

THE SKEPTICAL INTELLIGENCER

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THE ASSOCIATION FOR SKEPTICAL ENQUIRY
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If you are an ASKE member in the UK and would like a paper copy, please email the Editor, Michael Heap (mheap712@gmail.com)



FROM THE ASKE CHAIR

Michael Heap

Suggestion and suggestibility

No skeptic worth his or her salt should be lacking in a good working knowledge of the nature of suggestion and suggestibility and all their diverse manifestations in human life. Hence the time is ripe, I feel, for another plug for that highly esteemed series of monthly webinars, entitled ‘The Science of Suggestion’, founded by two of the UK’s leading lights in the study of suggestion, Dr Devin Terhune, cognitive neuroscientist and reader at King’s College London, and Professor Ben Parris psychologist at Bournemouth University, plus yours truly. These online seminars have been running since November 2021 and have included such topics as the theoretical basis of suggestion, the modulation of suggestibility, autosuggestion, dissociation, mass psychogenic illness, neurological underpinnings, social influence, forensic aspects of suggestion, genetics, pain, and above all, the nature of placebo. If you’ve missed any or all of these webinars, most have been recorded and may be accessed on the SOS website. So visit <https://scisugg.wordpress.com/> and join the mailing list by emailing sos@bournemouth.ac.uk.

BBC Verify

At the time of writing this piece, BBC 1’s news broadcasts have featured additional commentary by reporters on some of their announcements under the title ‘BBC Verify’. According to their website (*note 1*):

‘BBC Verify is a team of investigative journalists, a brand and also a physical area in the BBC newsroom in London, from which its experts will regularly appear across BBC news content, including on the BBC News website live pages, radio and the BBC News channel. The team will work across a range of stories, from breaking news to analysis and visual journalism all the way to original investigations.’

And according to Deborah Turness, CEO of BBC News (*note 2*):

‘BBC Verify comprises about 60 journalists who will form a highly specialised operation with a range of forensic investigative skills and open-source intelligence (Osint) capabilities at their fingertips. They’ll be fact-checking, verifying video, countering disinformation, analysing data and—crucially—explaining complex stories in the pursuit of truth.’

This is an initiative that skeptics should welcome. Let’s see how it goes.

Communicating with the Virgin Mary

The Catholic Church has established a task force to address the increasing number of individuals who claim to have direct communication with the Virgin Mary, including one woman who asserts she can conjure pizzas miraculously. Vatican authorities consider these claims to be problematic as they cause confusion, promote apocalyptic scenarios, and even make accusations against the Pope and the Church. Father Stefano Cecchin, the head of the Mariana Internationalis pontifical academy, is leading the effort to address this issue.

Gisella Cardia, has attracted hundreds of followers who believe her statue of the Madonna can produce slices of pizza.

The *Daily Star* reports that the woman in Rome, named Gisella Cardia, has attracted hundreds of followers who believe her statue of the Madonna can produce slices of pizza. During her monthly trances, Cardia reads out predictions supposedly relayed to her by the Virgin Mary. Despite having a fraud conviction in her native Sicily, Cardia continues to promote her claims

but has been ordered by the local mayor to remove unauthorized structures from a hilltop location. While the Vatican does not wish to impede prayer to Mary, they are determined to prevent fraudsters from exploiting Catholicism. Some of Cardia’s followers attribute the alleged accuracy of her predictions, including the prediction of COVID-19, to her supposed communications with Mary. It seems that one of these messages was that vaccinations were of no use, so Cardia’s followers chose not to be vaccinated (*note 3*).

UFOs/ UAPs

On May 31st, a NASA panel (*note 4*) held its first public meeting on its study of UFOs, or what the US government now terms UAPs (‘unidentified anomalous phenomena’). The panel was set up last year and a report on its findings is due for release in July. Nasa define UAPs as ‘observations of events in the sky that cannot be identified as aircraft or known natural phenomena from a scientific perspective.’ Its study is separate from the previous investigation by intelligence officials at the Pentagon. The 16-member panel said that scant high-quality data and a lingering stigma pose the greatest barriers to unravelling such mysteries.

Meanwhile, V.J. Ballester-Olmos & Richard W. Heiden have just released a major book (711 pages) on sightings of UFOs. According to the publishers:

‘*The Reliability of UFO Witness Testimony* is the first major book to comprehensively focus on the discussion and current views on problems and challenges posed by the reliability of UFO testimonies. This is a cross-disciplinary compendium of papers by 60 authors from 14 different countries. They are specialists in social, physical, and biological sciences, including psychology (predominantly) as well as psychiatry, sociology, anthropology, history, philosophy, folklore, religion,

journalism, engineering, computing, medicine, education, analysts with experience in the critical study of UFO perceivers, and other professionals. This volume shares thematically convergent ideas about the plausibility of alternate explanations for an alleged close-range UFO phenomenon.'

The book may be downloaded free of charge (*note 5*) or, if you prefer, UPIAR Publishing House (Turin, Italy) has published two softcover, A4 format print editions, one in black & white, another in full colour (ISBN: 9791281441002) (*note 6*).

The book will be reviewed by Ray Ward in the next issue of the *Skeptical Intelligencer*.

Notes

1. <https://tinyurl.com/5n6s524w>
2. <https://tinyurl.com/5aprsdvy>
3. <https://tinyurl.com/4ejd8e7b>
4. <https://tinyurl.com/5c8pavsx>
5. <https://tinyurl.com/4mw3pksj>
6. <https://tinyurl.com/77cs9u86>



LOGIC AND INTUITION

How do you escape?

You are journeying through a long deep ravine, with unassailable vertical cliffs either side and ahead of you. The only means of exiting the ravine is for you to retrace your steps to where you came in. Unfortunately a huge fire is raging in the path back to the entrance and is making its way towards you, blown by powerful winds. It seems that you have no escape: your way back to the entrance is blocked by the fire and if you continue on your course you will come to a dead end and eventually be

engulfed by the flames. You are carrying no means of communicating with the rest of the world. Is there no escape?

The hermit

A hermit lives in a shack on top of a high mountain in an isolated region. Every Monday, starting at 6.00 a.m., he walks the arduous journey down the mountain and on to the nearest village to buy his essentials for the coming week. He stays overnight at a hostel in the village and at 6.00 a.m. the next day he sets off back home, weighed down

by his shopping and faced with the strenuous climb back up the mountain. Naturally the journey back takes him longer and he is forced to stop and rest a couple of times. One day he pauses to rest and is amazed to notice that he passed this place the day before at exactly the same time. Should he be so amazed?

Answer on page 17.



THE EUROPEAN SCENE

European Council for Skeptics Organisations

Address: Arheilger Weg 11, 64380 Roßdorf, Germany

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

Facebook:

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

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

The ESP - European Skeptics Podcast



Building a bridge for skeptics

<http://theesp.eu/>

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

The 20th European Skeptics 2024

Plans are in progress for the next biannual European Skeptics Congress in 2024. The previous congress was held in Vienna in September 2022. To keep up to date with developments visit the ECISO website. For photos of the 2022 congress and comments go to the congress Facebook page at:

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



MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

Big Pharma and conspiracy theories

McGill University's Office of Science & Society's weekly newsletter almost invariably has one or more scholarly articles of interest to skeptics and the May 26th issue is no exception, featuring an article by Jonathan Jarry MSc entitled 'What the "Big Pharma" Accusation gets Right (and Wrong) about the Drug Industry' (*note 1*). He summarises the gist of his paper thus: 'Valid criticism of the pharmaceutical industry often snowballs into demonization, leading conspiracy theorists to promote an alternative that is simply hypocritical.'

This message will be wholeheartedly endorsed by skeptics in the UK, who recognise the immense debt of gratitude we all owe to the pharmaceutical industry and are aware that many of the criticisms we hear from vocal but rather uniformed quarters are simply naïve and ill-conceived. Nevertheless this industry does have a long history of questionable and dishonest practices and egregious self-interest, sometimes even endangering the health and lives of patients. This was extensively documented by the UK's Professor Ben Goldacre in his 2012 book *Bad Pharma: How Drug Companies Mislead Doctors and Harm Patients* and in many publications by him and others since.

Acknowledging both the good and the bad sides of Big Pharma, Mr Jarry summarises his take-home message as follows:

'There are legitimate criticisms of the ways in which drugs are developed and marketed by the pharmaceutical industry, from the withholding of negative results to the use of representatives to exaggerate the benefits of new drugs to doctors.

'The people who endorse the "Big Pharma" conspiracy theory will often promote the rejection of

pharmaceutical drugs and their replacement with lifestyle modifications and dietary supplements, but the former is often inadequate to treat disease and the latter is almost always based on poor studies.

'Pharmaceuticals are useful but the drug industry needs more transparency and regulation, and initiatives like the AllTrials campaign have made progress on that front.'

'Pharmaceuticals are useful but the drug industry needs more transparency and regulation, and initiatives like the AllTrials campaign have made progress on that front.'

Pharmaceutical solutions to obesity and other disorders

In an issue of the McGill University OSS newsletter prior to the above, Dr Joe Schwarcz provides some sober reflections on the use of injection of semaglutide as a treatment for obesity (*note 2*). Semaglutide causes the pancreas to release more insulin and for 15 years has been used in the management of diabetes 2. It also slows the rate at which the stomach empties and this extends the feeling of being full. Studies have shown that weekly injections may lead to as much as a 15% loss of body weight. The drug has now been hyped as a breakthrough in the treatment of obesity. Dr Schwarcz's paper is largely concerned with the side-effects of this medication in the short term, and its effectiveness and adverse consequences in the long term.

Another recent article questions whether pharmaceutical treatment is indeed the right way to tackle the growing prevalence of obesity amongst children in the UK (*note 3*). This article, by writer Alice Thomson in the *Times*,

discusses the issue of childhood obesity and the role played by the food industry and pharmaceutical companies in perpetuating this problem. It highlights the efforts made by the food industry to attract children towards their ultra-processed products, which are designed to be addictive and override natural appetites. This has resulted in a significant increase in obesity rates, with millions of people in the UK classified as obese, including a fifth of 11-year-olds.

The article then shifts its focus to the pharmaceutical industry, which is now poised to make billions of dollars by offering weight-loss drugs, including semaglutide, to teenagers and adults. These drugs are marketed as solutions to obesity, but the author argues that they come with potential severe side effects and do not address the underlying issue of unhealthy eating habits. Additionally, participants tend to regain much of the weight lost once they stop taking the drugs. The author expresses concern that relying on pharmaceutical interventions could create a cycle of binge and purge, leading to further health problems and eating disorders.

The author criticizes societal attitudes towards body image and calls for a focus on health rather than appearance. She emphasizes the need for children to learn healthy eating habits instead of relying on weight-loss drugs and explores alternative approaches to combating obesity by highlighting successful initiatives in Japan, Finland, and the Netherlands. These initiatives involve providing nutritious meals in schools, encouraging physical activities, and regulating food advertising. The author argues that the British government should take similar measures before resorting to weight-loss injections, noting that 'Since 1992, successive governments have launched 689 anti-

obesity measures but few have stuck because, like calorie-counting on menus, they rely on individual determination rather than changing the quality and quantity of food.' The author argues that 'merely relying on individual responsibility is not enough, as the fast-food industry and food suppliers continue to push addictive and unhealthy products.'

The theme of Ms Thomson's article is followed up by the journalist Janice Turner in a later issue of the newspaper (note 4). Her article adopts a wider perspective and is headed 'First obesity was monetised, now the cure is too.' This is to say that huge profits are made by the food industry fattening us up with unhealthy foods and making us ill, and huge profits are made by the pharmaceutical industry trying to slim us down and treat the resulting diseases and ailments. Some of these are mental health problems and disorders such as ADHD. The author suggests that 'As well as corrupting our appetites, corporations have cynically messed with our ability to soothe and heal ourselves.'

Some of the health problems these two writers refer to are psychiatric problems and disorders. To a large extent such problems are interpreted as medical or quasi-medical conditions, to

be treated pharmaceutically and the ministrations of practitioners of various forms of psychotherapy and counselling. The NHS spends a great deal on this, yet mental health problems have been increasing, along with the use of prescribed medication, even prior to COVID, and especially in children.

***'First obesity was monetised,
now the cure is too.'***

Consider, for example, anxiety and depression, the two most common (and overlapping) mental health problems. In 2008 the government announced its Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) initiative to provide wider availability of cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) for adults suffering from anxiety and depression (in 2010 IAPT was opened to all ages). Staff were trained to administer CBT and by the year 2020 there were over 11,000 qualified practitioners and support workers (note 5). The scheme was predicted to be cost-effective since patients could be weaned off their antidepressants (or not prescribed them in the first place) However, over many years now antidepressant prescriptions in England have increased substantially

for adults, adolescents and children (note 6) and currently 2 million people have been taking them for 5 years or more (note 7).

So what's going wrong? The consensus is that the level of spending on IAPT and all mental health services falls well short of what is required. But, as with obesity, perhaps we also need to consider other ways of thinking about the nation's mental health. Poor diet and obesity are indeed factors that contribute to mental health problems, along with life stresses; poverty; inequality; lack of social amenities and so on and, especially with children and young people; family breakdown; our educational system; and the iniquities of certain aspects of social media. Just as it requires political will to address the causes of the obesity epidemic, so too with the problem of the nation's mental health and indeed the nation's health in general.

Notes

1. <https://tinyurl.com/bdf5azu7>
2. <https://tinyurl.com/3jvea2ud>
3. <https://tinyurl.com/2u5w52tn>
4. <https://tinyurl.com/3b87k9hw>
5. <https://tinyurl.com/5bk5n7u9>
6. <https://tinyurl.com/23zywywn>
7. <https://tinyurl.com/569rsexw>



LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

Linguists ignored again!

I refer readers to my double article in the last two issues on Folk Linguistics. One point which I raised there (in Part 1) was that professional linguists are often not recruited to appear on discussion panels and the like where language matters are in question. And indeed non-linguists who publish on such matters, while competent in their own disciplines, often fail to avail themselves adequately of linguistic expertise on the points in question.

For example, the biologist and science writer Joel Janson recently

published an online comment – part of a series which deals with language issues – titled 'How Physics Justifies the Letters Y and W as Vowels' (note 1). His comments are not **mistaken**; but his title and indeed some of his discussion appear unsophisticated in respect of linguistic analysis. In respect of the title: as I noted in my Folk Linguistics piece, it is **phonemes** (or allophonic phones; but non-linguists might not find the need to invoke that technical distinction in such a context) which are to be classified as vowels or consonants, not alphabetic **letters**.

Janson does move on from this especially naïve-sounding opening to a more sophisticated treatment of this topic, involving articulatory phonetics (the tongue positions involved in pronouncing various sounds, etc.). But he fails to distinguish clearly between the cases of the phonemes spelled with Y and W. In English, Y represents an array of different phonemes. Some of these phonemes (as in *sky* or *rhythm*) are vowels, but the most common such phoneme is a consonant (as in *yellow*). It is a consonant of a specific kind, the kind closest to vowels in phonetic terms

– often referred to by linguists as ‘glides’. Consonantal Y specifically is phonetically close to the common vowel-phoneme /i/ (which is itself **not** usually spelled with Y; instances are the vowel in *see* and the second vowel in *police*.) However, any given token of Y represents a particular one of the various phonemes for which it is used; there are no English words where the same token of Y sometimes represents a vowel and sometimes a glide, or is somehow intermediate between the two types of sound (as Janson’s wording might suggest).

In English, W also represents a glide, in this case one phonetically close to the vowel-phoneme /u/, as in *too*. But W is **never** used in native English words to represent this or any other vowel-phoneme. There is thus no issue regarding the terms *vowel* and *consonant* which involves W the way there is for Y.

The facts which are relevant in cases of this kind are not **all** physical (articulatory-phonetic) in nature. There are highly relevant abstract phonological factors. But non-linguists such as Janson, even if they know some linguistics (as he clearly does), will not usually be competent to discuss such things; they will confine themselves to the phonetics, which requires no linguistic theory.

The case is of course different in different languages. In Latin the letter I represents a phoneme with two main ‘allophones’, one a glide and one a vowel, as represented by the first and the fourth letters of the name *Iulius* (Julius). There is a parallel situation involving V. In the languages of medieval Europe, these pairs of glides and vowels split into pairs of distinct phonemes. J (as in modern German) or Y (a letter taken by Latin from Greek, originally representing a specifically Greek vowel) came to be used for the glide associated with I; and W came to be used for the glide associated with V – which itself was eventually replaced by U where it represented a vowel; the modern consonantal use of V is a further development.

In some languages (for example German and Polish), W came to have the value represented elsewhere by V. In Welsh, W has come to represent the vowel-phoneme represented in Latin by V and in modern languages by U, OO etc., as in *cwm* (‘valley’) (pronounced something like ‘coom’; the word appears as a loan-word in English: *combe*).

Those anthropologists who have examined Aquatic Ape Theory have generally held that the evidence is not persuasive; many would even label it ‘pseudoscience’.

Janson’s general account of vowels is not wrong, although it contains the odd overstatement. He also presents the ‘vowel quadrilateral’ correctly. For a non-linguist, he has done well, and his incorporation of the approach of physical science to the phenomenon of phonation is welcome (though of course this is already familiar to professional phoneticians). But with a linguist as co-author he could have done better!

The Aquatic Ape commemorated in Wales!

A statue of the versatile author Elaine Morgan has been unveiled in her home town of Mountain Ash, South Wales (*note 2*) Morgan (1920-2013) is best known in skeptical (anthropological) circles for her ‘Aquatic Ape Theory’ (AAT). The ‘blurb’ in the cited article identifies Morgan as a ‘renowned evolutionary theorist’ and refers both to the AAT and to her feminist anthropological tract *The Descent of Woman* (1972) – which was ahead of its time, regardless of one’s assessment of her specific proposals, and was followed by further works in that vein.

The AAT (first major publication in 1982) was offered as a further corrective to what Morgan saw as theories implicated in gendered stereotypes and underplaying the role of women in human evolution. At a general level, this aspect of Morgan’s thinking did in fact meet with much

positive comment from the start and indeed has now become almost commonplace. The AAT, specifically, expanded upon earlier ideas (e.g. those of Alister Hardy) to arrive at the position that the ancestors of modern humans took a divergent evolutionary pathway from the other great apes by adapting to a largely aquatic lifestyle, involving major roles for women and promoting the key *Homo sapiens* characteristics of hairlessness and bipedalism.

Local pride in Morgan and her legacy is wholly understandable, and of course she still has many adherents elsewhere too. However, it should be noted that the AAT, specifically, was heavily criticised from the outset by her fellow anthropologists and has not become part of the academic mainstream. It is popular mainly in less specialist circles. Those anthropologists who have examined it have generally held that the evidence for the theory is not persuasive; many would even label it ‘pseudoscience’. The most important objection was (and remains) that it is not consistent with the fossil record. Those who have supported Morgan (e.g. the philosopher Daniel Dennett) have generally understated the volume and/or the force of these objections. Like Morgan herself with her degree in English, some of her supporters have arguably had too little training in anthropology. In addition they sometimes call upon Morgan’s critics to **disprove** her claims, rather than encouraging Morgan and her surviving qualified followers to advance stronger evidence than has been offered so far. (This pattern is common in such contexts.)

On the other hand, lack of formal qualifications in a discipline should not itself **exclude** an innovating author from consideration. And Morgan’s other work has, as noted, met with a more positive academic response. But Morgan (like some other thinkers on the edge of the mainstream) has been seen as paying too little attention to the critical comments of scholars **with** such a background, preferring in later works to repeat her thesis as if no worthwhile

reasons for doubting her ideas had been presented (sometimes intemperately condemning her critics). At the age of 89 she was still talking simply in terms of her own ongoing ‘belief’ in the truth of the AAT. But she was not altogether denied establishment recognition. In 2008, for example, she was admitted as a Fellow of the Linnean Society.

Of course, the evolutionary sequences involved here are too early to fall under a linguist’s remit (even if humans had language in these times, it had no written form and no trace of it remains). I write here only as a general skeptic.

Lunatic etymology online

The British vlogger ‘SciManDan’ presents short videos (‘Tinfoil Tuesdays’) in which he plays and critiques fringe claims. Many of them involve Flat Earth believers and other astronomically-inclined fringers, but various other extreme non-mainstream ideas are featured. Some of these include linguistic claims, notably very strange etymological claims which owe nothing to linguistic knowledge, are typically unsupported and are highly tendentious, being offered as support for fringe ideas on other fronts.

One of the believers in question is ‘Santos’, who espouses a bewildering ‘theory’ called Synchronism (*note 3*). He presents large sets of words with apparently unrelated meanings but with loosely similar pronunciations and/or spellings, adducing important ancient connections between them. His equations often fly in the face of

established linguistic knowledge or at any rate are unsupported by positive evidence.

One of Santos’ presentations commences with the English word *pole*, which he identifies as ‘the word of God’ and links with rhyming but semantically unconnected words such as *hole* and *vole* which he treats as all ‘hav[ing] the same source’, i.e. *pole* itself. Here, of course, he ignores the known or likely etymologies of these words, as is usual in such ‘theories’. He offers no evidence or reasoning in support of this claim. And the entire etymological pattern involved here, with shared **terminations** and dissimilar **onsets**, is vanishingly rare, especially in European languages.

Santos places especial emphasis on the word north, regarding the North Pole as the throne of God.

So far Santos is at least unusual in relating words through their terminations; but he quickly reverts to the more usual fringe approach of treating words with superficially similar onsets as connected. In the case of *pole* these include *pulse*, *plasma*, *pill*, *politics*, *pollution*, etc. He includes here words which feature R in place of L, such as *pure*, on the grounds that ‘L and R are interchangeable’ (really?). But he places especial emphasis on the word *north*, regarding the North Pole as the throne of God and identifying *north* as

half of a supposedly significant palindromic pair with *throne* - dismissing the final ‘mute’ E of *throne* purely for his own convenience. He also identifies other unconnected words as cognates (having the same source) and as relating to mythological notions. Etc., etc.

As in many other such ‘theories’, the idea is that the vocabularies of English and other languages are replete with unacknowledged/ concealed equivalences and relationships which imply the truth of utterly incoherent alternative theories of history and science. Santos’ version is among the more extreme. SciManDan himself, a physical scientist, appears to know only a little about the linguistic aspects of these matters, but he knows enough to demolish Santos without breaking sweat.

Obviously material of this kind poses no threat at all to mainstream thought. But it is alarming that it is being promulgated as veridical, with no admission that it is even speculative, still less simply fallacious. Most serious scholars will not become aware of it, or, if they do, will not trouble to critique it. But it is part of the ever-growing movement that rejects hard-won knowledge, despises true scholarship, and encourages the view that ‘anything goes’.

Notes

- 1 <https://tinyurl.com/mrxd2a3w>
2. <https://tinyurl.com/2p9wshte>
3. <https://tinyurl.com/3y6kv3jv>

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.

CONTRIBUTED ARTICLE

THE SUPPOSED SPECIAL STATUS OF GREEK AND LATIN

Mark Newbrook

On 11/1/23 I attended an online presentation staged by the USA-based organization Classical Wisdom, on what they consider the great importance of continuing to teach (Ancient) Greek and Latin in the present day. The well-qualified speakers gave various reasons for taking this stance, some of them more persuasive than others.

I would like to repeat here some points which I made in the chat on this presentation. I have a Classics degree (Oxford 1978) and I yield to none in my enthusiasm for these languages (and their associated cultures). But I want to proclaim the need for caution. As a professional linguist I suggest that some classicists are over-exuberant in their endorsement of the languages, going beyond what the evidence will bear and at times actually contradicting the evidence.

On this occasion, one contributor stated that Greek is the basis for all European languages. Even if one excludes languages such as Hungarian which originated outside Europe, this is simply false. Most languages in Europe have taken much from Greek, especially English and the Romance languages with their extensive Greek-derived learned/ technical vocabulary. (Some other such vocabulary derives from Latin, of course.) But that is not the same as having a **basis** in Greek. Even English and to a lesser extent the Romance languages have grammars seriously different from that of Greek, and also large amounts of non-Greek lexis, some of it non-Indo-European but some simply developed within non-Hellenic branches of Indo-European (IE) (like the grammar). This applies also to the rest of Germanic (including Scandinavian), Celtic etc. Some Indo-European vocabulary is **shared** with Greek through common IE origin, but

this fact confers no special status upon Greek. In fact (with the exception of some obscure partly Greek-based creoles) there is **no** language in Europe which has its basis in Greek.

The contributor in question resisted my attempt to make this point but continued to focus only on vocabulary transferred from Greek into other languages at relatively late dates.

As far as can be seen the languages themselves display logical principles no better than any other languages.

Another contributor, a mathematician, rehearsed the still commonly advanced view that Greek (or for some others Latin) gives one a deeper insight into logic. I have never seen a persuasive argument that this is so. Reading Greek **philosophy** certainly helps one appreciate the history of logical thought. But as far as can be seen the languages themselves display logical principles no better than any other languages. (There are occasional exceptions to this, e.g. Latin *vel* and *aut* explicitly encode the two logically distinct senses of ‘or’.) Also, the highly irregular (and synchronically unmotivated) morphology of Latin and especially of Greek reduces the level of systematicity and transparency found in their grammatical systems, and thus **hinders** learners’ appreciation of the grammatical structures and the associated semantic/logical structures.

A third contributor stated that the complexity of languages has been reducing over time. This is a major over-simplification of the facts; in some respects it is simply wrong. But this contributor was less dogmatic and

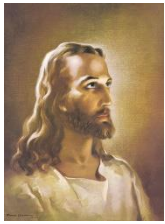
seemed amenable to discussion. Empirical linguistics has much to say about such issues.

Overall, I wonder if more carefully expressed views, more in keeping with the actual evidence, or indeed the overt challenging of extreme and inaccurate views, might be more persuasive.

I do not suggest that the Greek ethnicity of the second contributor mentioned above was relevant to his viewpoint; but this is not uncommon. And Greek and Latin are by no means alone in having ‘fans’ – usually native-speakers – who make exaggerated claims in respect of the special status of their favoured languages or proclaim their supposed superiority in one respect or another: suitability for use in logic (compare the above), computing, communication with extra-terrestrial aliens, general communication; also, supposed ‘aetiological’ (non-arbitrary) links between linguistic forms and types of real-world entities, and so on. ‘The oldest known form of **my** language is the ancestor of all languages’, ‘**My** language is the most coherent/transparent’, etc. Of course, the profound intellectual achievements of ancient Greek civilization encourage views of this kind as applied to the Greek language specifically. But linguists will require much more persuasive empirical evidence than has ever been advanced if they are to accept such ideas.

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).

REVIEWS AND COMMENTARIES



The Rise and Fall Of Jesus: A Complete Explanation for the Life of Jesus and the Origin of Christianity by Stuart Campbell, 3rd edition, 2019 (originally published in 1996; twice revised). Marburg, Germany: Tactum Verlag. ISBN-10: 3828843468, ISBN-13: 978-3828843462.

Reviewed by Mark Newbrook

Stuart Campbell, a former Christian, has a long-standing interest in the life of the person known in English as Jesus, and in his role as the key figure in the early development of the Christian religion. Campbell has a background in architecture and an undergraduate degree in mathematics and science. His other books include a skeptical treatment of the matter of the Loch Ness Monster (arriving at the position that there is no such creature) and an explanation of the UFO phenomenon in terms of meteorological and astronomical phenomena. Both books received largely positive online reviews, although some such reviewers (even some who ‘scored’ them highly) found the research methods suspect in places and found some of the explanations simplistic.

I want to stress in this present context that I am not myself a professional Bible scholar. I am a general, historical and skeptical linguist with an undergraduate background in Ancient Greek, ancient history and ancient and modern philosophy, and wide-ranging skeptical interests including the history of religion.

There is, of course, a huge tradition of scholarship concerning the figure of Jesus, which goes back to pre-medieval theology and became more diverse in orientation as Europe and its diaspora emerged from the domination of the churches by way of the C17-19 Enlightenment. For instance, it has now become common for authors to base their accounts of Jesus on historical information and the methods of history rather than on religious texts and

theological considerations. Indeed, some authors have argued that there was in fact **no** historical figure who can be identified with the New Testament (NT) character Jesus. But over the decades this ‘Christ Myth’ view has come to be regarded as a ‘fringe’ position; there are now few well-informed supporters of this stance, most of them humanists and rationalists (although by no means all humanists and rationalists would uphold this extreme view). Campbell agrees with the overwhelming academic majority in rejecting this Christ Myth/‘no-historical-Jesus’ view.

More importantly, there are scholars (mostly non-Christians, naturally) who hold that ‘Jesus’ was a very different person indeed from the interpretation of him which is accepted as true by conventional Christians. And there are other recent thinkers, some of them of a postmodernist persuasion, who argue that the ‘facts’ about Jesus’ life are almost impossible to confirm, are subject to reinterpretation by each group of thinkers and by each generation, and are in any case much less important than the **use** made of the figure of Jesus in the developing early tradition of Christian theology and practice. In addition there are further altogether ‘fringe’ claims about Jesus, such as the view that he died and is buried in Japan. These fringe positions, in particular, are obviously ‘grist to the skeptical mill’.

Paul (formerly Saul) was clearly the most influential figure in the genesis of Christianity and like the Evangelist John he displays ‘gnostic’ tendencies in his writings; but he displays little

interest in the person and life of Jesus, focusing upon his death and the significance of his alleged resurrection. This feature of his work (which predates all the extant Gospels) has been variously interpreted; but Campbell holds that Paul clearly acknowledged Jesus as a man. However, because he rehearses very few specifics about Jesus, Paul cannot be as heavily invoked in the present context as one might imagine.

This present book has a foreword (written in 1993) by the late critical scholar of religion James Thrower. As Thrower and Campbell both point out, discussion of Jesus (despite the post-Enlightenment changes mentioned above) is still dominated by Christian thinkers who regard the orthodox account of his life (allowing for differences between the various Gospels?) as beyond debate. Campbell is obviously free of such bias (although Christians may think that as an ‘apostate’ he now has a **different** bias), and he also goes beyond the criticisms of Christian (meta-)ethics voiced by Friedrich Nietzsche in challenging the ethical ideas reportedly promulgated by Jesus himself. (Various other authors have attacked Christian (meta-)ethics on purely philosophical grounds; to the surprise of many believers, there is no consensus that the Christian god, if real, would count as ‘good’.)

Thrower does urge a **critical** reading of this book on the part of self-identifying followers of Campbell, suggesting that objections to his thought might thereby be sought and possibly found. Unfortunately, there have been

no scholarly reviews of the book (any edition) which might have advanced such objections. This may be, in part, because of knee-jerk hostility on the part of many Christian Bible scholars, and/ or because (as Campbell notes) most **non**-Christians are not especially interested in Jesus as a man. And another factor may be the fact that most professional academics (who typically are already busy enough engaging with transparently mainstream material) are reluctant to devote time and effort to the assessment of material produced by writers without formal qualifications in the relevant domains, suspecting that it will prove not to warrant their attention. (The main exceptions are those scholars who are also active skeptics with a specific interest in such material.) This may sometimes lead to the ignoring of novel ideas which **are** in fact worthy of attention.

Campbell himself holds that his lack of relevant qualifications/ employment-history is the obvious reason why his book has not been reviewed by any academic commentator. He suggests, in fact, that it is his position as an ‘outsider’ which has enabled him to ‘see what appears to be the real Jesus’ (personal communication). There are certainly cases in the literature (in all disciplines) where a well-informed amateur has arrived at a novel position which has proved to be insightful and at least arguable. But skeptics will recognise Campbell’s stance as a position adopted too readily by very many non-mainstream, sometimes inadequately informed thinkers convinced of the great worth of their own ideas. Most such authors have much less ground (evidence, reasoning) for their iconoclastic claims than they suggest, and some have obvious ‘axes to grind’. An author’s own statements on this front cannot be **assumed** to be valid. Being an ‘outsider’ is obviously **not** an unadulterated advantage.

Another possible factor here involves Campbell’s own often dogmatic descriptions of his work, including his depiction of his book on the Loch Ness Monster as having a uniquely well-grounded status, the

unmodified use of the ‘factive’ term *solved* in the title of his UFO book, and, in his ‘blurb’ for this present work, the bombastic-sounding claim that it ‘explains otherwise inexplicable accounts’. While intending academic critics of writers of this kind should probably ignore such usage and concentrate on the actual content, this wording is of a kind which is not usual in academia and might make beginning or prospective scholarly readers or critics wonder if they are dealing with a genuinely scholarly treatment – and thus deter them.

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To be more specific: Campbell mostly argues closely for his conclusions regarding contentious points (for example as to what languages Jesus spoke), but sometimes one might consider that a conclusion or claim is overstated, inadequately argued or indeed rather speculative. Even where writers are themselves sufficiently well-informed to be confident about such matters, it is helpful to readers to be as restrained and as thorough in respect of the expression and justification of positions as the overall length of the work will permit.

In a broadly similar vein, Campbell refers to the NT text mainly by way of English translations and paraphrases, and in places refers to translations as sources or cites earlier scholars as referring to the Greek. Whatever his own proficiency in Greek, or in the Hebrew of the Old Testament (OT) (the source of the prophecies cited in the NT), this practice creates an issue in respect of his authority as a commentator, especially for readers who are themselves not versed in the languages. This is especially important at key points where the various Gospel narratives appear to contradict each

other and even more important where well-known translations differ; such cases should be handled with authoritative reference to the original. More generally, it is (rightly) standard practice for works proclaiming novel theories to refer to the original (with translations in notes where a work is aimed partly at those who require same). It would be of interest to see what specialist NT Greek scholars and OT Hebraicists might have to say about Campbell’s ideas.

Having said all this, Campbell’s book is certainly worthy of attention. As noted, much of his argumentation is close, with attention to detail. He cites many scholars and specific works, and he has researched the varied versions of Jesus’ life given in the orthodox Gospels and piecemeal in the rest of the NT (there are also various ‘apocryphal’ gospels, rendered ‘non-canonical’ as Christianity came to power in the Roman Empire after 300 CE). He also refers to various non-Christian accounts of the matter, which include the work of the important Jewish historian Josephus (whose account of Jesus is brief and textually contentious) and non-Jewish references (notably Roman). Campbell has also examined, in considerable detail, critical works by later scholars.

On the basis of all this diligent scholarship, Campbell has come to the view that Jesus has been misunderstood by Christians and that their Jesus-based religion is in fact irrelevant to modern life. Obviously serious atheists and indeed most skeptics would endorse this view in general terms. But there remains, of course, the question of how far Campbell’s **specific** case holds up.

The gist of Campbell’s exegesis of the Gospels is that Jesus **wanted** to be crucified and by his actions ensured that he would suffer this fate, because he regarded himself as the Jewish Messiah, the saviour (not only in a military sense) of the Jewish people who had suffered under foreign control, both in exile and in the ‘Holy Land’, for hundreds of years since the destruction of Solomon’s Temple in 6 BCE. The arrival of the Messiah was anticipated in Jesus’ time, and despite the undeniable

role of this concept in Jewish thought the threat of its immediate (alleged) fulfilment was unpalatable to the Jewish establishment and to the occupying Roman authorities. Jesus was aware of his consequential likely fate (Campbell devotes space to the question of the roles in this outcome of Pontius Pilate as Roman governor on the one hand and of the Jewish leadership on the other) and was unwilling to attempt to forestall it (which he perhaps might have achieved if he had abandoned his claims early enough), because he would then have **failed** to fulfil the relevant OT prophecies and the expectations of those who believed in them.

But Jesus wanted only to **seem** to die on the Cross and later to re-appear as the risen Messiah. He either genuinely expected that he would be resurrected, or else was complicit in a plot to survive his crucifixion and then to present himself as the risen Messiah. (Campbell discusses the vexed question of whether he was given a drug which caused him to appear to have died sooner than expected.) This plot failed; Jesus recovered sufficiently to manifest himself to his followers, who believed that he had indeed been resurrected, but was wounded beyond the possibility of prolonged survival and died shortly afterwards (probably in a private building). (Maybe Jesus himself realised, after reviving, that he had survived by natural rather than divine means and would not live much longer.)

The core of this analysis (as opposed to the question of the veracity or otherwise of beliefs in Jesus' actual resurrection) is not itself as strikingly different from the orthodox interpretations of the life of Jesus with which Campbell takes issue as one might expect from his 'blurb', preface etc. The most salient novel point is Campbell's interpretation of the 'multiple Messiah' doctrine as expressed in Jewish scriptures as involving specifically **two**, in principle distinct Messiahs, who might be seen as rivals and/ or as manifesting themselves at different times and/ or in different circumstances. According to Campbell,

Jesus came to see himself as a **synthesis** of these two figures, thereby conferring especial Messianic significance upon himself (which was, of course, accepted by the new religion, Christianity), and as having been accidentally or deliberately chosen for this role by the key supporting figure of John the Baptist (taken by some to be the very Messiah, which he himself reportedly denied).

Modern Christians and other non-Jewish interpreters of the texts might be forgiven for regarding this as a matter of specifically Jewish theology which does not bear heavily on the status of their own beliefs. However, the 'two-Messiah' interpretation, which was apparently espoused by the Pharisees, does locate the story of Jesus in a more specifically Jewish theological framework, in a way which Christians might find opposed to their own ecumenical ideas. And for many later thinkers of various kinds such questions, however important to Jesus himself, might appear of rather limited interest. Believing Jews who did/ do not accept Jesus (or any of the other 'false Messiahs' who appeared in the period in question or later) as the Messiah were/ are still awaiting the Messiah. These people might have varied opinions about the 'two-Messiahs' doctrine but such differences do not call their basic stance into question, and the figure of Jesus (regarded by such people as purely human) is not involved. 'Secular' Jews who have abandoned Jewish religious beliefs are Jews only in respect of ethnicity, and matters of Jewish doctrine are irrelevant to them. For believing Christians, Jesus **was** the Messiah (the Son of God, and for non-unitarians part of the Holy Trinity) and **was** resurrected; but if Campbell is right about the specifics this story is **much** less likely to be true than his own account (as indeed atheists will argue in any case.) Jesus was a mortal man on a misguided mission of a specifically Jewish nature, and his life is of no real significance to **any** of these groups of people. Specifically, Christianity, as a religion, should be abandoned.

Campbell discusses many other more specific topics and issues involved in the life of Jesus: the precise dates of his birth and death (hardly of **doctrinal** significance to Christians but of great interest), the location of his birth, his place in the C1-CE Jewish politico-religious world (see below), his relationships (if any) with the Nazarene sect and the Essenes of Qumran, the chronology of the early development of Christianity, Jesus' self-referring use of the term 'Son of Man' (taken from the apocryphal *Book of Enoch*, which is of great interest by way of background to the thought of Jesus' day but is itself implicated in various controversies), the miracles which he reportedly performed, his theological philosophy as described in the Gospels, the shape of his trial before Pilate, etc., etc. In respect of Jesus' philosophical location within the Jewish world, Campbell argues (with the eschatologist Albert Schweitzer) that Jesus was essentially a Pharisee or pro-Pharisee (surprising as this might appear for many recent/current Christians) and rationalised Pharisee doctrine about the Messiah (although Campbell's discussion of this complex area in Chapter 3 strikes this reviewer as one of his weaker sections).

The book ends with two Appendices, one of them dealing with the 'search for Jesus' over the centuries and the other with Schweitzer's view of Jesus.

Campbell's book is dense with information and arguments, and those without either a commitment to Christianity or a focused rejection of the religion might find it too heavy-going for what it is worth to them personally. Specifically, Christian believers might not want to read it for fear of having their core ideas disturbed, or might read it in a spirit of determination to reject its main thesis. But anyone with any kind of scholarly interest in these events long ago which spawned what is still the world's most-followed religion should find it worth the effort – whether or not they end up by accepting Campbell's conclusions.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

OF INTEREST

SKEPTICISM, SCIENCE AND RATIONALITY (GENERAL)

Sense About Science

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

Keep visiting the Sense About Science website for their latest projects. Participate in their Ask for Evidence campaign—the next Evidence Week in Parliament is Jul 3-5, 2023. See:

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

Suppression of research

‘At Sense about Science we have pursued many cases of research suppression over the past two decades, often getting results and research released by speaking directly to offenders before going public. But instead of seeing fewer cases, the problem is getting worse, with more extreme behaviour by institutions and individuals and the uncritical application of crude algorithms to make important, nuanced decisions. We need to call out those who are damaging research integrity and harming society’s ability to make important decisions. We’ve decided enough is enough – we need to call out those who are damaging research integrity and harming society’s ability to make important decisions. So we want you to tell us about cases of suppressed research you want us to investigate. We will treat all submissions in confidence, but plan to publish a register of offending institutions and individuals for cases brought into the public domain.’

<https://tinyurl.com/mr27f6b9>

Good Thinking

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

<http://goodthinkingsociety.org/>

Website of interest

See magician and mentalist Dustin Dean’s large collection of snappy Tik Tok videos demonstrating and explaining apparently paranormal effects and claims of paranormal ability by others. Very addictive!

<https://tinyurl.com/55fxn42w>

Pseudoscience

‘We don’t expect Ivy League researchers to start dabbling in pseudoscience, but it’s more common than you might think.’ Critical examination of the investigations into ‘psychic abilities’ by neurobiologist Spiro Pantazatos.

<https://tinyurl.com/26cwhsne>

Research reliability

‘Fraud in science is alarmingly common. Sometimes researchers lie about results and invent data to win funding and prestige. Other times, researchers might pay to stage and publish entirely bogus studies to win an undeserved pay rise – fuelling a “paper mill” industry worth an estimated €1 billion a year. Some of this rubbish can be easily spotted by peer reviewers, but the peer review system has become badly stretched by ever-rising paper numbers. And there’s a new threat, as more sophisticated AI is able to generate plausible scientific data.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/2s38uuzy>

And: UK Reproducibility Network ‘can be traced back to a meeting held by the Academy of Medical Sciences, jointly with the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC), Medical Research Council (MRC), and Wellcome in 2015, on the challenges and opportunities for improving the reproducibility and reliability of biomedical research in the UK. At this meeting, it was clear that there was a desire to address these issues, but no

single organisation who had clear responsibility for doing so ...’ At:

<https://www.ukrn.org/>

Teaching science in India

‘In India, children under 16 returning to school this month at the start of the school year will no longer be taught about evolution, the periodic table of elements or sources of energy.’

<https://tinyurl.com/5n8w79r6>

MEDICINE

HealthSense

Support UK’s HealthSense by becoming a member. Visit their website at ...

<https://www.healthsense-uk.org/>

.... and have a look at their current and past newsletters at:

<https://tinyurl.com/2p8zcvmb>

The Nightingale Collaboration

‘The Nightingale Collaboration challenges questionable claims made by healthcare practitioners on their websites, in adverts and in their promotional and sales materials by bringing these to the attention of the appropriate regulatory bodies. We also strive to ensure that organisations representing healthcare practitioners have robust codes of conduct for their members that protect the public and that these are enforced.’

<http://www.nightingale-collaboration.org/>

Vaccination

‘Vaccination rates have fallen among schoolchildren in England since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, health officials have said, amid a global crisis of confidence in vaccines. Fears have been expressed in recent months that thousands of children are at risk of catching deadly diseases, such as meningitis and blood poisoning, with

significant outbreaks likely due to reduced vaccination rates.’ At:

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

Also: ‘When seemingly healthy people die for no apparent reason, skepticism is bound to run rampant. Now such incidents have been given their own hashtag, #DiedSuddenly. The curiosity is understandable, but can also cause pain to families in grief.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/8dvuz7ad>

Meanwhile: ‘The directors and producer behind Died Suddenly, the viral “documentary” that tried to convince us that the COVID-19 vaccines were felling people by creating fibrous clots, are at it again. Their latest movie is called Final Days and it leans heavily into the God-versus-Satan end-times narrative Died Suddenly only hinted at.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/ycmj3emc>

And: ‘Some pigs are immunized using RNA vaccines, which anti-vaxxers are claiming are not tested for safety and could harm us. This is not true.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/559h22tj>

Clinical trials

‘Many of the world’s largest medical research funders still fail to ensure that clinical trial results are made public, new data show. Their lack of safeguards raises concerns that public money is being wasted while patients suffer harms due to systematic distortions in the medical evidence base. Only one funder worldwide, the UK’s National Institute of Health Research, has adopted all 11 research waste safeguards recommended by the World Health Organisation. Several funders, including the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, the Italian Ministry of Health, and Spain’s Instituto de Salud Carlos III, neither require their grantees to make all trial results public nor monitor whether they do so.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/yfufzfyjs>

And: ‘This study provides a snapshot of the scale of legacy research waste in the UK. It assesses the current publication status of 145 clinical trials sponsored by ten major UK non-commercial sponsors that were completed or terminated in 2017. Following outreach to sponsors

and short-term follow-up, 116/145 trials (80%) had fully reported results, and 11/145 trials (8%) had reported results in the grey literature. Results for 18/145 trials (12%) that enrolled 637 people remained completely unpublished as of early March 2023. Sponsors indicated that they plan to make public the results of 14/18 unreported trials. Our study had an impact on accelerating the reporting of some results, and seems likely to lead to future reductions in research waste. We propose three changes to UK Health Research Authority policies that could improve clinical trial reporting.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/mr25cfyb>

and discussion at:

<https://tinyurl.com/4z7cz23j>

Meanwhile, On YouTube: ‘This talk presents a new history and analysis of Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) making the case that while these can be very helpful, at present they are being fetishised and we now face medical scenarios that will require a restoration of faith in clinical judgement rather than more RCTs.’

<https://tinyurl.com/3zfr7arn>

World Health Organisation

‘At a time when the WHO is accused by conspiracy theorists of being in the pocket of Bill Gates and using mass vaccination as a nefarious scheme to control humanity, it’s easy to forget that there are genuine reasons to criticize the WHO. Its mission to ensure everyone on Earth has access to healthcare has led to its legitimization of prescientific belief systems and of thoroughly debunked practices. The WHO doesn’t stop at validating these pseudo-medicines; it wants them integrated with evidence-based medicine. And this push is not an afterthought. It’s part of a WHO multiyear strategic plan.’

<https://tinyurl.com/ycy337t2>

Traditional Chinese medicine

Foetuses exposed to traditional Chinese medicine have an increased risk of congenital malformations compared to those without exposure.

<https://tinyurl.com/bddn22sd>

Ashwagandha

‘Ashwagandha is a traditional Indian medicinal herb popular for its supposed ability to cure many ailments. Recently Denmark banned ashwagandha because of its potential negative impacts on hormones and its ability to induce abortion. Should all consumers be worried about ashwagandha?’

<https://tinyurl.com/mzeara54>

Placebo

‘The Placebo Effect Explained in 11 Levels of Complexity (and how to use it)’—YouTube.

Mozart effect

Claims that Mozart’s music can reduce symptoms of epilepsy are based on flawed research, according to new analysis.

<https://tinyurl.com/yt8nm732>

Supplements

‘To see a clear-headed and eloquent scientist command the attention of such a large listenership is encouraging. But when a respectable neuroscientist starts sanctioning mountains of dietary supplements, I begin to question his ability to evaluate the literature on these poorly regulated concoctions.’

<https://tinyurl.com/3urp43hc>

Foods as treatment

‘The notion that food can treat disease is certainly appealing. But the numerous books and articles that claim illness can be eaten away in one way or another tend to overstate the case.’

<https://tinyurl.com/3djuj8v9>

Honey

‘Apparently, if you search the internet, you will find articles saying that eating honey will help treat your seasonal allergies. It won’t. Honey can do many things, but it can’t do that.’

<https://tinyurl.com/v4sjyb69>

Diets

‘Mythological diets, like many incarnations of the carnivore diet, are silly yet popular and they’re worth debunking.’

<https://tinyurl.com/m9pcjn98>

Sugar and hyperactivity

‘I am sure you have all heard the oft-repeated myth that giving your children

sugar (or sugary treats) will cause them to become hyperactive. When I had kids, I believed that this was true. But over the years, I became much more skeptical of claims that seem to be widely accepted including sugar and hyperactivity in children.’

<https://tinyurl.com/4pr6aez>

Lactation cookies

‘Effectiveness of lactation cookies on human milk production rates: a randomized controlled trial.’ This study examined claims that lactation cookies are effective as milk boosters for lactating mothers.

<https://tinyurl.com/3ej7pymc>

Immortality

‘The pursuit of immortality: Gene therapy could be the key to longer lives. But some longevity fanatics, tired of waiting for the technology, are taking matters into their own hands.’

<https://tinyurl.com/5af979rc>

Cancer warnings

‘Of Toxic Earphones, Washing Machines, Sex Toys and Wolves at the Door: Thanks to California’s Proposition 65, numerous consumer items sport a warning that they contain chemicals that can cause cancer. Should items with this warning be avoided?’

<https://tinyurl.com/y5bkpvpv>

Melatonin

‘Many people complain of insomnia and want something to help them sleep. Melatonin is a common choice. It’s seen as a safe, effective, all-natural treatment available without a prescription. It’s often given to children to help with sleep, stress and relaxation. But a new report in the Journal of the American Medical Association suggests that health halo may not be deserved. Many commercially available melatonin gummies have more, and sometimes much more, melatonin than their label suggests.’

<https://tinyurl.com/8day8v8f>

Mystery illness

‘In 2020, a high-profile children’s charity was closed down. Just two years earlier, its young founder had died in mysterious circumstances, leaving everyone involved desperate for

answers. Only now is the truth becoming clear - a story of medical deception and celebrity obsession, exposed by a group of concerned parents determined to protect the cancer community from imposters.’ A BBC radio production in eight episodes, now available to listen to at:

<https://tinyurl.com/bdy5uyeu>

with a write up at:

<https://tinyurl.com/bdzcw8>

Saffron

‘The most expensive spice in the world is said to do wonders for an adolescent’s mood and to quell anxiety and depression, but clinical trials lending credence to this idea lack heft.’

<https://tinyurl.com/5xyv2uk3>

Chlorophyll water

‘Our social media feeds are filled with buzzwords like anti-inflammatory, detoxifying, or antimicrobial. Chlorophyll water is no exception. There are countless social media posts claiming that drinking a glass of bright green chlorophyll water every day will banish your acne. The claims go beyond skin care to bad breath and cancer prevention ...’

<https://tinyurl.com/4tf8sd8t>

Vabbing

‘Vabbing, as the name perhaps suggests, involves the dabbing of vaginal secretions onto so-called pulse points of the body—wrists, neck, inside the elbows—just as you would a fragrance. The practice purportedly makes you irresistible to a would-be partner. The craze took over TikTok for a while and received coverage across the internet. Proponents cite pheromones and deep-rooted biologic responses and fall back on its low-risk, no-cost character as reasons it’s harmless even if it weren’t effective—but it definitely is, according to them. Let’s see what science has to say.’

<https://tinyurl.com/bp7swynn>

Swallowing the tongue

‘Have you ever heard that you should tilt your head backwards during a nosebleed? Or that you should urinate on a jellyfish sting? Or that in case of a seizure you should put a spoon into the

victim’s mouth? These common first-aid myths, though well-intentioned, can be more harmful than helpful. And they come up each time I teach a first-aid course! The spoon myth stems from the belief that swallowing the tongue is possible and that placing an object into the mouth can prevent this. When I ask where people picked up this belief, they seldom remember. How did this misguided information get so ingrained?’ See:

<https://tinyurl.com/4hexb9s6>

and

<https://tinyurl.com/3hbwz2c5>

Taurine

‘The “Elixir of Life.” Really? This week that elixir is...drum roll...taurine! That exuberant phrase was repeated in numerous breathless reports of a study that appeared in the prestigious journal Science that described the anti-aging effects of this simple chemical found in our body.’ But is it?

<https://tinyurl.com/mukfrw8r>

PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHIATRY

ADHD

‘A leading NHS consultant psychiatrist has met me in person and concluded I don’t have ADHD - attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Yet, after shorter assessments online, three private clinics have told me I do - and offered me powerful medication.’

<https://tinyurl.com/44rsut55>

Non-verbal communication

‘In this article, we document four persistent misconceptions about nonverbal communication—namely, that people communicate using decodable body language; that they have a stable personal space by which they regulate contact with others; that they express emotion using universal, evolved, iconic, categorical facial expressions; and that they can deceive and detect deception, using dependable telltale clues.’

<https://tinyurl.com/59w47pms>

Supernatural beliefs

‘Humans across the globe use supernatural beliefs to explain the world around them. This article explores whether cultural groups invoke the supernatural more to explain natural phenomena (for example, storms, disease outbreaks) or social phenomena (for example, murder, warfare). Quantitative analysis of ethnographic text across 114 geographically and culturally diverse societies found that supernatural explanations are more prevalent for natural than for social phenomena, consistent with theories that ground the origin of religious belief in a human tendency to perceive intent and agency in the natural world. Despite the dominance of supernatural explanations of natural phenomena, supernatural explanations of social phenomena were especially prevalent in urbanized societies with more socially complex and anonymous groups. Our results show how people use supernatural beliefs as explanatory tools in non-industrial societies, and how these applications vary across small-scale communities versus large and urbanized groups.’

<https://tinyurl.com/yckd33h8>

POLITICS AND PUBLIC POLICY

Swearing on oath

“So Help Me God”? Does oath swearing in courtroom scenarios impact trial outcomes?”

<https://tinyurl.com/4r2yw7s6>

Public trust

‘The COVID crisis of the past three years has greatly impacted stakeholder relationships between scientists, health providers, policy makers, pharmaceutical industry employees, and the public. Lockdowns and restrictions of civil liberties strained an already fraught relationship between the public and policy makers, with scientists also seen as complicit in providing the justification for the abrogation of civil liberties. This was compounded by the suppression of open debate over contentious topics of public

interest and a violation of core bioethical principles embodied in the Nuremberg Code. Overall, the policies chosen during the pandemic have had a corrosive impact on public trust, which is observable in surveys and consumer behaviour. While a loss of trust is difficult to remedy, the antidotes are accountability and transparency. This narrative review presents an overview of key issues that have motivated public distrust during the pandemic and ends with suggested remedies. Scientific norms and accountability must be restored in order to rebuild the vital relationship between scientists and the public they serve.’

<https://tinyurl.com/2sbj3ehc>

CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Reducing conspiracy beliefs

‘Conspiracy beliefs have become a topic of increasing interest among behavioural researchers. While holding conspiracy beliefs has been associated with several detrimental social, personal, and health consequences, little research has been dedicated to systematically reviewing the methods that could reduce conspiracy beliefs. We conducted a systematic review to identify and assess interventions that have sought to counter conspiracy beliefs. Out of 25 studies (total N = 7179), we found that while the majority of interventions were ineffective in terms of changing conspiracy beliefs, several interventions were particularly effective. Interventions that fostered an analytical mindset or taught critical thinking skills were found to be the most effective in terms of changing conspiracy beliefs. Our findings are important as we develop future research to combat conspiracy beliefs.’

<https://tinyurl.com/bdeyvyxp>

MISCELLANEOUS UNUSUAL CLAIMS

Stargate

‘The project started in the 70s. The American intelligence services started to randomly investigate people who presented themselves to the world as psychics. It’s believed that the Soviet

Union was simultaneously doing the same. There was increasing interest in the phenomenon known as remote viewing. This is defined as the ability to receive information about situations or people that are far away. It’s a phenomenon of extrasensory perception. However, to date, there’s no supporting scientific evidence for it.’

<https://tinyurl.com/e47mx4ke>

UFOs

‘NASA held its first public meeting on UFOs Wednesday a year after launching a study into unexplained sightings. The space agency televised the hours-long hearing featuring an independent panel of experts. The team includes 16 scientists and other experts selected by NASA including retired astronaut Scott Kelly, the first American to spend nearly a year in space. Several committee members have been subjected to “online abuse” for serving on the team, which detracts from the scientific process, said NASA’s Dan Evans, adding that NASA security is dealing with it. “It’s precisely this rigorous, evidence-based approach that allows one to separate the fact from fiction,” Evans said.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/2mmdcan3>

And: ‘The headline is a bold one. “Intelligence officials say US has retrieved craft of non-human origin,” the story in the publication The Debrief reads. The phrase “whoa, if true” was coined for a situation like this. Especially the “if true” part.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/35hm2c5f>

Meanwhile: ‘A sequence of recent events — most notably, the shooting down of three “UFOs” along with a wayward Chinese spy balloon — is leading to the very scrutiny that ufology enthusiasts have long desired. But this closer look, to their great chagrin, will almost certainly reveal little compelling evidence that UFOs actually exist.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/bdd6xjm3>

And from Vicente-Juan Ballester Olmos, UFO FOTOCAT Blog: ‘Through the courtesy of Isaac Koi, I have received 217 photographic case folders from the archives of Dr. Michael Swords (Kalamazoo, Michigan). The

information contains references to many sources and, although often redundant, I feel it will contribute not less than 50 new entries to the FOTOCAT records, when fully processed. FOTOCAT's latest count shows 13,080 cases. May I remind researchers that I will gladly make available segments from the catalog, needed for research purposes, in the form of spreadsheet lists for a given year or period, for a particular country, province, region, department, or State, for precise photographer's name, type of explanation, etc. Just describe your project and ask!' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/7wb56n2z>

Madeline McCann

Further developments in the case of this missing child (see 'Of Interest' in the previous issue): 'A Polish woman who claimed she was Madeleine McCann appears to have ended her search for proof after receiving the results of a DNA test. Julia Faustyna, 21, made headlines earlier this year after posting a video to Instagram in which she claimed to be the British girl who disappeared, aged three, on a family holiday in Portugal.'

<https://tinyurl.com/2p8468jd>

Psychic scam

'A federal jury in the Eastern District of New York convicted a Canadian man today for perpetrating a decades-long mass-mailing fraud scheme that stole

more than \$175 million from victims in the United States. According to court documents and evidence presented at trial, Patrice Runner, 57, a Canadian and French citizen, operated a mass-mailing fraud scheme from 1994 through November 2014. As part of the scheme, Runner sent letters to millions of U.S. consumers, many of whom were elderly and vulnerable. The letters falsely purported to be individualized, personal communications from so-called "psychics," including Maria Duval (leading this type of fraud scheme to be referred to as a "Maria Duval Scam"), and promised that the recipient had the opportunity to achieve great wealth and happiness with the psychic's assistance, in exchange for payment of a fee.'

<https://tinyurl.com/5cy52wkb>

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>

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>

LOGIC AND INTUITION: ANSWERS

How do you escape?

Do not despair! How about trying this? Start a fire between you and the blocked end of the ravine. The wind will blow the fire *down* the ravine, and you can follow in its wake, walking on the burnt ground left behind. When the first fire at last reaches the burnt path that your fire has created, there is nowhere for it to go and it will subside. Now you can now

turn round and walk back towards the entrance on the burnt path created by both fires.

Good luck!

The hermit

There is no reason for the hermit to be amazed by the times of day being the same. It is inevitable that he will come to some point on his journey back at the same time that he did the previous day.

The situation is equivalent to two people making the journey, with one setting off from the hermit's shack at the same time that the other sets off from the village. At some point they are bound to meet, and obviously they will reach this point at the same time.

ASKE

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

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

m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk

email: aske1@talktalk.net

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