

# THE SKEPTICAL INTELLIGENCER

The Quarterly Magazine of ASKE  
THE ASSOCIATION FOR SKEPTICAL ENQUIRY  
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## FROM THE ASKE CHAIR

Michael Heap

### Understanding Astrology

ASKE has received the following message from Drs. Wout Heukelom of AinO Publications.

*'Understanding Astrology: A critical review of a thousand empirical studies 1900-2020* is the long-awaited update to *Recent Advances in Natal Astrology: A critical review 1900-1976*. Forty years in the making, it has 952 pages, 650,000 words, 750 pictures, 650 graphs, nearly 500 tables, over 4000 references, and was released in December 2022 by AinO Publications, Amsterdam, publisher of research journals for the Dutch Society for the Scientific Study of Astrology founded in 1971. This new work can be downloaded as four pdf files totalling 39.2 MB free of charge (*note 1*). No registration or login is required. The same site gives details for buying it in hardcover. It will not be available in paperback or from bookstores. *Understanding Astrology* is not a teach-yourself astrology book. But be warned that if you start you may find it hard to put down. We welcome your comments. Send them to me at:

[wout.heukelom@hetnet.nl](mailto:wout.heukelom@hetnet.nl).'

ASKE member Ray Ward, who reviewed the first edition of this book for ASKE in 2016, has provided us with comments on this latest version in this issue of *Skeptical Intelligencer*.

### Dowsing

According to a report in the *Times*, January 30<sup>th</sup> (*note 2*):

'Thames Water and Severn Trent Water still use dowsing rods to hunt for leaks, even though scientific studies show that they do not work. Water dowsing, also known as water divining, dates back to at least the 16th century. It typically involves a person holding two L-shaped or one Y-shaped rod in front of them. The rods, sometimes known as witching

sticks or wands, are supposed to twitch or cross to indicate the presence of water underground. There is no known force in physics that would account for how buried water would move the rods. Scientific trials have shown that dowsing is no more effective than guessing and experts have asked Ofwat, the water regulator, to stop companies spending money on it.'

For several days, the newspaper's correspondence column featured letters from people, including two retired engineers, who are or were practitioners of dowsing, or who knew people who were, and who were convinced of its effectiveness (including its ability to detect metal). One letter from a geologist expressed skepticism.

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***There is no known force in physics that would account for how buried water would move the rods.***

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Following this, *The Guardian* ran a feature on dowsing, calling on Chris French to give an informed skeptical opinion (*note 3*). And most recently, McGill University's Office of Science and Society's newsletter has a well-informed overview of dowsing, noting that despite its being thoroughly debunked as a method of water divination, it may be making a comeback owing to the increasing prevalence of drought across the world due to climate change (*note 4*).

### Harriet Hall

Following my report in the last issue of the *Intelligencer*, readers will be saddened by the announcement of the death of Dr Harriet Hall. Dr Hall was a physician and science communicator and a prolific campaigner for evidence-based medicine and against what she termed 'tooth fairy science' notably in

pseudo-medical practice (hence the title of her book *There is no such Thing as the Tooth Fairy!*). She was an editor and regular contributor to the journal *Science Based Medicine*, wrote blogs and newsletters under the title *SkepDoc* (*note 5*) and was a regular contributor to the periodicals *Skeptic* and *Skeptical Inquirer*.

Dr Hall was a speaker at the October 2015 QED gathering in Manchester, where she gave a lecture on acupuncture. A video recording of the is still available online (*note 6*).

There is an In Memoriam tribute to Dr Hall in *Science-Based Medicine* for January 15<sup>th</sup> (*note 7*) and an extensive up-to-date biography in *Wikipedia*.

### Arguing from Etymology

In the previous issue I had something to say about a point raised by Mark Newbrook in his piece on 'folk linguistics', namely that the idea that the etymology of a word reveals its 'true' meaning is a misconception, and its contemporary meaning is to be determined by analysis of how its current usage. Hence I suggested that arguing from etymology in order to justify a belief or point of view (or refute the same) is yet another example of weak or fallacious reasoning.

I was reminded about this by a recent letter in the *Times* from a Mr Reed, who had taken exception to the announcement in the same newspaper on February 4<sup>th</sup> that a humanist had been appointed as the first non-religious head chaplain at a British university. Mr Reed points out that 'The word (*chaplain*) has its origins in a building for Christian worship, deriving from the post of a Christian cleric, and retains certain religious connotations.'

Mr Reed has a point here, insofar as in the public mind, a chaplain is a Christian cleric and a chaplaincy is a place of Christian worship, and they have been so for many centuries (*note*

8). But what Mr Reed is failing to recognise is that the meaning of these words, *as they are currently used* is changing. According to *Wikipedia*:

‘Though originally the word chaplain referred to representatives of the Christian faith, it is now also applied to people of other religions or philosophical traditions, as in the case of chaplains serving with military forces and an increasing number of chaplaincies at U.S. universities. In recent times, many lay people have received professional training in chaplaincy and are now appointed as chaplains in schools, hospitals, companies, universities, prisons and elsewhere to work alongside, or instead of, official members of the clergy. The concepts of a multi-faith team, secular, generic or humanist chaplaincy are also gaining increasing use, particularly within healthcare and educational settings.’

This is true of the UK as well. So while these places may still be called ‘chaplaincies’, they employ people of a range of faiths as well as those of no religious persuasion. Indeed the university chaplaincy at which I volunteer goes under the title of ‘Multifaith Chaplaincy’. Nevertheless, it is true that because the public has not caught up with the expanded meaning of ‘chaplain’, humanists like me, who work or volunteer at such places, are not always happy referring to themselves as such. No such dilemma is faced by their non-Christian religious colleagues—for example, Muslim (Imam) and Jewish (Rabbi). ‘Faith advisor’ or ‘pastoral carer’ can be a useful way of identifying oneself, but for the poor humanist, there is no expression that entirely satisfies, and I tend to call myself a ‘humanist advisor’.

### **Nicola Bulley**

The disappearance of Nicola Bulley on January 27<sup>th</sup> while walking her dog by

the river near the village of St Michael’s on Wyre, Lancashire, continues to command the headlines at the time of writing. For readers from abroad who may not have heard of this news item, Ms Bulley ‘vanished’ while walking her dog by a river, having dropped her children off at school. The police soon arrived at a ‘working hypothesis’, namely that Ms Bulley had fallen in the river and her body had been washed downstream, and maintained this position even after extensive searches of the river and the nearby estuary had proved fruitless. This was contested by many people, some directly involved, others having nothing at all to do with the case.

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***Predictably, some individuals claimed to have located the whereabouts of Ms Bulley by clairvoyance, using devices such as crystal balls.***

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Conditions were thus in place for the emergence on social media of all sorts of theories and speculations, some of them the ‘conspiracy theory’ variety, to account for Ms Bulley’s mysterious disappearance (*note* 9). Predictably, some individuals claimed to have located the whereabouts of Ms Bulley by clairvoyance, using devices such as crystal balls. Most disquieting of all was the appearance in the village of outsiders wandering around and even breaking into property, eventually causing the police to issue a dispersal order. One villager was confronted by three such individuals in his back garden; he was later described a TikTok accounts as ‘dodgy’. Another local was informed by one of the three that he was a ‘suspect’ and said he would ‘sweep (*him*) off his feet’ after claiming the villager had touched him. This intense involvement of the media, both

mainstream and social, was extremely distressing for Ms Bulley’s family and friends, and the cause of great anxiety and concern for the villagers in general. Three weeks after Ms Bulley’s disappearance, her body was found—in the river.

Currently the government is facing criticism from many quarters for its efforts to protect people from harassment and malign influences through social media, and the inconvenience and disruption caused by certain forms of protest, claiming that these represent an assault on freedom of belief and expression. But I suspect that the public are much more concerned about the threats to their freedom presented by the actions of other members of the public rather than the lawmakers, as illustrated by this case.

### **Notes**

1. <https://www.astrology-and-science.com/U-aino2.htm>
2. <https://tinyurl.com/2s4jrp5t>
3. <https://tinyurl.com/4p7yjkjm>
4. <https://tinyurl.com/mpr6pr3m>
5. <https://www.skeptdoc.info/>
6. <https://tinyurl.com/2p8wnm69>
7. <https://tinyurl.com/brcp5rxw>
8. These two words themselves are historically derived from the Latin word ‘capella’ meaning ‘little cape’. According to *Britannica*, ‘In the 4th century, chaplains (Latin cappellani) were so called because they kept St. Martin’s famous half cape (cappella, diminutive of cappa). This sacred relic gave its name to the tent and later to the simple oratory or chapel where it was preserved,’ see: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/chaplain>
9. <https://tinyurl.com/mtzaeusp>



## LOGIC AND INTUITION

### The sawing machine

A sawing machine saws sticks, each 2 feet in length, into two parts at some random point along each stick. Over

time, what *in theory* will be the average length of the smaller part of the sticks?

*Answer on page 21.*



## 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](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, hosted the 19th European Skeptics Congress in Vienna from September 9-11, 2022. For photos and comments visit the congress Facebook page at:

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



## MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

### Doctors with fake qualifications

From time to time we hear in the news about people who have been working for years as doctors, either privately or in the National Health Service, until it has been discovered that they lacked the relevant professional qualifications. Usually they faked the evidence that they possessed such qualifications. Once their misdeeds are publicly exposed there is a hue and cry about how they managed to get away with what they did for so long.

A recent case is that of Zholia Alemi (*note 1*) who came to the UK in 1995 with documents indicating that she qualified in medicine at the University of Auckland. She was granted

provisional registration by the General Medical Council and after working in hospitals in Northern Ireland, was granted full registration in 1997. For the next twenty years she worked as a NHS psychiatrist, becoming a member of the Royal College of Psychiatrists in 2003, passing part I of their exams after four attempts and part II after three attempts. In 2012 she entered the GMC specialist register in psychiatry, enabling her to apply for consultant posts. Thereafter she worked in hospitals and clinics in the UK and occasionally abroad, specialising in learning disability and dementia. In that time it is estimated that she earned up to £1.3 million from the NHS and enjoyed a lavish lifestyle.

In 2018 Alemi was convicted of fraud and jailed for five years for faking

an 87-year-old patient's will in an attempt to inherit her £1.3m estate. The patient attended a dementia clinic in Cumbria. Alemi's defence of 'having autism' was rejected by the court.

A reporter for Cumbria's *News & Star* then undertook an investigation of her professional qualifications and it transpired that her University of Auckland degree certificate and other documents were 'clearly forged'. In fact she had failed to obtain a medical degree. She was convicted of fraud and sentenced to seven years in prison.

How was Alemi able to dupe the psychiatry hierarchy, the GMC, and her own professional colleagues? At the outset, no one properly checked the authenticity of her qualifications on her arrival in the UK. Apparently, it was



easy to discover that they were faked, as the investigation by the *News & Star* revealed. Maybe suspicions should have arisen when she had so much difficulty passing the exams for membership of the Royal College of Psychiatrists. But what about her day-to-day performance as a psychiatrist? The evidence on this is not encouraging (*note 2*). Over the years, Alemi was the subject of numerous allegations and formal complaints, including and inappropriate behaviour towards patients and staff, prescribing, and dishonesty. In July 2017 she received a twelve-month suspension from the medical register, which was renewed in August 2018. Finally, she moved around a great deal, registering with locum agencies in diverse locations of the UK, as well as working in Pakistan and the US, probably making it less likely for her unqualified status to be detected.

Probably the aspect of cases such as this that the public find most intriguing is this business of the unqualified individual being able to work undetected for years in a profession such as medicine, for which a great deal of training, knowledge, expertise and experience is required.

The Alemi case is certainly less extraordinary than others in this respect; after all her fitness to practice as a psychiatrist was confirmed by the Royal College. More dramatic instances of ‘imposter doctors’ have been reported (*note 3*), one of the most spectacular of these being Christian Eberhard, a German banker who forged his medical qualifications and worked as a hospital surgeon for 14 months participating in 190 operations, including amputations, before being found out. His only relevant experience was 10 months

working in a hospital in lieu of his national service.

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***Christian Eberhard, a German banker ... forged his medical qualifications and worked as a hospital surgeon for 14 months participating in 190 operations.***

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It’s hard to understand how Eberhard, working as a surgeon, was able to pull off something like this, but less so, perhaps, than someone working as a consultant psychiatrist. I am not disparaging psychiatry here, but my feeling is that it is quite feasible for an unqualified person to enact the role of a consultant psychiatrist, albeit at a mediocre level, in a hospital or clinic without detection. By that stage they will have had several years of experience and have the support of a multidisciplinary team, including other doctors. Also, medical professionals and those in professions allied to medicine undergo regular CPD (continuing professional development) training. It seems that Alemi’s failings were a lot to do with her personality and lack of principles. In my experience, as well as being clinically proficient and well-informed, essential qualities for ‘a good psychiatrist’ are conscientiousness, empathy, good interpersonal skills, leadership ability and so on, qualities not necessarily absent in a fake psychiatrist, though they apparently were in Alemi’s case. All of this also applies to my own profession, clinical psychology.

## **Commercial clinical trials**

A press release on February 20<sup>th</sup> (*note 4*) has announced that:

‘The government has appointed Lord James O’Shaughnessy, Senior Partner at consultancy firm Newmarket Strategy, Board Member of Health Data Research UK (HDR UK), and former Health Minister, to conduct an independent review into the UK commercial clinical trials landscape. The review will offer recommendations on how commercial clinical trials can help the life sciences sector unlock UK growth and investment opportunities. This will also advise on how to resolve key challenges in conducting commercial clinical trials in the UK.’ According to George Freeman, Minister for State at the new Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, ‘Commercial clinical trials are absolutely vital to both our UK life sciences sector and widening NHS patient access to innovative medicines all across the UK. ... However, our life sciences sector has reported a 44% fall in recruitment of patients to commercial clinical trials between 2017 and 2021 - so it is vital that we act to rebuild competitiveness.’

Also see ‘Clinical trials’ in ‘Of Interest’.

## **Notes**

1. <https://tinyurl.com/3edm6d9s>  
<https://tinyurl.com/ynd4j3ey>  
<https://tinyurl.com/3hxx6de3>  
<https://tinyurl.com/2drj2fju>  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zholia\\_Alemi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zholia_Alemi)
2. <https://tinyurl.com/yfdjw85v>
3. <https://tinyurl.com/2p9bjwvs>
4. <https://tinyurl.com/3a3fmmun>

## CONTRIBUTED ARTICLES

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### JESUS MISUNDERSTOOD

Stuart Campbell

*Sceptical of the usual account of Jesus' life, Stuart Campbell, once a Christian, explains what Jesus was really trying to do.*

To most people, even many Christians, Jesus was a good man who unaccountably fell foul of the Jewish authorities and was handed over to the Roman governor for execution (pace those who think unreasonably that Jesus did not exist).

However, those believers are hard put to explain why this happened. Why was he betrayed? Why did he encourage the betrayer? Why did he not defend himself or allow his followers to defend him? It is as if he *wanted* to be arrested and crucified (more of that later). Nor can rational believers explain why Jesus died so soon after crucifixion; why his tomb was found empty a day early; or why some claimed to have seen him alive afterwards.

Two hundred and forty years of serious enquiry have made little headway in the search for a satisfying explanation, even though many glimpsed answers to some mysteries. Albert Schweitzer summarised the attempts made during the nineteenth century and made a significant contribution himself (*note 1*).

All writers on Jesus have overlooked the evidence that Jesus' mindset was that of a Pharisee. They have been misled by Gospel accounts that he opposed the Pharisees. In fact he was critical only of 'the scribes of the Pharisees', the sect's literalists, whose behaviour he condemned. They overlook stories like that told by Jesus of Dives and Lazarus, which reflects Pharisaic beliefs about the afterlife.

At the time, as the Jewish historian Josephus explained, there were three main sects of Jewry: Sadducees, Pharisees and Essenes. Of these, only the Pharisees believed in bodily resurrection, the idea around which

Jesus' life revolved. Consequently, he had to have thought like a Pharisee and it is instructive to read what Josephus, himself a Pharisee, said about their beliefs.

Pharisees, he explained, believed that some actions, but not all, are the work of fate or Providence and that some are under human control, although 'liable to fate'. They believed that although fate determines everything, men have freedom to act for good or evil. Indeed, men could act as they wish while fate cooperates (*note 2*).

In short, a Pharisee believed that he could try to do the will of God and that, if he did so, the result would turn out to be what God had planned. His problem would be in determining what he could leave to God and what he had to do for himself.

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***Jesus' purpose was to demonstrate resurrection, the core belief of Pharisees, but mocked by the ruling Sadducees.***

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So what if some Pharisees, anxious to see the kingdom of God appear on Earth as prophesied, believed that they had to work to bring it about? What if the sect that Jesus led, the Nazarenes (nothing to do with Nazareth), believed this? Here we have a key that can unlock the mysteries of Jesus' life. Jesus is often recorded as claiming that he had to do the will of God, a plan he must have seen in the Jewish scriptures. The sect's erstwhile leader, John the Baptist, had seen signs that the kingdom was coming, even announcing it and he came to believe that Jesus might be the expected Messiah. If Jesus himself

came to believe this and that he had to make the kingdom come about, then his plan had to be to fulfil the relevant prophecies and make them come true.

This can explain why he arranged to arrive in Jerusalem to popular acclaim riding a donkey, so fulfilling a prophecy of Zechariah. Later he overthrew the tables of the Temple's money changers, so appearing to fulfil another prophecy. But in addition, these actions guaranteed that he would come to the notice of the Sadducean priests and give them cause to seek his arrest. But why should he want to do that?

Jesus' purpose was to demonstrate resurrection, the core belief of Pharisees, but mocked by the ruling Sadducees. Furthermore, if the kingdom of the resurrected was to be brought about, the Messiah had to be the first to be resurrected. This meant that he had to die and rise again, proving his credentials and undermining the authority of the Jewish rulers. A successful resurrection would bring down the Sadducees and put him in a powerful position, perhaps enough to drive the Romans out of Israel.

Consequently not only did he deliberately antagonise the priests, he even made it easy for them to arrest him by arranging for Judas to betray him, fulfilling a prophecy that a friend would do so, after arranging a last meal at a house in upmarket Jerusalem near to the High Priest's own house. Judas was sent with details of the place and time when Jesus could be arrested: a gift to the High Priests, who sent the guard to make the arrest. In Gethsemane, Jesus halted the party and agonised over the time he had to wait until the guards arrived (they were late). Then he went willingly and did not defend himself

either before the High Priest or, subsequently, before Pilate. He *wanted* to be arrested, tried and executed so that he could emerge triumphant over death itself, confounding his enemies.

To accomplish this he had to have a plan to survive the ordeal. Clues to what this plan was lie in his surprising early death, remarked on by Pilate and regarded as a miracle by Origen. Crucifixion was not a quick death; it could last for days. Yet Jesus was found to be dead after only a few hours. Shortly before, someone rushed to quench his thirst with the sponge provided. One explanation for this is that he was given opium hidden in the sponge. Opium is a drug that, in the right dose, causes the appearance of death in a coma (Shakespeare knew of this drug and reported its effects in his tale of Romeo and Juliet). Indeed, the story of his friend Lazarus indicates that this drug was tested on Lazarus, whose apparent death gave Jesus no concern and which he ignored for three days.

One need not conclude that this was an attempt to deceive. In those days, coma was unknown and it was probably believed that opium actually caused death and then, when the effects wore off, resurrection. Jesus surely believed that the plant from which it was derived was created by God for this very purpose.

The actions of Joseph of Arimathea suggest that he knew about the drug. He

made the centurion in charge of the execution squad go with him to Pilate to request Jesus' body and enable him and others to remove it to a tomb, perhaps his own, where Jesus could recover.

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***Shortly before [his death], someone rushed to quench his thirst with the sponge provided. One explanation for this is that he was given opium hidden in the sponge.***

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However, Jesus and his Nazarene friends bargained without Roman efficiency. One of the soldiers involved, perhaps to make sure that Jesus really was dead, plunged a spear into his side, an event vouched for by John in his Gospel. So now Joseph was removing a dead or dying Jesus, but he could do nothing about it because of the coming Sabbath. Desperate to save Jesus or embarrassment if he could not emerge alive on the Monday morning as expected, he must have removed him in the dead of night leaving an empty tomb.

That Jesus was never seen again is apparent from the stories that circulated afterwards, most of which are clearly invented. Only one has the ring of truth: that where the disciples were fishing in Galilee. There they saw a figure, clearly an old shepherd, whom they mistook for

Jesus. Not all of them were convinced that this person really was Jesus. Nevertheless Simon Peter and John returned to Jerusalem to preach the risen Messiah.

This was not Jesus' plan. He had planned to die as one Messiah and rise again as another (the 'Comforter' he promised). Ignorant of his plan, the disciples thought his disappearance intentional and looked for his return. Some Christians are still looking for it.

#### **References:**

1. Albert Schweitzer (1954): *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede), [ET by W Montgomery of Von Reimarus zu Wrede – Eine Geschichte der Leben– Jesu-Forschung (1906), Tübingen]; 3rd. ed., with a new introduction by the author (1950) [ET by J R Coates], London, A & C Black.

2. Josephus, Flavius (1866): *The Works of Flavius Josephus*, inc. Life, The Antiquities of the Jews, The Wars of the Jews and An Extract out of...[his] Discourse...concerning Hades, [ET by William Whiston of 1st cent. Greek original], London, Milner & Sowerby.

*Steuart Campbell is the author of The Rise and Fall of Jesus* (Tectum, 2019) See his website at:

[www.steuartcampbell.com](http://www.steuartcampbell.com).

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## **FOLK-LINGUISTICS AND ITS DANGERS: PART 2**

Mark Newbrook

I refer readers to my initial piece on this theme in the last issue (Part 1).

Another folk-linguistic misconception involves the idea that the oldest known languages and, especially, the languages of traditional tribal peoples in places such as the Amazon who lack advanced technology – or even the languages of 'Third World' countries such as the Philippines – are much more 'primitive' than, say, European or classical languages, and largely lack grammar. (Some people

even believe that only the standard varieties of e.g. European languages display fully-fledged grammar and that non-standard 'dialects' of these languages largely lack grammar. The very term *grammar* is reserved for the grammar of standard varieties.)

This idea relates in part to the loose use (by lay-people and, unfortunately, by some linguists) of the term *evolution* in the context of language change, to refer to specific changes in historic times which are mostly non-adaptive

and resemble changes in fashions; they are cultural in character, not biological. It has long been clear, in fact, that – while some languages are **a little** more complex in some respects than others (not always **usefully** so!) – all known human languages and 'dialects', living or dead, are approximately at the same evolutionary stage and thus at the same level of general complexity, flexibility and sophistication (in ways which separate them all from all known non-human communication systems). The

only general feature which distinguishes European or classical languages from tribal languages is vocabulary size – but all languages have or come to have the vocabularies which their users require, transferring words from other languages where necessary. And, as a linguist once remarked, when it comes to grammar and phonology Plato walks with the Macedonian swineherd, Confucius with the Assamese hunter-gatherer. This is so even if, as is often the case, the less prestigious language is unwritten and the associated culture thus lacks some genres such as written law codes, lyric poetry or academic history. There is no correlation between the linguistic types of languages (very largely invariant anyway in terms of linguistic **sophistication**, as I said) and the cultural types or the levels of technological or intellectual attainment which characterise the associated groups of language-users.

There must **have been** ‘primitive’ languages once, as language emerged out of its evolutionary forebears – but that was at least 150,000 years ago, and no such languages survive.

Another error involves the idea that one’s **own** language lacks grammar, some aspects of which are often perceived as unnecessarily complex and indeed redundant by those learning a **foreign** language; books and courses are marketed, often tendentiously, as referring only minimally to grammar. Of course, there are better and worse ways of **teaching** grammar, and different learners may benefit from different approaches; but grammar of some kind is an unavoidable feature of all human language. Several Cantonese-dominant Hong Kongers, naturally oblivious to the grammar of their native ‘dialect’, told me that Cantonese – like Chinese generally – is ‘very easy; no grammar’. No initially unfamiliar Indo-European-style grammar, they meant! Robert Lord had similar experiences with some (educated) Russians, who were totally bemused by his remarks (delivered in Russian) about Russian grammar (very much Indo-European).

A further group of folk-linguistic errors involve confusion between language and script. Any given language, if it is written at all, may be written in a range of scripts. Most usually there is a favoured script – the roman alphabet, for English – but some languages are regularly written in more than one script. Note the case of Serbo-Croat, discussed in Part 1; in a less equivocal instance, Mandarin Chinese is sometimes written in Hanyu Pinyin, which employs roman letters; etc. Some languages used in official domains have in fact changed from using one script to using another. This happened in the case of Turkish in early C20, partly for cultural and political reasons and partly because there is a better fit between Turkish phonology and roman script than obtained with the earlier Arabic-based script. But Turkish remained Turkish as a language.

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Furthermore, many languages may be written in the same script. Chinese script (which is unusually well-suited to the structures of its language) was once used to write Korean and still forms a large part of the complex writing system used for Japanese, even though these two languages are themselves totally unlike Chinese. The roman alphabet has long been used for many European languages and has spread around the world; it is now used not only for Turkish but for many other non-Indo-European languages such as Malay (formerly written in an Arabic-based script), Vietnamese, Kiswahili, etc., and for numerous hitherto-unwritten languages. Even the very characteristic Greek alphabet has been used to write Albanian, Hebrew and various other languages. The Greek alphabet is one thing, the Greek language another.

But this is not always acknowledged in popular usage. My Hong Kong students used to talk of the ‘English’ forms of local personal and place-names, meaning ‘in the roman alphabet’. The words themselves were still Chinese words. A Hong Kong delivery man once told me that a document was ‘in English’ (and that therefore I but not he himself would be able to skim-read it so as to check who should receive the delivery). It was in fact in French. Anything in roman script was ‘English’ to him. I have even spoken with a not uneducated English person who had previously assumed that written Greek was just English spelled with those unfamiliar letters – and now wondered how the Greek for ‘man’ could possibly have eight letters. (This person would presumably **not** have been confused by a French word which had more or fewer **roman**-alphabetic characters than its English equivalent and a totally dissimilar pronunciation.) And some people, hearing that Etruscan was written in a basically Greek script, assume that the two **languages** must therefore be similar and wonder how Etruscan is so little understood.

There is also confusion (perhaps venial for monolinguals) involving script-**types**. I have sometimes struggled to explain to people that Chinese characters (logograms) and Japanese ‘kana’ respectively represent entire words and syllables, **not** individual sounds as is done (approximately) in alphabetic writing (English etc.). (‘How can *Coca-Cola* be spelled with only four letters?’)

Another, partly related error involves the contrast between written and spoken language. During C19 linguists moving towards a scientific model of their discipline came to focus on speech rather than writing (the study of written language became a special sub-discipline). All languages involve speech – or signing – whereas only some have come to be written. All children (bar a very few with mental or physical impairments) learn to speak in their first languages – without much specific instruction at all – long before



they learn to write, and some people who speak (fluently) languages which are regularly written never become literate personally. Even ‘dead’ languages now available only in writing were once also spoken. But non-linguists still tend to focus upon the written forms. Speakers of languages such as English are much more consciously aware of alphabetic letters than of the sounds which they represent; few ever learn terms such as *phoneme*. Most people think of spelling – and punctuation – as more basic than the features of pronunciation – and indeed of semantic and grammatical structure – which these written features represent.

This is so to such an extent that it is often difficult to convince beginning students of linguistics that English words such as *this* and *these* (with its final ‘mute E’) have only three phonemes each, that non-initial X represents a sequence of two sounds, that *better* has only one medial /t/ (except in some Welsh accents!), or even that the initial sounds of *this* and *think* are different. Ethnic Chinese students almost always start by regarding written Chinese as more basic than spoken, and while there are genuine language- and culture-specific factors which encourage this view it also draws them into the outright error of regarding Chinese as an exception to the universal principle that almost all words of all languages are arbitrary in form. They focus upon the minority of Chinese characters which are at least historically pictographic – such as 大 = ‘big’, read off as *dà* in Mandarin – and claim that Chinese words themselves, uniquely, have non-arbitrary relationships with real-world entities.

For another example of confusion between language and script, involving the idea that a linguistic element not shown in writing is therefore not present at all, see ‘Language on the Fringe’, *Skeptical Intelligencer*, 25 (2).

A further misconception involves the equation of language as a whole and speech. From what has been said above, it follows that speech is only one manifestation of language, albeit the

most basic manifestation. Signed languages are perfectly valid languages, without being spoken. The written mode of language is obviously familiar. And of course some people with mental or physical impairments are unable to speak but still have language; and some people with afflictions such as aphasia may be temporarily unable to speak (although they can still write). And some creatures such as parrots or mynahs can produce human-like speech, while of course lacking the capacity for language. Language is one thing, speech another. (I am not here considering claims to the effect that some parrots **do** have the capacity for language; see Chapter 8 of my 2013 book *Strange Linguistics* on this issue. I have mentioned in this forum the joke about the C18 parrot which was supposedly the last speaker of Modern Cornish!)

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***In C19, especially before industrialisation, German speech was often heard as soft and gentle, suggestive of peaceful rural life.***

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There are various folk-linguistic ideas about accents. See Part 1 for comment on this issue in the context of dialect studies. A more basic-level error is the notion that only some people have accents – naturally, not oneself! The Australian linguist Karen Stollznow, who lives in Colorado, encounters comments such as ‘I wish I had an accent the way you do’. My Oxford classmate, from Upminster in Essex and very recognisably a Londoner, believed that he had ‘no accent’. At Reading University, I was once distinguished from a visually similar person on the basis of ‘having an accent’ (the other man had a Home Counties accent). (And it is not as if my North of England accent was ever especially strong!)

Another folk-linguistic focus involves the aesthetics of accents and languages. Many people have strong feelings to the effect that some languages (e.g. Italian) sound beautiful

and others much less beautiful. The latter – German in particular – are often described with adjectives such as *guttural* which many people take to have specific, disparaging meanings but which in fact are not used by phoneticians or have other, purely descriptive senses. Some English accents are also disparaged, sometimes with terms as strong as *foul*. (This is another upshot of prescriptivism; see Part 1.)

Judgments of this kind are often widely shared but seem to involve social judgments about the countries or regions rather than about the varieties themselves. Working-class urban accents such as those of Birmingham or Glasgow are often disliked – but English-speaking judges (such as Americans) who do not know the origins of the accents or the characters of the areas where they are heard assess them as no less appealing than, say, rural English speech or educated Welsh and Scottish accents. And negative ideas about the German language appear to relate to awareness of C20 political history. In C19, especially before industrialisation, German speech was often heard as soft and gentle, suggestive of peaceful rural life.

Linguists may have their own aesthetic preferences, for languages or accents as for anything else. But they will not make these preferences the basis for any purported factual judgements.

Like prescriptivism generally, these prejudices can have damaging consequences. The sociolinguist Howard Giles found himself highly rated for intelligence when he gave a talk to prospective students in his second accent, the prestigious ‘R.P.’, but more negatively assessed when he gave the very same talk in his native Birmingham accent to a matched group of listeners. And Giles’ associate who gave a similar, very coherent talk in his Birmingham accent was simply judged to be ‘stupid’, when he was in fact a university professor. These reactions discouraged some listeners from studying at the university in question.

The great sociolinguist William Labov contrasts (arguably with a degree of exaggeration) cases where discourse in New York City Black English Vernacular (grammar and accent) was judged much less coherent than it was with other cases where discourse on similar themes in educated New York City Black English was assessed as **more** coherent than it was.

I referred in Part 1 to non-linguists' attitude to matters of etymology. A further set of misconceptions, common among those who have some awareness of linguistics, involves the idea that linguists themselves are mainly interested in etymology or in other historical aspects of the discipline. Like some specific historical-linguistic ideas such as the quite widespread opinion that Sanskrit is the ancestor of all languages (which no **linguist** ever believed) or at least the ancestor of all Indo-European languages, this perception is outdated. For whatever reason, the large shifts within linguistics over the last 150 years have not 'filtered down' to the thoughtful lay public at large.

In fact, many linguists have relatively little interest in etymologies, or indeed in questions of vocabulary more generally, because these are relatively unsystematic aspects of language and linguistics is mainly about systems. Individual words and their histories are of interest if they well exemplify theoretical issues or are dramatically revealing in some way in respect of cultural matters or some other specific point; in other cases, they are often left to specialist 'lexicographers' or to sufficiently well-informed amateur researchers (see Part 1 for comment on amateur dialectology) whose work may later become an input to mainstream linguistics.

Even historical linguistics more generally is nowadays a specialist sub-discipline. In various forms, it constituted the core of the discipline in C19, but since World War I linguistics has been mainly a 'synchronic' subject, dealing with non-historical aspects of language(s). Some prospective students whose interests are historical are

disappointed when they discover this and may abandon the subject and miss the chance of profiting from modern linguistics as it is. Others are discouraged precisely because they are **not** attracted to what they misperceive as a heavily historical discipline.

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***Some prospective/ beginning students of linguistics expect to be taught about Neurolinguistic Programming, which in addition to being highly suspect is not even mainly linguistic in focus.***

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Where historical linguistics is of interest to both linguists and lay-people, it is not uncommon for the latter to adhere to positions which the former would reject. I mentioned the case of popular views concerning Sanskrit. But there are many other such cases. For example, many Welsh-speakers wrongly believe that Welsh is more closely related to Latin than it is to Gaelic. And I found in the 1980s that some of my Singaporean linguistics students regarded local semi-mythological traditions about the origins and histories of their own languages (notably Tamil) as more reliable than anything which empirical linguistics had unearthed about such matters. In this respect they were closer to Asian fringe linguistic thought than to mainstream linguistics. Much fringe linguistic work deals with historical matters, and some lay people with an interest in language and with commitments to specific languages may prefer these accounts to neutral but supposedly biased mainstream analyses, e.g. some Ethiopians regard any challenge to Ayele Bekerie's extreme notions about Ethiopic script as 'anti-Ethiopian' or even as racist.

People such as my former students often uphold folk-etymologies favouring their own first languages, such as the false claims heard in the Arab world to the effect that English words such as *routine* and *polymer* are derived from Arabic (again, many

similar claims arise in fringe linguistics).

Some such people also adopt exaggerated positions regarding the statuses of their own first languages, such as the false claim that Malay, a language used mainly by Muslims but only in Southeast Asia, is widely understood in the Arab world.

There is also a fairly widespread assumption that some of the better-known fringe linguistic notions and methods are part of mainstream linguistics; for example, some prospective/ beginning students of linguistics expect to be taught about Neurolinguistic Programming, which in addition to being highly suspect is not even mainly linguistic in focus.

Another major folk-linguistic conceptual difference vis-à-vis mainstream linguistics involves the adoption of excessively broad definitions of the notion 'language', leading to the perception of e.g. music and (in another vein) of the communication systems of non-human animals as more similar in structure to human language than they are. Some non-linguists label linguists as 'speciesists' for rejecting their view of animal communication systems as 'languages'.

Even more frequent is the continuing acceptance of semantic rather than grammatical definitions of grammatical concepts such as 'noun' ('a word referring to a person, place or thing'), 'verb' ('a doing word'), 'sentence' ('the expression of a complete thought'), etc. (In some educational systems students are actually penalised for writing or even saying sentence-parts which have grammatical elements ellipted but which are nevertheless clear and unambiguous, such as *On the roof* as an answer to the question *Where is the bird?*, on the ground that they have not expressed a complete thought.) These older definitions, while easier for non-linguists to grasp than grammatical definitions (grammar is notoriously the most difficult aspect of language for the untrained), are frequently misleading and hinder linguistic analysis.

At a more specific level, there may be confusion of linguistic ‘levels’, as in the claim (in a popular teaching book!) that Maori has no plural ending **because** it lacks the sound [s]. Most languages which mark the grammatical feature of plurality do this with sounds other than [s], and Maori grammar simply incorporates no plural marker at all; so the (striking) absence of [s] in Maori is irrelevant here.

Another folk-linguistic view is the position that the terms *vowel* and *consonant* apply to letters rather than to phonemes (‘sounds’). It is thus held that English has five vowels (although Y in words such as *sky* creates an issue here). In phonological terms English has many more vowels than this (the details are accent-specific).

At a somewhat more sophisticated level, some non-linguists have learned terms such as *phoneme* and *morpheme* but mis-conceptualise them. For example, some people with whom I once talked were treating *morpheme* as the equivalent to *phoneme* in the context of written rather than spoken language. In fact, *morpheme* is a **grammatical** term, and morphemes exist in both speech and writing. (These people also misinterpreted the term *syllable* as basically applying to written rather than to spoken sequences.)

One tendentious aspect of the recent ‘woke’ movement is the ‘tribalist’ view that only native-speakers of a given language or dialect are qualified to comment on it, and the parallel view

that only the deaf may comment on issues involving deaf communication (sign languages etc.).

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***It is thus held that English has five vowels (although Y in words such as sky creates an issue here). In phonological terms English has many more vowels than this.***

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There are more such misconceptions and errors. A slightly dated but still very useful book on these matters is Laurie Bauer and Peter Trudgill, eds., *Language Myths* (Penguin, 1998).

Some of the folk-linguistic ideas discussed here are not as damaging as others. And it is barely more reasonable to expect all competent language-users (i.e. all adults) to be competent in linguistics than it would be to expect everyone to understand biochemistry merely because they can digest food. It would, however, be useful if those who feel moved to comment on language matters would learn some basic linguistics first (even if to disagree with the mainstream from a position of some knowledge), or else **refrain** from comment – especially where their ideas are potentially influential.

It would also be useful if, as an outcome, the degree of polarisation of ideas regarding language were lessened. Because there are so many divergences between folk-linguistics and main-

stream linguistics, much thought about language falls into two widely separated camps. And as a result some people – including both prospective students and ‘popular’ writers – who become aware of mainstream views come to have little respect for them or confidence in them, despite the fact that mainstream consensuses are much better supported than folk-linguistic views. People are also liable to fall prey to the often persuasive-sounding claims of fringe linguists, who seldom draw attention to the mainstream ideas which they oppose (except where they – normally quite mistakenly – believe that they can demolish the mainstream). It is not good for a subject of study to become so divided, or for the recruitment of new emerging scholars to be hindered in this way. (On the other hand, one would not want to exclude altogether the possibility of an amateur with an unusual focus and talent coming up with a novel, potentially important observation. Nothing in excess, as the Greeks said!)

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

### **Editor’s Announcement**

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

## REVIEWS AND COMMENTARIES

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**Investigating Pop Psychology: Pseudoscience, Fringe Science, and Controversies** Edited by Stephen Hupp and Richard Wiseman. Routledge (2023) pp 157 ISBN 978-0-367-60994-8.

Reviewed by Steve Dulson

This book comprises a collection of sixteen subject-specific chapters, all wrapped up in a cool psychedelic cover. The authors were invited to provide a critical summary of a particular field of fringe science or pseudoscience, with the aim of investigating the main controversial issues of the day. The articles vary, in terms of style, depth and complexity (and, it has to be said, a few could have benefitted from the services of a proofreader...ahem). All of the chapters have been well researched and include extensive reference lists, which would facilitate plenty of further reading for those with particular interests.

First of all, Stephen Hupp (one of the editors) provides an introduction to the concept of ‘pop psychology’, describing the difference between science, pseudoscience and fringe science and outlining the common sources of false beliefs (false analogy, confirmation bias etc.), aka the ‘Faker’s Dozen’. Hupp identifies the ‘Mucky Seven’ hallmarks which usually accompany false claims and are utilised to convince others. Once you know what they are, they can be used as warning signs.

The next chapter discusses the topic of phrenology, which was originally pursued in the spirit of the scientific method, attempting to deduce personality by correlation with the shape of the head and facial features, but it has long been debunked; there being a strong cold reading element to it. The claims are described in an even-handed manner but the writer points out the dangers of the abuse of pseudoscience to justify dangerous

ideologies and agenda, particularly in the USA in the 1800s.

Extra Sensory Perception (ESP) and psychokinesis are discussed by James Alcock, who constantly refers to the ‘fundamental flaws in methodology’ behind the claims without actually explaining what the flaws are, which is a little frustrating. He does make a very good point though, regarding the fact that mainstream science has made massive discoveries and developed those ideas in recent decades; whereas, pseudoscientific ideas have been shown to be scientific cul-de-sacs with few (if, indeed, there are any) proofs in the published literature, despite the fact that many of them were conceived at the same time as the now-accepted theories. After a chapter on dream interpretation (more cold reading?), Stuart Vyse explores superstitions, which are particularly interesting because they can be viewed as different strands of the same cultural threads. A superstition can be cultural, regional or familial in nature and is, essentially, learned behaviour; being passed on by those we trust and so we assume that it must be based on some kind of truth. Superstition is the attachment of an outcome to a random action and can be quite nuanced in humans, involving self-conditioning, a need for ritual and a need to imitate. Experiments have shown that some animals also attach random actions to certain outcomes, which may indicate a deeper mechanism that persists within humans. Many aspects of religion can be interpreted as being superstitious in nature and may serve the same needs. Strangely, some experimental work has

shown that ritual behaviour may have psychological benefits that translate into better performance, in sports for example.

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***What started out as a culturally acceptable belief in nightly visits from gods or demons in ancient times (e.g. succubi) evolved into being seduced by ghosts and other spirits by the 19th century.***

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Chapters 6 and 11 can be discussed together as they bring the crux of the premise of the book together rather neatly, i.e. the influence of pop psychology on beliefs. The former discusses alien encounters and memory, while the latter concerns spectrophilia (sex with ghosts) and sexuality. Whilst not necessarily being obvious at the outset, both of these phenomena may include manifestations of sleep paralysis and related phenomena, which have evolved over time, as ways to try and explain the experiences people claim to have had, usually after they have fallen asleep. What started out as a culturally acceptable belief in nightly visits from gods or demons in ancient times (e.g. succubi) evolved into being seduced by ghosts and other spirits by the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Our modern popular psychology is more likely to replace these perceived entities with alien abductors. The surprising ease with which false memories can be implanted in the human brain (with potentially disastrous results) is also discussed.

Chapter 7 discusses the extensive research which has been carried out into

'learning styles'. This is the idea that some people learn things a lot better by using a certain method (e.g. visual learning or written learning) and about 90% of educators and students believe in the concept. This belief system may have an element of truth behind it but the theory is difficult to test because of things like confirmation bias and the fact that someone's preferences may not necessarily correlate with learning effectiveness. Regardless, people seem to maintain their belief in different learning styles. Realistically, certain learning styles probably suit certain people better when studying certain subjects, i.e. there are no hard-and-fast rules.

Schneider and Viskontas then take a look at brain training and intelligence. Whilst I have played brain training games on my old Gameboy, some of its purveyors have promoted claims of its ability to fulfil medical functions, particularly maintaining and developing general cognitive ability in the elderly (and those with degenerative conditions, such as Alzheimers). They conclude that brain training exercises can be fun but evidence of its efficacy in treating mental impairment is unclear; physical exercise and a social support network may actually be more effective in maintaining mental health.

Sigmund Freud certainly has a lot to answer for. His theories on personality and development still have a wide-reaching effect on studies into psychiatry and psychotherapy, as well as related fields. Chapter 9 addresses one aspect of Freud's unifying theory of human behaviour: the psychosexual stages of development and personality. Many aspects of these ideas are difficult to prove or disprove, experimentally, and their importance has been questioned by some researchers. Whilst the developmental stages defined by Freud, in which an infant may become fixated at a certain stage because of unhealthy levels of stimulation of a particular pleasure source, may not be the be-all-and-end-all, they may well contribute some useful explanations to the reasons behind an adult person's anxieties and behaviour. Its persistence

can be related to the fact that it captured the wider public's attention and has become a standard reference in pop psychology.

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***The chapter on horoscopes is a timely reminder of just how ridiculous some of these belief systems are.***

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The chapter on horoscopes is a timely reminder of just how ridiculous some of these belief systems are. The very idea that the personality and life events of one twelfth of the world's population could be predetermined by the date and place of their birth and the positions of the stars and planets at that time is mind-boggling. Again, some may read their horoscopes in their local rag as a bit of fun but, otherwise, file under 'cold reading', the 'Barnum Effect' and self-fulfilling prophecy.

Steven Novella's chapter on 'Alternative Medicine and Health' is surprisingly short, considering the vast gamut of practices which are currently termed as being 'alternative' medicine (they used to be called 'quackery' or 'health fraud' because they are, by definition, an alternative to actual medicine). Many of these medicines, therapies and other practices generally have their origins in 'ancient' or 'natural' methodologies. Ancient medicines tend to be mixed up with superstition and religion. At some point in the past, however, these known existing medicines were tested and scientifically proven to work – these became actual medicine. Those things that could not be tested (because they rely on anecdotal reinforcement or wishful thinking, etc.) or that have been analysed and shown to be ineffective, were rejected from the generally accepted list of recognised treatments. Novella says that 'alternative' and 'natural' (as in natural remedies) have become marketing terms and are just used as ways of attracting customers, who buy-in to such belief systems, to buy products. Labelling products as 'alternative' also means that the

regulatory standards and controls which real medicines have to comply with, can be avoided. (And why would you want to study real medicine at college/university for 5 years, or whatever it is now, when you can set yourself up online, having read a couple of self-help books and influencing a handful of followers on Facebook?) The assumption that something is inherently 'good' just because it has been called natural is flawed: the recent earthquakes in Turkey and Syria were 'natural'; some toxins have been 'naturally' developed by plants to kill animals, etc. Homeopathy is taken as a case in point. It was invented by a physician in a time before scientific medicine was really a thing and so it was based on anecdotal evidence and questionable reasoning. The notion of 'like cures like' has a ring of truth behind it, in a similar way to the basis of inoculation against diseases, but then logic leaves the building as the idea that the more something is diluted, the more powerful it becomes, is introduced. This directly contradicts logic and observable facts. Some of the preparation methods also seem ritualistic in nature, such as the need to shake a mixture so many times in a certain direction. Bizarre. A lot of time and effort has been spent on investigating the effectiveness of homeopathic remedies but they simply do not work (above the level of placebo effect). They seem to have formed part of a belief system for people who may not have been helped by mainstream medicine. A lot of funding and other resources have been wasted on this medical dead-end which could have been better used to investigate real medicine.

In Chapter 13 (unlucky for some...ahem), Antony Pratkanis examines the reasons why we believe in, what he terms, flimflam and are prepared to buy into scams and cons. This interesting section goes some way to explaining why the smartest of people are still taken in by scams: not only foolish people do foolish things. Pratkanis discusses such concepts as tailored pitches, source credibility, social consensus, self-generated



persuasion and the rationalisation trap to explain the ways in which a scam is specifically tailored to each ‘mark’ and then each mark actually contributes to their own victimhood.

Chapter 14 describes projective personality tests, the best-known being the infamous Rorschach Ink Blot Test. The idea behind these psychological tests is that the words chosen (or images drawn or interpreted) reveal deep, unconscious aspects of a person’s personality and psychopathology. Whilst the procedures and rationalisation for the way the testing is supposed to work makes sense, instinctively, the tests have never been successfully validated. These tests may be useful for instigating a dialogue with a patient, as a means for triggering meaningful discussion, but they should not be used as tools for ‘scoring’ or classifying people. For me, one of the

main problems is that the systems do not seem to allow the option ‘I see nothing’ or ‘It does not remind me of anything in particular’, which may actually be more revealing.

Christopher French then examines the topic of demonic possession and the ways in which religious beliefs have been used to explain psychological and medical conditions. The sociocognitive and neuropathological aspects of the psychodrama involved are briefly discussed.

Chapter 16 is titled ‘Energy Psychology and Therapy’ and focuses on several tapping and acupuncture therapies based on the idea of activating energy in specific points on the body to improve health conditions. It describes the difficulties of testing such things and highlights the fact that there may be some positive aspects to the techniques, although they have not been proved as

such. It may be that they do, indeed, help some people with certain conditions, but they are probably not universal.

The Postscript outlines ways of resisting false claims by asking the right questions, deducing the person who is promoting the claim’s motivations and assessing proposed scientific evidence, critically. This section includes a handy summary table, which lists the sources of false beliefs, the hallmarks of false claims and the tactics of persuasion.

All in all, this is an entertaining book with interesting content. I would argue that many of the topics are briefly introduced, rather than the evidence having been comprehensively and critically analysed but then, there are those extensive references I mentioned previously, if you feel the need for a deeper dive.

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## **Hope And Fear: Modern Myths, Conspiracy Theories and Pseudo-History** by Ronald Fritze London: Reaktion Books (2022) pp 404.

### **Reviewed by Mark Newbrook**

Ronald Fritze is an American skeptical historian of considerable note (one of a major cohort which also includes Jason Colavito, David Miano and skeptical archaeologists such as Kenneth Feder). He has written widely in this area, and his *magnum opus* of 2009, *Invented Knowledge: False History, Fake Science and Pseudo-Religions*, is one of the most impressive books on the topic and made a big impact on workers in skeptical history and associated areas, including me in my role as a skeptical historical linguist and epigraphist. I reviewed that book in *The Skeptic* (UK) 22:4/23:1 (2011), pp 74-75.

Fritze is also an expert on ‘Egyptomania’, the obsession with the architecture and motifs of dynastic Egypt which erupted in Europe at the time of the early-C19 decipherment of hieroglyphic script and again a century

later following the discovery of the tomb of the Pharaoh Tutankhamun. London-based readers can easily view examples at Highgate Cemetery and elsewhere, but buildings of this type survive in many places. Fritze’s 2016 book on the subject (*Egyptomania*) is already to be regarded as a classic. The topic continues to attract interest, partly motivated by awareness of this book. In 2022 I saw an exhibition at Scarborough Art Gallery of photographs of Egyptian-inspired buildings in Yorkshire.

But Fritze has turned again to skeptical history with this 2022 book, inspired in part by his diligent and fair-minded analysis of the ongoing pseudo-historical torrent generated by Graham Hancock in his role as a proponent of the thesis of a ‘lost’ Ice-Age civilisation possessing advanced technical capabilities which was destroyed in an

Atlantean cataclysm but had previously ‘seeded’ many of the known early civilisations around the world. Hancock’s ideas specifically do not themselves figure in this present book, but he is only one of a plethora of ‘hyper-diffusionists’ and other pseudo-historians (Harold Gladwin, Immanuel Velikovsky, etc., etc.) who advance such stories on evidence which is flimsy at best and typically worse – and repeatedly express their anger at the initial rejection and subsequent ignoring of their ideas by mainstream archaeologists, whom they regard as wilfully blind to their ‘evidence’, as unwilling for unworthy reasons to consider that the mainstream might be deeply mistaken and as complicit in the collective human ‘amnesia’ which the pseudo-historians adduce. In many cases it is these authors themselves who

might be seen as having unworthy reasons (maybe even as unworthy as racism) for believing what they believe. To no-one's shame, there is much that we do not know about early human civilisation. But unqualified writers such as these are obfuscating our knowledge rather than clarifying or broadening it.

Fritze's 2022 book is not, however, confined to pseudo-history, and indeed he displays his outstanding versatility as a 'general skeptic'. As his title suggests, he is also interested in other modern myths and in conspiracy theories. In his Introduction he surveys an entire range of fringe beliefs: the LaRouche/ Icke claims that the world is controlled by alien reptiles disguised as humans, the idea that Barack Obama was not qualified to serve as US President (the 'Birther' movement), claims about 'Area 51' in the context of alleged contact between the US authorities and extra-terrestrial alien spacecraft and their occupants, overt conspiracy theories about the aetiology and 'true' nature of the COVID pandemic, etc. He considers the socio-psychological impact of pseudo-factual TV shows such as *Ancient Aliens* (taken by many viewers to represent near-certain fact) and of openly fictional books and movies such as *The Da Vinci Code* (itself based on some pseudo-historical ideas) or *The X-Files* (again, often taken to be largely factual). Fritze points out that it is precisely the interpretation of fantasy material as reliably historical which has helped to bolster catastrophically harmful nationalistic/racist political movements such as Nazism and its contemporary successors (so far, mercilessly, less successful). (Compare Colavito's interpretation of H.P. Lovecraft's fantasy fiction as a major source for mid-C20 'alienist' pseudo-history.) And Fritze observes that the current post-modernist tendency to avoid criticism of other groups' belief systems, while itself arguably noble and contributing to egalitarianism, has as an unfortunate relativist upshot the now widespread reluctance to observe that some viewpoints really do represent

demonstrable and indeed harmful nonsense – and, even if not 'banned', should not be encouraged by the education system. These issues are **not** 'purely academic'.

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Fritze's first chapter addresses the general matter of thinking about pseudo-history and other such fringe 'paradigms', including the nature of (modern) 'myth' (a variously interpreted concept), hoaxing and the real or alleged promulgation of 'fake news', proneness to concoct or at least to accept accounts of imagined conspiracies and other tendentious and almost certainly false theories (sometimes called 'rejected knowledge') which have not successfully undergone peer-review (or academic scrutiny more generally), etc. In this context he rehearses Barkun's (overlapping) categories of 'knowledge' which lies outside the mainstream of scholarship, including the occult, 'cultic' belief-systems and tendentiously incoherent argumentation.

Fritze's second chapter deals with the question of **why** people believe 'strange things'. The reasons are not simple or uniform; they include aspects of evolutionary, cognitive and social psychology, socialisation patterns, cultural commitments and, prominently, religious commitment (often but not always closely linked with ethnic/ cultural identity). He cites various scholars on these aspects of the matter.

The remaining chapters deal in sequence with the matter of the 'Ten Lost Tribes Of Israel' (a now somewhat neglected piece of pseudo-history arising largely from the misinterpretation of ancient sources and subsequently associated with some religious minorities as well as with

fringe writers), conspiracy theories involving the Templars and other real or (more often) supposed secret societies, the beliefs in supernatural entities which contributed to the pseudo-intellectual underpinnings and offshoots of Nazism, and the Myth of Roswell associated with the well-known alleged flying-saucer crash in New Mexico in 1947. Each of these topics receives extended treatment, with many references to the sources and to earlier discussions.

Obviously, the book covers quite a range of topics of skeptical concern, each of which involves a different range of issues, and some readers may therefore feel that it lacks a unifying focus. However, many of the general points mentioned above apply (in different ways) to all four topics and are mentioned in each chapter as appropriate. Most importantly, Fritze repeatedly emphasizes the importance of evidence (and of reasoning) in considering any such claims – the main point which all four chapters clearly involve.

Various more specific points made suggest the desirability of further discussion, or of reference to additional authors. For example, the reference to Velikovsky raises the question of why the impact of his ideas, initially strong despite unusually focused and overt academic opposition, waned over time but then revived somewhat after his death in 1979 in the form of various 'Neo-Velikovskyan' positions. But in a book of this length there is obviously a limit to how much can be covered.

Fritze provides a conclusion, references, a bibliography and an index.

There is very little to criticize in this book, no more than a few cases of non-optimal wording. Obviously, adherents of the belief-systems which Fritze critiques will shout 'Foul!'. Equally obviously, card-carrying skeptics should be careful not to take everything he says on trust. But they, along with other readers of all persuasions, will profit very much from reading this book.



## Understanding Astrology: A Critical Review of a Thousand Empirical Studies 1900 to 2020 by Geoffrey A. Dean, Arthur Mather, David K.B. Nias & Rudolf Smit. AinO Publications, 2022, pp iv, 948. ISBN: 9789082492910. Printed hbk. €65.00. Downloadable free at [www.astrology-and-science.com](http://www.astrology-and-science.com). Not available in bookshops.

Reviewed by Ray Ward

In *Skeptical Intelligencer*, **19 (4)**, 2016, I reviewed *Tests of Astrology: A Critical Review of Hundreds of Studies* by Dean and others (AinO, 2016). Now comes this ‘revised and enlarged edition’. Enlarged indeed: it is nearly twice the size of its precursor. I described that as ‘the most comprehensive summary of the

subject’, and this one is even more so. There would, however, be little point in attempting a full review, since everything I said about the earlier work applies to this one, which simply adds to and strengthens what the earlier work said.

As I ended my earlier review: ‘In the words of a Chinese proverb quoted in

the book: “If a thousand people believe a foolish thing, it is still a foolish thing.” Many thousands, indeed millions, believe in astrology, alas, but, as the book shows, it is indeed a foolish thing.’ This book reiterates the point at great length. Just don’t drop it on your toe, or the stars predict a trip to the hospital!

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## Sometimes We’re Just Wrong: Prince Harry’s Pseudo-Factual Self-Reports

Mark Newbrook

R. Moehringer is the ghost-writer for Prince Harry’s much discussed book *Spare*. In response to criticisms of factual inaccuracies in the book, he has issued a defence *note 1*), which invites a skeptical rejoinder.

It should be said, at the outset, that Harry has been badly treated in the media; the truth has been repeatedly distorted or worse. And, like anyone else, he is entitled to his feelings, whether or not they are based on his memories. But memories are (inevitably) fallible. If Harry wants to be taken seriously, he should not proclaim, as he does: ‘My memory is my memory... and there’s just as much truth in what I remember and how I remember it as there is in so-called objective facts’.

What could Harry mean here by the word ‘truth’?! Truth can be complex, multi-sided, uncertain, subject to dispute, even personal and private where **only** one’s own feelings are concerned. But truth cannot be self-contradictory. If one of Harry’s memories really conflicts with an

established account of public events (historical in the broad sense), at least one of these stories must be wrong. Very probably the former. An extreme postmodernist subjectivist/ relativist view of historical truth is untenable; bluntly, it is nonsensical. If this were not so, the discipline of history would have to be, not merely modified to include the more valid aspects of postmodernist thought (see below) but **abandoned** in its accepted form.

To exemplify: Harry makes a claim about descent from Henry VI which is contrary to well-established fact. He makes another claim about an air-ticket, also contrary to recorded fact. Does he **dispute** established fact in such cases? On what grounds? Merely his own memory of things he has done or witnessed, has read, or has heard said? In any case, this simply will not do.

Harry also says: ‘Things like chronology and cause-and-effect are often just fables we tell ourselves about the past’. This is a more serious philosophical point, a feature of ‘trendy’ postmodernist thought. Where ideologies are centrally involved there

may indeed emerge quite different interpretations of events and different ‘narratives’ (‘fables’) of the same event. I once read two accounts of the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia which ended the ‘Prague Spring’ of 1968; they reflected conflicting ideologies to the point where it was not at once obvious that they referred to the same event at all. Focusing on marginal aspects of a situation – the attendance at Donald Trump’s presidential inauguration – and strongly ideologically motivated, Trump’s associates presented a story at odds with media reports and footage, and in fact foregrounded the incoherent notion of ‘alternative facts’.

But, even in cases such as these, a modernist historian will insist that the facts – often complex, as noted above – will be found (if discoverable) to be coherent. No ‘alternatives’, no self-contradiction. The postmodernist position is clearly exaggerated. And at the level of individual concrete facts the postmodernist position hardly applies. (At most, there may be differences of **perception** on the part of the protagonists – which can themselves,

where known, be factored into a historical account.)

In places, Harry is more moderate. ‘Landscape, geography, architecture, that’s how my memory rolls. Dates? Sorry, I’ll need to look them up. Dialogue? I’ll try my best, but make no verbatim claims, especially when it comes to the nineties.’ In fact, this seems to represent a different, more rational stance on truth from the comments cited above. Moehringer cites neurologist Jonathan Mink (via writer Mary Karr) as stating that ‘with such intense memories [...] we often record the emotion alone, all detail blurred into unreadable smear’. Yes indeed. No problem there. But such mental constructions can hardly be taken to represent concrete objective facts.

And another quote from Karr, also shared by Moehringer, reads: ‘The line between memory and fact is blurry, between interpretation and fact.’ Back

to postmodernist relativism? Moehringer also retweets people who say ‘these ‘factual errors’ [in Harry’s book] that have been called out aren’t necessarily real errors **in the context of an autobiographical account**’. Again, what could this mean? A palpable factual error is a factual error, whether in an autobiography or not. This position must be judged incoherent.

In summary: In respect of specific past events, one should **not** encourage people to think that conflicting accounts can both/all be correct, that neither/none of them is wrong, that a demonstrably false story – in these cases, one based only on memory – should be accorded historical status. False memories and people’s personal (repeatedly) reconstructed visions of their own lives are of psychological interest – but they are not history.

And there is no shame – or alarm – associated with having the occasional confused/false memory. In his 1980

autobiography, the Wales Rugby League star David Watkins completely mixed up two international matches in which he played – both staged at Swansea in 1975. In 2003 I myself misdescribed, in an essay on what had proved to be one of the most significant days of my life, the scoring sequence in the first RL match which I ever attended (in 1974). Sports details are especially well documented and hardly subject to debate. Although in the more obscure, less well documented domain of London amateur RL my files contain rival score-lines for two local cup finals of the 1970s – at least one of which, in each case, must be wrong! (I attended neither match; I flatter myself in thinking that had I been there I would have recorded the correct scores!) And Watkins was wrong, and I was wrong. So, on each such occasion, was Harry.

#### Note

1. <https://tinyurl.com/4dp8ayyk>

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## ANNOUNCEMENTS

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## 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. Participate in their Ask for Evidence campaign—the next Evidence Week in Parliament is Jul 3-5, 2023. See:

<https://senseaboutscience.org/evidence-week/>

#### Good Thinking

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

<http://goodthinkingsociety.org/>

#### Misinformation

‘Misinformation is a worldwide concern carrying socioeconomic and

political consequences. What drives its spread? The answer lies in the reward structure on social media that encourages users to form habits of sharing news that engages others and attracts social recognition. Once users form these sharing habits, they respond automatically to recurring cues within the site and are relatively insensitive to the informational consequences of the news shared, whether the news is false or conflicts with their own political beliefs. However, habitual sharing of misinformation is not inevitable: We show that users can be incentivized to build sharing habits that are sensitive to truth value. Thus, reducing misinformation requires changing the online environments that promote and support its sharing.’ Journal article.

<https://tinyurl.com/57rs9uyd>

#### Science skepticism

‘Science Skepticism Has Grown. Who’s to Blame?’

<https://tinyurl.com/2p8aek58>

#### 5G

‘A Facebook video with more than half a million views claims that people are exposed to more radiation from standing near a 5G tower than if they were inside a microwave. The claim is false with experts telling AAP FactCheck the levels of radiation inside a microwave are around 150,000 times greater.’

<https://tinyurl.com/2j73k332>

#### Nuclear fusion

‘Fusion skepticism follows a century of genius, fraud and hype.’

<https://tinyurl.com/373p4759>



## Journal papers

‘More than 1 in 10 researchers who are also the editors of science journals publish a fifth of their own papers in their journals – and 1 in 20 publish a third of their own work. This raises the question of whether editors’ submissions get treated more favourably.’

<https://tinyurl.com/4py88b9d>

## MEDICINE

### Clinical trials

‘The UK government will introduce a legal requirement to make public the results of all clinical trials within 12 months of trial completion. Any company or university breaking the law will be refused permission to start new trials.’

<https://tinyurl.com/yzns3dww>

see also

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

### 2022 Shkreli Award

‘Welcome to the 6th annual Shkreli Awards, the Lown Institute’s top ten list of the worst examples of profiteering and dysfunction in healthcare, named for the infamous “pharma bro” Martin Shkreli. Nominees for the Shkreli Awards are compiled by Lown Institute staff with input from readers of Lown Weekly. An esteemed panel of patient activists, clinicians, health policy experts, and journalists help determine the winners.’

<https://tinyurl.com/ycku38zt>

### Supplements

‘Multivitamins and mineral supplements are easily accessible to consumers. They are often marketed for their health claims and benefits – sometimes unsubstantiated. But their potential adverse effects are not always stated on the packaging.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/5539k8mv>

And from the US: ‘On February 3rd, 2023, a freight train carrying hazardous materials derailed in East Palestine, Ohio. The event encouraged important discussions about the regulation of train maintenance and the toxicity of the chemicals that were spilt and burnt, but in the midst of all this, a virtual care

business called the Wellness Company pledged “to put patients before profits” by offering free medical care until August to the people of East Palestine. The twist? Its Chief Scientific Officer is none other than Dr. Peter McCullough, one of the best-known faces of COVID-19 misinformation, and the Wellness Company he helps lead is a striking example of the very lucrative libertarian medical movement that claims to stand against the profit-motivated pharmaceutical industry while replacing drugs with expensive dietary supplements.’

<https://tinyurl.com/nh45w7rf>

### Traditional Mexican medicine

‘Health authorities in Mexico said Tuesday they will use more traditional medicine and more Cuban doctors in the country’s woefully under-equipped public hospital system. Zoe Robledo, the head of Mexico’s largest public hospital network, said at a news conference that the system will hire 753 practitioners of traditional massage and herbal treatments. The Social Security Institute will also employ “curanderos,” who are non-licensed healers who use bundles of herbs, smoke, alcohol and eggs to “draw” sickness out of the bodies of their patients.’

<https://tinyurl.com/4jr84maz>

### Chiropractic

‘Is It Safe to Get Your Neck Manipulated by a Chiropractor?’ ‘Most joint manipulations aren’t dangerous, but one rare complication can result in serious injury.’

<https://archive.is/Hw6V9>

### Detox

‘You Don’t Need a Binder in Your Detox Kit, and You Don’t Need a Detox Kit: Detox regimens, already misguided, are now incomplete without the purchase of the latest novelty: a binder.’

<https://tinyurl.com/2vyw3af8>

### Organic foods

‘Organic foods have been increasingly popular these days moving from local co-ops and farmer’s markets to large retail chains that specialize in organic foods (such as Whole Foods) to general

large retail chains. More and more stores dedicate portions of their produce sections to organic produce, usually at significantly higher prices. Even dairy and meat sections of most supermarket chains have sections that contain organic products. Again, at significantly higher prices (so, you’ll see a trend here). But there is a simple question that needs to be asked — are organic foods worth the extra cost? Are they healthier? Are they safer?’

<https://tinyurl.com/4f7vd8bu>

### GM and organic crops

‘Despite “incredible amount of pseudoscientific claims,” consensus confirms safety of GM crops—and they are often safer than organic.’

<https://tinyurl.com/5c3hzzyt>

### Earthing

‘Earthing or Grounding is a pseudoscientific idea that electrons acquired by direct contact with the earth can prevent/cure diseases and bring health benefits. This video exposes its founders, supporters and beneficiaries for exploiting vulnerable people with this junk science.’

<https://tinyurl.com/bdcttv79>

### Antivax misinformation

‘The man who launched the vaccine wars: Andrew Wakefield is still trying to fool the medical establishment.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/5b3re6nu>

And: ‘Social media users are sharing a claim that 1598 athletes suffered cardiac arrests between 2021 and 2022, which purportedly represents a huge increase from previous years. Many of the posts suggest COVID-19 vaccines are to blame. But the claim is false. The 1598 figure is based on a deeply flawed list of deaths and serious injuries. The list includes numerous people known to have died from causes other than cardiac arrests, including soccer legend Pelé, who died in December aged 81 after battling colon cancer; Russian athletes Ivan Kurenbin and Tatiana Igushina, who reportedly died in a speeding car; an amateur runner who fell off a cliff; and a 13-year-old boy hit by a train in Scotland.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/yjvy2nju>



### **Sexual health myths**

‘Doctors are fighting an uphill battle against misinformation about sexual health and contraception – including yoghurt-based thrush remedies, “cancer-causing” contraception, and requests for genital surgery – as young people increasingly turn to social media for medical advice.’

<https://tinyurl.com/msn9j3r8>

### **Photobiomodulation**

‘The Hype Around Photobiomodulation: The razzle-dazzle of cold lasers and red lights being used to treat just about anything offers two important lessons in how science works.’

<https://tinyurl.com/rjurzct>

### **Leqembi and Alzheimer’s**

‘Hype, Hope and Leqembi: A new Alzheimer’s drug has appeared on the scene with great fanfare, but how loudly should we be blowing that horn?’

<https://tinyurl.com/bdam6mf9>

### **Medbeds**

‘Strange corners of the internet are awash with chatter about miracle devices that can cure nearly any ailment you can think of using the power of mystical energy. Some companies charge thousands for these “medbeds” - but their claims are far from proven.’

<https://tinyurl.com/yzeh4mm8>

### **Wellness**

‘Two recent books shed much-needed light on the societal problems that make people seek out wellness in the first place.’

<https://tinyurl.com/y24wktud>

### **At-home blood tests**

‘The Advertising Standards Agency (ASA) has upheld a complaint made by a GP against a company that advertised an at-home blood test to help people manage their health as “free if we don’t find anything”. The website for Numan’s Fear Nothing Blood Test which offers a check for up to 21 biomarkers on a three-monthly subscription was found to be misleading because it implied something was medically wrong if a result was outside the “normal” range. Following a complaint from Glasgow GP Dr

Margaret McCartney about how the test was advertised, the ASA also found it was misleading because it did not provide a cost upfront, and was not clear at the start that it was subscription service.’

<https://tinyurl.com/2kt5ax96>

### **‘Pure blood’**

‘Vaccine skeptics blocking transfusions for life-saving surgeries, Facebook groups inciting violence against doctors and a global search for unvaccinated donors - Covid-19 misinformation has bred a so-called “pure blood” movement. The movement spins anti-vaccine narratives focused on unfounded claims that receiving blood from people inoculated against the coronavirus “contaminates” the body.’

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

### **Ivermectin**

Another clinical trial fails to support the use of Ivermectin for COVID-19. ‘Among outpatients with mild to moderate COVID-19, treatment with ivermectin, with a maximum targeted dose of 600 µg/kg daily for 6 days, compared with placebo did not improve time to sustained recovery. These findings do not support the use of ivermectin in patients with mild to moderate COVID-19.’

<https://tinyurl.com/5n7a4yfx>

### **‘Bioelectricity’**

‘Spectacular Pseudoscience: The Fall and Rise of Bioelectricity’; on the Origins of Frankenstein and the Dark Ethics of Electroshock Technology.’

<https://tinyurl.com/53jh3jbx>

## PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHIATRY

### **Anomalistic psychology**

‘Chris French is an anomalistic psychologist at Goldsmiths, University of London. Chris researches how human psychology can explain people’s beliefs and experiences of paranormal phenomena. He also runs Greenwich Skeptics in the Pub, a meetup group that you’re very welcome to join.’ Podcast at:

<https://tinyurl.com/zbnnt8n6>

### **Paranormal beliefs and sleep**

‘This study aims to fill a gap in the literature by investigating paranormal beliefs in relation to a wide range of sleep variables in a large sample. Participants (N = 8853) completed a survey initiated by the BBC Focus Magazine. They reported on their demographics, sleep disturbances and paranormal beliefs. Poorer subjective sleep quality (lower sleep efficiency, longer sleep latency, shorter sleep duration and increased insomnia symptoms) was associated with greater endorsement of belief in: (1) the soul living on after death; (2) the existence of ghosts; (3) demons; (4) an ability for some people to communicate with the dead; (5) near-death experiences are evidence for life after death; and (6) aliens have visited earth. In addition, episodes of exploding head syndrome and isolated sleep paralysis were associated with the belief that aliens have visited earth. Isolated sleep paralysis was also associated with the belief that near-death experiences are evidence for life after death. Findings obtained here indicate that there are associations between beliefs in the paranormal and various sleep variables.’

<https://tinyurl.com/mryf9tej>

### **The Hawthorne effect**

‘Research done at the Hawthorne Works in the 1920s and 30s, which yielded the “Hawthorne effect,” is a mess of sloppiness and misogyny.’

<https://tinyurl.com/4kk8hh2f>

### **‘Digital amnesia’**

‘The press loves to serve us alarming headlines about so-called digital amnesia and what our overreliance on computers and the Internet might be doing to our brain.’... ‘When we cast aside the doom-mongering that warns of our devices making us dumber-or even worse, of technology giving us “digital dementia,” comparing Internet use with a head injury or the kind of cognitive decline seen in Alzheimer’s disease-we stumble upon two problems: a foundational study that doesn’t replicate very well and a scientific-

sounding term coined by people who want to sell you something.'

<https://tinyurl.com/3n9mrad2>

### 911 call analysis

'Many forensic techniques are junk science. We can add 911 call analysis to the pile. Police thought they could read her mind just by listening.' It's a chilling statement in reporter Brett Murphy's ProPublica coverage and it sums up the pseudoscience of 911 call analysis. One of the founders of this technique, deputy police chief Tracy Harpster from Moraine, Ohio, is said to have plainly stated that he knows "what a guilty father, mother or boyfriend sounds like." How? By listening to their 911 call.'

<https://tinyurl.com/2fjhz2r>

### Perception of probability

'Most of us don't have an accurate idea of what probability of precipitation (PoP) truly means, even though most of us are certain we do!'

<https://tinyurl.com/28nfmz92>

### Blue Monday

'Is Blue Monday Real? The 'Science' Behind the Most Depressing Day of the Year.'

<https://tinyurl.com/2p9wrwm7>

### Neuroscience of deception

'I've teamed up with State Library Victoria to create a series of videos that both teach you how to perform extraordinary magic AND the neuroscientific secrets that make the magic work. These tricks are the perfect introduction to magic and neuroscience. All you need is a few objects from around the house!'

<https://tinyurl.com/2vz4pnk8>

### Political advertising campaigns

'Do mass political advertising campaigns via social media really influence voting? Though there have been plenty of claims that they do, experimental evidence has been limited. Now, though, a team led by Minali Aggarwal at Yale University reports their analysis of the impacts of a huge US\$8.9 million pro-Biden, anti-Trump digital campaign conducted in the lead-up to the 2020 US Presidential election. Their findings, reported in *Nature*

*Human Behaviour*, suggest that the impacts on voting were minimal.'

<https://tinyurl.com/5n7a4yfx>

### Diversity training

'U.S. police departments have attempted to address racial inequities in policing with diversity training. ... To examine their efficacy, we tested a day-long implicit-bias-oriented diversity training designed to increase U.S. police officers' knowledge of biases, concerns about bias, and use of evidence-based strategies to mitigate bias (total N = 3,764). Although the training was linked to higher knowledge for at least 1 month, it was ineffective at durably increasing concerns or strategy use. These findings suggest that diversity trainings as they are currently practiced are unlikely to change police behavior. We conclude with theorizing about what organizations and training programs could do for greater impact.'

<https://tinyurl.com/3d3h7mzt>

### Neurostimulation

'A former neurostimulator company chief has been indicted for creating and selling a fake medical component that was implanted into patients to scam insurers. Laura Perryman headed the Florida company Stimwave LLC, which sold useless pieces of plastic that were implanted into chronic pain patients in the guise of electronic receivers. According to the Department of Justice, the "dummy" device components jeopardized the patients' health and scammed insurers out of millions of dollars.'

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

## MISCELLANEOUS UNUSUAL CLAIMS

### Psychics

'A University of Idaho professor has filed a defamation lawsuit against a self-proclaimed psychic on TikTok after the tarot card reader accused her of killing four of the school's students, whose murders shocked the US last month.'

At:

<https://tinyurl.com/5e5fnf8>

Also: In 2007 Madeleine McCann, aged 3, went missing while on a family

holiday on Portugal. She has not been found since. 'A private investigator and psychic says a woman who claims she could be Madeleine McCann is "happy she is getting the truth". Julia Wendell went viral after uploading a video online to an Instagram called "I am Madeleine McCann", saying that she thinks she could be the missing girl who vanished in 2007 at the age of three. Now, after receiving "a number of death threats", Julia was taken to California by Dr Fia Johansson, a self professed physic and has said she is investigating the case.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/ynx2xtr6>

And: 'Like Prince Harry a quarter of British people have consulted a psychic – here's the science on why.'

<https://tinyurl.com/y2c6dhum>

### Unidentified ariel phenomena (UFOs)

From the US: 'The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022 required the Director of National Intelligence, in consultation with the Secretary of Defense, to submit an annual report to Congress on unidentified aerial phenomena. OONI submitted the classified annual report to Congress and published the unclassified annual report.' This can be downloaded at:

<https://tinyurl.com/fwrrwh3n>

### Ghosts

'Over the last few years writing about the paranormal, I've been trying to define a unified set of rules within which all reports of ghosts and hauntings can exist without contradiction, in order to provide a more coherent understanding of the phenomenon. Despite having this idea a few years back and thinking about it regularly, I should warn you that this article doesn't have a neat conclusion. However, this is the story of my attempt to find a consistent theory of ghosts.'

At:

<https://tinyurl.com/ecncn3ts>

'The BBC's Ghostwatch is undoubtedly one of the greatest media pranks, taking its place shoulder-to-shoulder with Orson Welles' War of the Worlds radio

drama from 1938. Airing in 1992, the Ghostwatch Halloween special broke new ground, diving into the ghostly world of malevolent spirits as it followed a team of paranormal researchers studying a haunted house in the boring London borough of

Northholt, a departure from clichéd castles and crypts. Doves of curious Brits couldn't resist a good scare. Sadly, not everyone interpreted it as its creator had hoped.'

<https://tinyurl.com/4x2bhvyx>

**Spontaneous human combustion**  
'11 True Tales About Spontaneous Human Combustion Survivors and Casualties.'

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

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## 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). Active venues are listed at:

<https://sitp.online/sitp/>

Skeptics in the Pub Online itself still has an excellent programme of online talks on alternate 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** monthly 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, including placebo and nocebo. 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**

'The QED team have announced the date of the next gathering in Manchester. QED ('Question, Answer, Explore') is a hugely popular annual skeptical conference with an attendance in the hundreds from all over the world. Presentations covering a limitless range of areas of interests, both in the sciences and the arts, are given by international experts over one weekend. The dates are

September 23-24 and the venue is the Mercure Manchester Piccadilly Hotel. On Friday 22 there is a free one-day SkeptiCamp event at the hotel as part of the ever-popular QED Fringe. Book early to take advantage of discounts.

<https://qedcon.org/news/2023/save-the-date-2023>

### **Humanists UK**

<https://humanists.uk/events/our-events/>  
Visit the Humanist UK website for details of events of skeptical interest. Plans are well underway for the 2023 Humanists UK annual convention, scheduled for June 9-11 at Liverpool Guild of students. Already an impressive list of speakers is on the programme, including Chris French, Samira Ahmed, and Adam Rutherford. There is much to be gained from attending these conventions, even if humanism does not describe your worldview and even if you consider yourself a religious person. You can find out more at:

<https://humanists.uk/events/convention2023/>

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## LOGIC AND INTUITION: ANSWERS

### **The sawing machine**

The answer is 6 inches.

If the point where the machine cuts each stick is chosen at random, then half the time the cut will be on the left half of the stick (with respect to the machine) and half the time on the right half. If the cut is made on the left half of

the stick, the smaller piece will be on the left and its length will be between 0 and half the length of the stick and since all points on the half-stick have an equal chance of being chosen as the cutting point, the length of the smaller piece of the stick will be, on average, half the length of the half stick, which is 1/4 of the length of the whole stick. The same

applies when the point falls on the right side of the stick. So the average length of the smallest piece is 1/4 of the length of the stick, which is 6 inches.

(This is only in theory: it would be practically very difficult for the saw to cut very tiny pieces at the end of the stick.)

## **ASKE**

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

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

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

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

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