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# *Skeptical Adversaria*

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The Quarterly Newsletter of The Association for Skeptical Enquiry



## FROM THE ASKE CHAIRMAN

Michael Heap

All readers will be aware that the renowned science writer Dr Simon Singh is being personally sued for libel by the British Chiropractic Association (BCA) concerning an article he wrote for the *Guardian* in April last year.

The BCA has taken exception to the following passage from the article: ‘The

According to a leaflet entitled ‘Happy Families’,

<<http://web.archive.org/web/20070206003656/http://www.chiropractic-uk.co.uk/gfx/uploads/textbox/Happy+families.pdf>>

© British Chiropractic Association’, 2006, ‘There is evidence to show that chiropractic care has helped children with the following symptoms: Asthma; Colic; Prolonged crying; Sleep and feeding problems; Breathing difficulties; Hyperactivity; Bed-wetting; Frequent infections, especially in the ears’.

**For more information:**

The British Chiropractic Association

Blaggrave House  
17 Blaggrave Street  
Reading

Berkshire RG1 1QB  
Tel: 0118 950 5950

Email: <[enquiries@chiropractic-uk.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@chiropractic-uk.co.uk)>

British Chiropractic Association claims that their members can help treat

children with colic, sleeping and feeding problems, frequent ear infections, asthma and prolonged crying, even though there is not a jot of evidence. This organisation is the respectable face of the chiropractic profession and yet it happily promotes bogus treatments.’

The BCA asked Dr Singh to retract his allegations on the grounds that they are factually wrong, defamatory and damaging to the BCA’s reputation. Dr Singh refused to do so.

In a hearing last month in London, High Court Judge Mr Justice Eady ruled that Singh’s article could be taken to mean that the BCA was being consciously dishonest and knowingly promoting treatments that do not work. He also ruled that Dr Singh’s article was fact and not comment, meaning that if Dr Singh had to defend this meaning of the article in court, he would have to demonstrate that the BCA believed that chiropractic treatments did not work.

Dr Singh could have settled out of court at a cost of over £100,000. Instead he has decided to appeal against Mr Justice Eady’s ruling, which could prove to be very costly and could go all the way to the European courts.

The case has international implications for science reporting and journalism more generally, warns Dr Singh. According to one source ‘It

comes against a background of increasing concern in many quarters that

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litigants opt for British courts as they are seen as easier places to get a favourable result, a problem labeled “libel tourism”.

For the latest news and developments go to ‘For Simon Singh and Free Speech - Against the BCA Libel Claim’ at:

<<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=33457048634>>

Also visit the 'Sense about Science' website and add your name to the list of signatories in support of Simon Singh (and/or donate to the 'fighting fund'), wherever you are in the world:

<<http://www.senseaboutscience.org.uk/index.php/site/project/336>>

'Sense about Science' is also running a 'Keep the Libel Laws out of Science' petition at:

<<http://www.senseaboutscience.org.uk/index.php/site/project/333/>>

If you are a UK citizen you can sign up to this ePetition at Number 10 to reform our libel laws:

<<http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/reformlibellaws/-detail>>.

A meeting in support of Simon Singh was held at the Penderel Oak, London, on 18.5.09. The speakers were Prof Chris French, the comedian and

bestselling author Dave Gorman, the journalist Nick Cohen, Dr Evan Harris MP, Prof Brian Cox, and Simon Singh himself.

For the video highlights go to:

<<http://www.facebook.com/l:/http://www.layscience.net/node/567>>

For write-ups of the meeting go to:

<<http://www.facebook.com/l:/http://gorman.blogspot.com/>> (Dave Gorman)

<<http://www.facebook.com/l:/http://www.newscientist.com/blogs/shortsharpscience/2009/05/singh-case-highlights-dangers.html>> (Graham Lawton of the *New Scientist*)

<<http://blog.newhumanist.org.uk/2009/05/simon-singh-hopes-to-appeal-chiropracty.html>> (The *New Humanist*)

One thing you can do to help Simon Singh is to buy his book "Trick or Treatment: Alternative Medicine on Trial" (co-authored with Edzard Ernst).

The paperback can be ordered on amazon.co.uk at:

<<http://tinypurl.com/pbnj4m>>.

### Stop Press!!

The following message has come via Sense about Science: 'On the issue of chiropractic claims, some of you will have seen the cumulative effect of interest in the case on the blogosphere over this past weekend; hundreds of chiropractic websites were taken down following questions by bloggers and urgent instructions from chiropractic organisations to avoid breaking the rules on medical claims for chiropractic'.

For further information on this go to:

<<http://www.quackometer.net/blog/2009/06/chiropractors-told-to-take-down-their.html>>.

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## LOGIC AND INTUITION

There are two simple puzzles in the present issue that have something in common but not at any abstract level. The first I obtained from a book by Robert H. Thouless entitled *Straight and Crooked Thinking* (Pan Books, 1953); the second was read to me by my wife and the source is now unknown.

### The hunter and the squirrel

Thouless's book was first published by Hodder & Stoughton Ltd. in 1930, the Pan publication being a revised and enlarged edition. At that time he was Reader in Educational Psychology at the University of Cambridge. The actual puzzle, according to Thouless (page 59),

was described by William James in one of his books.

James relates how he overheard a group of people arguing over a certain 'philosophical problem', which is as follows. A squirrel is on one side of a tree trunk and a man is on the other side further from the tree than the squirrel. Both of them set off running in a circle

round the tree so that the squirrel always keeps the trunk between himself and the man. The question is 'Is the man going round the squirrel?'

### The journey

A man sets off on a journey at the end of which his head will have travelled 11 metres further than his feet. What is his journey?

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## ONE OF US

One of the gratifying aspects of the British Chiropractic Association–v–Simon Singh case is the avalanche of support for Dr Singh from scientists, journalists, academics, writers, entertainers, and so on.

There are obviously 'Many of Us' out there, not only eminent scientists - Martin (Lord) Rees, Steve Jones, Richard Dawkins and David King - but well-known individuals with no particular axe to grind, such as Ricky

Gervais, Stephen Fry, Martin Amis, Harry Hill, Nick Cohen, Dave Gorman and Evan Harris.

In fact Mr Harris has already been awarded the accolade of being 'One of Us' (see *Skeptical Adversaria*, 2007 (1)).

Readers may recall that he is Liberal Democrat MP for Oxford West and Abingdon and his party's spokesman in the House of Commons on Science.

# JEJUNE AND JOYLESS DAY IN GODLAB

Brian Robinson

A personal and idiosyncratic report on the daylong Saturday event, 'God in the Lab' at Conway Hall, London on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2009, organised by the Ethical Society<sup>1</sup> and the Centre for Inquiry<sup>2</sup>, London

Please, dear Reader, forgive my grouchy headline if you can, because I wrote this immediately upon return home after what had proved a long and exhausting day: in my retirement I'm no longer so used to getting up at 6 a.m. as I did for this event, catching train and tube to reach the somewhat cheerless, chilly, puritanically Spartan Conway Hall for the 'God in the Lab' day. Probably a medieval monk on a vow of poverty would feel comfortably at home there.

First off, the amplification was dreadful, at least to my ears. I moved to different parts of the main hall to see if the sound was better elsewhere, but mostly it wasn't.

In general, the speakers talked for too long and left much too little time for questions, considering the huge amount of material they piled upon us. To add to the problems, at least for this listener, almost all the speakers, with the exception of the psychologist Dr Mike Jackson, tended to drop their voices at crucial points, or to indulge too frequently in 'throwaway' lines, rendering the comment inaudible (at least from where I sat). If speakers are going to use theatrical devices such as these, they should at least learn to do so properly. (By the same token, if they look backwards at the screen to talk about some point illustrated upon it, they should realise that the microphone will not pick up their voice if they keep it at the same level; either that, or the management should provide lecturers at these events with lapel microphones.)

Dr Emma Cohen, anthropologist at the Institute of Cognitive and Evolutionary Anthropology, is obviously very bright and erudite and she gave a talk packed from start to finish with what must have been brilliant insights about fascinating and important facts, but much, indeed most, of her talk

was lost on me because I couldn't hear it. (I did a random check at day's end with a few other audience members and several seemed to have had the same experience.) Besides this, for my money Dr Cohen tended to gabble her words at a great rate and I soon found I lost much of the import.

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**Imagine you've left your body; then: Would you still be able to feel cold? Could you still know things/see things/experience sexual desire? Would you need to use the toilet?....**

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If she had stuck to delivering a 20-25 minute talk on her findings on 'how children and adults across different cultural contexts intuitively reason about the relationship between bodies and minds' followed by questions from the floor, I'm sure I'd have remembered more of it. (Incidentally, while on this business of 'questions': I've long thought that after a talk, there should be a 10-minute break during which members of the audience *write* their questions on slips of paper which are then submitted to the speaker, who may then choose which ones to answer; this gets rid of the chance element, as well perhaps as the mesomorphic bully whose tree-trunk arm is always quicker off the mark than anyone else's. We would of course need a more leisurely pace, and to critics of this idea I'd say: 'Well, fewer speakers, but better quality discussion'. A stronger criticism would be that allowing speakers themselves to select the questions could allow them to ignore those that seriously challenged their ideas: but an impartial chairperson could choose the questions.)

Dr Cohen did start well, giving us a little test as a thought experiment. Imagine you've left your body; then: 'Would you still be able to feel cold?' Could you still know things/ see things/ experience sexual desire? Would you need to use the toilet? Could you still learn? Could you hope for things? Would you feel hungry? Could you feel itchy? Could you remember things?

I was disappointed that her 2007 book, *The Mind Possessed: The Cognition of Spirit Possession in an Afro-Brazilian Religious Tradition*, was not on sale in the hall because I'm sure it makes for most illuminating reading. I have since checked on the web, and see that nearly 30 pages of it can be read on Google Books at:

<http://tinyurl.com/cnkjwr>

Click on 'Preview this book'.. The blurb states: '[Cohen] argues that a cognitive approach offers more precise and testable hypotheses [than do traditional anthropological, medical-based and sociological analyses] concerning the spread and appeal of spirit concepts and possession activities'.

(More on Dr Cohen's work at the Institute of Cognitive and Evolutionary Anthropology at:

<http://www.icea.ox.ac.uk/about/staff/cohen/>;

and OUP (America) has some blurb endorsements at:

<http://tinyurl.com/d7b4mc>.)

As I said above, Dr Mike Jackson, who works in the NHS in North Wales and is Honorary Lecturer in Psychology at Bangor University, was clearly audible throughout (which proved it could be done, even at the Conway). Perhaps because I used to be a psychiatrist I found him extremely easy to follow, although for the same reason I learned little that a clinical psychiatrist would regard as new. He spoke about

the benign, indeed helpful, voices that some people hear and which they endow with 'spiritual' significance, contrasting that with the more malign phenomena experienced by people diagnosed with psychosis, mainly schizophrenia.

For a clear and fairly comprehensive summary on Dr Jackson's talk, see the blog 'No Double Standards' at <<http://tinyclips.com/dhdm4x>>. The entry for 23 March 2009 is headed 'Divine Madness?' and states "This is the live blog of the second talk in CFI U.K.'s "God in the lab" meeting at Conway Hall, London. 21st March, 2009'. Strongly recommended. In part, the blogger concludes: 'There is much data in this talk with fMRI slides and interesting implications. What does any of this tell us about God? Nothing, but it does tell us some things about human spiritual experience.'

I'm afraid I had a bad time (after an initial good start) with Prof Justin Barrett from the Centre for Anthropology and Mind, and lecturer at the Institute of Cognitive and Evolutionary Anthropology, University of Oxford. Dr Barrett sought to present his evidence for rejecting the notion that 'children only believe in gods because of a combination of possessing a tragically gullible mental *tabula rasa* and abusive indoctrination practices': the currently fashionable view, at least amongst those dubbed (with pejorative intent) 'The New Atheists'. I was well on the way to being persuaded by Dr Barrett's evidence when he suddenly said something that drew me up abruptly: I could no longer concentrate on his words because I kept wondering whether I'd misunderstood, or whether he seemed, in the experiment he was describing, to have assumed the truth of what he was setting out to prove (hardly likely for so experienced an investigator). In short, how did the idea of 'God' get into the minds of his child subjects?

I'll try to explain, but also do please have a look at what the above-mentioned blogger has to say on this, as

he makes a similar point but much more objectively than I'm doing here: <<http://tinyclips.com/dyxkfk>>. Dr Barrett had been describing a series of experiments with infants, very young children and somewhat older ones. One such experiment involved showing the child a biscuit packet, one with which the child was very familiar. 'What is in the box, do you think?' the child was asked. 'Biscuits' came the reasonable reply. But the adult now opens the box, and the child sees that it contains not biscuits but rocks.

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**Then immediately after this came the question that I blocked on. Without further explanation, Barrett continued, 'Would God know?'**

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The experiment was designed to show to what degree a child will attribute to others the same knowledge that he has himself; and how and to what extent this differs at different ages. The next set of questions were along these lines: 'Suppose your friend Jenny comes in and you show her this biscuit packet, what would Jenny think was inside without looking?' And at a certain age, 'Why, rocks, of course' is the answer. And then further questions follow, such as 'Would Mummy know what was inside?'

Then immediately after this came the question that I blocked on. Without further explanation, Barrett continued, 'Would God know?'

I was permitted - just - by the Chair to get in one 'brief' question about this at the end of the talk. In his presentation the speaker had left out the crucial matter of when - and how - 'God' had entered into the proceedings. By this time, the Chair, with an anxious eye on the clock and with one speaker to go, was rushing Prof Barrett along (see above on this sort of thing), so that he was able to give me only a very cursory reply that left me little the wiser: it seems that the experimenters had

'previously selected the children' and 'had known about the children's awareness of the God-idea beforehand. Once again, the blogger: '[many] of the examples seemed to be "leading the witness"'.

At this point I should like to ask if any reader was in the audience and if so to invite him or her to write in if they believe that I have been unfair, or unwittingly misleading. Oh, and how well could you actually *hear* everything?

As with Mike Jackson's subject matter, I also felt on home territory with the final speaker - or perhaps not so much on 'home' territory as on an adjacent plot of land. This is because some fifteen years ago I spent a year studying hypnosis and dissociative phenomena at UCL with Dr Mike Heap and his UCL psychology colleagues (this was for the Diploma in Clinical Hypnosis).

The speaker was Dr Miguel Farias, a researcher at the Ian Ramsey Centre and assistant director of the MSc in psychological research at Oxford University. The briefing notes for the talk tell us that 'for his doctorate, he studied the psychological characteristics of people engaged in New Age spirituality ... [and later went on] to unravel what happens in the minds and brains of religious believers when they are subjected to pain'.

Dr Farias illustrated his talk with numerous pictures of MRI scans of his subjects' brains. He had advertised for religious people willing to take part in experiments, and had also collected a cohort of atheists (although it seems some at least of these latter had been at one time believers: or maybe that was a different group; by this time I was getting tired ... Did this event try to cover too much, too superficially?) He settled on a group of devout Roman Catholics, having decided the criteria for inclusion, for example that they were regular attenders at Mass.

Dr Farias then had to devise a way of inducing in his subjects a state of 'religious consciousness' for the



duration of the experiment. He got them to gaze at and meditate upon a picture of the Virgin Mary, whilst they were inside the MRI scanner being subjected to measured painful stimuli on the backs of their hands, including having a hand dipped into ice cold water. For anyone who did the above-mentioned diploma, this will at once bring to mind similar experiments carried out by the late psychologist Ernest Hilgard (and other researchers) using hypnotised subjects. Hilgard considered that at some level beneath conscious awareness a hypnotised subject could 'observe' his or her pain without experiencing the suffering normally associated with it - the so-called 'hidden observer' effect, itself controversial (was it an artefact of his procedures?).

Curiously, Farias didn't mention hypnosis at all, nor indeed use the word 'dissociation' (I was waiting for both) until asked afterwards, from the floor, about these phenomena. (Perhaps another good reason why lecturers shouldn't teach through the medium of long uninterrupted monologues, especially towards the end of a long day: better to have some lively give-and-take, some intellectual tennis, a bit of arousal juggling Socratic dialectic.)

Naturally the atheists didn't get the BVM picture (pity, I thought irreverently) but they did get an image of a woman whom, it was supposed, you'd never deem to be the Mother of God. I imagine Dr Farias must have gone to some considerable trouble to find his 'secular parallel' to holy Mary: a screen goddess wouldn't have done, and if you'll indulge my irreverence just once more, neither would a still of Terry Jones playing Brian Cohen's mother. But I'm not being fair to Dr Farias' seriousness of purpose.

What Dr Farias, using fMRI, claimed to have demonstrated was that religious people, when looking at (and meditating upon?) their religious icons, suffer less pain than non-religious people looking

at secular pictures. Perhaps Marx would not have been surprised: 'Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people'.

(Aside: Is religious devotion, like opium, addictive? Does the addiction do more harm than good?)

In response to questions from the floor, Dr Farias speculated (a little) about whether this kind of religious analgesia would help people who suffer for their religion, for example martyrs.

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I see no reason why religious people should not find religious iconography helpful in all sorts of ways. But I remained unconvinced by Dr Farias's main contention that the analgesia they can elicit is *better* than that achieved by non-religious people (or for that matter, long-distance runners, wounded soldiers on the battle field, even players on the rugby field, who don't notice their injuries until after the race, battle or game is over).

After all, even without invoking the concepts of dissociation and hypnosis, what we have here is surely an example of distraction, and I was not convinced that there was any evidence, despite the pretty MRI pictures, that religious people can distract themselves more than atheists.

As I said, I spent a whole year studying, academically, the theory and practice of hypnosis, including its usefulness in pain relief, and I went on to use it in my own practice for that purpose as well as for other psychiatric and medical conditions. People use

imagery, to the extent that they are capable of doing so. Help someone, religious or not, to relax and focus, let them find their own special place of comfort and safety and they can reduce the psychological effect that pain has upon them. If God can eliminate pain, why did He let cheetahs cause so much of it to gazelles? As the French writer Stendhal observed, 'God's only excuse is that he doesn't exist'.

Should we expect to find gods in laboratories? The German philosopher Hans Vaihinger (a crucial influence on the thought of Alfred Adler), in his book *The Philosophy of 'As If': A System of the Theoretical, Practical and Religious Fictions of Mankind*<sup>3</sup> quotes (p 316) Immanuel Kant: 'God is *not a substance existing outside of me* [Kant's italics] but merely a moral relation within me'.

There is much current talk of some need to find a post-modern replacement for gods of all kinds. Are the speakers at the God in the Lab event, or some of them, trying to find some physically 'real' substance to fill that role? Some *thing* - an image of a scan on a computer monitor akin to a holy relic? - to vindicate and bolster faith?

If so, would this not merely be a new fiction to replace the old? Perhaps the best that could be said of such a new approach to an old fiction, of such a new 'As-If' for humanity to put its trust in, would be that it couldn't do a fraction of the harm that the old one did.

<sup>1</sup> The Centre for Inquiry, London website is at <<http://cfilondon.org/>>.

<sup>2</sup> The Ethical Society website is at <<http://www.ethicalsoc.org.uk/>>.

<sup>3</sup> London, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, English translation by C K Ogden, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, 1935. Vaihinger always acknowledged that one of his precursors here was Jeremy Bentham's *Theory of Fictions*.

## FROM THE BOOKSHELF

**‘Lost World of The Kimberley: Extraordinary Glimpses of Australia’s Ice Age Ancestors’ by Ian Wilson. Allen & Unwin, 2006 (pp ix + 315), ISBN: 9781741143911**

Reviewed by Mark Newbrook

Part travelogue and part intellectual detective story, this book by a well-known British independent historian and anomalist deals with the Bradshaw rock-paintings of the Kimberley in Western Australia, first seen by a European (Joseph Bradshaw) in 1891 and taken by some to represent ‘proof’ of a pre-Aboriginal Australian culture.

These paintings contain many stylised human figures and a range of symbols and representations of artefacts. They are in a style identified as not otherwise encountered in Australia. Their dates have been heavily debated but may be very early (see below on Wilson’s conclusions); and local Aboriginal people do not regard them as their ancestors’ work (or even as human in origin, though there are suggestions that their producers may have been the mysterious ‘Mimi’ people referred to in Northern Territory Aboriginal myths).

In books published in 1994 and 2000, the self-trained scholar Grahame Walsh argued that they represent the work of a pre-Aboriginal group who came to the area as long ago as 75,000 BP when the climate was more equable, and developed the art-form during a long sequence of cultures. He went on to speculate as to where such a group might have originated, likening the art itself to certain African forms but more seriously suggesting that a negrito group such as those found on some Indian Ocean islands might have been involved (arriving via Indonesia). Such a group would later have been displaced by Aboriginal populations; Wilson now proposes various possible destinations suggested by some of his cultural equations (see below) and also by genetic considerations. Or else they would have been assimilated into the Aboriginal population. But they would originally have been genetically and

culturally quite distinct; and Walsh held that there was some evidence (skeletal, mythological, etc) pointing in this direction.

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### **Any suggestion that Aboriginal people were not alone in being the first inhabitants of Australia is obviously a major political ‘hot potato’!**

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The movement of Aboriginal people into Australia appears to have been part of the earliest phase of *homo sapiens* diffusion from Africa. Even those Aboriginal people who have not been seduced by the currently trendy postmodernist/anti-scientific idea that their ancestors were ‘created’ in Australia, as recounted in their tribal ‘dreamings’, lay great stress on the scientifically demonstrated vast antiquity of Aboriginal settlement, as well as its priority (*note 1*). Any suggestion that Aboriginal people were not alone in being the first inhabitants of Australia is obviously a major political ‘hot potato’! (*notes 2 and 3*).

Now Ian Wilson, as an enthusiastic outsider and diligent enquirer, has added to the mix. His relationship with the rather secretive and indeed over-protective Walsh has been somewhat testy, and access to some of the sites was denied him for conservation reasons; but he has nevertheless managed to photograph many of the paintings. He argues that, while not of the vast age posited by Walsh, the Bradshaws nevertheless date back as far as 30,000-20,000 BP – similar to the dates for the ‘dreaming’ which have been suggested by Robert Bednarik and others. This dating is still impressively early but (*ceteris paribus*) it does remove the provocative implication that

the artists were necessarily non-Aboriginal. But Wilson has to admit that different dating methods have yielded wildly divergent dates for paint, biological material, etc associated with the Bradshaws; and at times he appears inclined (as have some other researchers) to favour some dating results over others mainly because the former support earlier dates. (There has also been contamination of some of the sites, e.g. by re-painting of the Bradshaws, or as a result of over-painting with later Aboriginal *wandjina* figures – but these effects obviously **reduce** the apparent ages of the Bradshaw paintings.)

Most dramatically, however, Wilson interprets the content of the paintings as indicating a degree of material culture far ‘higher’ than is normally ascribed to humans in this area at this date: elaborate garments, ocean-going boats, agriculture, etc (*note 4*). In several instances, Wilson does seem to have a case for this view. And he cites the discovery (from 1965 onwards) of stone axe-heads at various locations in northern Australia, which indicates that relatively advanced material cultures did indeed exist on the continent (albeit presumably among Aborigines) only a little later than Wilson’s dates for the Bradshaws. (It has to be emphasised, however, that Wilson does sometimes appear to be rather over-interpreting the images along the lines he favours.)

Importantly, the sophistication and size of the vessels portrayed (some shown with crews of as many as 29) suggest that seafaring might not have been beyond the capacity of the Bradshaw Culture – which links in with Wilson’s diffusionist ideas (see below). Note, however, that the Aborigines proper must themselves have initially sailed at least 100 km to reach Australia

– there has been no land-bridge to Asia in the relevant period – and that to all appearances some members of *homo erectus* sailed to Flores before 800,000 BP! This suggestion, while interesting, is thus not as dramatic as might be imagined.

The Bradshaws also contain many representations of animals. These include what are very probably thylacines, now long extinct on the Australian mainland. The animals in question look more like thylacines than dingoes, and in any case the dingo is believed to have been brought to Australia (by Aborigines) only at a much later date. In addition, animals closely resembling antlered deer are shown. Apart from the dingo, no placental mammals are known from pre-colonial Australia. Maybe the Bradshaw artists knew deer from elsewhere (and were motivated to represent them in the Kimberley); or they may have brought deer to Australia (why?); or the animals may be members of a now-vanished deer-like species (presumably marsupial or monotreme) not represented at all in the fossil record. Any of these scenarios would be rather dramatic.

Wilson links his ideas with those of Stephen Oppenheimer, who has argued (1998 and after; mainly on the basis of allegedly cross-culturally shared myths and artefact-styles) that a South-East Asian continent was catastrophically flooded, leading to massive diffusion both westwards and, crucially, eastwards into Australasia and the Pacific (and maybe even beyond), at dates which would mesh with Wilson's dating of the Bradshaws. Wilson cites similarities of many kinds between the symbols and artefacts displayed in the Bradshaws (hand-prints, clothing, the aforementioned vessels, non-Aboriginal hair-forms, boomerangs, representations seen by him as similar to Indonesian *wayang kulit* puppets, etc) and items or representations found outside Australia. He proposes (as did Walsh) that the Bradshaw artists migrated from other Indian Ocean/Asian regions or at least

had influential contact with peoples widely distributed across that part of the world (some of the parallels, as with those identified by Walsh, are with items from locations as remote as East Africa, or even Egypt). He also adduces – as does Les Hiddens – evidence of the early transoceanic diffusion of e.g. plant species (either natural, by way of sea currents, or human-borne) as proof that this scenario is at least possible.

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**There is only limited evidence of a goddess cult in Australia ...and the figures shown are too general in form to give Wilson much support here.**

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Oppenheimer has been criticised for loose comparative methods and tendentious over-interpretation; his ideas remain controversial (*note 5*). And Wilson too may sometimes be again guilty of a degree of over-interpretation here. For example, he identifies 'mother goddess' figures in the paintings, relating these to the theories of an ancient, very widespread goddess cult proposed by the feminist anthropologist Marija Gimbutas, herself a highly controversial figure (and also a proponent of dubious linguistic notions). But there is only limited evidence of a goddess cult in Australia (though admittedly such evidence as there is does relate to the relevant part of the continent), and the figures shown are too general in form to give Wilson much support here. He has to admit, in fact, that this idea is mainly speculative.

In some respects, however, Oppenheimer may have a stronger case; and, if Wilson's case too is deemed relatively persuasive, some of his diffusionist ideas as to the origins of salient features of the Bradshaw Culture might then appear more plausible. It has to be added, however, that (as Walsh's early critics observed) there is no other accepted archaeological evidence of such a non-Aboriginal culture in the area, and also that even the very oldest

*homo sapiens* remains found in Australia are all clearly Australoid (e.g. those at Mungo Lake and Kow Swamp, both much further south; Wilson refers to both sites, on pp 208-214 and p 207, respectively). Firmer conclusions must therefore await the results of further investigation.

### Notes

1. The very early dates of 120,000-176,000 BP for the Jinmium rock-shelter, which some readers may have seen proposed in the 1990s, were later corrected to a mere 10,000 BP; but the date of Aboriginal arrival is still given as around 60,000 BP.

2. Similar views have also been adopted by various fringe thinkers, some of whom appear to have anti-Aboriginal axes to grind (prejudice works both ways!). Some of those who agree with Walsh do not help their own case by accusing other scholars of bias in a manner rather reminiscent of fringe attacks on the 'blinkered' mainstream. Arguably unfairly, Walsh's early critics in turn identified Walsh's position as 'informed by racist perceptions of what Aboriginal people are capable of', by a '19<sup>th</sup>-century diffusionist framework', and by 'colonialism'. Wilson himself at times appears concerned to adopt views about the historical ecology of Australia, the validity of Aboriginal belief-systems, etc, which will not offend Aboriginal people. This is obviously a politically challenging area in which to work! At least the Bradshaws, not regarded by Aborigines as 'their own', are not protected from study by Aboriginal taboos – only (see below) by Walsh's protectiveness and by conservation imperatives.

3. My background comments are drawn from my papers. 'Playing the man: diffusionism, racism and the dreaded Bradshaws', in *The Skeptic* (Australia) Vol.22, No.2 (2002), pp.20-22 (also available at <<http://www.bad-language.com>>) and 'Tales from the Big Brown Land', in *Skeptical Adversaria*, Issue 7, (2003), pp 2-5.

4. If Aboriginalists firmly accepted the Bradshaws as Aboriginal work – even though they are disavowed by local contemporary Aborigines – this interpretation would, of course, be eagerly used to counter the traditional and still popular view of Aborigines as ‘savages’ whose hunter-gatherer lifestyle had remained largely static for all those thousands of years until Europeans

began to arrive: the Dutch just after 1600 CE, and according to some the Portuguese also, a century earlier. But, as things are, attitudes on this front are less definite. (See below on axe-heads.)

5. I myself am best equipped to assess Oppenheimer’s theory in respect of the specifically linguistic equations which he adduces; and in this respect both he and his linguist collaborators

seem inadequately informed as to historical linguistic theory and methodology, adopting the usual outdated amateur philological methods. This issue does not arise in this present case: there was no written language in pre-colonial Australia, and current Aboriginal languages are not relevant.

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### **‘The Seven Daughters of Eve’ by Bryan Sykes. Corgi Books, 2004, ISBN-13: 978-0552152181**

Reviewed by Barbara Melville

I think clear communication and enthusiasm are tenets of good science writing. Bryan Sykes, Professor of Human Genetics at the University of Oxford, is gifted in both respects. *The Seven Daughters of Eve* presents the story of mitochondrial DNA and its role in deep ancestry. It focuses on seven women who lived several thousand years ago, the common ancestors of most native Europeans. There are other ‘ancestral mothers’ known, but only seven are explored in this book.

Mitochondrial DNA is not the same as nuclear DNA, that is, the 23 pairs of human chromosomes we’re used to hearing about. Mitochondria are cell structures that supply the cell with energy. They have their own genetic material, which children only inherit

from their mothers. It is this inherited material that makes long female lines possible. Changes in the DNA, called mutations, allowed Sykes and his team to estimate the timeframes involved.

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**It is this strong sense of connectedness that kept me involved from start to finish.**

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Sykes takes us through some very interesting pieces of research, without ever verging on dryness. The Iceman of the Tyrolean Alps, the genetics of Syrian hamsters and the origin of the Polynesians are some of the topics introduced. The book also contains several chapters covering imagined lives of these seven women. This is where

many reviews of this book take a dark turn. I’m afraid I cannot refute this collective distaste, for I wasn’t keen either.

These imagined life chapters aren’t poorly written, in my view. Quite the opposite. They just interrupted a good work of popular science. Had I found these accounts on a website dedicated to such speculation, I might have felt differently. I can see what he was perhaps trying to achieve. These women aren’t knowable, and any link I have to them seems tenuous. Yet I still have an insatiable curiosity about their lives. It is this strong sense of connectedness that kept me involved from start to finish.

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### **‘Beyond Black’ by Hilary Mantel. Harper Perennial (paperback), ISBN: 9780007157761**

Reviewed by Peter Lucey

Ms Mantel - an excellent novelist - explores the world of psychics on the M25 belt. She went to a typical event in some ring-road hotel function room - the usual guy, shirt with damp armpits, trying to read the punters, and the usual audience. She is not a believer, of course, but what struck her, and perhaps awoke her muse, is that none of this rubbish was compulsory - that is, what did the audience want? How could a performer believe in himself or herself? Ms Mantel researched the topic and the result is *Beyond Black* a bitterly, blackly

funny account of Alison Hart, psychic, and her ‘flint-hearted side-kick’, Colette.

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**It takes a novelist to explore the emotions and pressures of the psychic world, something that sceptics can miss.**

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Artfully written, with feminist sympathy, *Beyond Black* explores Alison’s technique and inner fears and shows how Colette might believe, despite herself.

It takes a novelist to explore the emotions and pressures of the psychic world, something that sceptics can miss. The story becomes very dark towards the end as Alison’s appalling childhood and adolescence are fully revealed, but the book is a brilliant account of the psychic milieu, an accurate description of a slice of South East England, and the description of Colette’s brief marriage is a comic masterpiece. Highly recommended, and one for the beach!



# LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

## No such thing as grammar?

Amorey Gethin is one of a group of authors who reject the notion of syntactic (grammatical) structures as an 'illusion'. Gethin does actually make some good points about the weaknesses of some specific mainstream ideas, notably those of Chomsky – although it must be said that most of these points have also been made by non-Chomskyan mainstream linguists, of whom Gethin seems to know too little. But he goes much further, attacking the entire basis of modern scientific linguistics, in which such structures are seen as the most clearly unique feature of human language. Indeed, he holds that linguists actually **know** that grammar does not exist but promote it so as to bolster their own status.

Gethin 'explains' all linguistic and language-learning phenomena in terms of the meanings of words (and word-parts) alone, treating grammatical phenomena as matters of 'general meaning'. For instance, he replaces the concept 'noun' with a category of 'general meaning' roughly corresponding with 'entity' (concrete or abstract). (This resembles the folk-linguistic defining of 'parts of speech' in semantic terms, e.g. 'a noun is the name of a person, place or thing'.)

However, a noun is **not** itself the same kind of thing as the word for an entity. 'Noun' is a **grammatically**-defined category (e.g. a noun can be the grammatical subject of a clause). Different languages assign different grammatical categories to the words for entities (in Apache, a waterfall is a verb!); some languages lack certain grammatical categories altogether; and even within one language the distribution of grammatical categories is often complex (e.g. *red* is usually an adjective, but the more general word *colour* is a noun). And linguistic meanings are not necessarily directly expressed in the forms of sentences. If

they were, even the grammars of unrelated languages would be much more closely similar than they tend to be. Even within one language, there are often two or more grammatically different ways of expressing the same meanings, e.g. active and passive voice equivalents such as *Mark drank the beer* and *The beer was drunk by Mark*. Conversely, there are syntactically identical but logically distinct pairs of sentences such as *Jane is planning to marry a Dutchman*.

Gethin struggles unconvincingly to deal with cases of all these kinds. And even he is forced to acknowledge e.g. that the typical order of subjects, verbs, objects, clauses etc in a sentence differs from language to language. For instance, Welsh sentences typically begin with the verb. But this itself is a matter of syntactic structure, not of meaning.

## Inglish az shii kuhd bii speld

Most learners and many adult native speakers struggle with the spelling of English. It has even been claimed that there are higher rates of dyslexia in English-speaking countries than elsewhere – although there are contrary findings relating dyslexia to unrelated factors. The problem arises because English spellings often reflect now-superseded pronunciations or have multiple sources. Thus there are frequently various spellings of what is now the same sound (e.g. the vowel in the words *go*, *sew*, *hoe* etc), and multiple pronunciations sharing one spelling (e.g. the notorious case of *-ough-*).

Virtually all proposals for English spelling reform involve removing letters which represent no sound at all, e.g. *debt* becomes *det*. However, many proposals developed by fringe amateurs also involve the 'phonemic principle': a given letter or di-/poly-graph (eg *oo* or *ch*) consistently represents the same 'phoneme' (distinct speech-sound) and *vice versa*. Modern English accents used in South-Eastern England have 44

distinct phonemes, and a phonemic spelling of such a variety would therefore have 44 letters or di-/poly-graphs. The words now spelled with *-ough-* would be re-spelled with letters representing the actual phoneme(s) present in each.

But there is a major problem here. English has diversified so much around the world that even major educated urban accents differ too greatly to share a phonemic spelling system. For instance, words like *grass* would have to be spelled with the long A phoneme for Londoners but with the short A phoneme for most people from the north of England; words like *park* would be spelled with the R phoneme for Scotland and most of the USA but without it for most of England. Or else the spelling would be uniform but would therefore systematically favour some accents over others at each point (a highly political issue as well as an educational one!). The existing spelling is at least accent-neutral, overall.

In addition, phonemic spelling makes it impossible to spell homophones differently: the words *paw*, *pore* and *pour* would have to be spelled identically for most of England. In addition, roots with varying pronunciations, such as *photo-* in *photographic* and *photographer*, could **not** be spelled the same throughout. Etc, etc. Phonemic spelling thus reduces the recognisability of words and stems, hampering inexperienced readers.

In fact, some linguists (including Noam Chomsky) argue that phonemic spelling is **unnatural**, for English and more generally. It is certainly striking that alphabetic writing, which is defined as 'one symbol per phoneme' and is thus most consistent when spelling is phonemic, was, as far as we know, invented only once (probably in early Egypt). Alphabets are as widespread as they are because of the political, cultural and religious clout of Greece, Rome, India, Islam and modern Europe.

## THE EUROPEAN SCENE

**A**SKE is a member of the European Council for Skeptical Organisations. It has an Internet Forum on which you can read comments on sceptical issues from contributors and post your own. To access this, log on to <http://forum.ecso.org/>.

### Contact details for ECSO are:

Address: Arheilger Weg 11, 64380 Roßdorf, Germany  
Tel.: +49 6154/695021  
Fax: +49 6154/695022  
Website: <http://www.ecso.org/>

### 14th European Skeptics Congress

The 14th European Skeptics Congress, 2010, will be hosted by the Hungarian Skeptic Society in Budapest in 2010. The ECSO website will have updates on this but why not visit the Hungarian Skeptic Society website, which is very informative and is in English?  
<http://www.szkeptikustarsasag.hu/en/index.php>.

### Petition on behalf of 'non-conventional' medicine to the European Commission

Gabor Hrasco of the Hungarian Skeptic Society has drawn our attention to a petition for the European Commission to

take the legislative steps required for the legal recognition of non-conventional medical disciplines:

<http://www.petitionecomed.eu/>

As Gabor notes: 'these type of texts (like this one) do not mention "scientific proof" or "clinical trials", but "tradition", "popularity", "public demand" etc.

### A message from Poland

This is an extract from an e-mail enquiry via ECSO from Tomasz Witkowski of Poland:

[witkowski@moderator.wroc.pl](mailto:witkowski@moderator.wroc.pl)

'I am a psychologist and writer. I write about psychology and allied disciplines. My writing is accompanied by a deep concern about the future of my branch of science. On the one hand I am convinced that what is valuable in science has become so elitist that it is beyond the reach of an average person; on the other hand charlatans and

tricksters take advantage of this, preying on the misfortune and ignorance of others. In my books I try to bring science closer to the average reader. My latest project, called Forbidden Psychology, is an attempt at 'cleansing' psychology of trickery. You can read more about me on the English version on my web page:

<http://www.tomaszwitkowski.pl/page19.php>

'In 2007 I published a paper which was called Polish Sokal-style hoax (more about this:

<http://www.tomaszwitkowski.pl/page16.php>).

'Now I am engaged in many activities concerned on debunking pseudoscience.

## 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 *Sceptical Adversaria* or the *Sceptical Intelligencer*? Or would you like to take over one of the regular features in the *Adversaria*?

## OF INTEREST

### THE ANOMALISTIC PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCH UNIT AT GOLDSMITH'S COLLEGE LONDON

#### Website

<http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/apru/speakers.php>

#### Email

[c.french@gold.ac.uk](mailto:c.french@gold.ac.uk)

#### Venue

Seminars are held on Tuesdays at 6:10 p.m. in Room 256, Richard Hoggart Building, Goldsmiths, University of London, New Cross, London SE14 6NW. All talks are open to staff, students and members of the public. Attendance is free and there is no need to book in advance. For further information:

### TAM IN LONDON

See previous newsletter. Keep your eye on <http://www.tamlondon.org/>.

### MUNCASTER CASTLE PARANORMAL CONFERENCE

Date: 18-20 September 2009

#### Websites:

<http://www.ukskeptics.com/conference-2009.php>,

and (for bookings and further info):

<<http://www.muncaster.co.uk/muncaster-castle-paranormal-conference>>.

This exciting event organised by the UK Skeptics will feature many well-known speakers on sceptical topics.

### **SKEPTICS IN THE PUB**

Website for all venues:

<<http://www.skeptic.org.uk/pub/>>

#### **LONDON**

##### **Website:**

<<http://london.skepticsinthepub.org/>>

##### **Email:**

<[pub@skeptic.org.uk](mailto:pub@skeptic.org.uk)>

##### **Venue:**

Skeptics in the Pub, London, meets (usually) once every month at The Penderel's Oak, Holborn. A £2 donation is requested to cover the guest speaker's travelling expenses and sundries. All are welcome. Turn up at any time during the evening. The room is open for food and drink from about 5.30pm and talks start at 7pm.

There is also an associated Facebook group you can join (see website).

##### **Programme**

###### **22 Jun: Bruce Hood**

*SuperSense: From superstition to religion*

###### **Wesminster Skeptics in the Pub, London (TBC)**

A possible new meeting of Skeptics in the Pub focusing on policy related matters. The intention is to engage more with policy makers, decision makers, and regulators. It will complement, and will be little sister to, the main London Skeptics in the Pub.

For more detail, please visit:

<<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=203939300182>>

or email:

<[westminster@skepticsinthepub.org](mailto:westminster@skepticsinthepub.org)>

#### **LEICESTER**

##### **Local website:**

<<http://leicester.skepticsinthepub.org/>>

##### **Email:**

<[leicesterskeptics@googlemail.com](mailto:leicesterskeptics@googlemail.com)>

##### **Facebook:**

<<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=12736582903>>

##### **Venue:**

The Park, 5-9 Hotel Street, Leicester, LE1 5AW

##### **Programme**

The following presentations will begin at 7.30 pm:

###### **21 Jul: Richard Wiseman**

*Investigating the impossible: A skeptical approach*

###### **18 Aug: Christine Mohr**

*Is it creative to believe in the paranormal?*

###### **15 Sept: Richard Wilson**

*'45 minutes from attack!': WMD and other state-sponsored conspiracy theories*

###### **20 Oct: Nick Davies**

*Bad news: What's wrong with the media.*

###### **17 Nov: Chris French**

*The psychology of alien contact and abduction*

###### **19 Jan: Andy Lewis**

*What makes a successful alternative medicine?*

###### **16 Feb: Kevin Byron**

*Science and uncommon sense II*

###### **16 Mar: Simon Singh**

*Science in the media*

#### **EDINBURGH**

##### **Website:**

<<http://www.geocities.com/edinburghskeptics/skepticsinthepub.html>>

##### **Email:**

'We have a new email address. If you need to contact the society you can get to us here at <[edskeptics@gmail.com](mailto:edskeptics@gmail.com)>. Alternatively you can still get in touch with me (Alex Pryce) via my personal email at: <[info@chimaeraproductions.com](mailto:info@chimaeraproductions.com)>.'

##### **Blog:**

<<http://www.edinburghskeptics.wordpress.com>>

##### **Forum:**

<<http://edinburghskeptics.phpbbhosts.co.uk/>>

##### **Twitter:**

<<http://twitter.com/edskeptics>>

##### **Facebook**

Skeptics in the Pub, Edinburgh:

<<http://www.facebook.com/home.php#/group.php?gid=49320257971>>

Edinburgh Skeptics:

<<http://www.facebook.com/home.php#/group.php?gid=61379127151&ref=ts>>

##### **Venue:**

The Tron, 9 Hunter Square, Edinburgh, EH1 1QW.

Telephone (info):0131 226 0931

##### **Programme**

Meetings are on the first and third Thursdays of the month, the first one being a 'social sceptics night'. The following presentations (exact titles are sometimes not on the programme) will begin at 8.00 pm. Donations on the night (£2.50) are welcome to cover expenses.

###### **16 Jul: Richard Wilson**

*Conspiracy theories, etc.*

###### **August (one Saturday): Special 'Fringe' meeting ('Skepticamp')**

*Details to be announced*

###### **17 Sept: Caroline Watt**

*Parapsychology*

###### **October: 'Samhain Skeptics'**

*Four weekly meetings during the lead-up to Hallowe'en (with Richard Wiseman on Oct 7)*

###### **15 Oct: Nick Pope**

*UFO sightings*

###### **19 Nov: Evolution: Special Debate**

*Details to be announced*

###### **24 Nov: Evolution Party**

###### **17 Dec: Skeptics' End of Year Party**

#### **BIRMINGHAM**

For details of latest developments email Jon Donniss at:

<[jonnodonniss@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:jonnodonniss@yahoo.co.uk)>

#### **OXFORD**

For details go to the following website:

<<http://oxford.skepticsinthepub.org/>>

#### **CENTRE FOR INQUIRY LONDON**

For details of upcoming events, publications, etc go to the following website: <<http://cfilondon.org/>>.

#### **WELLCOME COLLECTION Quacks and Cures @ [Wellcome Collection](http://www.wellcomecollection.org/)**

Friday 10 July, 19.00-23.00

183 Euston Road

London

NW1 2BE

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

'A musical fanfare opens our spectacular free evening of medicinal remedies: an exciting late-night event of diagnoses and cures. Meet a quack doctor, handle live leeches or contribute your own home remedies. This event is free. No booking is required, drop in at anytime.'

### LIVERPOOL HOPE UNIVERSITY

Liverpool Hope University is hosting a conference on 'Health, Mental Health and Exceptional Human Experiences' this coming September. The conference will take place on the Monday following the SPR (the 7th September) on Liverpool Hope campus. Invited speakers include John Gruzelier, Isabel Clarke, Stefan Schmidt, Eberhard Bauer, Martina Belz, David Luke, Nicola Holt and Ginette Nachman.

If you want to register, please contact:

Dr Christine Simmonds-Moore  
Senior Lecturer in Psychology  
Psychology and Criminology  
Liverpool Hope University  
Hope Park  
Taggart Avenue  
L16 9JD  
<[simmonc@hope.ac.uk](mailto:simmonc@hope.ac.uk)>  
(0151) 291 2158

### WEBSITES OF INTEREST

#### On conspiracy theories

<<http://www.publiceye.org/conspire/toxic2democracy/Tox2Dem-exec.pdf>>

#### On placebo

<[http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/338/apr20\\_2/b1568](http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/338/apr20_2/b1568)>

#### On Reiki and religion

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/mar/31/us-catholic-bishops-reiki>>

From the *Guardian*, 31.3.09:

'Reiki, an alternative Japanese therapy with a growing band of followers in the west, is "unscientific" and "inappropriate" for use in Catholic institutions, according to America's bishops.

#### A reappraisal of Ernst Haeckel

In *The Lancet*, [Volume 373, Issue 9665](#), Page 712, 28 February 2009 (book review)

#### On the unreliability of memory

In *The Lancet*, [Volume 373, Issue 9665](#), Page 712, 28 February 2009 (book review).

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## LOGIC AND INTUITION

The answer is as follows:

### The hunter and the squirrel

According to Thouless's account, those who said that the man went round the squirrel pointed out that he was first to the north of the squirrel, then to the west of it, then south, east, and north again... Those who said that the man did not go round the squirrel pointed out

that he was not successively in front of it, then to the side of then to the back of it, etc. Neither side disputed the facts of the other's argument. James's answer was that 'it was not a question of facts but of words, of how one is to use the words "go round"' No dictionary

definition is precise enough to settle this dispute.

### The journey

The man is going round the world (mainly upright). In theory he could be going round any global object; whatever the circumference, the extra distance is always the same.

## About ASKE

ASKE is a society for 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 newsletter and we have an annual magazine, the *Skeptical Intelligencer*.

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, write to us at the address below, or email [m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk)

ASKE, P.O. Box 5994, Ripley, DE5 3XL, UK

email: [aske1@talktalk.net](mailto:aske1@talktalk.net)

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