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Edited by Michael Heap

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Formal articles should be aimed at the intelligent layperson, and authors should take particular care to define or explain unusual terms or concepts. Equations, statistics or other numerical and symbolic tools may be employed whenever required. Articles should be as succinct as possible, but may be of any length.

Authors of contributions to the *Skeptical Intelligencer* should take care to ensure that texts are temperate in tone and free of vituperation. They should also ensure that arguments are either supported by express evidence/arguments or identified as speculative. 'Do not pretend conclusions are certain that are not demonstrated or demonstrable.' (T.H. Huxley).

Before being accepted for publication, submitted texts will be reviewed by the Editor and any appropriate advisors. Where improvements or changes are desirable, the editorial team will work with authors and make constructive suggestions as to amendments.

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- *Chapters*: Griff, P. (1978) Creationism. In D. Greengage (ed.) *Pseudoscience*. Boston: Chapman Publishers.
- *Electronic material*: Driscoe, E. Another look at Uri Geller. <http://www.etc.org>. Accessed 21 April 1997.

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For further information contact the editor, Dr. Michael Heap at <m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk>.

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# EDITORIAL

## Michael Heap

Many apologies for (a) the late arrival of the 2006 *Skeptical Intelligencer* and (b) its thinness. Exhortations to ASKE members elicited a positive response from just two stalwarts, Brian Robinson and Mark Newbrook. Many thanks to them for setting an example to other members. What this issue lacks in quantity is made up by quality (of course I am omitting any consideration of my own contributions when I make this assertion).

Brian Robinson, a retired psychiatrist, raises some important matters when he takes to task Richard Dawkins' use of the term (or metaphor) 'delusion' in his best-selling book *The God Delusion*. Is it appropriate to refer to a religious commitment to God as a 'delusion' in the pathological sense?

Well, it depends what is meant by the term 'delusion' doesn't it? Yet is it not the case that when, in everyday discourse, we say that such-and-such a belief is a 'delusion' we are implying some shortcoming on the part of the believer? This is certainly true of beliefs other than religion: beliefs in extra-terrestrial visitations, certain fringe medical practices, Astrology, Tarot Cards, etc.

One obvious characteristic of such beliefs is that, like religious beliefs, they are widely shared. This is in contrast to beliefs held by individuals diagnosed with delusional disorder or paranoid schizophrenia. Their beliefs tend to be personally derived. Family, friends, neighbours, colleagues and acquaintances are usually not involved in constructing the belief system. In fact they will do their best to dissuade the person and make him of her 'see sense'.

I was thinking about this recently when, during a break in a ward round, the consultant psychiatrist expressed his belief that the human race was not long for this world, citing the effects of global warming or nuclear war as catastrophes that were like to befall us. He might also have mentioned a cataclysmic earthquake or asteroid impact.

The fear that such catastrophes are imminent for the human race does not as a rule form the basis of belief systems that preoccupy mentally ill patients (though it is possible that some would, say, express the belief that they are able to ward off such catastrophes). Most often, their beliefs are highly *personalised*. Let me explain.

Plenty of people entertain very unusual beliefs about the world, including conspiracies theories. Let's say that Tom Smith believes that foreign agents have infiltrated the BBC and ITV with a view to corrupting the public by broadcasting irreligious and lewd programmes and distorting information given out on news bulletins. (During the 'Cold War' some people did believe that communists had taken over the running of the BBC.)

Even though Tom has convinced himself of this, and his friends and family think he is 'mad', he may still carry on with his life in the normal way, succeeding in his work, being a dutiful husband and loving father, organising the local Neighbourhood Watch meetings and so on.

Those who know Tom may be inclined to say that he is 'deluded' or 'deluding himself', but no men in white coats are going to try to persuade him that it is in his best interests to spend some time in the psychiatric ward of the local hospital and that he will feel much better once he has started on a course of medication. However, alarm bells ring once Tom's theory start to dictate his beliefs, attitudes and behaviour in his everyday life. For example, he may suspect that the 'foreign agents' in question have been tipped off that he is onto them and, accordingly, have him under camera surveillance. Similarly, he may suspect that the landlord at his local pub has secretly recorded him proclaiming his beliefs to his pals at the bar. Rather more seriously, he may take it upon himself to ambush managerial staff as they are leaving the BBC or ITV headquarters and attempt to extract from them confessions that they are part of a conspiracy.

If these sorts of things happened, we would be very confident in saying that Tom has a mental illness such as delusional disorder or, if other symptoms are present, paranoid schizophrenia. (It is of course important to ensure that Tom's psychosis is not caused by some other medical condition, poisoning, drugs, the side effects of medication, etc.)

As Brian Robinson says, you do not help patients who are *suffering* (along with their family and other people) from delusions by an outright assault on their beliefs. Medication, supported by gentle encouragement to reflect, question and test out the beliefs can be very effective. It is a mark of progress when a patient can say, 'There *may* be another reason for...', 'I *might* have misinterpreted things...', 'I *could* be wrong...', etc. This is not something you often hear from people with religious convictions.

For a wider discussion of these themes, see my article 'Psychopathology and beliefs in anomalous phenomena' in the *Skeptical Intelligencer*, Vol 4, 2001, followed by commentary by Brian Robinson (accessible on the ASKE Website or at [www.mheap.com](http://www.mheap.com)).

## ARTICLES

This article was first published in the *New Zealand Skeptic*, number 80, Winter 2006. It is reprinted here with acknowledgments to editors and author.

### LAMARCKIAN AND DARWINIAN EVOLUTION

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#### Jim Ring is a Nelson Skeptic

*Attacks on Darwinian evolutionary theory have come from within the scientific community as well as from creationists. Much of this is the normal process of scientific scrutiny, but some bear all the hallmarks of pseudoscience.*

'Lamarckian evolution' is a term commonly used to denote the inheritance of acquired characteristics, as opposed to 'Darwinian evolution' in which such inheritance is thought impossible. But neither Lamarck nor Darwin had any idea of how inheritance works.

Lamarck was the first to classify the invertebrate animals (he coined the term 'invertebrate'). He realised that species were not fixed, but did not set a single common ancestor for all living things. His theory of evolution involved groups of organisms each moving up a predetermined ladder and it clearly stated that the 'lower' organisms were the ancestors of the 'higher' organisms on each ladder (*see Note 1*). This type of theory is called 'orthogenesis' (sometimes 'teleology') or directed evolution. Lamarck's scheme differed in that the directing agency lay within the individual. Earlier theories had used 'God' or 'Nature' to control the direction.

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It is commonly believed that Darwin started a new theory showing that acquired characteristics were not inherited. Not so.

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In Lamarck's scheme all organisms had an inner tendency to strive for a higher level and they were able to somehow choose which characteristics they passed on to their descendants (except perhaps for humans, who were already at the top). This is rather mystical so Lamarck suggested that use or disuse of various organs was an important factor for selecting what should be passed to the next generation. Clearly this is unsatisfactory (as was pointed out at the time). A caterpillar may 'use' legs to crawl away, but in what sense does it 'use' its protective colour or unpleasant taste? In what way would a brilliantly coloured insect with pleasant flavour 'disuse' these characteristics? For a caterpillar these factors are more important than legs for escaping predators.

Several terms (translated into English) originate with Lamarck; 'invertebrate' is one and 'biology' another but also 'higher' and 'lower' organisms, and 'missing link'. These latter terms are inappropriate in Darwinian theory.

It is commonly believed that Darwin started a new theory showing that acquired characteristics were not inherited. Not so: *The Origin of Species* first produces overwhelming evidence that organic evolution has occurred and then suggests a new theory, natural selection, as its mechanism. Knowing nothing about heredity, Darwin produced a theory that was independent of how inheritance was achieved; it made orthogenesis unnecessary. In recent times natural selection has been used as an explanation outside biology where genetic inheritance does not apply (a clear indication that it is not dependent on a single type of inheritance). Daniel Dennet calls it 'Darwin's Dangerous Idea'.

However, natural selection must be the most strongly resisted theory in science. The implications of the theory are so horrifying that many (including biologists) have felt it *must* not be true. It implies, as Dawkins put it, 'Nature is not cruel, not kind; merely indifferent.' Natural selection does not rule out the possibility of a creative supreme being, but it does rule out a Christian-style god that takes a benign interest in the living organisms it has created.

We all know that people have challenged the facts of evolution for religious or political reasons, but for a century or more these challenges have come from outside science. Most opposition to natural selection has come from within science, even though religious belief may have been the motive. A very large number of eminent biologists have opposed natural selection and some of these had no religious faith. Even T.H. Huxley was unhappy with the theory and concentrated on the facts of evolution. Nearly all the challenges to natural selection have involved some form of orthogenesis.

Many of the attacks on Darwinism in the past fifty years or so have come from Marxist biologists who let their

politics overrule their science. Some of these biologists were outraged when natural selection was applied to humans, particularly to human behaviour in the discipline originally called sociobiology. For a really excellent overview of this controversy read *Defenders of the Truth* by the sociologist Ullica Segerstråle.

Attacks on natural selection still occur. Unfortunately any challenge to Darwin, however ill-informed, still generates publicity even among those who should know better. For example, in January 2004 *New Scientist* headlined yet again *Why Darwin Was Wrong About Sex*. The article reveals another author who does not really understand Darwinian Theory. My wife (who many years ago taught biology) used to say, 'Few people claim to fully understand relativity or quantum theory because these seem to be written in mathematics. But natural selection seems to be written in English so few realise that a deep understanding of biology is necessary for its appreciation.'

I sometimes feel that people who write essays claiming that Darwin was wrong should demonstrate that they have read the collection of essays by John Maynard Smith titled *Did Darwin get it Right?* before any editor puts his or her effort into a publication with claims to be scientific.

### The Croizat affair

There was a disgraceful episode in the biology departments of some New Zealand universities around twenty years ago when a few zealots discovered the ideas of a fringe scientist called Leon Croizat and promoted a 'new' theory of evolution. 'Croizat believed that evolution had an internal direction that was independent of selection by environmental factors' (Gordon Hewitt, 1984). There was actually nothing new about this at all; it was a form of orthogenesis. In fact it closely resembled Lamarckism because the directing agency lay within the organism. The proponents confused the issue by concentrating on Croizat's insistence that vicariance was more important than dispersal in explaining the geographical distribution of living organisms (*see Note 2*).

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Combating pseudoscience in the ordinary media gives the public a false impression, as most people find it difficult to see that on some issues only one side constitutes science.

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This is pretty academic; probably few biologists were interested. But Croizat's claim that orthogenesis rather than natural selection was the guiding principle of evolution would have been extremely important if true. It would have overthrown Darwin's ideas and produced a true revolution in science.

Plenty of wacky ideas have gained support in universities and controversy is healthy. However, within

science it is essential that work is published in peer-reviewed journals and discussed at international science congresses. Scientists generally ignore their fellows who espouse nutty ideas without attempting publication in the professional literature. And this works well, as many daft ideas simply disappear.

Fair-minded people generally believe that every story has two sides. Combating pseudoscience in the ordinary media gives the public a false impression, as most people find it difficult to see that on some issues only one side constitutes science. Unfortunately there are cases, especially in medicine and education, where it is necessary to engage pseudoscience in the general media. Outrageous claims made by somebody with scientific qualifications cannot be safely ignored if they have an effect on society.

In the Croizat case these New Zealand zealots, unable to make any headway with their peers, bombarded the poor biology teachers in New Zealand schools with (mis)information urging them to teach the 'new theory of evolution' that was bound to supplant Darwinism. An attempt in this manner to short-circuit the normal processes of science is a sure sign of pseudoscience and charlatanism. It is worth noting that the 'new' theory (bound to supplant Darwinism!) seems to have sunk without trace.

For anybody with interest there is some debate in *NZ Science Teacher* from the 1980s with Keith Lockett and myself on the side of Darwin, and J.R. Grehan on the side of Croizat. Gordon Hewitt tried to remain neutral.

My letter to the *NZ Science Teacher* suggested there were some signals that would identify an article as probably pseudoscience:

- Its title is inappropriately grandiose.
- Its style is emotional.
- It has a touch of paranoia.
- It contains an enormous reference list, sufficient to daunt the most determined reader.
- On analysis the list contains a high percentage of references to the author's own works, or to the works of the 'group'.
- The majority of references are to relatively obscure publications that are difficult to track down.
- Those few references to well-known authors or publications are generally ancient.
- Readers are urged to get their ideas up to date - indeed to get ahead of the crowd.

The article by Grehan fitted all these criteria (his list of references was extraordinary) and should have been rejected by the editor.

Perhaps the most amazing aspect of this affair is that when it started, evolutionary theory had just had its most productive period since Darwin. Far from being a theory in crisis, or due to be supplanted, natural selection had triumphed over all its rivals. In the previous two decades George Williams and Maynard Smith had used games

theory to show that group selection was impossible in the long run. Then Hamilton put selection on firm mathematical grounds (he should have got a Nobel Prize). Richard Dawkins popularised these ideas.

All this occurred nearly a decade after Dawkins' first book so the new ideas were not buried in obscurity but available for the general reader. Yet they were ignored by the group. Croizat's New Zealand disciples were obviously too busy reading his turgid contributions to pay attention to what was happening in real science.

In nearly a century and a half of existence, natural selection has seen off more rivals than any other theory in the history of science, while the last quarter century or so must represent the final triumph for Darwin, with his theory being extended much further than he could have imagined.

The Croizat group in New Zealand claimed that he had made remarkable progress in Biogeography. *The Secular Ark* by Janet Browne is a history of Biogeography and

worth consulting to see the falsity (and absurdity) of this claim.

### Notes

1. Darwin wrote a note to himself, 'Never use the words higher and lower'.
2. To quote from a textbook: vicariance is the fragmentation of widespread distribution that results from mountain building, rising sea levels and other disruptive events on regional or global scales. Dispersal occurs when individuals colonise new regions as adjacent areas become more favourable or previously separated habitats connect.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Peter Joyce for his comments on an early draft of this article and pay tribute to the memory of Keith Lockett. He and I were involved in several struggles against pseudoscience in education before NZ Skeptics was formed.!

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This article was first published in the *Skeptical Times*, the Newsletter of the Irish Skeptics Society, Summer 2005 and is published with the kind permission of the editors. There are some slight amendments. The reference to the abuse of children in care was omitted in the *Skeptical Times*.

## POWER AND OBEDIENCE Of Healers And Hoaxers

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### Michael Heap

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In recent years an unusual hoax has been perpetrated throughout the USA. At the time of writing, over 70 occurrences of this hoax have been reported and an unknown number have gone undocumented. What happens is typified by the following.

A restaurant manager receives a telephone call from someone claiming to be a police officer. The caller states that one of the restaurant's present customers is suspected of theft and the restaurant manager is obliged to take the suspect into a back room and perform a body search. The caller directs the manager in his selection of the suspect, usually a young woman, and in the conduct of the body search, which involves the removal of clothing. According to Sheriff Joseph Arpaio of Maricopa County:

'It's mind-boggling that he (*the hoaxer*) gets away with it. Why would any responsible person do something like this

just because some guy calls them on the telephone and tells them he's a cop? Yet we've documented more than seventy of these hoax calls during the past two years, and in almost every case, the manager has agreed to perform the strip search. And even more incredibly, the female customers have almost always gone along with the scam'.

(See 'Torn and Frayed in Manila: Weird',  
<<http://tornandfrayed.typepad.com/tornandfrayed/weird/>>)

Perhaps a seasoned police officer like the sheriff should not be all that surprised by the activities in which people are sometimes willing to engage and the pretexts under which they do so. Certainly psychologists, amongst other social scientists, should not be so taken aback. Let me expand on this.

### **The contribution of psychology to skepticism**

Psychology is a discipline that is not uncommonly represented as the art of conveying in obscure terminology whatever everyday experience tells us is true of human nature. As a rule, I do not believe this to be a fair assessment. For one thing, there are important principles whose influence psychologists have demonstrated, in a rigorous and convincing manner, to extend far beyond what common experience informs us is the case. An example is the degree to which the brain is the architect of how we construct reality and not simply its dutiful representative. Time and again skeptics invoke this principle in order to account for the experience of paranormal phenomena, the recollection of impossible events, and so on.

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At any time, we actively seek out, construct or monitor our role prescription. We have a need to do so.

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Another important principle, and one that is essential to understand the above hoax, is the extent to which our social behaviour is scripted and choreographed by the requirements of the various roles – implicit and explicit, formal and informal – that we occupy in the course of everyday life. It is as though the life of each one of us is an extemporised drama; at any time we take our cue from our understanding of what our current role demands of us.

As in the case of the earlier mentioned principle, we are far from passive in this process, although we may seem to be so. At any time, we actively seek out, construct or monitor our role prescription. We have a need to do so. But it is also the case for both principles that their salience and potency are more evident under certain circumstances, such as uncertainty and threat, than others. ‘What is my place in the order of things?’; ‘What am I supposed to do?’; ‘Am I authentic in my role?’; and ultimately, ‘Who am I?’ are all fundamental questions whose answers we have a need to construct.

Power, in this analysis, is the ability to influence people in the construction of their answers. We all possess this power in varying degrees and according to circumstances; we are all, likewise, subject to it. It may be for the good or, unwittingly or deliberately, for the bad.

The early experiments of psychologists such as Solomon Asch, Muzafer Sherif and Stanley Milgram were controlled demonstrations of the importance of social influence – compliance, conformity, obedience to authority, and so on. Milgram’s experiments are particularly apposite here (Milgram, 1974). Participants were persuaded seemingly to administer painful and even lethal electric shocks to their fellow human beings on the pretext that they were engaging in serious scientific research. (Unknown to

them, there were in reality no shocks and the ‘shocked’ participant was merely acting.)

### **Alleged indecent assault by professionals:**

#### **The compliant complainant**

I was drawn to the story of the hoax because, in my work as a forensic psychologist, over 50% of the instructions I receive concern sexual offences. Also, because of my background in hypnosis, I have acted as an expert witness in criminal and civil cases in which hypnosis or a related procedure has allegedly played a part. In quite a number of cases, the defendant – a doctor, psychotherapist, trainer, etc. – is accused of indecent assault and sometimes even rape. Some allegations, in my opinion, are likely to have been partly or wholly fabricated; in many others the weight of the evidence suggests otherwise. What is striking about such cases is the acquiescence and compliance displayed by the complainants in response to the unwelcome attentions of the perpetrator. Why, despite the absence of any explicit threat or physical force, do they seem able to offer at most only a token display of resistance? Why in some cases do they not immediately inform others what has happened? And why, sometimes, do they return for further appointments?

These anomalies are often exploited by the defence to undermine the credibility of the complainant, whereas the prosecution may wish to account for them by reference to hypnosis: the complainant was ‘put into a trance’ and thereby rendered as an automaton, completely obedient to the hypnotist’s demands.

In fact, the experience and behaviour of the victims in these cases are usually very similar to those who have been similarly abused without any use of hypnosis. The high level of compliance and obedience that hypnotic subjects may display can be shown to be due, in the main, to the social context in which the hypnosis takes place, rather than any property specific to hypnosis (Hawkins, 1993; Heap, 2000, 2006, in press). Victims in the hypnotic context may attribute their unexpected degree of passivity and cooperation to their ‘being hypnotised’. This may provide what for them is an acceptable rationale for why they were so compliant.

Most of what I have been discussing so far involves human malevolence in some respect. In the matter of the hoax that I described earlier, the malefactor is the hoaxer. Although we cannot be certain, it is entirely plausible that those performing the strip searches did so in all innocence, believing that they were providing authentic assistance to the police. (Despite this, civil and criminal action has been taken against some of these people and the owners of restaurants).

Several years ago my advice was sought by a police force investigating Mr M, a community worker who was facing multiple charges of indecently assaulting and raping young girls in his trust. The skills he demonstrated in

selecting and grooming these poor children were astonishing. Amongst his activities, Mr M would organise coach trips to the seaside for parties of children where they would stay in hotels. Some parents would also come along. One method he used to target his victims was to offer a prize of a free holiday to one of the children. He would ring up the parents before the trip and say, for example, 'Tell little Lucy to start packing her case – she's won the prize!' Overjoyed, the parents would gladly deliver their child into his hands. Little Lucy would share his hotel bedroom with the predicted results. In fact, on at least one occasion Mr M shared a room with his victim while her father, oblivious to what was going on, was occupying another room.

Another ploy Mr. M used was to persuade his victims that the abuse was necessary in order to win an award or a prize for the club. In other words, it was a kind of ordeal that both of them had to submit to (*see Note 1*). Of course, part of the ordeal was a vow of secrecy. Mr M had actually videotaped many of these assaults and the police brought one down in case I wanted to see it. I settled for their verbal description of its contents. In it, Mr M matched the child's manifest distress by protesting how horrible it was that they were having to go through all of this in order to win the prize and how he hated what he was doing.

The police officers were experienced men who were well accustomed to how children and vulnerable adults can be manipulated and groomed for sexual exploitation. Nevertheless, they admitted to being astonished with the ease by which the defendant had been able to access his victims and obtain their acquiescence.

Now, the accused was an amateur stage hypnotist and the officers asked me if he could, for example, have hypnotised the parents, and given them a post-hypnotic suggestion that when he telephoned them and uttered a particular word or phrase, they would automatically hand over their child to him when he came to collect her. I informed the officers that hypnosis is not like this.

Perhaps the reader at this point is reminded of the Indian guru Sai Baba. Supposedly a god incarnate, he has 30 million devotees throughout the world. It is considered a great privilege for the sons of his devotees to have private audiences with their guru. In a BBC television documentary, *Secret Swami*, shown in the UK on 17.6.04, some of these young men revealed exactly what privileges were granted them once they were alone with this man and the curtains were drawn. How many of Sai Baba's followers withdrew their allegiance to him after these revelations? Precious few it seems. Here, then, is another parallel with the above child abuse case. Regarding the latter, the officers informed me that there was much anger in the local community about it. No surprise there, but the anger was directed against them! The parents were accusing the police of pursuing a vendetta against the accused, whom they regarded as an upstanding and totally

trustworthy person. (Now this evil man has been convicted, I imagine that these attitudes have changed.)

### **The hoax paradigm in healing**

In many examples we can cite on this theme, the harm done, or the potential for harm, is not necessarily the result of deliberate malevolence. ('The road to hell is paved with good intention'.) This is much in evidence in several important areas of human activity, healing being one and religion another. (I use the word 'healing' in its broadest sense.) For example, in March 2004, a Mr Bryan Evans was exposed on a BBC Wales television programme for claiming to cure cancer by psychological means, namely by resolving painful memories (see *The ASKE Newsletter, Skeptical Adversaria*, 2004 (2)). I understand that Mr Evans is now contrite, but maintains that he genuinely believed in the authenticity of these ideas and practices, which he learned from a certain Dr Geert Reike Hamer, an Austrian therapist (who, notwithstanding his being sent to prison, may also have genuine faith in his methods). I can believe Mr Evans: medical practices down the ages have included many that were not only useless but were directly harmful and, especially in the treatment of mental illness, no different from torture (*see Note 2*). Yet those taught to administer these procedures sincerely believed that they had real healing potential.

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In my professional life I just about go back as far as a time when electro-convulsive therapy (ECT) was occasionally prescribed more for punitive than for therapeutic reasons.

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We must be mindful, however, of the power that the practitioner of such methods – indeed of any 'healing' procedure – wields over the individual who is subject to his or her ministrations. Power has a tendency to corrupt; the greater the power entrusted to the practitioner and, correspondingly, the greater the submissiveness of the other, the greater the ease whereby methods come to be used for the purposes of exploitation and even wanton abuse and cruelty. We are all aware of the ease whereby some unpleasant medical, psychiatric and psychological procedures can come to be used in a less than caring manner. In my professional life I just about go back as far as a time when electro-convulsive therapy (ECT) was occasionally prescribed more for punitive than for therapeutic reasons.

Here are two further examples quoted in a paper about children 'in care' by Andrew Kendrick (1998).

'Two cases of programme abuse in the UK have been the subject of major inquiries. In Staffordshire, at least 132 children were subjected to "Pindown" between 1983 and 1989. Pindown involved: persistent isolation in an area



cordoned off as a “special” or Pindown unit; removal of ordinary clothing and the enforced wearing of shorts or night clothes; persistent loss of “privileges”, and non-attendance at school, no writing or reading materials, no television, radio or visits. While the Pindown regime had a purported “philosophy” to give children intense, individual attention, the Inquiry concluded that it was “intrinsically unethical, unprofessional and unacceptable” (Levy & Kahan, 1991, p. 167). In Leicestershire, a purported treatment approach known as regression therapy involved dealing with young people as with a child under five: e.g., dressing the child; spoon-feeding or using baby bottles; “the apparently bizarre use of the paraphernalia of babyhood in the treatment of adolescent boys and girls”. There were significant complaints “because young people found the treatment to which they were subjected in the name of therapy to be abusive in itself” (Kirkwood, 1993 p. 62).’

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People who are trained or training in a particular school or system of psychological therapy may develop an unquestioning and almost religious commitment to that therapy.

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At this point, perhaps, the reader may well have brought to mind the ‘ritual abuse’ scandals of the 1990s when some social workers, trained to detect the presence of ritual, sexual and physical abuse of children, wrought havoc on families in Rochdale and the Orkney Islands. We may also be reminded of the dreadful business of ‘recovered memory’ therapy – how countless individuals have come to believe, without any proper evidence, that they were subject to sexual abuse as children.

In my professional experience I have often noticed how people who are trained or training in a particular school or system of psychological therapy (and there are many of these around) may develop an unquestioning and almost religious commitment to that therapy, which is not warranted by any clear evidence of its validity. (I am sure the same is true in medicine and it is certainly so in the field of alternative medicine.)

As part of my own training, in the 1970s I worked in the Child Guidance Clinic at a North London hospital where the dominant system of therapy in which staff had been trained or were training was the psychoanalytic approach of Melanie Klein. The psychotherapists had been taught to interpret much of what the child did or said in the therapy session by reference to certain bodily parts, how big they were, what the child wanted to do with them, what he or she unconsciously thought about the therapist, and so on. (I did not formally train in child psychotherapy and was accordingly limited to using more mundane methods in my efforts to help children who were referred to me).

After working there for some time I had a number of concerns. The two principle ones were, firstly, that I could see very little evidence that the children and families who attended the Unit received any benefit, and secondly, the majority defaulted on their attendance after a few appointments, usually one or two. (I confirmed this by periodically drawing out random samples of patients’ files and checking the final recorded entry). In other words, the punters voted with their feet.

It seemed to me that the people working there should have been questioning the validity and utility of the theory and practices in which they had trained or were training. Not a bit of it! Nobody else but me seemed to be bothered about this at all and what discussion there was about defaulting and absence of progress was usually concerned to account for both from within the dogma espoused at the Unit. The same response greeted any attempt to give these problems an airing; this was interpreted as evidence of some personal problem that was only understandable in psychoanalytic theory, the term ‘negative counter-transference’ being a favourite abracadabra word for neutralising any dissent.

My experience is one that numerous colleagues also tell me they have had at other similar units. I need to say that I have since had experience of other child and adolescent services which I would highly commend for offering a range of psychological interventions and which encourage a more critical approach to their work. (Also, nowadays there is greater emphasis by NHS managers on continual audit, cost-effectiveness, performance and outcome measures, etc.)

### Synthesis

I have reached a point in the discussion on the verge of another phenomenon, namely that of cults. (It is, incidentally, no surprise that many healing systems are associated with some charismatic, guru-like figure and even a set of acknowledged apostles or disciples). Indeed I earlier could not avoid reference to the guru Sai Baba. The themes to discuss in pursuing this topic would be the ones enunciated here. However, I do not wish on this occasion to expand upon this particular subject.

I wish instead to try to pull together the threads of the meanderings of which my initial account of the hoax has taken me. In much of what I have been discussing, there is a common paradigm. There are usually three actors in a real-life drama, each with his or her distinctive role. One thing that defines their relationship is power. I shall characterise their roles as I, P and R (Instructor, Practitioner and Recipient). In the case of the hoax, I is the hoaxer, P the restaurant manager, and R is the woman who is searched. I gives permission to P to assume a position of power with respect to R and to behave in ways in which in normal circumstances would be considered abusive, indecent and cruel.

In the case of healing, I is the trainer (an individual, an institution, etc), P is the healer, and R is the client or patient. The power relationships correspond with those of the hoax, although it is only in certain circumstances that P's actions may be construed as abusive, indecent or cruel in other contexts.

There are two considerations that are of significance to a skeptical analysis. The first is the authenticity of the roles occupied by the actors. Clearly in the case of the hoax, none of the actors are authentic in the roles they are explicitly assigned.

A second consideration is each actor's awareness of whether his or her perceived role is indeed authentic or not. In the case of the hoax, I is aware that his role is not authentic; this is true of P in the healing context where he is a therapist administering a cure that he knows is worthless or, worse still, that is merely a guise for satisfying his own perverted wishes.

How can we guarantee that healing is no different from hoaxing in the above paradigm? The best we can do is to establish the authenticity of the practices being taught and applied. If they are not authentic, then the patient, and usually the therapist and the trainer, are being deceived. This may be a fairly benign outcome, but often, for the patient at least, it may prove a disaster.

#### Notes

1. It may be relevant to note the following here. As was stated earlier, the naïve participants in Milgram's experiments were apparently willing to torture their fellow human beings on the pretext that this was in the interests of science. Milgram himself was criticised for exposing innocent people to this revelation. His apologists asserted that this was justified in the interests of science!
2. This is still going on in some places. A schizophrenic patient whom I know once experienced treatment from a

'traditional healer' in his country of origin. This consisted of whipping 'to drive out the evil spirits'. Needless to say, if evil spirits were there, they showed no inclination to relocate.

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### Call for Contributions

If you have attended a conference or presentation, watched a programme, or read an article or book that would be of interest to readers, why not write a review of this, however brief, for the *Skeptical Adversaria* or the *Skeptical Intelligencer*?

## BOOK COMMENTARIES

### ON RICHARD DAWKINS AND *THE GOD DELUSION*

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**Brian Robinson**

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Richard Dawkins is a luminous writer and a charismatic speaker and to hear him in the flesh is as if to stand marvellously refreshed under the cascade of some glittering waterfall high on a bracing mountain peak. He knows how to make us laugh at the more extreme absurdities of faith and often seems to inspire an urge to dance in triumph on the shattered pieces of arcane theology littering the wake of his ferocious progress. I hope readers will get the message that I yield to none in my admiration of and respect for the man.

His latest book *The God Delusion* will surely take its place alongside the other great classics of the genre, such as Bertrand Russell's *Why I am not a Christian* and Sigmund Freud's *The Future of an Illusion*, not to mention the ancient Roman philosopher-poet, Lucretius, whose purpose was also to free people from religious superstition and its attendant terrors. *The God Delusion* is one of Dawkins' most brilliant, and brilliantly entertaining books.

And yet despite myself I can't help being more than a little skeptical about his project to liberate humankind from religious tyranny, and not simply because so many illustrious predecessors (including the aforementioned) appear, especially today from our perspective of a fearful world of clashing fundamentalisms, to have laboured so fruitlessly. However my argument has rather more to do with the very metaphor that Dawkins has chosen – that of delusion, psychiatric disorder, mental illness (itself reminiscent of Lucretius, Freud and Russell).

Dawkins himself deals with this problem in his preface, pointing out that some psychiatrists wrote to him of their disquiet at the term, proposing instead 'relusion'. But he decided to stick with 'delusion', quoting one definition: 'a persistent false belief held in the face of strong contradictory evidence, especially as a symptom of psychiatric disorder'; and adding, 'the first part captures religious faith perfectly', stating his agreement with Robert M. Persig in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*: 'When one person suffers from a delusion, it is called insanity. When many people suffer from a delusion, it is called Religion'.

Dawkins leaves the topic, declaring that he intends that 'religious readers who open (*his book*) will be atheists

when they put it down'. Which is precisely what bothers and worries me.

For I too am a psychiatrist, and if I dealt with my deluded patients in the way Dawkins deals with his deluded believers, I wouldn't be surprised if they didn't even stick around long enough to prove to me that I couldn't cure them. There isn't enough space here to go deeply into cognitive psychology, or to consider what may be the physiological foundations underlying our most cherished beliefs. Still less is there room to debate controversies around alleged benefits that beliefs, even false ones, may confer.

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It seems to me that it's the very 'pathology' Dawkins elaborates to explain the symptoms that undermines the 'therapeutics' he practises to rid his patients of their disease.

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It may be unfair of me to make so much of Dawkins' choice of metaphor. However he reinforces the notion of illness when he thinks of religion as a virus of the mind. What would it be like, he has asked elsewhere, if a meme-like virus took over the mind the way a physical virus hijacks the chemical machinery of a cell? He has no doubt: it would be religion! I have no quarrel with that. It's a very powerful idea.

But it seems to me that it's the very 'pathology' Dawkins elaborates to explain the symptoms that undermines the 'therapeutics' he practises to rid his patients of their disease.

As so often in human affairs, logic can be pretty powerless in the face of the entrenched emotions of those with vested interests. As Freud found long ago, the closer you get to the truth about many patients, the stronger become their psychological defence mechanisms such as denial and reaction formation.

And so it will be with many religious believers. They resist being ducked by Dawkins under those cold showery waterfalls of cascading logic. Especially if he's just tossed them, as he laughs, out of a cosy warm and very comforting bath of faith.

## TWO BOOKS MAKING UNUSUAL CLAIMS ABOUT LANGUAGE

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### Mark Newbrook

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In earlier papers (notably in *Skeptical Intelligencer*, 7, 2004, pp 22-33), I have discussed many non-standard 'fringe' claims about language which involve the central topics of historical linguistics: the origins, diversification and mutual influence, over time, of languages and the scripts used to write them. But this is by no means the only way in which such non-standard 'fringe' claims can involve my discipline (linguistics as a whole). There are many books on the market which display misconceptions or errors of other kinds concerning language or particular languages. I exemplify here with one highly 'fringe' work and one superficially scholarly treatise.

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Walker felt that certain aspects of the message which she was receiving would remain unclear until a date which had to be determined astronomically.

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In her book *The Stone Of The Plough* (Element, 1997), Ann Walker claims to be in contact with a Native American spirit entity called White Arrow. Originally White Arrow sent her seven key symbols, and later he and various alien entities – one of them called Zipper – met with her in visions and gave her platitudinous messages of the usual kinds: 'Stop polluting the planet!', etc. (They also spoke to each other in a language she did not know.) Walker felt that certain aspects of the message which she was receiving would remain unclear until a date which had to be determined astronomically. She came to believe that this involved the well-known but highly contentious theories of Gilbert and Bauval about links between Orion and the Giza pyramids, and Gilbert wrote an interpretive appendix to this book.

Walker's entities also sent her messages allegedly written in various ancient scripts/languages. For instance, she reproduces messages in what she identifies as the demotic and hieratic Egyptian scripts. (These are the names given to the simplified scripts that were used for everyday purposes, as opposed to the more formal hieroglyphic system; the language itself was essentially the same, Ancient Egyptian.) But the characters given by Walker bear very little resemblance to genuine demotic or hieratic. In addition, like most amateurs, Walker treats Egyptian script as logographic or ideographic (one symbol per word

or concept). This is certainly the superficial impression given by the more pictorial hieroglyphs, but even in early dynastic times all Egyptian writing was predominantly phonological (syllabic/alphabetic).

In other messages given to her by Zipper, Walker finds Koine/Hellenistic Greek (the main official language of the ancient eastern Mediterranean, including Egypt, from around 300 BCE onwards). But her versions of the relevant words do not correspond with Greek expressions carrying the relevant meanings. Indeed, the sequences given as if in Greek script are meaningless as Greek, and some are phonologically impossible (they cannot be pronounced as Greek at all, even as nonsense words). If Zipper, or any human 'expert' advising Walker, thought that this was Greek, they were simply wrong.

In fact, virtually all of Walker's comments about linguistic matters are naïve, confused and wrong. She talks as if very familiar facts about late dynastic Egypt (for instance, the major historical events which led to the local importance of the Greek language) are not well known and constitute dramatic revelations. In the same passage, she ludicrously identifies the Greek Septuagint as 'the first Bible ever written' (it is a translation of the pre-existing Hebrew Old Testament). In addition, her conceptualisation is often faulty. For example, she confuses languages with scripts, a very basic and damaging error.

Since Walker does not identify her sources (other than sometimes by e.g. given name), it is difficult to follow up her claims in respect of help and endorsement from 'experts'.

It is surely obvious that everyone should ignore Walker's claims. But this did not stop other online reviewers of her book (linguistically untutored) from lambasting me in quite strong terms when I made the above points. Walker herself was apparently uninterested in discussion and her representatives had nothing of interest to say in response to my points.

For a somewhat longer skeptical treatment of Walker's ideas (but with only a limited focus on the linguistic aspects), see Lawton & Ogilvie-Herald in *Giza: The Truth* (Virgin, 1999/2000, pp 254-256).

Shlain's *The Alphabet Versus The Goddess* (Viking, 1998) appears much more restrained and scholarly in tone. For that very reason, it is arguably more dangerous. In this book, Shlain argues that the adoption of alphabetic scripts

in ancient times triggered massive, unwelcome changes in apparently unconnected areas of human thought and society, chiefly involving shifts in the direction of 'linear', non-holistic thinking, an excessive concern with logic and science, and patriarchal systems in which women and their ideas have been suppressed and undervalued. In developing his case, he naturally ranges widely outside his own field of expertise (surgery). I am able to comment authoritatively only on his linguistics; but, given that the discipline is so central to his thesis, the major problems which he has in this area are crucial.

These problems include:

- a) sporadic confusion of languages and their writing systems (compare Walker)
- b) sporadic confusion of alphabetic writing and writing systems generally
- c) neglect of syllabic writing systems (most important in the period in question)
- d) some inaccurate and dated terminology/perspectives on logographic writing systems such as that of Chinese
- e) utter confusion of phonemes and speech sounds (some of his specific comments in this area are wildly wrong)
- f) adoption of a wrong and misleading definition of the term *alphabet*
- g) apparently limited awareness of the range of views among contemporary linguists
- h) adoption of speculative and partisan accounts of the early stages of human language and society

i) inadequately supported claims to the effect that many major historical developments were largely caused by the adoption of alphabetic script

In respect of this last point: it is not difficult to see the effects of a near-universal causal factor if one is determined to do so; but much more systematic and objective investigation would be required before one could actually demonstrate the validity of such a thesis. There are many other such analyses; at the least, all but one of them must be wrong (as Mark Knopfler almost said), and very few appear exceptionally persuasive or even plausible when subjected to serious scrutiny.

Whatever Shlain's other strengths, he should have acquired a much stronger grasp of linguistics before developing theories in this area. My extended comments on Shlain's linguistics appear in *The Skeptic* (Australia) 19:3, 1999 (pp 42-44).

Many more such examples could be provided. Moral: any claims about language made by non-linguists should definitely be referred to a competent linguist (open-minded but critical!) for comment – especially if they appear *prima facie* implausible or suspect! The same goes, of course, for any other subject which one does not oneself know well. 'Experts' and current orthodoxies are not always right; but they are more likely to be right than rank amateurs (whether or not learned in other fields) with bees in their bonnets! Or at least they – or the points they make or would make – will raise searching questions for said bees!

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