

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

Integration in Northern Ireland

From June 24 to 26 this year, Humanists UK held their annual convention at the MAC in Belfast (*note 1*). This was their first live convention since 2019 and, as ever, it was informative and stimulating, with excellent speakers and discussions, covering an extensive range of topics of contemporary concern. One does not have to be a humanist or of no religious faith at all to engage positively in these events; most reasonable, open-minded people, whatever their beliefs, would feel at home in this environment.

One notable achievement is the legal recognition of humanist weddings, something that has yet to happen in England and Wales.

One of the recurring themes of the convention programme was the social and political situation in Northern Ireland, particularly the sectarian divide. The impression I gained was that the terrible events of their recent history, prior to the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, fuel a powerful determination, noticeably on the part of younger people, never to return to ‘the bad old days’, but to move forward and create a progressive, vibrant, inclusive community. NI Humanists have been at the forefront of this movement and have campaigned successfully on several fronts—abortion, same-sex marriage, and inclusion of humanism in the schools’ religious education curriculum to name but three. Another notable achievement is the legal recognition of humanist weddings, something that has yet to happen in England and Wales.

One event of particular interest to me was a panel discussion about NI schools. It remains the case that over 90% of pupils attend schools which are

segregated along religious lines (Protestant or Catholic) and in 30% of schools there are either no Protestant or no Catholic children at all. Most of the NI population support integrated education, less so the influential sectarian bodies in charge. I was amused when one panellist informed us of one response of the latter to the charge that not enough was being done to promote integrated education: ‘They all have the same Religious Education curriculum’.

Another presentation of special interest to me was by a panel of activists, each of whom is involved in cultural and artistic projects in their communities aimed at ‘making the world just a little bit more kind, more rational, and more tolerant’. One of the speakers, a DJ named Holly Lester, is heavily engaged, with Boyd Sleator, the panel chair and Coordinator for Northern Ireland Humanists, in campaigning to boost the NI night-time economy, notably the popular music-and-dance scene. At present this is somewhat stifled by the strict licencing laws and inadequate night-time public transport.

You might wonder, as I did, how this venture could facilitate greater integration, harmony and mutual respect across the historical cultural and sectarian divide that is still very evident in this part of the UK. All was revealed when this was explained by Mr Sleator, and for me this was quite a significant take-home message from the convention. Let me explain.

I have some involvement in Religious Education in England, both as a Humanist school speaker and a co-opted member of our local Standard Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE). One responsibility for SACREs is to construct an agreed RE syllabus for schools that takes into account the religious and cultural mix of the local population but, in line with

Section 375(3) of the Education Act 1996, it must reflect ‘that the religious traditions of Great Britain are in the main Christian’.

From my schooldays until my current involvement with SACRE I had no knowledge or experience of RE as taught in schools. In the 1950s and 60s, at least at the schools I attended, RE was called ‘Scripture’ and consisted almost entirely of Bible study. (In the sixth form we had some lessons from an RE teacher, a devout Christian, who endeavoured to inform us about other religions.) It is clear to me that the RE that is now taught in schools is different from that which was inflicted on my generation. The teaching is less doctrinal and pupils learn about the six major world religions (or more) as well as non-religious systems of belief, including Humanism.

An increasing proportion of the population—now the majority—have no religious affiliation at all. The latter trend is most evident in children and young people.

These changes acknowledge two significant social trends which are reflected in the classroom. The first is much greater diversification of religions in the UK, mainly due to migration, and the second is the fact that an increasing proportion of the population as a whole—now the majority—have no religious affiliation at all (*note 2*). The latter trend is most evident in children and young people, and hence in the classroom.

As a result, there has been a growing movement among those organisations concerned with the RE curriculum in both England and Wales (I can’t speak for the Scottish or NI curricula) for any RE syllabus to give due emphasise to

the individual nature of faith, belief and personal philosophy. In Wales the title ‘Religious Education’ has been replaced by ‘Religion, Values and Ethics’ and in England pressure is mounting in favour of ‘Religion and Worldviews’.

Teaching children about the different religions and faiths that they are likely to encounter in their life, both socially and through the media, seems a very worthwhile endeavour, one that should assist in promoting mutual understanding among people from all varieties of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. But is it possible to overplay the role of RE at the expense of other ways of achieving the same?

This is certainly how my generation was brought up: the two topics always to be avoided at the dinner table were politics and religion.

I am a member of a small, city-wide interfaith group that organises talks by people of different faiths as well as occasional social events. I have also, for several years, worked as a humanist volunteer in chaplaincies in healthcare and higher educational and settings. In the latter capacity I have both organised and participated in projects encouraging interfaith dialogue and understanding amongst university staff and students. What I have learned from all of this is that people in general are not that interested in learning about other people’s faiths. Hence, I cannot say that my own modest efforts in this direction have met with much success.

Having given more thought to this, I am not all that surprised. My own experience in life is consistent with the above conclusion. That is, I believe that in this country at least, other people’s religion or faith tends to be viewed as a private matter and, if different to our

own, to interrogate others directly about this would be considered impolite and intrusive. This is certainly how my generation was brought up: the two topics always to be avoided at the dinner table were politics and religion. And, if you do ask people (as I used to do in a professional capacity) whether they are religious, in many cases their answer will be no, and that religion isn’t something that they bother much about.

So maybe formally learning about the various faiths and beliefs isn’t the most important way of promoting acceptance and harmony among people from differing ethnic and cultural backgrounds. If so, we must be cautious about the idea that this can be largely achieved amongst young people through the RE curriculum.

Let’s now return to the campaign on behalf of NI’s nightlife and its significance in promoting integration in the community. During the conference, we heard from several speakers how members of the NI public are often asked, for various administrative purposes, to identify their religious allegiance—Protestant, Catholic or (in recent years) ‘Other’; and how, in the absence of an answer, a good guess can be made from the person’s name, where they live, what school they attended or are attending, and even what sports they play. But, as Mr Sleator explained during the panel discussion, if there is one context in which sectarian identity does *not* matter, especially with young people, it is listening to music and dancing at nightclubs, concerts, raves, and so on.

We can generalise from this and say that real, effective integration happens quite naturally among people from different cultures and communities when they forget their differences and come together to do things that they all enjoy or that are otherwise important in their lives. In doing so they may discover how much they share ideas, values, likes and dislikes, fears,

aspirations, and so on. This has certainly been my own experience.

Simply separating people into groups and labelling them according to group membership may create prejudicial behaviour and conflict.

Social psychologists, such as the late Henri Tajfel, have effectively demonstrated that simply separating people into groups and labelling them according to group membership may create prejudicial behaviour and conflict. So, while learning about other people’s religious beliefs and practices is a laudable pursuit, it seems that the most effective means of promoting harmony within diversity is enabling people to come together to engage in normal social activities and feel part of one common community, without having to think about their own and other people’s faith, ethnicity and cultural background.

Awards

UK Skeptics are calling for nominations for the following annual awards:

The Award for Skeptical Activism for an individual or organisation who has done outstanding work to promote critical thinking within the last 12 months.

The Rusty Razor for an individual or organisation who has been the most prominent promoter of unscientific ideas in the last 12 months. Nominations will close on October 15th (*note 4*).

Notes

1. <https://tinyurl.com/2yyaapt5>
2. <https://tinyurl.com/324hfvs5>
3. See, for example, <https://tinyurl.com/nsc48h24>. ‘Religious Education’ is presently the legal term in use.
4. <https://tinyurl.com/4eeysxuc>



LOGIC AND INTUITION

Who said it?

Yet another puzzle about liars and truth-tellers: Ben always tells the truth, Sue only sometimes. Which of them said, 'This is not the first time I have made this statement'?

The three coins

And yet another puzzle about coins. I have, in order of increasing value, a lead coin, a silver coin and a gold coin. Make any statement you like and if it's wrong I'll give you the lead coin.

Otherwise I'll give you either the silver or the gold coin. What's your statement?

Answers on page 19.



THE EUROPEAN SCENE

European Council for Skeptics Organisations

Address: Arheilger Weg 11, 64380 Roßdorf, Germany

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

Facebook:

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

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

The ESP - European Skeptics Podcast



Building a bridge for skeptics

<http://theesp.eu/>

Find out what is happening on the skeptical scene throughout Europe by visiting this site. 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

Clinical reporting across Europe

'Eight of the 21 largest public and philanthropic medical research funders in Europe are stepping up their efforts to improve clinical reporting, following an assessment that found widespread gaps in existing research waste safeguards.'

'At present, many academic clinical trials in Europe fail to make their results

public, wasting taxpayers' money and leaving large gaps in the medical evidence base.

'The public institutions that hand out money to medical researchers can prevent such waste by putting into place eleven safeguards recommended by the World Health Organisation.'

<https://tinyurl.com/493dpbnw>

Lisa-Maria Kellermayr

'Lisa-Maria Kellermayr, an Austrian GP, was a doctor who dedicated her life to her patients and was vocal about the risks of Covid-19 on Twitter and in the media. She had endured months of death threats from Covid conspiracy theorists and anti-vaxxers. Colleagues expressed frustration with the lack of support she received for dealing with the daily abuse. Last month, Kellermayr took her own life.'

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

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.



MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

Alternative therapies and the NHS

Two examples of the use of alternative therapies in the UK's National Health Service have been reported recently by the mainstream media, in both cases highly critically. The first of these (*note 1*) concerns a job advertisement by Manchester University's NHS Foundation Trust for a 'spiritual healer/reiki therapist' with a salary of £26,000. The successful applicant is to work with cancer patients at Manchester Royal Infirmary's palliative care department. The post is being funded by the Sam Buxton Sunflower Healing Trust (*note 2*), a charity that 'supports cancer patients and their families by providing funds to employ Complementary Therapists (Healers) in the NHS and Hospices'.

Reiki is a Japanese 'healing' practice that uses a form of massage entailing either a 'light touch' of the practitioner's hands or having them hands above the person's body without contact. I have spoken to people who have undergone Reiki and invariably they speak very positively about their experience, notably their feelings of relaxation, physical warmth and wellbeing.

According to the job advert, the successful candidate will 'activate the healing process' in cancer patients by harnessing 'energy principles'.

I am here referring mainly to people who were not acutely ill but were attending a day centre for individuals with incurable, life-limiting illnesses. So far as I am aware, no healing or curative claims were made for Reiki by those in charge of the centre or the practitioner herself, but the service users were clearly very thankful to have

this on the centre's programme of activities (*note 3*).

Why, then, was the Manchester trust's advertisement for a Reiki practitioner given a hostile reception by the press? Firstly because, according to the job advert, the successful candidate will 'activate the healing process' in cancer patients by harnessing 'energy principles', a claim that has no scientific basis whatsoever and is totally unrelated to the evidenced-based rationale that informs the treatment the patients will be receiving at the hospital. And secondly because there is no evidence that Reiki affects the disease process itself.

The second example (*note 4*) is the use of aromatherapy during maternity care at Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust (NUH). Maternity care at the NUH is currently the subject of an inquiry, prompted by dozens of baby deaths. More than 450 families are taking part in the review, led by the expert midwife Donna Ockenden.

Aromatherapy is a form of massage that uses aromatic materials, including essential oils, to enhance psychological and physical wellbeing. As with Reiki, people who have received aromatherapy invariably describe their experience to me in positive terms and find it very relaxing (I have no personal experience of either Reiki or aromatherapy). During the inquiry into the NUH, several bereaved families have recalled aromatherapy being heavily promoted at the trust's maternity units.

So again we ask the question why has news of the use of this procedure by an NHS trust provoked such an outcry? Once more it is because the women who received it were led to believe that it was evidenced-based practice. For example, The NUH guidelines state that aromatherapy can help expel the placenta, and suggest midwives ask women to inhale oils such as clary sage,

jasmine, lavender or basil. They also describe the oils as 'extremely effective for the prevention of and, in some cases, the treatment of infection' and advocate their use with women suffering from cystitis, or as a compress on a caesarean section wound. Another claim is that frankincense 'may calm hysteria' and is 'recommended in situations of maternal panic'.

The use of aromatherapy for these purposes is not supported by NICE guidelines. These also state that aromatherapy should not be offered 'for pain relief during the latent first stage of labour'.

The use of aromatherapy for these purposes is not supported by NICE guidelines.

Commenting on the NUH guidelines (*note 4*), Susan Bewley, emeritus professor of obstetrics and women's health at King's College London, said the maternity unit's use of aromatherapy was inappropriate. 'The NHS should not give aromatherapy this veneer of respectability. The advice appears in long, detailed, faux-serious guidelines that make implausible and unsupported claims that appear to have been approved by colleagues asleep at the wheel. It is a waste of valuable midwifery skills and time.'

Notes

1. <https://tinyurl.com/29rwuhc2>
2. <http://www.cancertherapies.org.uk/>
3. Tai chi exercise classes were also on the programme and were similarly well received. Indeed, great disappointment was expressed when these sessions came to an end. They were replaced by another activity, Zumba, which quickly became very popular.
4. <https://tinyurl.com/4wt3nz6b>



LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

Societies with limited linguistic repertoires

In *The Citadel of the Autarch* (1983), the fourth and final volume of Gene Wolfe's acclaimed 'New Sun' science-fiction quartet, a people known as the Ascians is introduced. The Ascians are very strange in various ways (Wolfe, who died in 2019, was in fact adept at creating decidedly unusual scenarios); but one aspect of their society which has drawn relatively little comment from sf buffs involves the fact that they speak only with a limited, fixed range of sentences. They are, it seems, unable to construct a new sentence, even one differing minimally from an established sentence, and even if such a novel utterance clearly seems to be required in context. Pairs or groups of Ascians interact by choosing the most relevant (often, rather, the least irrelevant) sentences. The Ascians are not really able to communicate with outsiders.

The restrictions on the linguistic repertoire of the Ascians appear to relate in large part to the desire of effectively authoritarian governments over the centuries to discourage independent thoughts. Even if an Ascian can somehow manage to formulate such a thought, the language provides no way of expressing same.

This feature of Ascian talk obviously conflicts with a basic feature of human language: the capacity to combine the limited numbers of phonemes and, in this context, words into a potentially infinite number of larger units displaying grammatical and semantic variation. Without this capacity, language could not function as it does in the societies which we actually encounter around the world. Even if some notions are strongly discouraged, it is normally possible to devise a means of expressing them, perhaps in sentences which sound strange or self-refuting but which do have possible meanings that can be teased out.

Some early work by Noam Chomsky and his followers focused upon sentences which are grammatically unremarkable but cannot easily (or at all?) be assigned an intelligible meaning. The best known such sentence is *Colourless green ideas sleep furiously*. See for example the discussion attached below (*note 1*). Linguists differ as to how such cases should be interpreted; some regard them as merely semantically awkward, with no dramatic theoretical implications. Sentences in invented languages such as Ascian might provide input to these discussions.

Readers may be reminded here of George Orwell's 'Newspeak' (Nineteen Eighty-Four), in which opposition to the authoritarian government is difficult to articulate.

Readers may be reminded here of George Orwell's 'Newspeak' (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*), in which opposition to the authoritarian government is difficult to articulate. Sentences such as 'Big Brother is bad' are perceived as self-contradictory, because the word *bad* (*un-good*) is **defined** as involving unwelcome opposition to Big Brother or the system.

My partner and I have been playing the online game 'Animal Crossing' (*note 2*). When one's personal Animal Crossing avatar engages in conversation with one of the established residents of 'the island', a given utterance can be responded to only with one of a very small range of utterances, mostly rather general in nature. Specific content can be input only by actions, e.g. by giving the other character a present. There is no real means of introducing a new topic (except marginally by 'emailing' another character). This feature is at times frustrating (though it is not as

ominous as the scenarios in Wolfe or Orwell!).

More invented books

Last time, in my section on 'Translations' of books which never existed, I commented on Edmond Szekely's presumably duplicitous presentation of invented iconoclastic texts. My correspondent Helena Wall drew my attention to the fact (mentioned in a presentation which she had organised and attended [*note 3*]) that in the *Arabian Nights* it becomes clear that many of the stories are being falsely presented by the authors as translations, in order to give them an aura of historicity (and exoticism).

In turn, this reminded me of the C12 author Geoffrey of Monmouth saying in his preface to his *History of the Kings of Britain* (*HRB*) that most of the book is translated from an earlier Welsh or Breton manuscript. This was obviously an attempt to add authority – very important given the strangeness of much of Geoffrey's content. We do have a relevant work in Welsh called the *Brut Tysilio*, but the consensus is that this is translated **from HRB**.

Some later authors on the fringe of historical scholarship – notably Anatoly Fomenko and his fellow (mainly Russian or Eastern European) chronological revisionists – have come to the view that Geoffrey is so authoritative that his highly non-standard, often fanciful accounts of the ancient and early medieval history of the British Isles should be preferred to the accepted accounts of this period – which most scholars would regard as more or less certain to be correct in the main, except where genuine anomalies or contested versions exist. In some cases, Geoffrey's account can – very much by special pleading – be treated as compatible with Fomenko's shortened chronology for European history. (Specifically, the chronological revisionists hold that many accepted

historical episodes form doublets, only one member of which actually took place.)

When I was studying the Bible at the age of 12-13, my teacher, who (despite being an ordained clergyman) was nothing if not sceptical of much in the texts, drew our attention to a verse in the book of *Joshua* (10:13): ‘Is it [= the immediately preceding quasi-factual statement] not written in the Book of Jasher?’. This has understandably been taken (especially by non-specialists) to mean that the author of *Joshua* wished to disclaim responsibility for the statement in question. Our teacher used this example to encourage us to become sceptical (skeptical?) of the reliability of the historical material in the Old Testament.

In fact, as the scholar Tov Rose observes, there are at least five separate apocryphal works attributed to ‘Jasher’, all composed much later than Biblical times and never considered authoritative. The particular text referred to here is a translation of a Hebrew book printed in 1613, with the Hebrew title *Sepir Ha Yasher*, meaning ‘Book of the Upright’, or ‘the Upright or Correct Record’. This title was misread with *Jasher*, and at some point Jasher was treated as a proper name. But the grammar of the Hebrew sentence will not permit this interpretation. If TR is correct here, anyone who treats this sentence as referring to a specific very ancient author is simply mistaken. (This does not impugn the ideas of my teacher, who was hardly a specialist – I do not know if he personally could even read Hebrew – and should be credited with having found the passage and having presented it to us as an issue.) And there is also another spurious ‘Book of Jasher’, in which Jasher really is treated as the name of the author – but this work was not published until 1750 (it provides an alternative account of the Pentateuch story).

An entire fraudulently invented language!

George Psalmanazar (C17-18) was a Frenchman, who claimed to be the first native of Formosa (Taiwan) to visit

Europe. For some years he convinced some people, especially in the UK (where he moved in literary circles); but his true origin was eventually revealed.

Some German linguists were so convinced by his claims that they included his so-called ‘Formosan alphabet’ in books about ‘exotic’ languages.

In his book, Psalmanazar described the ‘Formosan’ language, which was in fact an early example of a constructed language (conlang). It is not clear that he himself ever visited East Asia or studied any relevant language; but (like the later Cyril Henry Hoskins aka Tuesday Lobsang Rampa) he was adept at finding excuses when challenged about his supposed origins and experiences. His book appeared in multiple versions, in English, French and German. Some German linguists were so convinced by his claims that they included his so-called ‘Formosan alphabet’ in books about ‘exotic’ languages, even as late as C19. Psalmanazar gave lectures on this topic, notably engaging in debate with the astronomer Edmond Halley at a meeting of the Royal Society.

This is Psalmanazar’s version of the Lord’s Prayer:

*Amy Pornio dan chin Ornio vicy,
Gnayjorhe sai Lory, Eyfodere sai
Bagalin, jorhe sai domion apo
chin Ornio, kay chin Badi eyen,
Amy khatsada nadakhchion toye
ant nadayi, kay Radonaye ant amy
Sochin, apo ant radonern amy
Sochiakhin, bagne ant kau chin
malaboski, ali abinaye ant tuen
Broskacy, kens sai vie Bagalin,
kay Fary, kay Barhaniaan
chinania sendabey. Amien.*

Of course, most conlangs are in no way fraudulent; they are either languages created to be used widely as international ‘auxiliary’ (second) languages; or languages created for use in fiction (mainly science-fiction or fantasy), etc.

Óðsmál

Óðsmál is said to represent an intellectual breakthrough: it is presented as a researched framework in Icelandic/Norse Germanic mythology, the revived Norse religion Ásatrú, the Icelandic Edda poems, and Scandinavian myths. At one stage it was supported by the Icelandic Government. The originator is the esotericist Guðrún Kristín Magnúsdóttir, who has been heavily influenced by theosophical notions (this is in fact how I myself came upon these ideas; I am something of a ‘pet unbeliever’ in the world of Melbourne theosophy!).

GKM makes sweeping, inadequately supported statements about links between Scandinavian and East Asian notions, such as ‘We shall skip our common literalism (–which is mere illiteracy–), find allegory, symbolic language, and the profound theosophy in rúnatal (last part) of [the Norse poem] Hávamál’. She re-translates this poem in highly symbolic Theosophical terms, stating that it is ‘all about how to transcend thought, and space-time, [so as to get] to the realm of The Great Womb ... which is our pure consciousness’.

Helena Wall suggests that GKM’s interpretation in terms of these links might be influenced by her perception that ‘mythemes’ shared by the two regions (polytheism, multi-layered underworlds, cyclic time, Jörmungandr vs. Nāga, etc) should be seen as evidence of genuine deep-time connections. Some of these parallelisms might appear more persuasive than others.

GKM’s overall goal is to ‘give all men [and women?] knowledge and understanding of the profundity contained in Forni Siður / Heathenry / Paganry / Ásatrú’. In this context, she asks, provocatively, ‘Do you know why we are born?’. On a specifically linguistic front, she draws links between Scandinavian and Indic (Sanskrit, etc.) – which she regards as much more closely related than do mainstream Indo-Europeanists.

Without more sophisticated, concrete evidence, it is difficult to

envisage these ideas becoming accepted outside esoteric circles.

Any progress on the Rohonc Codex?

See 'Language on the Fringe' in the *Skeptical Intelligencer*, 2020 (3) on the intriguing case of the Rohonc Codex, sometimes compared with the much better-known Voynich Manuscript: yet another controversy linked with Hungary and its somewhat mysterious national language. The RC was apparently discovered in Hungary in early C19; it is of unknown date.

It might be better for a committee of experts in comparative philology and all the main relevant languages to work on such problems together. ...

In a recent book (*note 4*) Benedek Láng discusses a range of earlier views regarding the Codex (which he has apparently spent many years surveying). As is not uncommon, he presents his work as going at least a long way towards a solution/decipherment. But reviewers have observed that he does not actually get much further than the earlier authors whom he cites. This again is not uncommon. The more specific (not to say controversial) a given claim, the weaker the evidence often seems to be. It might be better for a committee of experts in comparative philology and all the main relevant languages to work on such problems together (with open minds, but rigorously).

Any progress on non-human languages and 'languages'?

See 'Language on the Fringe' in the previous issue on the notion that some non-human species (maybe even including some plants) may have communication systems analogous to human language (contrary to established thought on these issues). Many readers will have seen how *Mimosa pudica* folds its leaves when they are touched. But it has now been shown that

if one puts *Mimosa pudica* (a fast-moving plant, thus easy to experiment on) into a sealed chamber with a dose of anaesthetic (not necessarily a specific anaesthetic), it will eventually stop doing this, as though it has been rendered unconscious. And when this happens, the waves of electrical activity that usually spread through the plant's tissues are themselves suppressed. So: does this mean that such plants exist in a state of awareness that is suppressed by anaesthetics? And could this state be considered a kind of sentience, involving (perhaps) a subjective internal experience, i.e., a manifestation of 'low-level' consciousness? If so, our understanding of consciousness and our attitudes towards plants could require modification. (But there is – so far – no suggestion here of quasi-linguistic ability on the part of plants.)

Ideas of this kind have been in circulation for a long time. For example, the maverick American scientist Thomas G. Gentry (1843-1905) (who also dabbled in historical linguistics and other subjects) published a book entitled *Intelligence in Plants and Animals* (1900) (previously *Life and Immortality: Or, Souls in Plants and Animals* [1897]). See also a reference to a more recent (fringe) work on plant 'language' in my piece 'Redundant Theories' in this issue.

Waking from the Paleolithic Trance of Language?

On 12/6/21, Heron Stone presented a paper with the above title to the Melbourne Agnostics group which I attend. Stone expressed highly dogmatic views on various relevant topics; for example, he proclaims that anyone who is convinced of the truth of atheism is 'dumb'. (He may be thinking, as believers often do, of those atheists who support their conclusion on quasi-scientific rather than philosophical grounds; but surely even these thinkers may not qualify as 'dumb'!) Stone endorses a theological and directional account of evolution involving little graduality and instead punctuated equilibrium, species in niches, sudden

shifts, etc. Specifically, he proposes that religion, once developed, frees people from the 'language trance', which he believes (with little hard evidence) came about during the Palaeolithic and induces false ideas about the world; religious belief thus leads to enlightenment, and at least some religiously-inclined humans are able to move on to a better state denied to unbelievers. Like various other critics of language (some of whom I discuss in my 2013 book *Strange Linguistics*), Stone holds that **all** current manifestations of language involve illegitimate abstract notions which conflict with what he regards as valid ontologies, and therefore lead to confusion and block intellectual and spiritual progress. Language must be radically modified or even replaced by other symbolic systems.

It would require a much longer discussion than this to grapple fully with Stone's ideas. And the effort involved might not be judged worthwhile, except perhaps by philosophically-focused linguists with great amounts of patience! It seems unlikely that ideas of this kind will come to be taken seriously in mainstream philosophy or linguistics. And actually modifying linguistic behaviour and associated thought so very radically might be seen as altogether infeasible. Stone is apparently trying to achieve this with his own offspring but even this might not get very far if the offspring are also moving in 'normal' circles. Nevertheless, the ideas of Stone and similar thinkers are not without interest.

Notes

1. <https://linguistlist.org/issues/2/2-457/#2>
2. <https://www.animal-crossing.com/new-horizons/>
3. <https://tinyurl.com/y6tsu63w>
4. *The Rohonc Code: Tracing a Historical Riddle* (Benedek Láng) (translated by Benedek Láng, Teodóra Király, and Nick Palmer) (Penn State University Press) (2022).

CONTRIBUTED ARTICLES

REDUNDANT THEORIES: OCKHAM STRIKES AGAIN

Mark Newbrook

A number of theoretical proposals made over the last few decades (and some from earlier) involve the postulation of entire systematic theories or layers of analysis which have not previously been considered necessary or even envisaged (at least in ‘the West’). Some of the proposals of this kind which are in question here have been advanced by (relatively astute) amateur authors and are not familiar to most of the relevant mainstream-professionals. Others circulate in the relevant mainstream-professional domains but are regarded by some other scholars in the domains in question as unnecessary or as too ‘costly’ (in respect of extra complexity) to be warranted by such extra explanatory power as they may have. This reflects principles such as Ockham’s Razor or, at a more general level, Bertrand Russell’s maxim that one should not believe in the truth of statements which are not supported by any good evidence or argumentation. Some examples known to me follow; some of these involve my own discipline of linguistics. Readers may know of others.

Universal Consciousness

Some thinkers proclaim that the entire universe and all the entities within it (plants, stars, rocks, perhaps even abstract entities such as numbers) are conscious, to varying degrees and in varying ways. For example, the Australian author Nicholas Coleman endorses this standpoint, rehearsed most succinctly in his online talk ‘From Finite Mind to Cosmic Consciousness’ where he embeds in this view an account of what he sees as the broadening of his own consciousness and its increasing merger with that of the universe. He exemplifies with his belief that weeds are conscious enough (a) to resent being pulled up and (b) to understand that this action may

nevertheless serve a greater good, and that people such as him can become aware of this.

Similar ideas about consciousness are presented by Roza & Margarita Riaikkenen in their book *Creator and Creators* (previously reviewed by me in this forum), and by many others. Such authors often locate consciousness at ‘quantum levels of reality’, although it is not always clear that what they mean by this is what the bolder physicists who entertain such notions might mean.

There does not seem to be much empirical evidence for the theory of universal consciousness.

There does not seem to be much empirical evidence for the theory of universal consciousness, nor are there any very persuasive philosophical considerations indicating that it **needs** to be invoked as a means of explaining any features of the universe. The specific so-called evidence for consciousness (etc.) outside the animal kingdom is very largely ‘fringe’ in nature; see for instance Peter Tompkins & Christopher Bird’s 1974 book *The Secret Life of Plants*. It is not even agreed among zoologists that invertebrates are conscious. On the other hand, some more recent research has suggested that even plants – though not objects deemed inanimate – really might have low-level consciousness. The matter is contentious.

In many cases the motivation for the more extreme views along these lines appears to be largely religious (Asian religions) or spiritual in nature. Indeed, it is not easy to see how universal consciousness could be explicated in terms other than these. There appears to be no **physical** basis for thought of **any**

kind other than in animals. But, as I will go on to observe, it is by no means clear that the realms in question are themselves real.

The Spirit World, Esoteric Astrology, etc.

Many people from various religious or spiritual backgrounds assume the existence of a huge, vastly complex ‘Spirit World’ containing the disembodied spirits of the departed, non-corporeal spirit entities which were never physically incarnate, occult forces and effects, etc. This notion is so widely promulgated that writers of fiction, song lyrics etc. can assume awareness of such beliefs, if not actual acceptance.

In a similar way, astrologers posit a large, complex metaphysical system which involves the determination of future events or at least of the tendencies of individuals by occult effects involving heavenly bodies. Again, the gist of this world-view is very familiar to most people, whether or not they take astrology seriously as opposed to merely enjoying the ‘sun sign’ horoscopes which circulate in the popular media (*note 1*).

The more specific doctrine of esoteric astrology, whose leading early guru was Alice Bailey, is ‘the study of astrology from the Soul’s point of view’, aimed at developing understanding of what human souls are attempting to accomplish. Of course, such a program assumes the very reality of the human soul, which many thinkers deny and which might not necessarily be required for more orthodox astrology to be valid. Esoteric astrology is in fact part of a more general esoteric viewpoint, often importing the view that underlying the physical body there exists an ‘etheric’ body, which might be called the ‘soul’ and which is more central to human existence than is the

physical body. In some versions there is an entire series of ‘subtle’ bodies. These entities transmit the energy forces of the various subjective aspects of human nature, and enable life and consciousness.

Each individual etheric body is supposedly part of the subsuming etheric body of the whole of humanity, which is in turn part of the planetary etheric body, and so on up to the largest astronomical systems. There is a constant circulation of energies and forces around this enormous, complex web; it is this which is to be explicated by esoteric-astrological and other such theories.

Accounts of this kind typically incorporate universal consciousness and/or reincarnation through a sequence of lives for each individual, adding further to their already vast complexity. Their proponents also tend to believe that each human being exists ‘for a purpose’.

As with mainstream astrology, the existence of this enormous system is often simply assumed. I attended an online presentation based on one of a series of videos produced by Australian ‘esotericist’ guru Philip Lindsay, which proceeded on the basis that all this is simply fact, with no admission that it would be disputed by many philosophers and almost all scientists. The tone was didactic (‘You need to become informed about these metaphysical truths’). Some of the audience – who admittedly were already inclined to such beliefs (they were Theosophists and such) – apparently swallowed the content whole (unless they were only pretending to do so in order to please the local presenter, whom they knew; but I doubt this). But – in the absence of startling novel evidence or argumentation – mainstream philosophy and empirical science for their part can readily proceed on the assumption that this stupendously ‘costly’ metaphysical apparatus simply does **not** exist.

Metaethical frameworks

I attend various presentations on ethical and metaethical issues. Many of my

fellow-attenders concern themselves in chat with the alleged need for all individuals to locate their specific ethical judgements and decisions (casuistry) within justificatory frameworks. If there is no source which a given individual trusts that offers a framework which that individual can accept, they should (‘need to’) develop their own.

Many people believe in a creator god whose identifiable pronouncements on ethical issues they regard as de facto valid and binding.

For some, of course, there **is** a framework which can readily be accepted. Many people believe in a creator god whose identifiable pronouncements on ethical issues they regard as *de facto* valid and binding (often, even where they appear inconsistent). (People like me hold that such pronouncements **could not** create ethical truths, but this is irrelevant in context. Also irrelevant here are objections to frameworks of the further kinds mentioned below.) Others believe in the objective reality of metaphysical systems such as karma, which automatically classify human actions as morally good or bad (and generate consequences); trusted authoritative sources set out the principles in question. Still others accept humanist frameworks such as the various types of utilitarianism, which ideally provide calculi for determining the ethical statuses of alternative choices.

Some people who accept metaethical frameworks of this kind find it strange that some others feel no need for such a framework. I myself have been treated as naïve for not recognising such a need. But it can be held that thoughtful people of all religious persuasions and none have a largely consistent intuitive grasp of right and wrong, whether or not they find themselves able to accept any objectivist theory of metaethics (if indeed they are aware of such things).

(Naturally there remain specific points involving serious disagreement.) If those who take this view do seek to generalise across these judgements, the generalisations are usually very simple, not amounting to a ‘framework’. One such is the ‘Pagan Moral Principle’: as long as you do no harm to others [or to the world], do as you wish. This principle does not help one to choose which of two mutually-exclusive permitted (good or neutral) acts to perform, or to choose ‘the lesser of two evils’ in cases where **some** harm must be done or allowed to occur (as in the ‘Trolley Problem’); but not everyone **expects** to arrive at a system which will altogether obviate the need for careful *ad hoc* casuistry, and I suggest that the PMP works well as far as it goes. And if this viewpoint, or some other briefly-expressed viewpoint, is at least arguable, there **may** be no conceptual need for metaethical frameworks of higher degrees of complexity, whether or not any specific framework might actually hold up. An individual’s **felt** need for such a framework may be no more than that.

Ortholexics

When I was a member of Victorian Skeptics (1991-2003) and active in the relevant fora, I encountered various novel proposals for previously unpursued branches of linguistics and associated aspects of other disciplines. One (unpublished) contributor to these fora was a (moderate) ‘prescriptivist’ thinker on language who proposed a new branch of linguistics to be called ‘Ortholexics’; this would exist over and above empirical lexicography and would specify the ‘true’ meanings of words, which should be adopted.

But (as is common where prescriptivism is in question) the meanings which this contributor identified as ‘true’ were often in fact merely the **older** meanings of the words, sometimes now obsolete. In other cases they were meanings which were seen by this thinker as preferable for other reasons, good (clearer, less ambiguous, etc.) or bad (those meanings which, by way of historical

chance, apply in contemporary standard varieties).

This person and his supporters were disappointed, and indeed a little cross, when I raised the standard descriptivist objections to his proposal – even though I cheerfully granted that languages used as widely as English is used do need standard varieties displaying only minor variations of form or meaning, and that responsible linguists can properly assist with this (as many Melbourne-based linguists, including me, frequently did, notably at a then regular conference called The Style Council). I was even accused (quite unreasonably) of ‘muddying the waters’ when I acknowledged that there **is** an especially clear case for a degree of rational and sensitively-expressed prescriptivism a) in technical domains, where precise, unambiguous usage is required, and b) in teaching foreign learners (who not unreasonably want to be told how to say things). But these are special cases/situations. And in any case it is notoriously difficult to control native speakers’ usage, especially in speech. (As far as writing is concerned, a heavy editorial hand can achieve this in the context of publishing, especially in technical domains. But self-publishing is now much easier than in the past, and permits individual choice in respect of usage.)

Ontolexics

A more recent (again so far unpublished) contributor to online discussion of language matters proposes an entire new branch of linguistics (overlapping with neighbouring disciplines) to be called ‘Ontolexics’. Ontolexics concerns itself mainly with those aspects of linguistic meaning which are most intractable: terms referring to emotional experiences, to ‘phenomenological’ entities of philosophical or psychological interest, and most of all to mystical experiences. The idea is that the sharing of such concepts is so difficult as to require an entire theoretical framework, perhaps to be seen as intermediate between the strictly linguistic (grammatical & semantic) and the semantic/logical,

which would be ‘powerful’ enough to resolve communication issues. This will often involve the principled elimination of variation in usage (word-choice and word-meaning) by working towards fully agreed definitions of terms.

Some philosophers have found problems associated with the question of how language can exist at all.

Now of course the nature of language as a whole is not wholly unproblematic in a philosophical sense. Some philosophers have found problems associated with the question of how language can exist at all. But given that it does exist there seem to be no overwhelming **linguistic** problems with the shared (or partly shared) understanding and use of words, even those referring to entities of difficult types such as are listed above. Even radical non-mainstream proposals straddling linguistics and philosophy, such as those advanced by John Trotter, are not directed specifically at concepts of these types. And the relevant philosophical issues regarding ontology generally do not involve linguistics – except by way of dissolving occasional confusion arising from arguably less-than-optimal conventions of linguistic form. Issues on the ontological front involve the relative ‘awkwardness’ of types of **concept** or **entity**, and there is already a considerable philosophical literature in this area.

It is true that the empirical evidence (of any type) for a given linguistic meaning is typically not as clear-cut or as ‘objective’ as the evidence for the grammatical or phonological analysis of the word (etc.) in question (although these too **may** be in question, either individually or as examples of theoretical disagreements or issues of analysis). But linguists would not agree that linguistics can properly concern itself **only** with these more strictly ‘objective’ aspects of words. Examination of linguistic meaning, though often more difficult than

examination of grammar etc, is a legitimate part of the discipline. Behaviour, self-reports etc. are often invoked here, despite the associated issues (e.g. it sometimes appears that a self-report is mistaken). And even if linguistics, in some such respects, really cannot be a full science (only science-like), it is certainly not conceived as a ‘phenomenological’ or metaphysical discipline, as is suggested in Ontolexics. If we linguists really thought it was like that, most of us would give up on it, or at least on its semantic side, as failing to be the kind of subject we want. But we are not currently persuaded that we need to do this.

Certain subjects, including some of a metaphysical or mystical nature, do especially require evocative or metaphorical language, which is a focus of Ontolexics. But such language is also very common (more common than is often realised) more generally. And in association with scholars in the other relevant domains linguists have not been deterred from analysing such usage.

In addition, individual language-users and groups of language-users may have different ‘personal’ (or even idiosyncratic) meanings for words in the same language (relating to each speaker or writer’s ‘phenomenological experience’, etc.), or may use the same word with a range of different (usually related) meanings (in private thought or in attempted communication). But all this is simply a perfectly legitimate function of the nature of linguistic meaning. Relative awkwardness or complexity in the analysis of such phenomena, and in generalising across communities of language users with a range of divergent usage or understanding, does not equate to failure on the part of the discipline. And all parties in a given interaction can usually ‘negotiate meaning’ at least to the point of useful compromise.

Furthermore, interpersonal variation and variation within the usage of individuals apply also to grammar, phonology etc. – not only to semantics.

As semantic complexity and variability increase there is indeed a need for more attention to the question of mutual understanding (what Ontolexics refers to as ‘increasingly constrained and nested shared language modes’). But, again, it is not clear that there is any philosophical (or linguistic) complexity here beyond what is already familiar.

Neither will linguists accept that (intended) meanings must always reflect the currently most popular personal definition of a term, in a given particular demographic (if indeed demographics can be firmly delineated). This would be unrealistic. Synchronic diversity, variously motivated, is normal. In this context, linguists will not recognise Ontolexics’ identification of ‘the difficulty and/or disinterest [‘lack of interest’?] of linguistics’ in respect of lexicography.

To summarise, Ontolexics is invoked to address some supposed problems which a linguist might consider are mostly not real, are mostly not important where they **are** real, and are already dealt with adequately within current linguistic theories (or within philosophy) where they **are** important. Overall, linguists will not currently be persuaded that there is a need for a separate large sub-discipline of this kind.

Mentalese

As is agreed by philosophers of language of all persuasions, thought and language are not the very same thing, whatever the relationship between them may be. We need to specify the nature of this relationship. One approach to this large task involves the specific Chomskyan concept of ‘Mentalese’, which (like many Chomskyan proposals) relates to a computational image of the human mind.

Mentalese would be a hugely complex inherited mental framework, a ‘language of thought’, species-specific and uniform across the species, fully-fledged in structural terms and encompassing the ability to draw inferences and such, but (inevitably) devoid of specific meanings and lacking

any language-specific distinctions in itself – while **allowing** for all such distinctions, and for all the ambiguities and subtleties of grammatical and word-level meaning which arise or might arise in any language. Chomskyans have argued that without such a framework one could not learn one’s real first language, because a multi-generational infinite regress of learning experiences would then inevitably be involved.

In order to justify itself, the theory of Mentalese needs to demonstrate counter-balancing gains.

Some of the arguments on these issues are philosophical rather than linguistic in character, and indeed one key figure in the historical development of this argument is John Searle, whose own work straddles the boundary between these disciplines. But the core of the argument involves the fantastic breadth, depth and complexity of an abstract linguistic system such as Mentalese. In order to justify itself, the theory of Mentalese needs to demonstrate counter-balancing **gains**. But it is far from clear that it really is needed in order to account for first-language-acquisition or for other aspects/features of human language. And in some relevant cases the analyses used in argumentation are specifically Chomskyan; linguists of other persuasions propose different analyses which do not have the imputed consequences. Leading critics of Noam Chomsky such as Peter Matthews, Geoffrey Sampson and Vyvyan Evans find the notion of Mentalese unhelpful, *prima facie* implausible and indeed contrary to what we (now) know of how we learn languages and interact with the world.

A related but farther-reaching issue in linguistics – discussed in Chapter 12 of my 2013 book *Strange Linguistics* (Lincom-Europa), and in some of my earlier pieces in this forum – involves the Chomskyan notion of Universal

Grammar (abstract and cross-linguistic), which many non-Chomskyans regard as poorly supported and indeed as redundant.

Chomskyan systematic phonemics

I conclude with a more technical proposal of this kind, also from within my own discipline of linguistics: the Chomskyan theory (if so it be) of systematic phonemics. (Phonemics involves language-specific sound-systems at more abstract levels than ‘surface’ phonetics. It has been clear since C19 that **some** version of phonemics is required, in addition to phonetics, if linguistic sounds are to be insightfully analysed.)

The key early book-length work advancing this proposal was Noam Chomsky and Morris Halle’s *The Sound Pattern of English* (New York, 1968). The two authors were among the most prominent linguists of the day; Chomsky had also achieved prominence in the world of New Left political theory. The book was taken very seriously by the linguistic world as a whole when it appeared, and, while now dated in many respects, it is still regarded as a ‘classic’.

However, in his 1971 paper ‘The Problem of Nonsense Linguistics’ (*Acta Societas Linguisticae Upsaliensis*, II/4 (1971), pp. 99-109), Göran Hammarström argued that in fact the thinking set out in this work is little if any less ludicrous than that rehearsed in various fringe linguistic papers written by rank amateurs which he also discussed. He characterised much of the theory developed in the book as highly abstract, counter-intuitive and seriously under-demonstrated. On the basis of unpersuasive argumentation grounded in limited and doubtfully analysed data, a vast system of abstract ‘underlying representations’ for the spoken forms of English words is established. These representations are often appreciably closer to current English spellings (which are notoriously complex in origin) than are standard non-Chomskyan ‘shallow’ (less abstract) phonemic representations derived

algorithmically from the phonetics and often referred to as ‘taxonomic phonemics’. (This is associated with a Chomskyan claim to the effect that taxonomic-phonemic spelling is psychologically disfavoured.)

In associated works, theoretical findings based on these ideas are applied to other languages and indeed are treated (as is normal in this tradition) as of universal application if valid.

Even if Hammarström’s criticism should be deemed overstated, it can still be argued that these Chomskyan analyses have **not** in fact been shown to be valid in linguistic terms and are not theoretically necessary, either for English or cross-linguistically. Linguistically naïve native speakers do not behave as if unconsciously aware of them, despite typically being much more aware of spellings than of

taxonomic phonemes (of which they are in most cases aware only unconsciously). Non-Chomskyan linguists have found it quite possible to analyse the phonology of languages (and their various accents) relying upon orthodox taxonomic phonemic representations (plus the relevant pre-theoretical phonetic representations at useful levels of precision). There is no real need to posit this huge additional level of analysis (even if it is seen as altogether **replacing** the simpler taxonomic phonemic analyses rather than being added ‘on top of them’). The Chomskyan analyses have, it seems, been highly respected in large part simply because of the prestige and perceived authority of authors such as Chomsky and Halle.

In Chapter 12 of my book I include this as one of a number of specific

aspects of mainstream linguistics which invite skeptical scrutiny.

Note

1. I once met an astrologer – a mature undergraduate student – who was amazed to learn that most scientists had no time for astrology (as indeed are some other practitioners and believers who respond to questionnaire surveys or are challenged in conversation). When I asked her to defend the validity of astrology, she said ‘Of course it’s valid, it’s plain fact; you only have to compare people’s behaviour with their horoscopes! Who could doubt it?’ But she did acknowledge uncertainty in respect of the astrological significance of recently discovered trans-neptunian minor planets!

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: ‘Evidence Week is back at the UK Parliament for its fifth year, 14 to 18 November 2022! Please save the date, as we would love you to join us at Westminster (online or in person) to ask your MP to scrutinise the evidence behind the policies that matter most to you. More details coming soon! Evidence Week brings together parliamentarians, scientists, and the public to discuss how evidence is used to make policy decisions, where researchers from all sectors will be presenting their latest findings on topical issues to MPs. Last year,

Evidence week partners had over 150 direct meetings with parliamentarians, showing a clear appetite in Westminster for expert research.’

<https://tinyurl.com/y423cufz>

And: ‘We’re looking for short-term volunteers to support us in bringing together another successful Evidence Week and other activities later this year. Roles include contacting MPs and general assistance in the run up to the event. If you are interested and available to help between 17 October and 18 November, please fill in our volunteer form and we will get back to you.’

<https://senseaboutscience.org/volunteer-with-us/>

Good Thinking

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

<http://goodthinkingsociety.org/>

Misinformation, pseudoscience, etc.

‘The change from printed and televised news towards the digital world has caused a radical adjustment in the traditional media industry, challenging media companies’ business models and forcing them to innovate. Since many struggle to reach the same audiences and revenues as they got before the Internet, they may be tempted to pursue different strategies to achieve online virality. However, these strategies are sometimes similar to those followed by misinformation sources, which may have unintended societal consequences beyond the financial performance of individual media organizations.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/4sh3m997>

And: ‘Grape fasts, horse dewormer, bleach supplements — what can we do about health hoaxes online?’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/25yjzs5a>

Also: ‘Study aims to ascertain how COVID-19 and vitamin D misinformation was presented on YouTube.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/4687feuz>

However: ‘People Are Smart Enough To See Through Misinformation: The average person is less gullible than you think.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/3b562bb5>

Even so: ‘The relentless and often unpredictable coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) has, among its many quirky terrors, dredged up once again the issue that will not die: science versus pseudoscience. The scientists, experts who would be the first to admit they are not infallible, are now in danger of being drowned out by the growing chorus of pseudoscientists, conspiracy theorists, and just plain troublemakers that seem to be as symptomatic of the virus as fever and weakness. How is the average citizen to filter this cacophony of information and misinformation posing as science alongside real science? While all that noise makes it difficult to separate the real stuff from the fakes, there is at least one positive aspect to it all.’

<https://tinyurl.com/5e4zuz8b>

And from the US: ‘Misinformation is eroding the public’s confidence in democracy. ... One of the drivers of decreased confidence in the political system has been the explosion of misinformation deliberately aimed at disrupting the democratic process. This confuses and overwhelms voters.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/3cwpe4dr>

Likewise: ‘Hitting the Books: Modern social media has made misinformation so, so much worse’. Book review at:

<https://tinyurl.com/yybrfd52>

But: ‘Psychological inoculation can reduce susceptibility to misinformation in large rational agent networks.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/2p95jexw>

Meanwhile: ‘The BMJ will no longer report on press releases that we judge have omitted supporting documentation that is fundamental to the story, such as a detailed research summary that allows proper scrutiny of claims for a new drug breakthrough or a working paper that is

the basis for a new government strategy. If we ever do so we will make it clear that only the press release was available to us and why we still decided to publish. We hope others will follow. The first test of our new policy may be imminent now that the World Health Organization has declared monkeypox a public health emergency of international concern.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/23d56jkh>

Skepticism for children

‘In the tradition of other classic cautionary tales such as “The Tiger Who Came To Tea”, and “Not Now Bernard”, “There’s No Such Thing As The Tooth Fairy!” (by Harriet Hall) is a sweetly engaging, funny and relatable story about sibling rivalry which also serves as a warning about how difficult it can be to change one’s beliefs, even when faced with evidence to the contrary. No matter what she says or what proof she has Henry is convinced he is right, so will anything that Harriet says change her little brother’s mind?’

<https://tinyurl.com/46ymc76t>

Unreliable and fraudulent research

Also: ‘A neuroscience image sleuth finds signs of fabrication in scores of Alzheimer’s articles, threatening a reigning theory of the disease. ... The immediate, obvious damage is wasted NIH funding and wasted thinking in the field because people are using these results as a starting point for their own experiments.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/bdh4kkkt>

And: ‘We are warned by scientists and the media to avoid misinformation. Yet, some of the purveyors of that misinformation are scientists and the media. It is well-known within academia that “there is no [study] that is so dreadful that it cannot be published somewhere.” A recent one claiming that vitamin B6 can treat depression serves as a case in point. As a society, we either hold everybody to the same epistemic standard of scientific accuracy, or we accept that “trusted sources” themselves can peddle misinformation and continue to get away with (and profit from) it.’

<https://tinyurl.com/5xkata2d>

Moreover: ‘Retraction Watch has witnessed a retraction boom since its founding 12 years ago. But the scientific community must do much more.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/2ay6psnp>

And: ‘What happened when we tried to get a paper claiming ‘billions of lives are potentially at risk’ from COVID-19 vaccines retracted.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/3xb6w6fh>

Also: ‘Retracted papers are used in clinical guidelines – how worried should we be?’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/bdh4kkkt>

Meanwhile: From whistle-blower Dr Peter Wilmshurst: ‘Failure to retract fraudulent research: an open letter to the Principal of University College London’. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/5n6xmxuw>

Science and the media

‘Social media and new tools for engagement offer democratic platforms for enhancing constructive scientific criticism which had previously been limited. Constructive criticism can now be massive, timely and open. However, new options have also enhanced obsessive criticism. Obsessive criticism tends to focus on one or a handful of individuals and their work, often includes ad hominem aspects, and the critics often lack field-specific skills and technical expertise.’

<https://tinyurl.com/yc5zrmhx>

Fact-checking website

‘Logically’ is a substantial fact-checking organisation that ‘combines artificial intelligence with expert analysts to tackle harmful and manipulative content at speed and scale. We work to reduce the individual, institutional, and societal damage caused by misleading and deceptive online discourse.’

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

Organic farming

‘Did Sri Lanka’s ban on synthetic fertilizers plant the seed for the country’s current economic crisis?’

<https://tinyurl.com/mp9vbj5z>

MEDICINE

Website of interest

‘**ConscienHealth** works with experts and organizations to advance sound approaches to health and obesity, the biggest threat to the health of America in this century. We advocate for evidence-based prevention and treatment.’

<https://conscienhealth.org/>

Big Pharma

‘For decades, the drug industry has yelled bloody murder each time Congress considered a regulatory measure that threatened its profits. But the hyperbole reached a new pitch in recent weeks as the Senate moved to adopt modest drug pricing negotiation measures in the Inflation Reduction Act.’

<https://tinyurl.com/3xp55r4s>

Medication for PTSD

‘No evidence that medication can prevent PTSD in people exposed to trauma, according to new Cochrane review.’

<https://tinyurl.com/ypr77493>

Diet and exercise

‘A new study finds that exercising to make up for eating poorly doesn’t really work in terms of lowering mortality risks. Similarly, eating well but remaining inactive may help lower your risk of dying from certain cancers to a degree, but does nothing for all-cause or cardiovascular disease mortality, the researchers found. Researchers also observed that those who exercised the most and consumed the healthiest food significantly reduced their risk of dying from all causes, from cardiovascular disease, or from certain cancers.’

<https://tinyurl.com/2s4a53hd>

Original study at:

<https://tinyurl.com/2p8u7j3c>

Traditional Chinese Medicine

‘Chinese are stealing donkeys from Africa to make ‘special glue.’ Also see *Skeptical Intelligencer* (2019 [4]) and 2022 [2]).

<https://tinyurl.com/5esev3a4>

Collagen and skin aging

‘Some celebrities whose skin seems to age at an unusually slow pace have sworn by collagen supplements. But what does collagen do to the skin? And can supplements really slow down skin aging?’

<https://tinyurl.com/2hfmydp3>

Health guidelines

‘“You oughta wanna do better.” That sums up the feelings evoked by a disturbing number of guidelines for health and wellness. This feeling comes when the guidelines conflict jarringly with the lived reality of many or most people. When guidelines become a prompt for finger wagging, they won’t move the needle on population health in the right direction.’

<https://tinyurl.com/3sk558ed>

Autism

‘The lawyer for a Fraser Valley naturopath facing investigation for his business selling fecal microbiota transplants to families of autistic children argued in a B.C. courtroom Tuesday that naturopaths are “not bound by science”. Naturopath Jason Klop was in B.C. Supreme Court petitioning for a judge to order the College of Naturopathic Physicians to end its investigations into his business and lift his ban on manufacturing, advertising and selling pills and enemas made from human feces.’

<https://tinyurl.com/4x8zfuzk>

GM foods

‘No evidence has ever been found proving that GMOs harm human health. In fact, every major scientific organization, including the National Academy of Sciences and the World Health Organization, has attested to the safety of this plant breeding technology.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/5xzsh4mh>

And: ‘Why People Oppose GMOs Even Though Science Says They Are Safe.’

<https://tinyurl.com/29jdf2a8>

Cannabidiol products

‘Study shows widespread mislabeling of CBD content occurs for over-the-counter products.’

<https://tinyurl.com/3ycf72fc>

Gwyneth Paltrow

‘Gwyneth Paltrow’s latest profile reveals the wellness industry’s utter quackery. It’s not surprising to see Goop’s anti-science, anti-fact garbage exposed for what it is – and all the signs were there for Elle Macpherson’s hook-up with discredited doctor Andrew Wakefield, too.’

<https://tinyurl.com/3xu67zve>

‘Miracle’ Cure

‘Leader of “Genesis II Church of Health and Healing,” Who Sold Toxic Bleach as Fake “Miracle” Cure for Covid-19 and Other Serious Diseases, Extradited from Colombia to the United States.’

<https://tinyurl.com/2p9fw5xk>

London Medical School

‘A website for the Centre for Medical Sciences and Research, www.cfmsr.org.uk, appearing in April 2022, featured text stating, “London Medical School” and “London’s leading clinical skills and aesthetic medicine training provider”. Wandsworth Trading Standards challenged whether the use of the term “Medical School” was misleading because it implied it was a provider of education for medical practices, specifically Primary Medical Qualifications. The ASA challenged whether “London’s leading clinical skills and aesthetic medicine training provider” was misleading and could be substantiated.’ See the Advertising Standards Authority ruling at:

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

Supplements

‘Only one-quarter of people who take vitamins would stop taking them if advised to do so by public health. While it is understandable to want to take your health in hand, there are better, cheaper things you can do. Quit smoking, exercise regularly, eat plenty of fruits of vegetables, avoid junk food, and you will drastically reduce your risk of both cancer and heart disease. Simply take vitamins, and you will not.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/yc3jx98z>

And: ‘A major analysis of 87 randomized controlled trials of vitamin supplements, the most comprehensive

such undertaking ever, carried out by the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force, concluded that there is insufficient evidence to indicate that vitamin supplements offer protection against cancer or cardiovascular disease. In simple terms, supplements make for expensive pee.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/2p9zympe>

Also: ‘A considerable proportion of products remain available for purchase after issuance of U.S. Food and Drug Administration warning letters targeting specific supplement products.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/bdfjzkpz>

Meanwhile: In a recent trial, ‘Vitamin D₃ supplementation did not result in a significantly lower risk of fractures than placebo among generally healthy midlife and older adults who were not selected for vitamin D deficiency, low bone mass, or osteoporosis.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/e2ee5j4b>

And: ‘Doctors have warned that people may not realise that vitamins can have toxic effects at high quantities.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/2erkk9pd>

And not only that: ‘Are select dietary supplement products advertised and sold to support or boost the immune system accurately labeled according to the Supplement Facts listed ingredients on product labels? This case series study analyzed 30 dietary supplement products purchased from Amazon.com with claims related to immune health. Seventeen of 30 products had inaccurate labels; 13 were misbranded, and 9 had additional components detected but not claimed on the label.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/4pks9xp3>

Meanwhile: ‘The amount of cyanide in B12 supplements isn’t a cause for concern. The real concern is misleading pseudoexperts.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/27p9t256>

Structured water

From Australia: ‘Nine newspapers breach reporting guidelines by failing to disclose a conflict of interest over a story promoting “structured water”.’ (Advocates of structured water claim

that it is like water that hasn’t been polluted or contaminated by human processes and is therefore healthier than tap or filtered water.)

<https://tinyurl.com/yheuyrvh>

Olive oil shots

Can Olive Oil Shots Really Improve Your Skin and Reduce Bloating? ‘Yes, olive oil is awesome for your health. No, you don’t have to drink it.’

<https://tinyurl.com/3vrwa9tn>

<https://tinyurl.com/e2ee5j4b>

StellaLife Oral Recovery

‘There is no published scientific evidence or logical reason to believe that the homeopathic ingredients in StellaLife’s Oral Recovery kit produce any medicinal benefit, “promote oral health,” or “promote a lifetime of good health or well-being.” It’s possible that the kit’s non-homeopathic ingredients provide a rinsing or covering action that can lessen post-surgical discomfort. Even if this were so, it would not justify paying \$89.70 for any such product.’

<https://tinyurl.com/529b9svd>

Placebo quackery

‘For several decades now, many scientists, including me, have been working hard to reveal the full power and scope of the placebo effect – the amazing ability of a simple sugar pill or other non-pharmaceutical “fake intervention” to improve someone’s quality of life. This research has been crucial to giving scientific credibility to a powerful psychological effect. But the advances of science have also backfired, spawning an alternative industry that preys on the vulnerable.’

<https://tinyurl.com/2y59yxr4>

Breakfast cereals

‘Cheerios, Honey Nut, Frosted Flakes; Which one to choose?: The nutritional value of your favourite cereals might make you say “Cheerio”. ... Let’s face it, these products aren’t popular because of their health benefits, they are popular for their taste. If you really cared about nutritional value, you’d be eating porridge with berries instead.’

<https://tinyurl.com/2p8vdubm>

Health foods

‘The Goop-ification that marked the last decade of consumerism (as exemplified by Gwyneth Paltrow’s feel-good nostrums) shows increasing signs of decay as shoppers, especially Gen Z, exhibit a more critical eye.’

<https://tinyurl.com/2tj77hnd>

Time-restricted feeding

“Time-restricted feeding could be key to combat obesity,” says the headline. The press release from the University of California at San Diego is a little more restrained, though. “A rhythmic small intestinal microbiome prevents obesity and type 2 diabetes,” it says. Then finally we get down to reality in the paper. There we find that there’s no combatting of obesity, no prevention of type 2 diabetes in this study. Instead, it’s a study of how diet and feeding patterns affect the microbiome in a portion the small intestines of mice. It’s a fine study that also provides a case study of unrestrained puffery about time-restricted feeding.’

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

Quackery for eye problems

‘Being in the business of separating sense from nonsense for several decades, I have across many contemptible scams. One of the most outrageous ones entices people to fork out money for a nutritional supplement that claims to induce stem cells in their body to turn into cells that will cure all, yes ALL, vision problems. I learned about this purported miracle through an interminable video in which David Lewis, identified as a “former eye specialist,” spews out a host of claims about curing every possible eye problem. You can discard your glasses and forget about LASIK surgery! Macular degeneration, cataracts, glaucoma or retinitis pigmentosa? No problem! All can be cured!’

<https://tinyurl.com/m33khvt6>

Beauty products

‘If you buy beauty products, you’ve likely seen cleansers, lotions and creams marketed as “clean,” a term that can mean natural, chemical-free, organic, non-toxic and also: nothing.’

"It's a marketing phrase that implies more than it defines," said Timothy Caulfield, a Canada Research Chair in health law and policy and professor in the school of law and public health at the University of Alberta. "What they're really selling is an idea. They're selling sort of a gestalt. They're selling a vibe. They're not selling reality."

<https://tinyurl.com/z7brbjpk>

Smoking cessation

Why women should not put chewing tobacco in the vagina for smoking cessation. (*You cannot be serious—Ed.*)

<https://tinyurl.com/3h4bsdbv>

Cancer quackery

'For \$120,000, you too can have these colored static screens that supposedly cure cancer in your living room.'

<https://tinyurl.com/ynvjx95c>

Chiropractic

Chiropractor reveals three of the many lies that chiropractors tell you.

<https://tinyurl.com/y573nxbm>

PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHIATRY

Mental illness

'According to one analysis of English newspapers, the number of articles stigmatising mental illness roughly halved between 2008 and 2016, while those challenging that stigma roughly doubled over the same period. And that seems to be having a positive impact on day-to-day experiences of prejudice – people with mental illness now report markedly less discrimination from family, friends and colleagues compared to just a few years ago. Despite this progress, some myths about mental illnesses are still widely shared, including false claims about the efficacy of treatments. Here are six of the most prevalent beliefs, and the truth behind them. ...'

<https://tinyurl.com/2b5s52ua>

Screen time and children's wellbeing

'New research confirms the dangers of too much screen time for kids and teens: Those who play sports, take music lessons, or socialize with friends after

school are happier and healthier than children who are glued to a screen during these hours.'

<https://tinyurl.com/yckdzssh>

Video games

A recent study has found 'little to no evidence for a causal connection between game play and well-being'.

<https://tinyurl.com/44h6szy9>

Working memory training

'Training working memory for two years—No evidence of transfer to intelligence.'

<https://tinyurl.com/4aefk9w>

For discussion see:

<https://tinyurl.com/ye25z89t>

Abortion and mental health

'It's an unfounded message experts say is repeated again and again: Having an abortion may damage a woman's mental health, perhaps for years.'

<https://tinyurl.com/m84frj28>

Depression

'The main areas of serotonin research provide no consistent evidence of there being an association between serotonin and depression, and no support for the hypothesis that depression is caused by lowered serotonin activity or concentrations. Some evidence was consistent with the possibility that long-term antidepressant use reduces serotonin concentration.'

<https://tinyurl.com/bdh885ds>

And: 'Nearly half a million more adults in England are now taking antidepressants compared with the previous year, according to NHS figures. The number of prescriptions for children and teenagers has also risen. From 2021-22, there was a 5% rise in the number of adults receiving them – from 7.9 million in the previous 12 months to 8.3 million. It is the sixth year in a row that there has been an increase in both patients and prescriptions.'

<https://tinyurl.com/2p93d7m3>

Schizophrenia

'A growing number of psychiatrists maintain that, as a presumed disease entity, as an identifiable state, schizophrenia simply does not "exist."'

<https://tinyurl.com/4p29thy2>

False memories

'Memories people no longer believe in can still affect them in helpful and harmful ways.'

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

Psychopathy

Study 'casts a doubt on the widely acknowledged link between psychopathy and murder. The findings can be explained largely by the fact that homicide is a heterogeneous criminal offence; while it is possible that psychopathy and other dark traits may be linked to some types of homicide, this link cannot be established for homicide in general.'

<https://tinyurl.com/4cjf62e4>

CLIMATE CHANGE

Public perceptions

'Americans experience a false social reality by underestimating popular climate policy support by nearly half.'

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

RELIGION AND CULTS

Cults

'Sarah Edmondson has been asked why she joined NXIVM more times than she can count. But it wasn't until 2017, standing naked in the home of a friend as the women around her were branded with a cauterising iron, that Sarah really started asking herself that question too. How did she get here? Why did she join the North American self-help cult?'

<https://tinyurl.com/2j3twspz>

POLITICS AND SOCIAL POLICY

Bureaucracy

The three deceits of bureaucracy: 'An increasing concern for many of us working in universities though is that our institutions might be forgetting their primary mission—the reason for our existence. Instead, they are focusing on goals that did not even exist a quarter of a century ago. Previously, scholarship, research and teaching were the key objectives. They still apparently are if you spend a few minutes looking up mission statements for various universities. But in reality the focus of

many institutions has become corporate control.’

<https://tinyurl.com/ywfscv46>

Election fraud

From the US: ‘In what has essentially become an information war for the future of democracy, people driven by misinformation are acting on it to harass election workers and subvert the will of the voters. And election officials have struggled to find an effective message to fight back.’

<https://tinyurl.com/mp9vbj5z>

CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Alex Jones

‘As Alex Jones shows, there are millions to be made from manufacturing false narratives to fulfil people’s darkest fantasies.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/49h3d44m>

‘Flat-Earthers’

‘While it is tempting to dismiss “flat Earthers” as mildly amusing, we ignore their arguments at our peril. Polling shows that there is an overlap between conspiracy theories, some of which can act as gateways for radicalisation. QAnon and the great replacement theory, for example, have proved deadly more than once. By studying how flat Earthers talk about their beliefs, we can learn how they make their arguments engaging to their audience, and in turn, learn what makes disinformation spread online.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/yuuueebaj>

General

‘Why do people believe in conspiracy theories?’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/3pw4rdeh>

Also ‘Choose your reality: Trust wanes, conspiracy theories rise.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/4ruc7bs2>

However: ‘It may feel like more and more people believe in the existence of grand conspiracies, but that feeling is not supported by the evidence.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/bdhrmptw>

So, ‘How should you talk to a loved one who believes in conspiracy theories? It’s easy to dismiss conspiracy theorists — but this is not a productive way to tackle the issue.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/bdtz54tb>

MISCELLANEOUS UNUSUAL CLAIMS

Falls of fish

‘Sharon Hill, a skeptical US researcher, and Paul Cropper, a longtime cryptozoology investigator from Australia, have put forward an explanation for a recent fall of fish over the US town of Texarkana: a flock of birds may have regurgitated the fish while flying over the town.’

<https://tinyurl.com/4mfnsks6>

Ghostly experiences

From the Australian Skeptics Newsletter #151: ‘A recent study published in *Spirituality in Clinical Practice*, which went through 20 peer-reviewed papers, has suggested a new term for hauntings and ghostly experiences - ‘Haunted People Syndrome’. “Haunting phenomena are complex intertwined phenomena involving personality, ideology, culture, and previous experience towards making sense of an event or series of events deemed haunting,” psychologist Brian Laythe explained. Exactly where the researchers sit on the reality of anomalous phenomena is less clear.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/yzv8p5jh>

Also: ‘Three Legendary Scientists Who Have Been Misquoted By Ghost Hunters’ (Edison, Tesla, and Einstein). At:

<https://tinyurl.com/yj2edskb>

Lobsters

‘Lobsters are not immortal but the myth that they are seems to be.’

<https://tinyurl.com/29u9h4ff>

UFOs?

‘Recent photos taken from a plane flying over the Atlantic Ocean left many

viewers speechless. An unexplained mysterious halo of red light was seen from the sky.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/3a5djpnz>

And: ‘In a world of easy deep fakes, looking at any alleged paranormal or UFO/UAP with a huge amount of skepticism has never been more important. In this video, two movie visual effects artists look at a number of popular, reported “sightings” and debunk them like shooting fish in a barrel.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/ycp6rveu>

Loch Ness Monster

‘A new fossil find in Morocco was twisted to claim that the existence of Nessie is now believable. The Scottish legend can actually be traced back to a popular motion picture.’

<https://tinyurl.com/43duubac>

Psychics

‘An elderly Brazilian woman’s daughter was part of a bizarre scheme to swindle her mother out of more than \$140 million worth of art by using a ring of supposed psychics who claimed the paintings were cursed, police said. Sabine Coll Boghici, 48, plotted to defraud Genevieve Boghici, 82, out of art, jewellery and money worth around 724 million reais, or \$142.42 million, police in Rio de Janeiro said in a statement.’

<https://tinyurl.com/5n7me76a>

Quantum physics and the paranormal

‘What Paranormal Researchers get wrong when they talk about quantum physics.’

<https://tinyurl.com/fjharvmx>

UPCOMING EVENTS

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

<https://theesp.eu/>

Skeptics in the Pub

Events of interest to skeptics are once again 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/>

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/2s4e3tzr>

Annual Australian Skeptics National Convention - Skepticon

(Change of dates)

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 December 3-4 (note that the dates have been changed from their previous announcement, November 26-27). The event is both live streamed and in person. Earlybird registration is now up to September 14th.

<https://tinyurl.com/v3bpd2m9>

LOGIC AND INTUITION: ANSWERS

Who said it?

There must have been a first time when the person said, 'This is not the first time I have made this statement' and then they would have been lying. So this person must be Sue.

The three coins

If you say to me, 'You will not give me the silver coin' then I can't give you the lead coin as this would make your statement true. The only option I have is to give you the gold coin (presumably

the one you'd like to have most) and thus your statement is true.

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

email: askel@talktalk.net

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