoccupations* (2001), there should be no such thing as ‘alternative medicine’. Something either works and becomes part of orthodox medicine, or doesn’t and is discarded. Diamond and Ernst both mention St John’s wort, found to be effective against depression and therefore, as Diamond says, simply a medicine, not an ‘alternative’ medicine.

Nick Ross, journalist and co-founder of Healthwatch, devoted to exposing quackery and pseudoscience, says in his introduction that Charles is a fundamentally good human being - rightly, but bringing that deadly phrase ‘well-meaning’ to mind! As he also says, gamblers remember their wins and forget their losses, and something similar happens in CAM.

Ernst says his aim is to contrast Charles’s perceptions with available scientific evidence, most chapters consisting of an introduction, Charles’s

views, outline evidence, and comment on consequences. He relates his experience at Exeter, starting from a belief that CAM had considerable potential. A multidisciplinary team of, eventually, about 20 researchers investigated a vast range of treatments (he lists 38) and published more papers than any other team researching in that area. Charles was aware of their work, but their interests differed: Charles was promoting CAM, Ernst was testing it; Charles wanted the integration of untested treatments into routine practice, Ernst cautioned that this was counterproductive or even dangerous.

Ernst discusses the influence of Sir Laurens van der Post (1906-1996), a South African bruited as an educator, explorer, philosopher, humanitarian, conservationist etc., who became something of a guru to Charles (hence his knighthood). His reputation took some serious knocks after his death. An ‘official’ biographer, the journalist J.D.F. Jones, was chosen, but the result was not what might have been expected: Jones’s book, pointedly entitled *Storyteller* (2001), exposed him as a serial liar who vastly exaggerated many aspects of his life and invented much of what he claimed to have done. Ernst mentions his belief that he deserved a Nobel Prize, and Jones, indeed, says he aspired to two, getting others to nominate him for the Literature and Peace Prizes with proposals in fact written by himself. The most sensational revelation was that, while married to his second wife, he made pregnant a 14-year-old girl (less than a third of his age) whose family had entrusted her to his care on a voyage from South Africa to England. He made some financial provision for the

resulting daughter, but never acknowledged her. Ernst quotes a passage about himself he wrote for his publisher, none of it true. Jones called him ‘a fraud, a fantasist, a liar [and] a serial adulterer ... [who] falsified his Army record and inflated his own importance at every possible opportunity’. But Charles fell for him hook, line and stinker (no, that isn’t a typing error!). He emboldened the deeply insecure Charles to follow his special interests, and his notions about medicine were inspired by him. But since the above-mentioned disclosures, Charles’s silence on van der Post has been deafening. An annual lecture in his honour was quietly cancelled, and there is not a word about him in Charles’s flop of a book, *Harmony* (2010). (A chapter in Ernst’s book discusses this ‘lasting document of his often bizarre views’; on CAM, ‘he has demonstrated himself [in *Harmony*] to be ill-informed, ill-advised and often dangerously wrong.’)

Van der Post’s influence was evident in Charles’s insulting presidential address to the British Medical Association in 1982, when, as his biographer Tom Bower says, ‘a 34 year old with a mediocre degree in history [preached] the power of spiritualism, based on a jumble of ideas inherited from van der Post, Jung and the 16th century Swiss healer and alchemist Paracelsus ... to an audience of doctors.’

The embarrassing Foundation for Integrated Health (FIH) was established in 1993. Charles, launching it, displayed his ignorance by referring to ‘proven complementary therapies’ (as if there were such things), and by his notion of ‘integrating’ orthodox medicine and



CAM when, as has been said, there should be no ‘alternative’ medicine, only medicine. As Ernst says, the ‘integration’ idea is based on belief, not science: without evidence the ‘best’ is arbitrary and meaningless, and the evidence that ‘alternative’ medicine relieves suffering is less than solid and sometimes negative. Charles called for more research, but showed a fundamental misunderstanding of its function of testing hypotheses which may prove to be right or wrong, not of confirming his evident long-held conviction that CAM is effective whatever research might show. FIH sponsored no meaningful research; as Ernst wrote, it became ‘a lobby group for unproven and disproven treatments populated by sycophants’ - ‘Yes Men’ hoping to see their names on the next Honours List. FIH was never, he said, tasked to sponsor research; its focus was on promoting CAM, and the call for more research a fig leaf to cover Charles’s own deficits in rational thinking. FIH collapsed in 2010 amid allegations of fraud and money laundering; two officials were arrested, and the former finance director was sentenced to three years’ imprisonment. And the College of Medicine and Integrated Health, promptly launched in 2010, was simply an obvious rebranding of the ignominiously closed FIH, and shows the same faults, though without the financial irregularities.

Charles advocates ‘holism’ or ‘whole person care’, but, as Ernst says, good medicine is, was, and always will be holistic. Good doctors should address not just physical problems but social and spiritual issues. If they don’t, they are not good doctors, and if such defects are widespread it is conventional healthcare which must reform, not hand the problem to ‘integrated’ practitioners, which would either mislead patients into believing holism, compassion etc. are exclusive to ‘integrated’ medicine when they are in fact hallmarks of any good healthcare, or, if such things are neglected in conventional medicine, distract from efforts to correct those deficits.

In 2005 politicians received the Smallwood Report on the role of CAM in the NHS, commissioned directly by Charles and written by an economist with no previous experience of healthcare-related subjects. The Editor of *The Lancet* bluntly called it ‘dangerous nonsense’, particularly its promotion of homeopathy for asthma, fostered by ‘a prince who seems to know nothing at all’. A group of leading medical experts published in *The Times* an open letter to chief executives of the NHS and primary care trusts similarly warning about what it said on homeopathy and asthma. One consequence of the report was an official complaint by Charles’s private secretary to Ernst’s vice-chancellor alleging he had violated confidentiality rules and leading to the closure of his unit. While claiming to support CAM research, Charles had indirectly managed to close the leading research centre on the subject!

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***Charles, ‘full of good will’, starts from a reasonable vantage point but stumbles over his obsession with CAM.***

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Then there was the ‘GetWellUK’ study in 2007-8, which appeared to show positive results but was seriously flawed: there was no evidence ‘health gains’ were caused by alternative therapies; no potential for economic savings; no control group; no objective verification of outcomes; patients were self-selected, so their expectation of benefit explains much of the result; and all patients had parallel conventional treatments. The methodology was so poor that the findings were never published in a peer-reviewed journal. One commentator called it ‘an attempted fraud to extract NHS money for traders in quackery’, and Professor David Colquhoun, FRS, simply called it a farce.

Duchy Herbals Detox Tincture, produced in partnership with the homeopathic pharmacy Nelsons, was launched by Charles in 2008. As the

British Dietetic Association said, ‘the idea of “detox” is a load of nonsense.’ All it eliminated, Ernst says, is cash from consumers.

Charles’s disgraceful ‘black spider’ letters to politicians (his role as heir to the throne does not include interfering in politics) show his ignorance. Does he think, asks Ernst, that he, who doesn’t use the NHS and is surrounded by people who probably don’t, and with no medical qualifications, is better equipped than doctors to estimate patients’ suffering? He complained of an ‘anti-homeopathic campaign’ which was in fact a drive to get patients the most effective treatments; if he thinks homeopathic products are in that category he is simply wrong. His belief that homeopathy might incur lower costs is also erroneous: ‘there cannot be cost-effectiveness without effectiveness’; ineffective therapy will later need an effective one, at greater cost.

Even when Charles is right, he is wrong. Yes, we should, as he said, use antibiotics more cautiously - but the answer is not to use homeopathy instead! As Ernst says, it is a classic example of where Charles, ‘full of good will’, starts from a reasonable vantage point but stumbles over his obsession with CAM.

Social prescribing, aiming to connect patients to different types of community support, emerged around 2000 and got Charles’s support. But he hailed it as the same as integrated medicine - it isn’t - and wrongly said orthodox medicine is just ‘pills and procedures’, a ‘straw man’ set up for him to knock down. He also advocated patient choice but, as Ernst says, patients may choose to smoke, drink alcohol, skydive.... Charles criticises opposition to vaccination - but much of it emanates from the realm of CAM. As Ernst says, social prescribing is a smokescreen for Charles’s wish for the incorporation into medicine of the treatments he advocates: ‘social prescribing of nonsense must result in nonsense.’

Osteopathy has some, though not much, evidence in its favour, and quite a lot against, both negative (it doesn’t

work) and positive (severe complications have been noted, there are serious contraindications, and there is no monitoring system in place to allow definition of the incidence of adverse effects). Certainly there was no justification for the School of Osteopathy to be given university status, as it was in 2017; such status implies a research function, and what is now the University College of Osteopathy has an average output of about three papers per year....

Charles supported chiropractic, resulting, in 1994, in chiropractors gaining legal status equal to doctors, dentists, nurses and physiotherapists, and the creation, in 2003, of the Royal College of Chiropractors (RCC). Some chiropractors focus on back and neck pain, but others claim to be primary care physicians able to treat almost any medical problem, though the evidence that it is effective beyond placebo is weak for spinal problems and negative for all other conditions. Some chiropractors fail to appreciate the limits of their competence: they treat patients (including infants) and conditions they know little about, issue anti-vaccination or other harmful advice and misinformation, advise against taking prescribed drugs, disregard contraindications, violate medical ethics by not obtaining fully-informed consent, overuse X-rays, extend treatments unnecessarily to boost income, and sell useless dietary supplements. Their legal recognition and the creation of the RCC would seem to have no more justification than the osteopathy school's university status.

Charles promoted Gerson therapy, a claimed cancer cure consisting of ingesting organically-grown vegetables and large amounts of vegetable juices, coffee enemas, and a range of supplements - at high costs! An eminent oncologist, Professor Michael Baum, who (like Ernst) was present at a lecture where Charles attributed a claimed recovery from cancer to Gerson, protested. His power and authority, he said, came from 40 years of study and 25 years of active involvement in cancer research; Charles's came from an

accident of birth. He begged him to exercise his power cautiously when advising patients with life-threatening disease to embrace unproven therapies. And Gerson was indeed so: there is no evidence that it is effective against cancer or any other condition, and a clinical trial suggested it reduced, not prolonged, survival time. Gerson is essentially a starvation diet: it deprives patients of vital nutrients, drastically impairs quality of life and causes a long list of serious problems. Most patients find the diet very hard to follow, and if they fail to adhere to it they are, of course, told it's their fault if the cancer fails to respond. They then die prematurely, not merely deprived of their funds and quality of life but made to feel guilty.

There are two very different types of herbal medicine: well-tested herbal remedies (like St John's wort), and a 'traditional' version involving a diagnosis according to obsolete criteria and concepts and treatment with a concoction supposedly tailored to the patient, so that ten patients with the same diagnosis may receive ten different mixtures. One is supported by good evidence, the other not, but Charles's promotion of herbal medicine never differentiated between them. He called for its regulation but, as Ernst says, 'even the best regulation of nonsense must result in nonsense', and Professor Colquhoun said that regulation was needed, but not the ineffective kind Charles wanted; it should be on whether the products work, with the rules being the same for all drugs. Charles could have promoted one of the few areas of CAM supported by sound evidence, but it would have required a clear distinction between its rational and irrational concepts, and Charles chose the irrational path, resulting in the potential benefits being almost unknown in the UK.

Left to the end is Charles's favourite, homeopathy, long favoured by royalty: it became part of the NHS from the start in 1948 due to royal influence; a homeopathic pharmacy carries Charles's royal warrant; he opened Glasgow Homeopathic

Hospital; and he is Patron of the Faculty of Homeopathy. But, as Ernst says, its principles of 'like cures like', and dilution of remedies to the point where not a single molecule of the active ingredient remains renders them stronger, not weaker, fly in the face of common sense and scientific fact. Today there is broad consensus that it is a placebo therapy, and NHS England unequivocally says that 'There's no good evidence that homeopathy is effective as a treatment for any health condition.' Products can be based on plants or any other material - one supposedly contains parts of the Berlin Wall! The dilution of one drop to a number of drops with 60 zeroes supposedly works due to some undefined 'energy' or 'vital force'. But, as Ernst says, it 'cannot work unless the known laws of nature are wrong'. It is said that even if the 'remedies' themselves are ineffective (any positive results being attributable to a placebo effect unrelated to homeopathy itself), at least they are harmless (I was present at a mass overdosing of homeopathic products to demonstrate their ineffectiveness), but this is not true: homeopaths often advise patients to forgo conventional treatments, with obvious dangers; they also advise against immunisation, and even advocate homeopathy for cancer.

But, as with herbal medicine and other therapies advocated by Charles, his support for homeopathy appears to have had the opposite effect to what he might have wanted. When he first sided with homeopathy there were five NHS homeopathic hospitals; now there are none. The NHS used to reimburse the costs of homeopathy, but no longer does. Some claim this is due to highly-organised and well-funded sceptics, but UK sceptics are neither highly organised nor well funded; the cuts are predominantly due to the lack of good evidence for homeopathy in an age of evidence-based medicine when it is no longer thought ethical to continue funding disproven treatments.

Ernst gives a horrific instance of how negative examples by prominent people endanger lives: Charles's swift

and apparently unscathed recovery from coronavirus was attributed by an Indian government minister to homeopathy. This was denied by Charles's office, but it made headlines in India, and officials used homeopathy in an effort to keep the pandemic at bay, a disastrous decision which unquestionably cost many lives.

Charles has actively promoted other CAM therapies (including those

mentioned, Ernst lists 17), though many have nothing in common, are incompatible, and cannot all be right.

Charles comes from an enormously privileged background, and could simply have indulged himself in the hedonistic lifestyle that his status made possible, as some of his ancestors did. To his credit, he has done some good things (like the Prince's Trust), but it is tragic that this patently decent,

concerned, compassionate man has weakened the influence he could have had by cleaving to nonsense. Ernst sums up: '[Charles] has no competence in science or medicine and takes advice only from people who are of his opinion in the first place.' He can have his own opinions, but 'he cannot have his own facts.' As with much else involving Charles, the most appropriate response to this book is: 'God save the Queen!'

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**Beyond The Hype: The Inside Story of Science's Biggest Media Controversies** by Fiona Fox. London: Elliott & Thompson (2022), pp 282. ISBN 978-1-78396-617-2.

## Reviewed by Steve Dulson

Someone once wrote, 'He who understands both sides of an argument will have the fewest friends.'\*

The Science Media Centre (SMC) was established in 2002 with the intention of pioneering a proactive approach to improve the media coverage of science. Their founding philosophy is that 'the media will do science better when scientists do the media better.' The SMC promotes itself as standing astride journalism and science, recognising the vital importance of being able to communicate new scientific knowledge to the public but appreciating the different needs of the journalists tasked with doing so. The need for a body such as the SMC arose from the fact that, historically, scientists have been an insular breed, hiding away in their laboratories and academia and avoiding the press. The media, however, tend towards sensationalism in order to gain public attention but they (and the public) do not necessarily know how to act responsibly with the information provided by scientists who are not used to engaging with the general public. The MMR vaccine and GM food debacles perfectly illustrate the ways in which an ineffective response from the scientific community can lead to seriously misinformed (and ill-informed) debate in the media and the wider public. The

effects of the distrust and ignorance created by this lack of meaningful engagement are still being felt today.

Fiona Fox (OBE) is a founding director of the SMC and the eleven chapters in this book highlight their work by relating their involvement in several cases studies of particular issues. She writes in an entertaining style, detailing her opinions (hopes and fears) in an open and honest way; the book is written as her own personal account of her experiences of events which, she admits, is sometimes (often) contested by others (see comments on Chapter 3 below).

Chapter 2 gives an example of the way in which openness in scientific studies at least allows a more informed debate on sensitive issues, such as (always controversial and highly emotive) animal testing. Unnecessary testing is, obviously, indefensible and the horrific images that have been circulated over the years fully justify the revulsion felt by many; the secrecy surrounding testing practices and facilities further playing into the hands of the pressure groups. Whether this justified the intimidation and violence perpetuated by such activists/terrorists (depending on your point of view) is a matter for further debate. Opening the doors of testing facilities to journalists could have been seen as a mere PR stunt

at first but the willingness of the scientists involved to finally come out and explain what they do (and why) has probably softened the views of less militant reporters, to the extent that this is rarely a front-page story anymore.

And then we come to Chapter 3, regarding research into the treatment of myalgic encephalomyelitis (aka: chronic fatigue syndrome - ME/CSF). I had little awareness of this issue before reading this book but it seems to be the topic that excites the most vociferous reactions in the review comments on Amazon; all of the reviews focus 100% on this chapter (and they are most definitely not fans). In fact, apart from the essay length entries, many of the comments have a similar tone and turn of expression (almost as if they were written by the same person – or lobbying group). They do not mention any other chapters or topics! I am unable to comment on the medical detail of the argument but the main thrust of the chapter seems to be borne out by the comments made: that scientific disagreement on a controversial subject should not be avoided because of the fear of 'reprisals' but should be handled carefully.

Chapter 4 describes the success story of stem cell research, which resulted from engaging the press in the

right way and at the right time, educating the right people as to what it really entails, rather than allowing scare stories to be perpetuated by those who automatically assume that it will be against their scripture, for example. This seems strange to me, as stem cells do not appear to be mentioned in my copy of the bible at all. One of those cases of ‘I think what god meant to say’ perhaps?

The book then tackles the sacking of the so-called ‘drugs tsar’ David Nutt; a cautionary tale of the politicisation of science and what happens when a scientist who is employed by the government arrives at conclusions which do not fit the narrative it was expecting/wishes to promote. It is so important that scientists have an outlet to convey their findings, free from being gagged by those in power.

‘Climategate’ refers to a situation which occurred in 2009, when thirteen years’ worth of email exchanges and documents were hacked and leaked from the records of the director of the Climate Research Unit at the University of East Anglia, Professor Phil Jones. Sceptics pointed at the content of these writings as proof of a conspiracy theory, as they suggested that the scientific findings of various studies, which were contrary to the climate ‘crisis’ narrative, were being downplayed. It was unfortunate that the main target of the campaign did not confront the issue straight away, which allowed the media to come to its own conclusions. Sadly, the story blew up just before the Copenhagen Climate Summit, derailing the main thrust of the debate. Some of the soundbites used were certainly taken out of context but the situation highlighted the importance of scientists to engage in honest and open debate with respect to their findings, in order to clearly explain the uncertainties involved, particularly when they challenge the current consensus. The book describes the SMC’s involvement in trying to reduce the impact of this smear campaign but, from a personal perspective, I agree that claiming that any field of science is ‘settled’ or beyond debate is fundamentally

unscientific. Anyone who has ever tried to dispute unquestioning proclamations on social media will know that name-calling and mud-slinging soon follows the first rebuttal. Whilst this is initially gratifying (because you know they have lost the argument) it is also disappointing (they have not learned anything because of their closed-mindedness) and our knowledge is not progressed.

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***It is so important that scientists have an outlet to convey their findings, free from being gagged by those in power.***

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One of the points which the SMC did not manage to persuade the media to report on accurately was the predicted increase in global warming presented in a press briefing for a paper in *Nature* in 2005. A range of increased temperature between 2°C and 11°C was predicted for the year 2100 (i.e. a huge range). It surprised no one when the figure of 11°C was plastered across the front pages, despite the fact that ‘this top line would be entirely misleading and inaccurate because the statistically significant models were mostly clustered around the 2 to 3°C mark’. So much for models. I have never really understood the concept of being a global warming ‘believer’ or a ‘denier’. How can anyone who knows anything about the earth or its processes (of which humans are just one) not understand that climate has changed continuously ever since its formation and will continue to do so, long after humans cease to exist (the timescale for this being a hot topic, considering recent events)? Surely it makes good sense to not pollute the planet on which we live, regardless of the minutiae of who is exactly to blame for what? All we can realistically do is seek to mitigate the effects of the changes (which occur through natural processes, as well as the actions of humans) and reduce our contribution to it, wherever possible.

From flash flooding to Fukushima, the SMC now has a database of knowledgeable scientists on a range of topics, which it circulates to science journalists as soon as a big story breaks. The hope is that, even though the headlines may still sensationalise such events, at least they will be accompanied by informed commentary, avoiding unnecessary panic by the public and deflecting potential politicisation by those with vested interests.

Chapter 8 is a cautionary tale of the speed with which cancel culture can take hold and rip through people’s lives, as comments (or jokes) are taken out of context and used against them, sometimes unfairly. It is unfortunate that company sponsors and employers are so quick to join in the judgement game and run scared from public opinion on social media, rather than checking the facts of a situation before reacting.

Chapter 9 explores the uneasy relationship between scientists and science journalists, while the penultimate chapter discusses the changing role of the science press officer. The author recounts a number of examples of the interactions between these important professions, both the successful cases of even-handed reporting and the occasional embarrassing failure, all of which have helped to create the current system. Science reporting is a fine balance between educating the public with accurate science and generating interesting headlines that grab the attention (hence the quote at the top of this review).

The book concludes by discussing the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic changed the way in which science-based stories were presented to the public, providing a good opportunity to explain more of the scientific detail behind the methods and analysis that contributed to government policies. Of course, there were the odd occasions when unpopular decisions were made by government and blamed on the science bodies which provided the data they were based on but, by-and-

large, the author considers the situation to have been a pinnacle of science, journalism and government interaction. In the medical field, particularly in the case of clinical trials, some time-consuming peer review procedures were relaxed somewhat, due to the need for the rapid development of a vaccine – ‘one scientist claimed that studies that usually took a hundred days from submission to acceptance were taking six days’. Whilst ‘preprints’ were widely used to good effect by the scientific community (the term describing the sharing of preliminary

scientific papers that have yet to be peer-reviewed on open servers but are accessible by journalists), it may have been prudent not to have released findings to the news media before the science was ‘ready’. It is argued that their use should be reserved for such extreme situations and this should dwindle as the world slowly creeps out of the pandemic.

In summary, the scientific method and the journalistic principle of impartiality have much in common; the goal to a better future seems to be to ensure separation of the science and the

facts from the politics. Yes, the SMC sometimes gets it wrong but it appears to be doing more good than harm, on balance, proactively matching science journalists with experts in the relevant fields to inform the debate, at least. And if you should be triggered by some of the issues discussed, I would advise seeing through the reviews of this book on Amazon (which do not actually review the whole book) and look beyond the hype.

\*Well ok - it was me.

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**The Premonitions Bureau: A True Story** by Sam Knight. London: Faber, 2022. ISBN 9780571357567, pp. [5], 249. (The American edition is published by Penguin Press, ISBN 9781984879592).

## Reviewed by Ray Ward

Precognition is one of the fundamental claimed paranormal powers, and there are countless stories of accurate predictions. This book describes how what one reviewer called a ‘maverick psychiatrist’, John Barker, got interested in the subject and founded the Premonitions Bureau of the title, with the collaboration of Peter Fairley, science editor of *The Evening Standard* and later science correspondent of ITN, a name very familiar to me, as a space buff, for his reporting of the American space programme. The bureau asked for examples, and naturally received hundreds, the vast majority, of course, proving bogus.

Barker’s interest was sparked by the appalling Aberfan disaster of October 1966, when a colliery spoil tip collapsed, engulfing a primary school and houses in the South Wales village and killing 144 people including 116 children. Barker visited Aberfan, heard of a ten-year-old girl who was said to have told her mother of a dream in which ‘something black’ covered the school and died in the disaster the next day, and was also told of claimed similar premonitions. Knight’s description of the tragedy is long, detailed and moving, but ultimately

pointless with regard to his main theme, having nothing to do with claims of precognition.

Knight, a London-based staff writer for *The New Yorker*, wrote about Barker in his magazine in 2019 and has expanded that piece into what the same reviewer called ‘a short book [...] long on period atmosphere and enjoyably gratuitous detail’. I take ‘gratuitous’ to be a politer form of the word I would prefer, ‘redundant’. It may be short, but could have been far shorter. If ever a book was padded it’s this one; everything truly relevant to the subject of premonitions would fit into a far smaller space. The American edition, more bluntly subtitled ‘A True Account of Death Foretold’, got comments like ‘crisp’ and ‘he does not waste a word’, but, as a former abstractor, I saw many passages which could have been shortened without losing anything, and there is much great and unnecessary detail. We get three pages on the death of Donald Campbell on Coniston Water (wrongly called Lake Coniston) in 1967 while attempting the water speed record, and a photograph of the crash of his boat, *Bluebird*, occupying two full pages, on the strength of a vague and

unsubstantiated claim that he foresaw his death.

Barker worked at Shelton Hospital, near Shrewsbury, one of the dreadful old mental institutions descended from the Victorian ‘lunatic asylums’, known as the ‘water towers’ from a 1961 speech by the Minister of Health, Enoch Powell, where patients and staff had often been there for decades, the staff sometimes as institutionalised as the patients. Knight’s description of the hospital and the work of Barker and his colleagues runs to many pages, and there is even a fuzzy photograph over two full pages. It is informative and affecting about the history and nature of such ghastly institutions but, again, irrelevant to his main theme. Later we get several pages on the foot-and-mouth outbreak of 1967 and its effect on the hospital and the nearby area, moving into the desire to reform or even sweep away such institutions (as Powell wanted), and the AEGIS (Aid for the Elderly in Government Institutions) campaign to improve care in such places. Certainly it helps us to understand what Barker faced, but its relevance to his interest in premonitions is doubtful.

Knight also devotes several pages to Barker's association with a man with Munchausen Syndrome, in which people feign or induce disease or injury to get attention or sympathy, often undergoing unnecessary tests, treatment or surgery, and we even get a photograph of the man with his abdominal surgical scars. But, again, it has no relevance to claimed premonitions.

Fairley arranged a meeting with Barker and a group of astrologers, clairvoyants and card readers at the Charing Cross Hotel with what might appropriately be called predictable results. As Knight says, 'Although he was an experienced researcher, there was a heedlessness to Barker's work on the occult [...]. It was the approach of a sceptic; only he was not a sceptic.' He did not disagree when told he might himself have a supernatural gift. His conversation with a 'clairvoyant' is a classic example of careful answers, vagueness, unverifiable claims, and the pattern, familiar to anyone who has investigated such claimed abilities with proper scepticism, of assertions that may appear to apply to only one person but would in fact be accepted by many.

'Premonitions are impossible, and they come true all the time', says Knight. Well, yes, but only in the sense that some inevitably come true by chance. Billions of people do countless things and have countless experiences, so some dreams or other claimed precognitive experiences will appear to correspond with future events; it would be surprising if they didn't. 'Astounding coincidences' (the rational explanation for premonitions, says Knight) come into the same category; again, the truly surprising thing would be if they didn't happen. Knight tells of a wartime firewatcher who said that whenever he cleaned his rubber boots a bad night followed, so he left them dirty; it is far more likely that he remembered the bad nights with clean boots, and forgot those when they were dirty and the better nights with clean boots. Predictions with some semblance of accuracy are remembered, wrong ones forgotten. Knight sums it up as 'Seeing

patterns where there are none'; it's called apophenia, and is the explanation for astrology, palmistry, 'psychic' powers and much else. Knight tells us that when his (now) wife (before they married) was pregnant they saw three magpies ('Three for a girl' in the rhyme) from their bedroom window, knew they would have a daughter, and did, but is honest enough to admit that magpies were often seen there and usually uncounted.

And, in his descriptions of the Blitz, someone should tell Knight the V1 wasn't a rocket!

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***A fundamental requirement of a claimed premonition is an unequivocal prior record of it: 'seers' always have a 100% accuracy record - after the event!***

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Barker got in touch with Brian Inglis, undoubtedly a brilliant man but appallingly gullible about paranormal claims and 'alternative' medicine.

A fundamental requirement of a claimed premonition is an unequivocal prior record of it: 'seers' always have a 100% accuracy record - after the event! Knight tells of a group who 'described themselves as habitual seers, whose premonitions had been borne out over the years', but significant evidence for such claims was, of course, always lacking. Barker recognised that most of the Aberfan premonitions, like other extraordinary intuitions, were collected after the fact, and Fairley summed up: 'The world is full of people who claim to have seen something coming but they always speak out after the event.'

Barker wrote that we should try to harness precognitive powers with a view to preventing disasters like Aberfan, but recognised the 'Jonah quandary': in the Old Testament, God asked Jonah to prophesy the destruction of Nineveh, but Jonah reasoned that if the people of Nineveh believed his warning and repented, God would forgive them, Nineveh would not be destroyed, his prophesy would prove

false, and he would look foolish. He ran away and ended up in a whale. A prophecy ceases to be accurate if the event is prevented, or, as Knight says, 'If a calamity is averted, how can it generate a vision to precede it?' Premonition implies that the future somehow already exists, and sends 'waves' or 'vibrations' into the present which can be detected; if so, nothing can be done to change it.

Details that don't fit are ignored. One of Barker's 'stars' claimed a vision of a Caravelle (a jet) crashing, supposedly fulfilled by the crash of a Britannia (a turboprop). (A serious plane crash happens every few weeks somewhere, so predicting one in the near future is quite safe!) Another predicted a tornado or hurricane on the west coast of the USA, hailed by Barker as true when tornadoes happened in the midwest (very common there), nearly two thousand miles from the west coast. She also supposedly saw the first fatality during spaceflight, the death of the cosmonaut Vladimir Komarov in Soyuz 1 in 1967, though she said he was on his way to the Moon (he wasn't), and could have heard there was a man in space by the time of her 'vision'. This account too goes into much unnecessary detail, running to five pages with a photograph. (And Knight commits a classic misuse, saying the craft 'careened' through the atmosphere, when he means careered.)

In Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's story 'Silver Blaze' Sherlock Holmes refers to 'the curious incident of the dog in the night-time'. Someone says, 'The dog did nothing in the night-time', and Holmes responds: 'That was the curious incident': he had deduced from the dog's inaction that the miscreant was known to the dog. 'The dog that didn't bark' has come to mean things that might have been expected to happen, but didn't, and they abound in precognition claims. As well as failed prophecies of things that didn't happen, we get failure to predict events that did happen and might be expected to have been foreseen if such powers exist. If the future sends 'waves' into the past, those generated by sensational events

like the Kennedy assassination, the deaths of Diana and Dodi, 9/11, etc. might well be expected to be the strongest and most easily detected, but I know of no convincing claims of predictions of those or many other very striking happenings. Nor does anyone appear to have plausibly predicted the tragic, chaotically responded-to, and utterly unprepared-for fire at Shelton Hospital in February 1968 which killed 21 patients (Knight wrongly says 24). Barker, Knight says, hungered for the limelight: his dalliance with the occult and claimed premonitions became public knowledge, and Private Eye 'noted acidly that Barker's brainchild had failed to foresee a disaster at his own place of work'.

Barker's prominence and his efforts to publicise his book *Scared to Death: an Examination of Fear, its Cause and Effects* (1968) was not popular with his employers. His assistant was denied study leave to accompany him on a lecture tour to America and had to take the trip as a holiday. Its official purpose was to visit universities and hospitals to discuss aversion therapy, but Barker also wanted to plug his book. Although intended as a sober and scientific work, his American publishers sent it straight to paperback, with a cover showing a woman in a white dress running from an apparition, with a bulging eye staring from a rip in the image and the words: 'Thoughts can kill! A medical doctor's amazing [...] case histories of deaths caused by strange and terrifying psychic powers'. They also put 'M.D.' after his name to hammer home his qualifications, though it is an American designation which Barker did not have. I was reminded of 'PhD' after an author's name, which I always regard as a warning!

Just two of Barker's many subjects did appear to have a high success rate, but there are reasons to think that the 'hits' may not have been reported accurately, or there were other reasons for scepticism, such as the aforementioned need for a prior record

of the premonition. There is also the 'file drawer' problem familiar in paranormal research, the possibility of large numbers of unrecorded predictions never made known because they were inaccurate, and of such numbers as to make the apparently accurate ones explicable by chance. A favourite technique is to predict something virtually inevitable, keep quiet when it fails to materialise, and trumpet it when it does.

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***Barker died on 20 August 1968, and it is - naturally! - claimed that one of his 'stars' claimed to have had a premonition of his death.***

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Knight says the Premonitions Bureau was in operation for 18 months, and there were plenty of signals that Barker was on an errant path. Even the troublesome officials may have been trying to protect his reputation. 'When a truly preventable tragedy [...] took place - a fire in an old hospital, full of alarms and hoses that nobody knew how to use - the bureau proved valueless. Ninety-nine per cent of its predictions did not come true.' He goes on to say that a useful definition of a delusion is not an inaccurate belief about the world, but one you refuse to change when confronted with proof that you are wrong.

Barker died on 20 August 1968, and it is - naturally! - claimed that one of his 'stars' claimed to have had a premonition of his death. But, early in the book, we read of her assertion that when she was seven she saw an egg her mother was frying lift itself until it almost touched the ceiling, that a fortune teller told her this symbolised the death of someone close, and that a few weeks later one of her best friends died. Quite impressive if true, but that is a big 'if': like many other things in the field not just of precognition but of the paranormal generally, it is purely

anecdotal, with no concrete evidence, and the same applies to her claimed experience presaging Barker's death. Knight is generally too ready to accept accounts of strange experiences without evidence.

Of course, accurate predictions are perfectly possible. Hans Eysenck publicly claimed a high success rate for his predictions (and an even higher one privately), without, of course, adducing any paranormal powers or phenomena but simply by observing and extrapolating from trends and developments, though they, of course, could only be general, not specific events like plane crashes, a colliery waste tip slide, etc.; the theme of this book is precognition by paranormal means, and nothing in it provides any concrete evidence that such a thing is possible.

An odd error in the Acknowledgements is a reference to the 'Society of Psychical Research', when Knight gets it right elsewhere: Society for Psychical Research.

For a book published in both Britain and America by reputable firms, it has its oddities. None of the illustrations has accompanying captions, which are strangely listed at the end, and their relevance is sometimes doubtful. A photograph of the GPO international switchboard appears, because one of Barker's 'stars' worked there, though there is no indication that he is in the photo, and it would hardly be relevant if he were. The photo of the man with Munchausen Syndrome has already been mentioned. A chart from the accident report of a plane crash (over two full pages), photos from the foot-and-mouth outbreak and of Peter Fairley doing something strange, and a fuzzy photo of something called a Merry Carlton (never mentioned in the text) also seem irrelevant. And finally, the book's useability is much reduced by the lack of an index, and it is appalling that such prestigious firms did not have one compiled.

## 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.

From SAS: ‘What Counts?’ scoping inquiry report welcomed inside and outside government’. ... You can watch a recording of the panel discussion at the Institute for Government ...

<https://senseaboutscience.org/what-counts/>

‘...and read an op-ed by Tracey in politics magazine

<https://tinyurl.com/59rj8s34>

‘You can download the full report or read a summary of our findings and recommendations.’:

<https://senseaboutscience.org/what-counts/>

‘Our report calls for better transparency around the evidence behind policy decisions, to empower people to implement policies with confidence. We are recommending the government to establish a transparency of evidence standard and look into setting up a public responsive trials unit for government policy. ... If you’re aware of relevant work being done in this area, or would like to get involved, please contact our Deputy-Director, David Schley’ at:

[david@senseaboutscience.org](mailto:david@senseaboutscience.org)

##### **Good Thinking**

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

<http://goodthinkingsociety.org/>

##### **Science and politics**

‘Keeping science and politics socially distanced from each other is the best way to ensure government spin doesn’t

damage trust in the former, says Fiona Fox.’

<https://tinyurl.com/2p9hmd6d>

##### **Trust in science**

‘Believe in science? You should be more skeptical about scientists and “science”’.

<https://tinyurl.com/22x79mxw>

##### **Critical thinking**

From the Australian Skeptics: ‘Noted Nigerian skeptic Leo Igwe and his colleagues have started a Facebook group for their Critical Thinking Social Empowerment Foundation. They are looking for people to join and follow their activities. They run critical thinking workshops for teachers and students. They are asking for donations to help keep the program going in schools across the regions.’

<https://tinyurl.com/yrremv96>

##### **Forensic science**

‘How did we fall for the junk science of forensics?’ Review of *Junk Science and the American Criminal Justice System* by M. Chris Fabricant.’

<https://tinyurl.com/2p88btn3>

##### **Misinformation**

Combating misinformation in science and medicine: Michael Schubert interviews Timothy Caulfield. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/y3resa2z>

‘The unbearable weight of defining disinformation and misinformation on the internet.’

<https://tinyurl.com/vfntd6pd>

‘A media diet rich with misinformation can increase misperceptions, heighten political cynicism, lower trust in the media, and further exacerbate growing polarization. Understanding which media outlets users visit — and why — is key to understanding how misinformation spreads and ways it can be stopped.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/5n8933cw>

‘Stopping bad-quality news remains tricky, but one method shows promise.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/3hxp8asm>

‘Although the use of social media to spread misinformation and disinformation is not a new concept, the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic has further highlighted the dangers that misinformation can pose to public health. ... The purpose of this article is to inform the infectious diseases community of the history and dangers of health misinformation and disinformation in social media, present tools for identifying and responding to misinformation, and propose other ethical considerations for social media.’

<https://tinyurl.com/2b5wx2xn>

##### **Preprints**

‘Peer review, despite its flaws, is one of the most important pillars of the scientific process. So preprint servers, which make scientific papers that have yet to be reviewed or published available online, have been slow to catch on in many fields. But then came the pandemic.’

<https://tinyurl.com/y3xvkshj>

##### **Harassment of science journalists**

‘For the past several years, we’ve watched with rising concern as journalists in the United States and abroad have been increasingly subjected to online harassment. ... Sadly, online attacks and threats have become the new normal in many newsrooms, with the result being that journalists are subject to a form of mob censorship.’

<https://tinyurl.com/mwbxyvee>

##### **Evolution**

‘The Costs of Canceling Darwin: Fewer scientists, more skepticism of science in states that limit evolution instruction. Virtually every U.S. high-school



student is required to study biology, at minimum, to earn a diploma. But the exact content of the course varies from state to state.'

<https://tinyurl.com/5ey7t2mr>

## MEDICINE

### **The pharmaceutical industry**

More on the egregious practices of pharmaceutical companies: 'The response of the ABPI (*Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry*) to misconduct by pharmaceutical companies.'

<https://tinyurl.com/3nj4kd2v>

### **Trust in medical science**

'Medical science faces a credibility crisis that threatens its ability to protect people's health. Scientists need to grasp the forces sowing suspicion about their work.'

<https://tinyurl.com/4w9bwy6u>

### **Sex and gender website**

Clinical Advisory Network on Sex and Gender is 'a group of UK and Ireland based clinicians calling for greater understanding of the effects of sex and gender in healthcare'.

<https://can-sg.org/>

### **Good Health Today/ Urhealth**

The Advertising Standards Authority has upheld complaints about two related websites offering treatment for a wide range of medical and psychiatric conditions that are unsupported by clinical trials. For the ruling see:

<https://tinyurl.com/4p3tstya>

For the websites go to:

<https://www.urhealth-matters.com/>

and

<https://goodhealthtoday.co.uk/>

And for a rant about the ruling by the unknown person managing the sites, go to:

<https://www.urhealth-matters.com/advertising/>

### **Vaping**

'Some smokers use e-cigarettes to try to kick the habit, but new research shows mixing smoking and vaping is no better for your heart health than just smoking. Among 24,000 men and women, smoking cigarettes and e-cigarettes didn't reduce the risk of heart attack,

heart failure, stroke or any cardiovascular disease.'

<https://tinyurl.com/3vbbpys9>

### **'Boosting the immune system'**

'Zachary Rubin, an allergist and clinical immunologist, explains there is a fundamental flaw in how we think about caring for our immune system. "The whole term 'boosting your immune system' is inaccurate," Rubin tells Inverse. "It's a term used by the wellness industry to sell products that are wildly unproven scientifically".' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/3pj5memm>

Meanwhile: 'A local Reiki practitioner claims on her website that her clients receive "spiritual universal energy" during one of her therapeutic sessions. Indeed, one of the published testimonials is from a client who claims the practitioner could "connect to [her] energy almost instantaneously" and she could feel her moving from chakra to chakra, "connecting all the pieces."' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/2p9c73k7>

### **Alzheimer's disease**

'Costly Alzheimer's treatment is spreading around the world, with virtually no science to back it up.'

<https://tinyurl.com/4ut3c8fm>

### **AIDS denialism**

'AIDS was a terrifying mystery, and then we solved it. When researchers identified the human immunodeficiency virus as the reason why young, previously healthy people were developing rare cancers and wasting away, it was a triumph of medical science. But even as the medical community reached a consensus that HIV caused AIDS, a counter-movement was emerging, claiming that HIV didn't exist, or that the virus existed but was harmless. The symptoms of AIDS, according to some of these people, were actually caused by HIV therapies themselves. To this day, some people continue to believe that HIV is a hoax.'

<https://tinyurl.com/5n7hn6ja>

### **The vagus**

'Resetting the Hype Around the Vagus Nerve. ... The vagus nerve is a darling of the all-natural healing crowd. Its complex arborescence makes it the

ideal nerve on which wellness teachers can hang a multitude of claims.'

<https://tinyurl.com/ycxv34m8>

### **Herbal remedies**

'Herbal supplements may be natural, but that does not mean they are always safe.'

<https://tinyurl.com/4trc7cam>

### **'Miracle foods'**

'Kale "miracle food" paper retracted for being "word salad".'

<https://tinyurl.com/y2fwrka9>

### **Sudden infant death syndrome**

'Sudden infant death syndrome, or SIDS, "will be a thing of the past," according to Carmel Harrington, a sleep researcher at the Children's Hospital at Westmead, in Australia. A press release describes her new study ... as a "game-changing" effort and a "world-first breakthrough" that could prevent future deaths from the tragic illness. Celebrations quickly spread on social media: "THEY FOUND THE CAUSE OF SIDS. ... Sadly, these claims are quite absurd.'

<https://tinyurl.com/yb6cmh5v>

### **Homeopathy**

'Assessing the magnitude of reporting bias in trials of homeopathy: a cross-sectional study and meta-analysis.' 'Conclusions: Registration of published trials was infrequent, many registered trials were not published and primary outcomes were often altered or changed. This likely affects the validity of the body of evidence of homeopathic literature and may overestimate the true treatment effect of homeopathic remedies.'

<https://tinyurl.com/486tuxxy>

### **Fitness trackers**

'A boom in fitness trackers isn't leading to a boom in physical activity' (*I could have told them it wouldn't—Ed.*).

<https://tinyurl.com/4hdjsb2n>

### **Sun protection misinformation**

'Many U.S. adults misunderstand how to protect themselves from the sun to reduce their risk of skin cancer, according to a survey released by the American Academy of Dermatology.'

<https://tinyurl.com/5efn2nwe>

### Testicle tanning

‘If you think the Covid-19 pandemic was the first time the far right took strange health advice proffered by wellness devotees, think again.’

<https://tinyurl.com/477hnha4>

### Autism

‘A British autism charity that received hundreds of thousands of pounds in national lottery funding has links to the anti-vaccine movement and is being jointly run by a campaigner who likened the Covid-19 jab rollout to a Nazi war crime.’

<https://tinyurl.com/2p8c2d5u>

## CLIMATE CHANGE

### Climate change

‘While people around the world are becoming more concerned about climate change, climate change denialism persists in one form or another. A 2021 poll of U.S. adults by The Economist/YouGov found that nearly 10 percent didn’t believe that global warming is occurring at all; nearly a quarter believed that the climate is changing but not due to human activity, and 14 percent were unsure. With the seven hottest years ever recorded occurring between 2015 and 2021, how is it possible that only about half the population believes that anthropogenic climate change is real?’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/2p99u4p3>

Meanwhile: ‘Flood victims from Australia’s north-east coast, who in droves now self-identify as “climate refugees”, have converged on a grab-bag of Facebook groups and community message boards to condemn some Byron Bay locals who have taken to calling recent flooding a “manmade” weather event that “definitely isn’t” linked to climate change.’

<https://tinyurl.com/2p99dne7>

## PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHIATRY

### Modern psychiatry

‘Since the late 1800s, beginning with Pasteur and Koch, we have known that health care depends upon the scientific

method, long used by scientists interested in the natural world. Thanks to science, our understanding of physiological and public health has grown exponentially since then. . Nevertheless, in the absence of scientific evidence, psychiatry has medicalized mental disorder and their rhetoric has succeeded—with the public and with doctors.’ At

<https://tinyurl.com/f996a8um>

And: ‘A Hopelessly Flawed Seminar in “The Lancet” About Suicide (*and self-harm*).’ ‘The total failure of the much touted biological psychiatry has been documented numerous times, but the psychiatrist won’t give up. They continue to produce misleading brain scan studies, brain chemistry studies, and genetic studies, and psychiatric textbooks for students of medicine, psychology and psychiatry are full of this.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/4w89j46x>

### Superstitions

‘From carefully avoiding cracks in the pavement to saluting every magpie that you meet, superstitious behaviour is really common. But why do we have superstitions? Where do they come from? And are they helpful or harmful?’

<https://tinyurl.com/2m68b5z7>

### Mindfulness

‘Studies purporting to show changes in brain structure following the popular, 8-week mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) course are widely referenced despite major methodological limitations. Here, we present findings from a large, combined dataset of two, three-arm randomized controlled trials with active and waitlist (WL) control groups. ... We assessed changes in gray matter volume, gray matter density, and cortical thickness.’

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

### Psychotherapy

‘Some psychotherapeutic approaches are not only ineffective, they’re actively harmful. We’re now starting to identify them.’

<https://tinyurl.com/ymj8tm3m>

### The Dunning-Kruger effect

Scientific Expertise vs. the Dunning-Kruger Effect: A conversation with Nobel Prize winner Adam Riess. ‘The scientific method teaches us to test hypotheses and form beliefs based on evidence and repeated observations. In the internet era, many believe that their own viewpoints are just as valid or accurate as that of experts. Although scientific experts often second-guess themselves, most of us are prone to the overconfidence of the Dunning-Kruger effect.’

<https://tinyurl.com/bdz9yt67>

### Belief in the paranormal

‘In a review of 71 studies that explored links between belief in paranormal phenomena and cognitive function, most of the findings align with the hypothesis that such beliefs are associated with cognitive differences or deficits.’

<https://tinyurl.com/59emn27p>

‘Why Women Are More Likely to Believe in the Supernatural: Key differences in empathy and intuition.’

<https://tinyurl.com/3pvxc8wv>

### Dogs’ personalities and breeds

‘Dogs’ Personalities Aren’t Determined by Their Breed: A new genetic study shows generalizing breeds as affectionate or aggressive doesn’t hold up.’

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

### Graphology

‘Neither your signature nor your handwriting says anything about your personality: graphology is largely an urban myth.’

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

### Mental health and season of birth

A survey of 72,370 individuals has failed to confirm that season of birth and month of birth are reliable predictors of anxiety and depression across one’s lifetime.

<https://tinyurl.com/2sabd2kw>

## RELIGION

### Exorcism

‘A 3-year-old girl was allegedly tortured and killed by her family in a 12-

hour exorcism in her granddad's California church — with her mom later posting a smiling video saying dismissively, "It is what it is."

<https://tinyurl.com/5n62ex2m>

## POLITICS AND SOCIAL POLICY

### Mass shootings

'What happened to (rare) incidents of mass shootings in Australia in the 20 years following the National Firearms Agreement':

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

## CONSPIRACY THEORIES

### QAnon

In the US, State Senator Lana Theis has come 'under fire for preposterously claiming in a fundraising email that Democrats want to "groom and sexualize kindergarteners" and teach white children to hate themselves.'

<https://tinyurl.com/4mf9kadd>

### Anti-abortionists

'Fetus-powered street lamps? Republicans ramp up outrageous anti-abortion lies ahead of Roe's demise: During a House hearing, the GOP demonized patients and doctors with QAnon-style conspiracy theories.'

<https://tinyurl.com/3cv69akb>

## MISCELLANEOUS

### UFOs/ UAP

From Vicente-Juan Ballester Olmos: 'On June 25, 2021, the US Department

of Defense released a 9-page "Preliminary Assessment: Unidentified Aerial Phenomena." It was a public version of a longer classified report prepared for US Congress, a 17-page report that has been released to UFO researcher John Greenwald under FOIA. This UAP report is sanitized and certain words, lines and entire sentences have been redacted by being blacked out to hide information such as military systems and operational details. By comparing both documents chapter by chapter, a number of inferences may be made, both about the document itself and about the differences between the two versions. That is the purpose of this article that I have just published through Academia.edu, "On the 2021 UAPTF Classified Report". I hope it may be useful to you.'

<https://tinyurl.com/yhhu84tt>

### Alien abduction

'Alien abduction stories are, at least in the West, relatively common ... Thanks to psychological research over the past few decades, however, we can probably conclude that these alien misadventures arise due to two entirely more mundane phenomena: sleep paralysis, and false memories.'

<https://tinyurl.com/b8pnyw9d>

### The Bermuda Triangle

'7 Chilling Conspiracy Theories About the Bermuda Triangle: From the supernatural to the super-ridiculous, these tales involve wormholes,

malfunctioning compasses, and even Atlantis.'

<https://tinyurl.com/37a9862n>

### Ghosts

'Spooky Britain: how ghosts became a national obsession: Mysterious glowing orbs, unexplained chills, things that literally go bump in the night: signs of paranormal activity have reportedly surged during the pandemic. As have specialist investigators, organised ghost hunts, eerie podcasts.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/3p7kzszy>

And: 'How ghosts became big business: They source the spookiest sites and aim to give their clients the scariest night of their life. Jo Macfarlane meets the ghost hunters turning our age-old fascination into Britain's most spirited startups.'

<https://tinyurl.com/2p9ybjv4>

The Science Behind Why People See Ghosts and Demons. 'Don't call an exorcist... yet.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/bdcr5ava>

Meanwhile: 'A paranormal investigating team from Bassetlaw has made a public statement addressing comments made by renowned comedian, Ricky Gervais.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/2p8frprp>

### Predicting the war in Ukraine

'Numerology, astrology, tarot: pseudoscientists are predicting the outcome of Kremlin's war in Ukraine.'

<https://tinyurl.com/427he98j>

## 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/>

### 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/>

### QED

QED is a two-day science and skepticism convention taking place at the Mercure Piccadilly Hotel in Manchester from the 29th-30th October 2022. Fantastic speakers from the worlds of science and entertainment will be joining us for a weekend

celebration of science, reason and critical thinking.

<https://qedcon.org/>

### CSICon

'This is the Infodemic, an age of misinformation, conspiracy theories, and pseudoscience; when people believe that magic potions cure diseases, aliens are among us, and the earth is flat. It's time to bring the brightest minds in science and reason together to fight back against this

outbreak of dangerous nonsense, and have a hell of a great time doing it. It's finally time for CSICon 2022, October 20-23 at the Flamingo Resort in Las Vegas. Registration is now open for what might be the biggest and best skeptics' conference ever! See:

<https://tinyurl.com/2s4e3tzt>

### **Skeptics in the Pub**

Events of interest to skeptics are now being presented live (in some cases with the option of viewing online). Skeptics in the Pub Online still(?) has an excellent programme of online talks on Thursday evenings. See:

<https://sitp.online/>

### **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>

### **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.' A full list of Pint of Science cities and countries can be accessed at:

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

### **Annual Australian Skeptics National Convention - Skepticon**

The Australian Skeptics Society are happy to announce that the 2022 Annual Australian Skeptics National Convention - Skepticon - for 2022 will be held at the National Library in Canberra on the weekend of November 26-27.

<https://tinyurl.com/v3bpd2m9>

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## LOGIC AND INTUITION: ANSWERS

### **Sums of consecutive numbers**

If there are indeed 3 consecutive whole numbers whose sum is 102 then the middle one of these must be 102 divided by 3. If 102 doesn't divide by 3, then there aren't any such numbers. 102 is

divisible by 3. Incidentally, a quick check for this is to see if the sum of its individual integers, namely 1, 0 and 2, is itself divisible by 3, which it is. Now, 102 divided by 3 is 34. So the three numbers are 33, 34 and 35.

You'll find that the solution for any problem involving an odd number of consecutive numbers is just as straightforward, but for even numbers, matters are a bit more complicated.

## About ASKE

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

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

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

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