
Skeptical Adversaria

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Note from Michael Heap: This extra large edition of the ASKE Newsletter is so full that I have spared myself the task of providing my usual 'Editorial'. Instead I wish all readers a happy Yuletide and a prosperous 2010. And while we're about it, if you are not yet a member, why not include in your New Year's resolutions (or business plan as we now call it) joining ASKE? For details see the back page.

'HORIZON' ON SPEECH

Reviewed by Mark Newbrook

Television documentaries about language are few, and the story about the origins of speech and 'why we speak' on *Horizon* (BBC2, 10/11/09, 9 pm) was very welcome indeed. Much has been learned of late, and the programme was based on recent, largely sound research (mainly psycho-linguistic) and should have been found very informative by non-linguists. Viewers' comments on the web-forum (*see Note*) display great interest, although some of them understandably feature some confusion and naivety.

In one hour it is, of course, impossible to do full justice to such a massive and thorny subject, and much of what was said was excellent; but it is important, especially with non-linguist viewers in mind, to issue some caveats about the content of the programme:

1. Some of the information (e.g. about the vocal-tract features now known to be shared by humans and apes) was indeed novel and theory-changing; but much of the (psycho) linguistic thinking presented was **not** as original or as unsettling to established views as was suggested. For instance, the reported recent conclusions on child language acquisition match those of

extensive earlier work, some of it more broadly based. And some other material presented in the programme seems somewhat dubious: e.g. that involving very brief experiments with rapid change in concocted languages, which appears methodologically suspect and also implies undefended and possibly exaggerated assumptions about very early, pre-literate human language (of which no trace survives to be examined, of course).

A creature which cannot speak at all may still have language, and one which can produce human-like speech sounds (e.g. a parrot!) may prove not to have language.

2. As is the norm with 'popular' commentary on language matters, the major distinction between (a) speech and (b) language (including signed and written language) was not adequately drawn or used in discussion. Findings concerning the origins and nature of speech – especially concerning speech

Contents

'Horizon' on Speech	1
Logic and Intuition	2
One of Us	3
From the Bookshelf	4
Language on the Fringe	7
The European Scene	9
Of Interest	9
Upcoming Events	13
Logic and Intuition: Answer	16
About ASKE	16

sounds *per se*, which are not structural units of language – do not directly relate even to the sound-systems of the languages in question, still less to linguistic structures at other 'levels' such as grammar. It is quite probable that when language first developed it was signed rather than spoken, but this would only marginally have affected its

structure. A creature which cannot speak at all may still have language, and one which can produce human-like speech sounds (e.g. a parrot!) may prove **not** to have language. (This affects the significance of e.g. the findings on vocal tracts mentioned above.)

3. The point that no other species is known to possess a communication system of the vast order of complexity displayed by human language was well made (and was clearly unfamiliar to some viewers); but the crucial distinguishing feature of human language known as *double articulation* – the contrast between phonemes/sounds (meaningless in themselves) and meaningful words (or morphemes) composed of these sounds – was not foregrounded. (To illustrate: initial /n-/ in English *nice*, *nasty*, *neutral* contributes nothing of itself to the contrasting meanings of these words.)

4. As is again the norm in treatments of language by non-linguists (including both popular treatments and the work of ‘fringe’ writers), the focus was heavily upon **words** rather than on other types of linguistic feature, notably grammar. Grammar is again a crucial distinguishing feature of human language; and, contrary to some popular misconceptions, all human languages have complex grammars. This bias of focus may relate to the difficulty most non-linguists (even if otherwise well-informed) have with the explicit understanding of grammar and other structural aspects of a given language, as opposed to the relatively

straightforward, largely unstructured vocabulary. Even if the producers of the programme were themselves competent in this area, they may have judged the concepts involved too complex for their lay (though thoughtful) audience. Nevertheless, a misleading impression of the subject was given.

The coverage of views and scholarly backgrounds was somewhat selective.

5. The coverage of views and scholarly backgrounds was somewhat selective. As is once again not uncommon, there was arguably too little input from general linguistics as opposed to (here) psycholinguistics. More importantly, the general linguistics presented, and the associated psycholinguistic views, were squarely those associated with Chomsky and his followers such as Pinker. Chomskyan linguists have emphasised the uniqueness of human language (see 3 above) more saliently than have the members of other persuasions; but they are not alone in this. And, more crucially, their ‘nativist’ theory of an inherited, very largely species-uniform ‘language faculty’ which enables children to acquire their first languages as rapidly as they do, is by no means universally shared (though this view has received by far the most popular notice in the last few decades). Some non-American linguists, notably the British linguist Sampson, have argued strongly

that the evidence actually supports the contrary view that we acquire language through our general intelligence. They interpret e.g. the data involving the ‘KE’ family (many of whom struggled with language all their lives) in this very different way, regarding the FOXP2 chromosome-code mutation as generating below-average general intelligence and thus causing difficulties with language but with much else besides; they would **deny** the claim in the programme that the members of KE were of normal intelligence in other respects. In this context, it should be noted that the conclusions of Vargha-Khadem’s team, featured in the programme, do **not** in fact favour the nativist view anywhere nearly as much as was suggested. This is a key area where the variety of views should have been made clear.

6. There were a few other more specific worries: e.g., it is difficult to believe that humans acquired language quite as recently as 50,000 years ago, given that people already speaking languages clearly related to other languages, used elsewhere, almost certainly migrated to Australia rather earlier than this.

However, even with these caveats, the programme was of great interest and use.

Note

<http://www.sagazone.co.uk/forums/thread/51709/#post3128778>

LOGIC AND INTUITION

Hempel’s Ravens is a well known paradox (also called the Raven Paradox) and the subject of much debate amongst scholars.

Wikipedia has a thorough account of the various approaches to the problem. One day I might study them but in the meantime life presents more tempting diversions. Here is my variation on the original puzzle. An explorer from the planet Vesta visits Earth and wishes to

find out if it is true that all ravens are black. Purely by chance the first bird he sees is a green parrot. Vestian logic allows him to say that this provides evidence that all ravens are black. Why?

One argument is the intuitively plausible theorem that ‘If two statements

are logically equivalent then any evidence for one is evidence for the other’. Two statements relating to the present case are (i) All ravens are black and (ii) Any bird that isn’t black isn’t a raven. These statements are logically equivalent; they are saying the same

thing and are true and false in exactly the same circumstances. Hence by the above theorem any observation that supports one must support the other. The explorer's observation of a green parrot is evidence for statement (ii). Hence it is also evidence for statement (i).

Well, you can demonstrate the absurdity of this by replacing statement (ii) with 'Any *thing* that isn't black isn't a raven'. Again the two statements are

logically equivalent. Therefore if the explorer sees, say, a yellow banana, this supports (ii) and therefore (i) 'All ravens are black'!

There are some arguments in favour of Vestian logic but for my brain they are too complicated. Is there a simple way to support our extraterrestrial colleague? Let's simplify the puzzle without altering the logic.

Suppose an explorer is visiting a certain village in which there are just 100 inhabitants. It is rumoured that *all females* in this village have blue eyes. The first person the explorer sees is a man with green eyes. Is this evidence in support of the rumour?

Answer on page 16

ONE OF US

Step onto the podium Ms Daisy Goodwin! You are definitely 'one of us' for your article 'However they sugar it, you're swallowing a delusion' (*Sunday Times*, 29.11.09).

http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/guest_contributors/article6936389.ece

If nothing else, by standing in for the usual incumbent India Knight, Ms Goodwin spared us the standard weekly fare of neurotic suburban middle-class whingeing. In refreshingly no-nonsense style, Ms Goodwin lays into the homeopathy industry. She begins by informing the reader of the origins of homeopathy, when in 1796 the German physician Samuel Hahnemann 'noticed that if he ate the bark of cinchona tree, he started to get malaria-like symptoms'. We know what happened next.

'The royal family take homeopathic remedies', she notes; 'there are even homeopathic hospitals available on the National Health Service. I have intelligent friends (make that ex-friends) who have spent much money and time training to be homeopaths. All this, but there's not a shred of serious scientific evidence that homeopathy has any therapeutic value'.

Ms Goodwin's article comes fast on the evidence given to a House of Commons Committee by Mr Paul Bennett, director of professional standards at Boots the chemist, that 'There is certainly a demand for these products I have no evidence to suggest they are efficacious'.

In addition to her diatribe against homeopathy, Ms Goodwin reminds readers that she recently complained to the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) about L'Oréal using Cheryl Cole,

who has a full head of acrylic hair extensions, to advertise the restorative properties of Elvive shampoo.

'Hair extensions, for the non-Wags among you, cannot be washed with normal shampoo. The ASA knocked me back, pointing to a two-second disclaimer admitting that Cole's hair was styled with some "natural" hair extensions.

For the price of 100 bottles of Elvive, a child who has been through hell can have the chance, in the words of the L'Oréal slogan, to get their hair mojo back.

'Since then there has been much media coverage of the ethics of using a woman who has enough fishing line woven into her hair to net the last remaining cod shoals in the North Sea to promote shampoo, but the advertisements are still running and L'Oréal has not commented.

'If, like me, you would like to protest against being treated like a halfwit by the dark forces of big hair, then why not join the campaign for hair justice at:

<http://www.justgiving.com/daisy-goodwin>

and donate £2.65, the price of a bottle of Elvive, to the Little Princess Trust,

which gives real-hair wigs to children who have lost their hair because of cancer treatment or alopecia.

'For the price of 100 bottles of Elvive, a child who has been through hell can have the chance, in the words of the L'Oréal slogan, to get their hair mojo back'.

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Another One of Us

Readers south of the border will probably not be aware of Scottish Television's 'The Write Factor'. This is a competition (now closed) in which visitors to the STV's website are invited to send in their own essays on a topic of their choice and the writer of the one judged best wins a £5,000 contract to contribute articles to the website.

The title of a piece by one of the finalists, Lindsey Mason, is 'Astrology is bunk: There, I've said it'. Ms Mason makes it clear to us that she is no fan of pseudoscience and is a keen follower of James Randi. Her essay is at

<http://entertainment.stv.tv/opinion/141266-astrology-is-bunk-there-ive-said-it/>

FROM THE BOOKSHELF

‘Australian Cryptozoology’ by Gary Opit, 2009 (pp 162).

Reviewed by Mark Newbrook

This ring-bound, A4-sized self-published work is the latest addition to the already strong tradition of cryptozoological work emanating from the Big Brown Land. It joins the offerings of such as Healy & Cropper (1994), Smith (1996) and other works on ‘bunyips’, ‘Tim the Yowie-Man’ (2001), etc, a veritable string of books specifically dedicated to the thylacine (‘Tasmanian Tiger’); also: sections in works on Australian mysteries (including spectacular claims about e.g. surviving populations of the ‘giant goanna’ *megalania* and even surviving dinosaurs in the writings of the maverick Rex Gilroy, whom Opit takes seriously as a ‘naturalist’; see p 27); Australia-focused sections in general cryptozoological books; various articles in *Cryptozoology* and other journals; and now of course web-based material

The indigenous fauna of Australasia is distinguished by the absence of any (scientifically recognised) placental land-dwelling mammals, which apparently never crossed the ‘Wallace Line’; even the well-known dingo was introduced by Aboriginal people around 4,000 years ago (*note 1*). In their place, we find the familiar marsupials and three species of monotreme (two in Australia) (*note 2*). The cryptids reported in Australia by more sober authors include: (a) surviving populations of large marsupials deemed extinct by mainstream scholarship (notably thylacines and the ‘marsupial lion’ *thylacoleo*); (b) out-of-place placentals (or quasi-placentals) such as big cats (as in the UK and eastern North America) and the ‘yowie’ (Australia’s equivalent of the Asian yeti and the North American bigfoot/sasquatch); (c) animals of uncertain classification (notably the ‘bunyip’) (*see note 3*).

In his rather disjointed introduction, Opit first explains the focus of cryptozoology and summarises the

content and character of much of the earlier Australian material. He then provides a string of summaries of Australian cryptid sightings, mainly of yowies, which would probably be better relocated to the relevant later chapters (see below).

The indigenous fauna of Australasia is distinguished by the absence of any (scientifically recognised) placental land-dwelling mammals.

In the final section of the introduction, Opit engages in a critique of contemporary science in a manner typical of the genre, arguing on the strength of carefully selected facts that science has been much less successful than its practitioners would claim in arriving at accounts of aspects of the physical universe (including humanity itself). To some degree, in fact, he seems to adopt the popular view of science as concerned mainly with conclusions (rather than with the scientific method and the ongoing revision of theories in response to expanding knowledge) and the associated fringe perception of scientists as unwilling to consider new or non-standard ideas. In addition, he adopts the ‘trendy’ view of traditional belief systems (here, Aboriginal) as reflecting the true structure of the universe more accurately than contemporary science and thus demonstrating the superior wisdom of traditional peoples.

Some of Opit’s own extrapolations from the scientific data he cites are themselves almost mystical and involve undefined claims about ‘vibration’, ‘dimensions beyond light-speed’, etc – again as is currently popular in New Age thought. This kind of extreme

fringe claim is **not** required for or relevant to the substantiation of reports of flesh-and-blood cryptids. (Despite the above, Opit rejects the view of cryptids as paranormal entities; see p 57.) These reports, if valid, will (eventually, in favourable circumstances) meet the normal standards of scientific evidence and be accepted by mainstream thought; they cannot be usefully justified in terms of weaker empirical standards associated with non-standard pseudo-science. Opit’s focus on these ideas will weaken the book in the eyes of scientists and is thus counter-productive. In addition, these ideas stand in confusing contrast with Opit’s own stated and repeatedly instantiated commitment to the need for careful empirical study if cryptids – even those frequently reported anecdotally, as recounted in this and other books – are to be accepted as genuine (a pattern of conceptual tension familiar in this kind of context).

In the body of the book, Opit commences with an essentially uncontroversial discussion of the Australian environment, flora and fauna as it has developed over time (chapter 1) and a chapter (2) on ‘Aboriginal people and the Australian mind’. This latter chapter again presents a highly positive view of traditional Aboriginal beliefs about the relationship between people and the land (identified in the introduction as ‘proven’ by scientific data).

Opit stresses Aboriginal beliefs surrounding the ‘dreaming’, and urges that all people embrace such ideas as reflecting spiritual reality and engendering more fruitful attitudes to humanity and the world (*note 4*).

Although this point is not foregrounded in this chapter, Aboriginal beliefs of course include belief in the ‘real’ existence of creatures which count as cryptids in the context of ‘western’ science, and in fact the very distinction

between ‘real’ creatures and e.g. spiritual entities is typically interpreted differently in such traditions.

In the later chapters, reference is made to these ideas (and, interestingly for this reviewer, to the **names** of the cryptids in the relevant Aboriginal languages), as well as to modern reports of the creatures in question (involving either chance sightings or expeditions) and earlier discussions of these matters. All these types of datum are obviously of great interest. Opit reproduces newspaper reports and other documents, and refers where appropriate to physical evidence such as casts of alleged footprints, structures supposedly created by yowies, the bodies of animals apparently killed by cryptids, objects scraped or disturbed by them, etc (he includes photographs).

In these later chapters, Opit deals with yowies and a range of similar creatures (chapters 3-8), putatively marsupial ‘cats’ (chapter 10), anomalous ‘big cats’ (chapter 11), bunyips (chapter 12) and thylacines (chapter 13). He also includes discussion (chapter 9, i.e. pp 85-86, also pp 28-30) of the possibility of the local survival of *homo erectus*, whose remains have not actually been found in Australia but **have** been discovered, spectacularly, in long-insular Flores. In this context there is also a brief reference (p 28) to the ‘hobbits’ more recently found in Flores. The final chapter (14) deals with the *ri* or ‘New Guinea mermaid’, which he links with Elaine Morgan’s highly controversial ‘aquatic ape’ theory of human evolution (which Opit takes very seriously, without however rehearsing the scholarly objections).

Again, interestingly for this reviewer, Opit refers (albeit very naïvely) to (quasi-)linguistic behaviour on the part of yowies (p 45); and in chapters 9 and 14 he summarises claims to the effect that cryptids probably representing surviving *homo erectus* exhibit linguistic behaviour (p 86) – compare Woods (1997), etc on the alleged (pre-)linguistic behaviour of

sasquatches – and that the development of language was crucial in the differentiation of *homo sapiens* (and its closest relatives such as *erectus*?) from their hominid predecessors (pp 158-159; citing here Jared Diamond).

There is clearly a reasonable case to be made that some of these cryptids might be genuine animals; others are more suspect.

Opit is a serious (if at times arguably selective) student of the technical literature. Each chapter contains extensive references to relevant scientific literature, especially where it can (possibly sometimes dubiously) be adduced in support of his ideas, and a bibliography, and the work ends with a general bibliography.

There is clearly a reasonable case to be made that some of these cryptids might be genuine animals; others are more suspect. However, Opit personally is evidently totally persuaded that his cryptids are genuine animals and that the zoological mainstream is grossly in error in rejecting them. (He takes a similar view of non-Australian cryptids, accepting e.g. the 1967 Gimlin/Patterson sasquatch film as veridical and arguing against some skeptical points; see pp 73-74.) Indeed, he makes frequent statements in which the existence of a given cryptid species or a reported observation of a specimen is treated as a matter of plain fact. Some of these statements refer to field observations (often prolonged and/or repeated) reported by his associate Pixie Byrnes, who provides drawings of the animals. But in this context one might reasonably expect rather **photographs**, which would furnish some more of the hard evidence for these cryptids which – as Opit admits (p 14) – is at present often conspicuously minimal, despite the fact that the entities in question appear to observers to be flesh-and-blood animals like any other animal. (Of course, this is

precisely why these alleged creatures remain cryptids.)

However convinced Opit himself is, he would do well to adopt a less forthright stance, and to take contrary mainstream views more seriously, if he wishes to influence the scholarly community. But he **has** given that community plenty to (re-)consider!

Notes

1. But note that mysterious animals closely resembling antlered deer are shown in the ‘Bradshaw’ rock art of the Kimberley (itself of disputed provenance); see e.g. Wilson (2006). Opit addresses the question of how various placental mammal species could have reached the Australian bush (e.g. p 57 on yowies, pp 115-118 on big cats) – with varying degrees of plausibility.
2. Remoter New Zealand’s land-dwelling fauna is even sparser, and included no mammals at all until humans and accompanying *kiore* rats arrived, apparently around 1000 CE.
3. The main New Zealand cryptid reports involve the moa, a genus of giant ratite birds thought by most scholars to have been exterminated by the Polynesian settlers.
4. In this context, it should be noted that – as reported by e.g. Josephine Flood – some traditional Aborigines who become familiar with Europeans, especially scientists and such, perceive them as ‘having no dreaming’ and thus as ‘going their own way’. But for many ‘western’ scholars, this emancipation from their people’s own traditional beliefs is to be seen as part of the legacy of the Enlightenment from which science and critical philosophy emerged, and thus as **advantageous** – as long as the traditional beliefs are not merely discarded but rather taken into account both for such merit as they do possess and as objects of study in themselves.

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Review of *The Spiritual Anatomy of Emotion* by Michael A. Jawer (with Marc S. Micozzi), Park Street Press/Inner Traditions, 2009, (pp 576). ISBN: 978-1-59477-288-7/ ISBN: 1-59477-288-6.

Reviewed by Jon Wainwright

There are certain words—holistic, paradigm, spiritual—that can trigger a sceptical frown, and, although these do crop up in this book, we are reassured by Larry Dossey's foreword as to 'the deep respect Jawer shows for the scientific tradition'. Michael Jawer himself believes that our 'intellectual, emotional, and spiritual lives. . . are fueled by the physical.' This book is a 'scientific study of emotion' and 'of the energy that animates us' and he thinks we are 'on the verge of a vital new understanding of the human organism and its place in the universe.' Dossey also remarks that scientists, 'at least in theory, are supposed to be open to new findings', a line taken by some who are too quick to accuse scientists who disagree with them of not being 'open' to their ideas. Dossey goes on to suggest that because 'anomalous experiences' are widespread, they are not really anomalous, and that those 'who turn away from this area need a wake-up call, a reality check.' (One useful definition of anomalistic psychology is 'the study of extraordinary phenomena of behaviour and experience' (<http://www.gold.ac.uk/apru/what>), and this is used by scientists who have very much turned *towards* the study of such experiences.)

At one point Michael Jawer asks: 'Why not turn the laser focus of science on the perennial conundrums of the anomalous? Surely society at large would benefit from an explanation, beyond the usual dismissals and cavalier putdowns.' Perhaps Jawer meant to say 'the laser focus of *neuroscience*', otherwise he ignores the long tradition of scientific exploration in this area.

Michael Faraday investigated table moving in the 1850s. W. K. Clifford thought there was no such thing as disembodied consciousness and he delighted in debunking paranormal claims in the 1870s. Research continued throughout the twentieth century and experiments testing paranormal claims have just been carried out by Chris French's Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit. Science *has* offered explanations (Faraday concluded that the sitters were unconsciously pulling and pushing the table) or else found that there is nothing to explain (the professional medium Patricia Putt scored zero out of ten in a recent test of her powers). Whether society chooses to accept these results is society's business, and beyond the influence of most scientists.

For the record, since they are not closed systems, living organisms do not defy the second law (of thermodynamics).

Early in the chapter on energy, electricity and dissociation we read (p 109):

'Perhaps the most noteworthy thing about living organisms is that, so long as they are alive, they evidently defy the second law of thermodynamics, which states that, as the molecules of something randomly interact, their arrangement will, over time, become less and less ordered. This is also known as *entropy*. . . . the various

forms of life. . . emerge into this world as highly organized individuals, growing and sustaining themselves *contrary to entropy*. . . . Of course, when they die their substance returns to being governed by the second law. But what about when they are alive? No question will ever be more basic to medicine, religion, philosophy, or science''.

Although this passage is incidental to the main themes of the book, I've picked it out for criticism because of the central importance of the second law for 'the whole of science, and hence in our rational understanding of the universe' (Peter Atkins, *Four Laws That Drive the Universe*, p 49). The authors could have been clearer in their handling of it. (For the record, since they are not closed systems, living organisms do not defy the second law.)

More trivial is Jawer's mistaken use of the phrase 'begs the question' when he simply means 'raises the question' rather than the logical fallacy of circular argument. This is a common mistake in journalism and broadcasting but less excusable in a philosopher—or a philosophically literate scientist. More important philosophically, he wants to replace the 'two divergent categories' of mind and body with Ken Dychtwald's term 'bodymind'. I'm not sure what he means by 'divergent' or whether Jawer understands 'category' here in the sense used by, for example, Gilbert Ryle in *Concept of Mind*. Most of the scientists and philosophers I've come across use the words 'mind' and 'body' without implying substance dualism. As well as

being an ugly neologism, ‘bodymind’ betrays a philosophical confusion: to which category does this new concept belong, or does it create a third?

Although these faults dampened my interest in the book, I don’t want to leave the impression that it is flaky through and through (Jawer does acknowledge that alternative approaches to medicine ‘remain controversial, although some have garnered more credence than others’). However, the seesawing from science to non-science too often left me with a queasy feeling. For example, in the one paragraph we read that ‘the root of feeling is very much biological, very much physiological’, but only after we have read that the sympathetic and parasympathetic branches of the autonomous nervous system ‘can be considered the *yin* and *yang* of the body’. Can they? By whom and to what purpose? Elsewhere we have a clue as to the author’s attitude toward Eastern religions and philosophy, which, ‘of course, have a long tradition of

emphasizing that essential unity’ of the physical and the mental. A skeptic might ask where were these same great religions and philosophies when it came to working out those other great unities—the atomic structure of matter and the genetic code underpinning all life on earth? Modern science might not have all the answers, but then neither does ‘ancient wisdom’.

(T)he sympathetic and parasympathetic branches of the autonomous nervous system ‘can be considered the *yin* and *yang* of the body’. Can they? By whom and to what purpose?

One of the aims of this book is to convince us that the mind is far more than the brain. There may be some neuroscientists – ticked off by Raymond Tallis but still glued to their scanners and coloured maps – who occasionally forget that we have bodies attached to

our brains and societies attached to our bodies, and so on, but there is a danger of overstating the case, of placing too much emphasis on our bodies in the construction of our selves, of that which makes us truly individual. (After all, Stephen Hawking is living proof that, even when the body is severely disabled, the mind can still function at the highest level.) Careful thinkers have always been wary of a simplistic equating of mind and brain: as long ago as the 1870s, for example, the great W. K. Clifford complained that many ‘eminent men have been so much impressed with the exact correspondence between what goes on in our minds and what goes on in our brains, that they have mixed up the two things’. While *The Spiritual Anatomy of Emotion* explores an area of perennial interest, it leaves us still on the verge of that ‘vital new understanding’.

Editor’s note: The author of ‘The Spiritual Anatomy of Emotion’ will reply to this review in the next issue.

LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

Secret history?

Laura Knight-Jadczyk is a formidably widely-read independent scholar with highly radical views on history and the nature of humanity (see *The Secret History of The World*, <http://www.cassiopaea.org>, etc.). I encountered her work at the 2008 Unconvention in London and approached her with information on her linguistic claims, which do not loom especially large but are important – and display some knowledge of the subject but a (temporarily?) incomplete grasp. Most obviously, she accepts some amateur etymologising of the usual kind as support for non-standard historical claims, notably Iman Wilkens’ view that the Trojan War really occurred in Britain, France and his native

Netherlands (he equates e.g. Cambridgeshire river names with those given in Homer!).

Knight-Jadczyk (K-J) was unwilling to be corrected here (pending further reading), whereas she was (surprisingly) more amenable to my exposition of mainstream reservations about the much less fringe but seriously (and increasingly) controversial theory that Indo-European and several other language families had a common ancestor (‘Nostratic’) spoken 10-12,000 years ago. This theory would fit in with her view (quite widely shared and not altogether unsupported) that there was a world catastrophe at that time caused by minor-planet impact. (More generally, K-J regards the more extreme revisionist/catastrophist histories

proposed by Velikovsky, Cremo etc. as much more strongly supported by the evidence than mainstream scholars would allow. She holds that all such seriously revisionist views are systematically suppressed by the powers that be.)

On another front, K-J is strongly opposed to Judaic-Christian-Muslim monotheism, regarding it as balefully influential even on recent scientific/historical scholarship, and in fact as ‘psycho-pathological’. Saliently, she holds that it would be psycho-pathological even for a creator god to claim the right to allegiance and obedience. I myself agree that humans might legitimately resist such claims – partly because of the logical argument, best summarised by Russell, that

objective ethical truths, if any exist, cannot follow from religious truths. But, despite my own atheistic views, I suggest that a creator god, if (s)he existed, **would** have a *prima facie* case here, unlike truly psycho-pathological human tyrants making similar claims.

On the other hand, K-J holds (obviously against skeptics and most scientists) that the evidence for spiritual and 'paranormal' entities of other kinds is overwhelming and should persuade even those who themselves have no awareness of divine or parapsychological forces in the world. But she also thinks it likely that some humans have a 'soul' which confers veridical awareness of these entities. Others (including sceptics) have no such awareness exactly because they have **no** souls. (This idea is similar to the less dramatic claim that humans have a psychic/spiritual 'sense' but that some are 'blind' in this respect.) Souls probably arose by way of mutation in the process of evolution (her version of same!). But it is not clear how such entities as souls (if they can exist at all) could arise in this way (though see e.g. Stephen Goldberg's view, expounded in *Anatomy of The Soul*, that important aspects of a mind can exist after the demise of the brain from which it is generated). And the fact that even members of the same family may differ in respect of such awareness surely renders K-J's specific position dubious.

K-J is searching for a new form or aspect of linguistics which would relate to her ontology by way of being 'hyper-dimensional'. She declined to attempt to explain this idea to me, seeing me as lacking a soul and thus being permanently unable to grasp the concepts involved. (For her, humanity is doomed to remain divided on issues of this kind, where empirical evidence does

not directly apply. The soul-less have an incorrigibly impoverished world-view.) She did suggest that semiotics might be identified with her 'hyper-dimensional linguistics', but this notion seems to reflect either confusion or a so-far unarticulated non-standard view of semiotics (it is normally taken to be the study of symbolism, with linguistics as one of its most major sub-fields, and thus to be wider in scope than linguistics but not at a 'different level').

K-J is searching for a new form or aspect of linguistics which would relate to her ontology by way of being 'hyper-dimensional'.

Postmodernist daemons

Another author of a broadly similar bent is Patrick Harpur, who is known for his book *Daimonic Reality* and had an article in *Fortean Times*, **246** (2009). Harpur is more overtly 'postmodernist' than K-J, and displays the common postmodernist tension between the revisionist view that some theories which are rejected by most contemporary scholars are much closer to the truth than those espoused by the latter and the relativist view that multiple apparently mutually-contradictory theories can all be 'true'. (As Sokal & Bricmont pointed out in commenting on Roger Anyon's relativist stance on the clash between the scientific consensus on the Asiatic origins of the Amerindian peoples and the rival, ill-supported 'indigenist' claims of writers such as Vine Deloria, it is, obviously, impossible for both members of such pairs of theories to be true; and in each such case some theory must be true and others false, even if we

can never be 100% sure as to the full truth.) Harpur regards evolutionary theory as merely another origin myth on a par with e.g. traditional mystical notions, and indeed as grounded much more in some of these very notions (reinterpreted by modernists) than in genuine science. He believes, in fact, that some of the key evidence adduced in support of evolution is faked or at least very tendentiously interpreted.

One key case involving the above Amerindian matters is that of 'Kennewick Man', to which I shall return – along with other such controversies.

Writing revisited!

In recent instalments I've discussed some issues concerning written language (spelling reform, children's learning, etc). There are various debates here to which linguists (who often focus mainly on speech) could contribute more than they do. In February 2009 it was reported that 5.2 million British workers (many of them native speakers) are 'functionally illiterate' in English (they cannot read signs in railway stations or wording on medicine bottles). Even the most 'trendy' egalitarian sociolinguist must view this with alarm! And some are promoting measures which might render easier the task of becoming effectively literate; for instance, Birmingham City Council is eliminating the apostrophe from its official wording (*St Paul's* becomes *St Pauls*, etc). One might see this as another instance of 'dumbing-down'; but larger features than this have been eliminated in other languages (notably Greek), and linguists could help by carefully analysing the impact of such moves – if their assistance were sought or encouraged!

THE EUROPEAN SCENE

ASKE 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/>. For those in Facebook, you can become a fan of ECSO here:

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/ECSO-European-Skeptics/282444750410?ref=nf>

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 will be hosted by the Hungarian Skeptic Society in Budapest from 17th-19th

September 2010. See the ECSO website or visit the Hungarian Skeptic Society website:

<http://www.szkeptikustarsasag.hu/en/index.php>.

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

OF INTEREST

Updates on the campaign against the libel laws and Simon Singh's case

From Sile Lane

slane@senseaboutscience.org

On 14.10.09 at the Royal Courts of Justice Simon Singh was granted permission to appeal the ruling on meaning in his libel case with the British Chiropractic Association. The appeal will be in February 2010:

See:

<http://www.senseaboutscience.org.uk/index.php/site/project/409>

and

<http://jackofkent.blogspot.com/2009/10/permission-granted.html>

**KEEP LIBEL LAWS
OUT OF SCIENCE**

To keep up-to-date with this campaign see

www.senseaboutscience.org/freedebate

If you have not yet signed the petition please consider doing so. Can

you convince 10 more people to sign up?

Sile Lane has written a guest blog for the *British Medical Journal* explaining why England's libel laws are so restrictive to free and open debate. See: <http://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2009/09/10/sile-lane-on-keeping-libel-laws-out-of-science/>

The Liberal Democrat party conference in September hosted a fringe event on Defending Free Speech: Keep libel laws out of science. See: <http://www.libdemvoice.org/defending-free-speech-keep-libel-laws-out-of-science-16083.html>.

For an account of the meeting (including a speech by Richard Dawkins) see:

<http://www.senseaboutscience.org.uk/index.php/site/project/403/>

For information on how to donate to the campaign go to

www.senseaboutscience.org.uk/index.php/site/project/423

Also from Sile Lane: 'Can you help or suggest fundraising? We need to flesh out the problem so that it can't be ignored. You have already sent us examples - many of them - of when you have come up against the libel laws. Tell us more. If you have examples where:

- you have been scared to write or speak out about something
- you have had to withdraw something you had written
- you have had your writing edited before it was published because of fear of legal action. Can you write 200 words about it for our dossier? We are compiling this evidence on or off the record and it is not for widespread publication just yet but is for submitting in meetings about the problem.

'Diligent volunteers have helped to get names up on the website, we need to be ready for some more. If you can help with this in the office email Julia at jwilson@senseaboutscience.org'.

Also see the 'Keep Libel Laws out of Science Book Fund' Click at:

www.justgiving.com/bookfund

A message from Simon Singh (via Sense about Science):

'Dear Friends,

'It has been 18 months since I was sued for libel after publishing my article on chiropractic. I am continuing to fight my case and am prepared to defend my article for another 18 months or more if necessary. The ongoing libel case has been distracting, draining and frustrating, but it has always been heartening to receive so much support, particularly from people who realise that English libel laws need to be reformed in order to allow robust discussion of matters of public interest. Over twenty thousand people signed the statement to Keep Libel Laws out of Science, but now we need you to sign up again and add your name to the new statement.

'The new statement is necessary because the campaign for libel reform is stepping up a gear and will be working on much broader base. Sense About Science has joined forces with Index on Censorship and English PEN and their goal is to reach 100,000 or more signatories in order to help politicians appreciate the level of public support for libel reform. We have already met several leading figures from all three main parties and they have all showed signs of interest. Now, however, we need a final push in order to persuade them to commit to libel reform.

'Finally, I would like to make three points. First, I will stress again - please take the time to reinforce your support for libel reform by signing up at www.libelreform.org. Second, please spread the word by blogging, twittering, Facebooking and emailing in order to encourage friends, family and colleagues to sign up. Third, for those supporters who live overseas, please also add your name to the petition and encourage others to do the same; unfortunately and embarrassingly, English libel laws impact writers in the rest of the world, but now you can help change those laws

by showing your support for libel reform. While I fight in my own libel battle, I hope that you will fight the bigger battle of libel reform.'

And more from Sile Lane:

The campaign for libel reform was launched by Sense About Science, Index on Censorship and English PEN on Wednesday 9th December. You can read about it in the following articles:

[BBC News Comic Dara O Briain says libel laws 'quash dissent'](#)

[The Times Scientists urge reform of 'lethal' libel law](#)

[The Independent Comic Dara O Briain lambasts 'bully' libel law](#)

[The Mirror Dara O Briain wants libel reform](#)

[THE UCL provost: libel law is stifling academic freedoms](#)

[New Scientist blog Campaign to reform English libel law launched](#)

[Press Gazette 'Libel can kill - reform it now'](#)

[The Press Association Dara O Briain wants libel reform](#)

THREE BOOKS FOR YOUR CHRISTMAS STOCKING

(i) Julian Baggini, regular columnist for the Skeptic, has a new book out called *Should you Judge this Book by its Cover?* From the Preface:

'The aim of this book is to make proverbs and other familiar sayings speak their wisdom afresh, and to clear away some of the mistaken ideas they can give rise to. In order to achieve this goal, it is important that I do not try to replace one set of pat interpretations with another. Rather, I want to stimulate the reader to think for herself about the ideas within, as if for the first time. That is why I make no attempt to make my discussions exhaustive. Nor do I spell everything out: the point is to make the reader check her own spelling. This is a book to argue and converse with. It is not a reference book, manual or a self-help guide. It exists simply to fuel the thinking of those who think for themselves.'

You can find further details (including Julian's video) at:

<http://julianbaggini.blogspot.com/2009/09/should-you-judge-this-book-by-its-cover.html>

(ii) The following is an abridged extract from an email from Ariane Sherine, who has edited a brand new book called *The Atheist's Guide to Christmas*, featuring writing from 42 atheists including Richard Dawkins, Derren Brown, Ben Goldacre, Charlie Brooker, David Baddiel, Josie Long, A.C. Grayling, Julian Baggini, Richard Herring, Simon Singh, Brian Cox and many more. All royalties from the book are going to the UK HIV charity Terrence Higgins Trust, providing testing, medical and legal advice and emotional support to people living with HIV'

Please order *The Atheist's Guide to Christmas* for just £8.44 with free delivery here:

<http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/0007322615>

(iii) And from Wendy Grossman: We are in the final stages of producing a 'Best of the Skeptic' volume: Wendy M Grossman, Chris French & Simon Hoggart (eds.) (2009) *Why Statues Weep: The Best of the Skeptic*. London: Philosophy Press.

The Skeptic magazine is the UK's longest running publication devoted to examining science, secularism, psychology, critical thinking and claims of the paranormal. This collection covers a wide range of topics such as popular myths, UFOs, psychic fraudsters, claims of psychic healing and alien abduction, near-death experiences, false memories, and much, much more. The book includes contributions from Susan Blackmore, John Diamond, Edzard Ernst, Ray Hyman, Richard Wiseman, and many other leading sceptical commentators, as well as interviews with Stephen Fry, Paul Daniels, and Joe Nickell.

Advance orders are now be taken for delivery for Xmas 2009 at the special price of £9.99 within the UK and £11.99 elsewhere (post free in both instances). The RRP for the book will be £11.99. Register with no commitment by calling

020 7841 1959 or by emailing <mailto:matthew@philosophersnet.com>.

MoD UFO Department to close

The Ministry of Defence is closing down its department that investigates UFO sightings. The department was established in 1950 and costs £50,000 a year. According to its website:

‘The MOD has no opinion on the existence or otherwise of extra-terrestrial life. However, in over fifty years, no UFO report has revealed any evidence of a potential threat to the United Kingdom.

‘The MOD has no specific capability for identifying the nature of such sightings. There is no Defence benefit in such investigation and it would be an inappropriate use of defence resources. Furthermore, responding to reported UFO sightings diverts MOD resources from tasks that are relevant to Defence.

‘Accordingly, and in order to make best use of Defence resources, we have decided that from the 1 December 2009 the dedicated UFO hotline answer-phone service and e-mail address will be withdrawn. MOD will no longer respond to reported UFO sightings or investigate them. The ongoing programme to release Departmental files on UFO matters to the National Archive will continue.’

<http://www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet/FreedomOfInformation/PublicationScheme/SearchPublicationScheme/HowToReportAUfoSighting.htm>

Nick Pope, who ran the Ministry of Defence UFO project from 1991 to 1994, told *The Sun* that this is ‘outrageous’. ‘We’re leaving ourselves wide open to terrorist attacks’. (*Let’s see if he is right – Ed.*)

The Magistrates Blog

<http://thelawwestofealingbroadway.blogspot.com/>

Sceptics will find this site a useful source of absurd but true tales. See for example ‘Small Earthquake In Chile - Not Many Dead’ (an account of ‘an illegal rave in which nobody died, but some kids had a good time’) and ‘Depressingly Familiar’ on Prof Nutt.

‘Scent identification’ of guilty suspects by dogs derided

<http://www.xproexperts.co.uk/newsletter/nov09/nov3.php>

A Texas based pressure group has derided the practice of ‘scent identification’ whereby trained dogs are supposed to be able to pick out suspects in a line up. They say the practice is based on faulty science and has led to a number of wrongful convictions.

House of Commons Science and Technology Committee

The website for this committee, which gives access to its publications is:

http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentarycommittees/science_technology.cfm

For access to memoranda submitted to the committee for its recent deliberations on homoeopathy go to <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmsctech/memo/homoeopathy/contents.htm>

These include evidence from David Calquhoun, Ben Goldacre, Edzard Ernst and Andy Lewis.

Also see blog at www.skeptical.org.

Also see abstract of article ‘Giving homoeopathy on the NHS is unethical and unreliable, MPs are told’ at http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/339/nov27_2/b5080 (Published on 27 November 2009 in the *British Medical Journal*)

The Skeptic vodcasts

The Skeptic web site now features a regular vodcast presented by Dany.

<http://skeptical.org.uk/news/category/curiosities>

Muslim scholars are rejecting theory of evolution

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/faith/article6919413.ece>

Also, last year a Muslim creationist succeeded in getting the website of the leading atheist Richard Dawkins banned in Turkey (*op. cit.*).

Scientologists convicted of fraud

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/8327569.stm>

Copper bracelets don’t work

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/8310792.stm>

‘Copper bracelets and magnetic wrist straps are useless for relieving pain in people with arthritis, say University of York researchers’.

Autism and MMR: More evidence for absence of link

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/8268302.stm>

The NHS Information Centre has found that one in every hundred adults living in England has autism, which is identical to the rate in children.

Swine flu scaremongering

<http://www.skeptic.com/eskeptic/09-09-23#feature>

(From ASKE members Niall Taylor)

‘A fantastic article by Harriett Hall (aka ‘skeptdoc’) about scaremongering about swine flu vaccination:

‘Claim: Mercola says ‘Injecting organisms into your body to provoke immunity is contrary to nature.’

‘Fact: Nature kills people. Doing something contrary to nature is what medicine is all about. It’s a good thing. and...

‘Mercola’s advice for preventing flu: Eliminate sugar and processed foods from your diet, take a high quality source of animal-based omega 3 fats like Krill Oil, exercise, optimize your vitamin D levels, get plenty of sleep, deal with stress, and wash your hands.

‘Fact: Washing your hands is a good idea.

‘Mercola claims: ‘Vitamin D deficiency is the likely cause of seasonal flu viruses.’

‘Fact: Now really! Vitamin D deficiency in a human body can no more ‘cause a virus’ than it could ‘cause a cat’...’

Anti swine flu vaccine march, Edinburgh

For a posting and blog by the Edinburgh Skeptics on this event on 13.12.09 see:

<http://edinburghskeptics.wordpress.com/2009/12/08/anti-vaccination-march/>

Swine flu and holy water

The following describes what seems to be a variation on the paradox 'Why put a lightening conductor on a church?'

<http://cnews.canoe.ca/CNEWS/WeirdNews/2009/11/11/11714931-reuters.html>

False claims about Ribena

<http://www.nzherald.co.nz/>

Search for 'Ribena' on the above site for the story of 'The Ribena Girls'. Also see the account in **the British Medical Journal**, 14 October 2009, at:

http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/339/oct14_2/b4136

A few years ago, two 14-year-old New Zealand girls exposed a false claim by the pharmaceutical giant GlaxoSmithKline (GSK). In 2004 Anna Devathanan and Jenny Suo were doing a school chemistry experiment to measure the amount of vitamin C in foods. They tested cartons of 'Ready to Drink' Ribena and found that, contrary to the manufacturer's claims and in contrast with a fresh orange juice control, the drink contained almost no vitamin C. After repeatedly replicating their results with help from their teachers, they contacted GSK and queried the advertising claim that the drink had 'four times the vitamin C of oranges' only to receive a 'brush off'. The youngsters contacted a newspaper and then a television company and soon became minor celebrities in their country. The national Commerce Commission became involved, and this year GSK admitted in court that it had breached the New Zealand Fair Trading Act. The company was fined a hefty sum and forced to run corrective press advertisements.

According to the *BMJ* article 'Fresh blackcurrants do indeed contain four times as much vitamin C as fresh oranges, but there was, apparently, not that much fresh blackcurrant in the 'Ready to Drink' Ribena being sold at the time.

The Ribena girls are back in the news because they've been voted New Zealanders of the Year.

Derren Brown

A number of Internet sites have sprung up debunking Derren Brown's (obviously spoof) claim that he correctly predicted the lottery numbers drawn on 9/11.9.09 using 'the wisdom of crowds' and 'automatic writing'. For exposés and humorous takes try the following:

<http://poeljames.googlepages.com/HowDerrenDidIt.html>

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EUit0Bs_YT0&annotation_id=annotation_24215&feature=iv

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rqAt2akPHJ8&annotation_id=annotation_556818&feature=iv

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-rHPH5Xanss&NR=1&feature=fvwp>

Mr Brown appears to have divided sceptics, if the exchanges on ASKE.net following his stunt is anything to go by. In the discussion, due acknowledgement was given to his debunking of paranormal ideas and practices, but concern was expressed that his own explanations for his remarkable talents, such as sensitivity to non-verbal cues and the use of subliminal suggestion, are just as misleading. For an earlier critical assessment of Derren Brown's claims see the piece by Simon Singh for the *Daily Telegraph*, 5.6.03, entitled 'Spectacular Psychology or Silly Psycho-babble?':

http://www.simonsingh.net/Derren_Brown_Article.html

But, asks one ASKE member, will the following ('Science of Scams') redeem Mr Brown?

<http://derrenbrown.co.uk/blog/2009/09/derren-brown-science-scams/>

And from another ASKE member: 'Did you see that the same numbers came up in consecutive draws in the Bulgarian lottery?'

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/8259801.stm>

Pet cat becomes registered 'hypnotherapist' and NLP practitioner

When I (*MH*) was heavily involved in the hypnosis scene I regularly came across people advertising themselves as

'registered hypnotherapists'. This sounds reassuring but what it meant was they were on one of dozens of private lists. Recently someone had his pet cat George put on two hypnotherapy registers and one register of NLP practitioners.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/8303126.stm>

Tim Minchin's 'Storm'

A poem for sceptics. Here's a version with the text:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UBhtqDCP-s>

Professor David Nutt on illegal drugs

The site below will direct you to articles and discussions concerning Professor Nutt's dismissal from the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs after he had stated what he considered to be the scientific evidence on the harm due to cannabis and other substances.

<http://blogs.bmj.com/medical-ethics/2009/11/14/david-nutt-speaks/>

See also 'Magistrate's Blog', p 11).

'Sense about Science' has also been working with senior scientists and scientific advisers to issue a set of *Principles for the Treatment of Independent Scientific Advice*. These have been endorsed by more than 80 scientific advisers, leading scientists, remaining members of the ACMD and the board of the Food Standards Agency and can be found at:

www.senseaboutscience.org/scienceadvice.

'We are now awaiting a response from the Government: Lord Drayson is taking forward the Government's consideration of the Principles (which are a proposed Code of Practice for ministers) and will report by Christmas. For clarification, Professor Beddington, the Government Chief Science Adviser will continue with the already planned and scheduled review of the Chief Scientist's 2005 Guidelines on Scientific Analysis in Policy Making which deal with how Government departments seek and obtain scientific advice. This work will conclude in February.'

Scientist reproduces Turin shroud



The Shroud of Turin has been reproduced by an Italian scientist. (*It's already been done by someone else-Ed*)

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/8291948.stm>

Interview with James Randi

The following (*edited*) is from Mark Williams (also at <http://skeptic.org.uk/news/2009/1661>).

If you already subscribe to The Skeptic you should (*have received*) the relaunch issue of the magazine. Inside the issue is an interview conducted with James Randi on Sunday 20th April 2008.

Randi kindly allowed our small group into his Vauxhall hotel room,

where we filmed the interview prior to his departure to visit the Magic Circle. He was a very gracious and accommodating host.

In the 52 minute interview, Randi discusses his Canadian education, walking out of an English Literature exam, truancy, magic and his 22 jailbreaks, Uri Geller, Project Alpha and fooling scientists, exposing Peter Popoff and miracle healing, thinking critically and independently, mortality, heart bypass surgery and medical science.

The resulting film has now been released to accompany the print version of the interview. It forms part of the Media Archive but has been split into six parts, starting here (from <http://youtube.com/theskepticmag>).

Please comment, subscribe and circulate this as widely as possible. Most of all, enjoy.

'Neuro-linguistic programming: Cargo cult psychology?'

A critical review by Gareth Rodrique-Davies in the *Journal of Applied Research in Education*, 1 (2), 57-63.

<http://jarhe.research.glam.ac.uk/media/files/documents/2009-07->

[17/JARHE_V1.2_Jul09_Web_pp57-63.pdf](#)

Chris French's latest *Guardian* column

This is on sleep paralysis and reports of alien abduction

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2009/nov/09/the-fourth-kind-sleep-paralysis>

Psychic beliefs are a religion

A police employee, Mr Alan Power, sacked for claiming psychics should be used to crack crimes has won a landmark ruling that his views should be seen as a faith. Mr Power said he believed psychics could contact people after their death and help in the investigation of crime. He said his beliefs stemmed back to his childhood when he saw 'ghosts'.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/merseyside/8357813.stm>

UPCOMING EVENTS

THE ANOMALISTIC PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCH UNIT AT GOLDSMITH'S COLLEGE LONDON

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

Email

tamas.borbely@gmx.com

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. Talks are open to staff, students and members of the public. Attendance is free and there is no need to book.

You are strongly recommended to register (at no cost) with the APRU's 'Psychology of the Paranormal' email list to ensure that you are informed of

any future changes to the programme. Visit: <http://www.gold.ac.uk/apru/email-network/>

2 Feb: Emmanuelle Peters

Understanding delusional thinking: A scientist-practitioner perspective

9 Feb: Nick Campion

How many people really believe in astrology?

23 Feb: Stephen Law

Intellectual black holes

2 Mar: Miguel Farias

Believing in the Da Vinci Code: Social-cognitive predictors and correlates

9 Mar: Gustav Kuhn

The science of magic: How magic changes our expectations about autism

16 Mar: Richard Wiseman

'Heads I win, tails you lose': How parapsychologists nullify null results

23 Mar: Sam Parnia

Near death experiences during cardiac arrest

18 May: Peter Brookesmith

The unextraordinary oddity of Alan Godfrey's 'alien abduction'

SKEPTICS IN THE PUB

Website for all venues:

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

Note: you are advised to check the relevant website to make sure that the details of any meeting you wish to attend have not been changed.

BIRMINGHAM

For details follow the SitP link or email:
jonnodonnis@yahoo.co.uk

BRIGHTON

Venue

The Caroline of Brunswick, 39
Ditchling Road, Brighton BN1 4SB

Programme

Meetings start at 8.00pm.

16 Feb: Richard Wiseman

Investigating the impossible

BRISTOL

For details follow the SitP link or email:
mailto:richard.craig@bristol.ac.uk

CAMBRIDGE

Venue

The Maypole, 20a Portugal Place, CB5
8AF

Programme

Meetings start at 6.30 pm.

26 Jan: Andy Lewis

The persistence of delusion

30 Mar: Malcolm Gaskill

Ectoplasm: Remembering the medium
Helen Duncan

27 April: Richard J. Evans

Holocaust denial

29 June: Nick Pope

The real X-Files

EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Skeptics

Email: edskeptics@gmail.com, or
info@chimaeraproductions.co.uk.

Blog:

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

Forum:

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

Twitter:

<http://twitter.com/edskeptics>

Facebook

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

Venue

Talks: The Newsrooms, Leith Street,
Edinburgh, EH1

Socials: The Waverely, St Mary's
Street, Edinburgh EH1

Programme

Meetings start at 8.00 pm.

3 Jan: Alex Pryce

*The Sunday Sermon 3: Supernatural
frauds*

21 Jan: Daniela Rudloff

Mental shortcuts: A necessary evil?

7 Feb: Alex Cameron

*The Sunday Sermon 4: The emergence
of Maitreya the World Teacher*

18 Feb: Charles Paxton

Statistics and cryptozoology

7 March: Sean McHugh

*The Sunday Sermon 5: Hinduism as
superior to atheism*

18 March: Ciaran O'Keefe

Forensic Psychology

15 Apr: David Colquhoun (TBC)

How quackery corrupts real science

1 May at 12 am: 'Mary Kings Ghost

Fest' at Mary Kings Close, High Street,
Edinburgh EH1

20 May: Gordon Rutter

The Fortean Society

17 June: Michael Heap

*Authenticity and its influence on
behaviour attitudes and beliefs*

15 July: Ken Humphreys

Jesus never existed

4 Aug at 10.37 am (some mistake

surely-Ed.): 'Skepticamp' with the
Edinburgh Skeptics at The Newsrooms,
Leith Street.

16 Sept: Stuart Wilson

Details to be confirmed

21 Oct: To be arranged

18 Nov: Speaker(s) to be arranged

Religious debate

Other Events:

16 Dec: Christmas party

GLASGOW

Venue

The Junction Bar, 14-16 West George
Street, G2 1DA

Programme

Meetings start at 7.30 pm.

17 Dec: Ariane Sherine

*The Atheist Bus Campaign and The
Atheist's Guide To Christmas*

IPSWICH

Venue

P J McGintys, 15 Northgate St, Ipswich,
Suffolk, IP1 3BY

LEEDS

Venue

The Living Room, 7 Greek Street, Leeds
LS1 5RW

Programme

Meetings are on the third Saturday of
the month, starting at 2 pm.

19 Dec: Ariane Sherine

*The Atheist Bus Campaign and The
Atheist's Guide To Christmas*

16 Jan: To be announced

20 Feb: Mike Granville

*Catholic Church: Big church or big
business?*

20 Mar: Gerry Hannant

Managing religious violence

19 June: Stewart Richmond

Magnetic bracelets: A repulsive scam?

LEICESTER

Venue

The Square Bar, 5-9 Hotel Street,
Leicester, LE1 5AW

Programme

Meetings start at 7.30 pm:

19 Jan: Andy Lewis

The persistence of delusion

16 Feb: Simon Singh

Science in the media

16 Mar: Kevin Byron

Science and uncommon sense II

20 Apr: Jon Ronson

Men who stare at goats

18 May: David Colquhoun

How quackery corrupts real science

LIVERPOOL

Venue

(i) Crown Hotel, 43 Lime Street,
Liverpool, L1 1JQ

(ii) Doctor Duncan's, St Johns Lane,
Liverpool, L1 1HF

Programme

Meetings start at 8.00 pm.

17 Dec: Trystan Swale (Venue (i) at
8.00 pm)

Ghosts and the people who hunt them

7 Jan: Social (Venue (ii))

21 Jan: Simon Singh (At 6.30 pm,
Venue TBC)

*Trick or treatment? Alternative medicine
on trial*

LONDON

Note: you now have to book (see website)

Venue:

The Penderel's Oak, 286 High Holborn, London WC1V 7HP

Programme

The room is open for food and drink from about 5.30pm and talks start at 7.30pm.

I can't find the programme on the website.

MANCHESTER

In the process of development: see SitP website

NOTTINGHAM

In the process of development: see SitP website

OXFORD

Venue

The Chequers Inn, 131a High Street, Oxford, OX1 4DH

Programme

Meetings start at 7.30 pm

12 Jan: Richard Wilson

Don't get fooled again: The skeptic's guide to life

2 Feb: Andy Lewis

The persistence of delusion

8 Jun: Chris French

The psychology of anomalous experiences

SHEFFIELD

The following meeting *only* will be held at The University Arms, 197 Brook Hill, Sheffield S3 7HG at 7:30pm.

21 Dec: Ariane Sherine:

The Atheist Bus Campaign and The Atheist's Guide To Christmas

Venue

Apart from the above meeting the venue will be The Lescar Hotel, 303 Sharrow Vale Road, Sheffield, S11 8ZF.

Programme

Meetings normally start at 7.30 pm.

11 Jan: Andy Lewis

The persistence of delusion

8 Feb: Simon Singh (At 6.45 pm)

Trick or treatment? Alternative medicine on trial

8 Mar: Tony Youens

Adventures in scepticism

12 April: Michael Heap

Suggestion and the paranormal

10 May: Simon Perry

Skeptical activism and the quacklash

14 Jun: Chris French

The psychology of anomalous experiences

12 Jul: Peter Harrison

The failure of magic as a tool to promote skepticism

WESTMINSTER

A meeting of Skeptics in the Pub that focuses on policy related matters. The intention is to engage more with policy makers, decision makers, and regulators.

For more detail, please visit:

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

or email:

westminster@skepticsinthepub.org

WINCHESTER

Click on 'Hampshire' on the SitP website (or go direct to <http://www.hampshireskeptics.org/>) and learn about the Hampshire Skeptics.

Venue

The Royal Oak, Royal Oak Passage, Winchester, SO23 9AU

Programme

Meetings start at 7.30 pm.

28 Jan: Rebecca Watson & Sid Rodrigues

About Skeptics in the Pub

25 Feb: Richard Wilson

(See website for topic)

25 Mar: To be announced

To be announced

29 Apr: To be announced

To be announced

27 May: Simon Perry

(See website for topic)

CENTRE FOR INQUIRY LONDON

<http://cfilondon.org/>.

Programme

The meetings below will all be held at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, WC1R 4RL. (Note from Chris French: CFI London have kindly agreed that subscribers to *The Skeptic* can have free entry to either or both of these events. If you don't subscribe yet, you can take

advantage of the current special offer for new subscribers to allow you to get a one-year subscription to the magazine (4 issues) for £15 instead of the usual £20. That means that you can get a one-year subscription plus entry to both events for a mere £15 instead of the normal total price of £40!)

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

30 Jan 2010, 11.00am-3pm: Simon Singh, Andy Lewis and others

Trick or treatment?

<http://www.cfilondon.org/2009/06/18/trick-or-treatment-alternative-medicine-on-trial-with-simon-singh/>

6 March, 2010, 11am-3pm. Nick Pope Adrian Shine, David Clarke, and one other

Monsters vs aliens

<http://www.cfilondon.org/2009/12/04/monster-vs-aliens-day-ufos-the-loch-ness-monster-and-big-foot/>

SUNDAY TIMES OXFORD LITERARY FESTIVAL, 2010, AT CHRIST CHURCH COLLEGE

<http://www.sundaytimes-oxfordliteraryfestival.co.uk/>

Note the following

25 Mar, 2010: Simon Singh

Trick or treatment? (On the ongoing court case)

26 Mar, 2010: John Polkinghorne vs. David Papineau

Does science reveal the mind of God?

27th Mar, 2010: Ben Goldacre

Also starring: Richard Wiseman, Stephen Law and others. More details to be announced.

CONFERENCE ON LUCID AND COGNITIVE DREAMS

<http://www.anomalistik.de/aktuell/veranstaltungen/tagung-2009-klartraum-wahrtraum.html>

'Lucid and cognitive dreams: empirical research of extraordinary dream experiences' Conference (in German, with some English speakers) in Heidelberg, 26-28. March 2010

LOGIC AND INTUITION

The answer is as follows:

The simplified puzzle retains the essential feature of the Raven Paradox. In both cases, for the puzzle to make sense we assume that some of the general population (birds or villagers) have the quality in question and some don't (some birds are black and some aren't; some villagers have blue eyes and some don't). In the simplified version, the general population and the subgroup are finite in number, likewise, at any given time, those in the original version (ravens and birds on the planet Earth).

Well, if that's the case we can simply the puzzle even further. Say you are waiting outside a room in which 4 people are having a meeting. Some are male and some female. You know that at least one of them has blue eyes and your theory is that all the women have blue

eyes. A green-eyed man comes out of the room. The likelihood of a blue-eyed woman being left in the room now increases; thus the chance that all the women left in the room have blue eyes has also risen.

The same reasoning is applicable to the example of the Vestian explorer and the villagers. For the proposition under investigation to be true it should also be the case that there are at least as many of those possessing the quality in question (blackness or blue-eyedness) as there are in the subgroup identified – ravens or female villagers. This is not essential to the above argument but obviously if there are fewer black birds than ravens or fewer blue-eyed villagers than female villagers then the proposition is doomed from the start.

There may be a flaw somewhere in my reasoning but I understand that arguing from probabilities is considered sound by some (see the Wikipedia article). That is, in the case of the Raven Paradox, the green parrot provides relevant or useful information for the proposition in question but 'the amount of confirmation is very small'.

So how do you deal with the following? A scientist has a theory that people who suffer from a certain medical condition all have defective gene X. The first person the scientist tests is Anne. Anne does not have this medical condition and she is found not to have defective gene X. The scientist claims that this provides support for the theory.

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 <mailto:m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk>

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