
Skeptical Adversaria

2011, Number 4 (Winter)



The Quarterly Newsletter of the Association for Skeptical Enquiry



FROM THE ASKE CHAIRMAN

Michael Heap

As with climate change and numerous political controversies, I am sure that sceptics have differing views on the advisability of ‘GM food’, in which alterations of DNA have been deliberately engineered.

Likewise it is difficult for the non-specialist (i.e. the vast majority of the public) to come to an informed decision, particularly when those people who are knowledgeable on these matters disagree in such fundamental ways (cf. economists). However, one’s sceptical antennae should certainly start to twitch when one reads some of the propaganda and ideology of those opposed to the cultivation of GM food. (Also I admit to being irrationally pulled towards the proponents’ side by the mere fact that Prince Charles is amongst the opposition.)

I admit to being irrationally pulled towards the proponents’ side by the mere fact that Prince Charles is amongst the opposition.

My attention was recently drawn to a letter in the *Times* about GM foods in which the writer refers to wheat intolerance and coeliac disease (the editors have mistakenly headed the letter ‘Allergic reaction’). The writer refers to an article favourable to GM food by Professor Maurice Maloney of the Rothamsted Institute, an agricultural research establishment. The writer disputes Prof Maloney’s opinion that

there is no evidence that GM foods have caused people to develop ‘so much as an itch’ and refers to ‘the big increase in coeliac disease and wheat intolerance, which was rare in the 1950s’. He avers that ‘Wheat has changed dramatically in the past 50 years and our bodies cannot cope’.

This sounds very alarming and I certainly do not wish my risk of developing coeliac disease to be increased by the introduction of GM wheat (unless, possibly, this increased risk was more than offset by a decreased risk of my developing other serious illnesses). However, it was not clear to me whether the writer was linking the rise in the incidence of coeliac disease to GM wheat (which has so far not been available for general consumption). Also, it seems to me that one explanation for any observed increase in the illness is simply improved recognition of symptoms and diagnostic procedures and better and more extensive screening. (There is also the tendency for people to incorrectly self-diagnose food intolerance and food allergy, as does the alternative medicine industry.) However, this is something for the experts to advise on, as is whether any increase in coeliac disease has anything to do with wheat having changed dramatically over the last 50 years.

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One of the motives for cultivating GM wheat is actually to help people with bowel disorders such as coeliac disease - see ‘Should we genetically modify wheat for celiac disease sufferers?’ (*note 1*).

In the past, opponents of GM food in this county and elsewhere have destroyed GM crops that have been cultivated for research purposes. In June

2011 the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) received permission to conduct Australia's first trial in which humans will eat GM wheat. However in July, Greenpeace activists destroyed the entire crop (about half a hectare) of GM wheat that had been cultivated on an experimental farm in Canberra. The wheat's genes had been modified to lower the glycaemic index and increase fibre to create a product which would improve bowel health and increase nutritional value. Animal feeding trials of up to three months had been conducted, with human trials at least six months away. No genetically modified

wheat strain had ever been approved for cropping in Australia before (*note 2*).

In the UK the government recently gave permission to Rothamsted Research to begin scientific investigations next year into the potential benefits of wheat that has been genetically modified to produce a pheromone that repels aphids (*note 3*).

In the US there are also moves to resurrect previously abandoned plans to cultivate GM wheat.

So, I ask myself where I stand on GM food. I want the elected government to make a decision on the basis of what dispassionate scientific experts tell them. I am not impressed by conspiracy

theories and I certainly do not want Greenpeace and other activists deciding for me by committing acts of vandalism.

Notes

1. <http://santarosaweightloss.com/2011/03/should-we-genetically-modify-wheat-for-celiac-disease-sufferers/>
2. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2011-07-14/20110714-greenpeace-gm-protest/2794272>
3. <http://uk.news.yahoo.com/gm-wheat-trial-backed-government-154918225.html>

LOGIC AND INTUITION

The following puzzle is a favourite of the mathematician Marcus du Sautoy, Simonyi Professor for the Public Understanding of Science. It *may* be solved by algebra, but it can also be solved by logical thinking.

You are rushing to catch a flight at an airport. On part of your journey there is a moving walkway. One of your shoelaces is undone so you're going to

have to stop at some point to do it up. Should you do this when you are on the moving walkway or when you are not on the walkway, or does it not matter?

Answer on page 11.

ONE OF US

With so much woo-bashing going on in the media now, this feature of the newsletter has been rendered redundant for some time. However, I was so heartened to read a diatribe against Chinese traditional medicine recently that I think a mention of the author and some of his more quotable comments is in order.

Step forward Mr Giles Coren, regular contributor to the *Times* opinion columns. On 19.11.11 Mr Coren penned a piece entitled 'Which? idiots think pricey salt is a problem'. The first two-thirds of this article is, to be honest, a pretty unconvincing attack on the consumer magazine *Which?* for a report condemning the consumption of sea and rock salt as a 'healthy' substitute for ordinary table salt. It is no such thing, despite the higher cost. However, Mr Coren then turns his attention to the scandal of the slaughter of rhinoceroses for their horn which is used by certain practitioners of traditional medicine not,

as is commonly believed, as an aphrodisiac, but for colds and convulsions, and some believe it has life-saving properties. Needless to say, there is no convincing evidence or rationale to support this. But the killing of rhinos continues and, in fact, has increased over the last 3 years. The Javan rhino and the Western black rhino have just been declared extinct. Angry? Mr Coren certainly is:

'Traditional Chinese medicine. What a vile oxymoron. It's simply got to go. All of it. I know those high street purveyors of bee vomit migraine cures and fenugreek poultices look harmless

enough, but it is this quackish faith in fairy stories – at any level – that creates a universal sanction for rhino killing.'

And there is more:

'All hokey-pokey alternative, herbal homeopathic, medical bunkum must go. This preposterous voodoo.....should have been consigned to history's dustbin decades ago.' And:

'We have real medicine now and the sooner we stop this herbalist ooga-booga, the sooner we can build a world consensus against witchdoctory folkloric flimflam and medical hocus-pocus, and leave the rhino in peace.'

Phew!

REVIEWS

Planet Word: A five-part BBC2 documentary by Stephen Fry (first broadcast in 2011 on 25/9, 2/10, 9/10, 16/10 and 23/10) and an accompanying book by J.P. Davidson with a foreword by Stephen Fry, published by Michael Joseph (Penguin), London, 2011 (pp 446).

Reviewed by Mark Newbrook

In this BBC TV series, the well-known writer, broadcaster and polymath Stephen Fry has addressed the topic of human language, in which he has a long-standing interest. He makes many points which should be better known to thoughtful language-users than they typically are, in places correcting common folk-linguistic misconceptions; and his presentation of the material is enthusiastic, articulate, fascinating and eminently accessible to the intelligent and interested lay-person, perhaps more so than if the series had been made by a professional linguist working alone. The five programmes cover, successively: 1) the historical origins of language (as explained both in traditional myths and in the work of linguists) and the acquisition of language by children; 2) language variation and identity; 3) the 'use and abuse' of language; 4) writing systems; and 5) language and power.

Given the obvious importance of language for the human species, Fry is justifiably concerned at the rather low level of explicit awareness of the relevant issues which prevails in otherwise well-educated lay circles. He is also judicious and for the most part fair in assessing the current state of knowledge regarding language, and he draws heavily upon the expertise of linguists and of scholars in related fields, displaying considerable erudition. But (unfortunately, as I would suggest) he has chosen not to invite any linguist to co-author the work; and there are points at which he adopts a 'popular' approach (which may be judged fully justified in other sections) and thereby oversimplifies issues and perhaps

underplays the significance of academic linguistics (not widely known in the community at large) as a discipline. In addition (as in his works on other topics) there are certainly places where, despite a measure of diffidence, he appears over-confident in expressing or endorsing ideas which are in fact controversial, and in consequence presents rather one-sided or even (occasionally) inaccurate accounts of certain key issues.

It should be emphasised that not all languages have all the same 'parts of speech'; for instance, some have no clear distinction between verbs and adjectives.

Below I treat the undoubted merits of Fry's material largely as given, and focus, programme by programme, upon the most important cases where a non-linguist watcher might reasonably be encouraged to exercise a degree of reserve and caution. Rather unfortunately, these are particularly salient in the first programme.

Programme 1

Most linguists hold, on the basis of evidence of various kinds, that *Homo sapiens* has had language for rather longer than the 50,000 years suggested by Fry.

It should be emphasised that not **all** languages have **all** the same 'parts of speech'; for instance, some have no clear distinction between verbs and adjectives.

Fry's account of the 'design features' of human language omits or underplays some key points, notably the feature (unique among known communication systems) of 'double articulation', the relationship between phonemes, meaningless in themselves, and the meaningful morphemes/words which they make up in combination.

By no means all linguists would accept the 'nativist' theories of Noam Chomsky, Steven Pinker and their followers, which imply that the brains of young humans contain a 'dedicated' language module which exercises highly **specific** constraints upon possible linguistic structures, that the genetic disorders displayed by the 'KE' family relate to language specifically (see especially pp. 41-42 of the book) and that even otherwise intelligent non-human species (such as apes) are inherently unable to acquire the most significant aspects of language; despite his occasional *caveats*, Fry's overt admiration for Pinker in particular seems to have led him to adopt a somewhat one-sided view of this set of issues.

Fry does not really explain the (admittedly often difficult) notions involved in grammatical analysis adequately for his purposes.

There is debate among historical linguists as to the geographical origin of the Indo-European language 'family'; some locate Proto-Indo-European in Anatolia rather than in what is now Russia.

Programme 2

Fry arguably relies excessively upon non-linguists (amateur dialectologists,

dialect writers, etc.) in his discussion of dialects and accents, and some of his treatment is in consequence rather naïve – especially where, for example, he takes seriously the popular idea that climatic differences affect regional accent variation, or where he treats regional varieties as if they had sharp geographical boundaries.

Programme 4

Fry adopts a rather one-sided view of the desirability of alphabetic writing, even for languages such as Chinese which have traditionally been very successfully written in scripts of other types; he downplays the cross-linguistic evidence which suggests that these other

types have their own very considerable advantages (psycholinguistic, etc.).

The accompanying book has a preface by Fry himself but is authored by John Paul Davidson, a well-informed television director/producer with anthropological training. In this mode the pressure on space is obviously reduced, and the treatment of some of the above-mentioned issues is somewhat more even-handed. But in my view it is still a pity that no professional linguist was involved as a co-author; this might for instance have reduced the incidence of naivety as displayed in Davidson's discussion of writing systems on pp. 259-260 (in the context of the decipherment of the syllabic Linear B

script). And in Fry's preface some of the problems referred to above emerge again, for example on p. 17 where he oversimplifies (at least in his presentation) the contrast between the thought of Chomsky and that of Benjamin Lee Whorf (as indeed he does in Programme 2 of the documentary series).

Nevertheless, the book is well worth obtaining, even for those who have already seen the documentaries; and the documentaries themselves should be viewed eagerly by all who have an interest in language or who need to increase their awareness of linguistic matters (teachers, educationists, parents, writers, broadcasters, etc.).

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The Believing Brain; How we Construct Beliefs and Reinforce them as Truths by Michael Shermer. New York: Times Books, 2011; pp 386. ISBN 978-0-8050-9125-0.

Martin Wallace

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As a member of NZ Skeptics [Inc.] I have become increasingly aware of the huge and ever-growing list of unsubstantiated beliefs in our society, including religion, alternative medicine, alien abductions, ESP, flying saucers, vaccination refusal, and so on and on.

Why are there so many of them and their adherents, and so few of us sceptics?

In his new book Michael Shermer sets out the reasons for this situation. It is our believing brains, evolved hundreds of thousands of years ago, that are responsible. Belief without evidence is a salutary behaviour when facing a trembling bush behind which a predator may be lurking. Don't wait for evidence—just go! Survival is selected for by belief!

Michael Shermer is the founding publisher of *Skeptic* magazine in the USA, writes a regular columnist in *Scientific American*, and is an adjunct

professor at Claremont graduate University. He lives in California.

In this book, he explores beliefs in many fields, and how we select data after forming the beliefs, to reinforce them. He describes how deeply inherent is our desire to detect patterns in our sensory information, and the evidence from neurophysiology and behaviour genetics which shows how and where this occurs. Religion for example exists in all cultures and can be called 'a universal'.

Dr. Shermer explores the history of empiricism and the extraordinary prescience of Francis Bacon (c 1620) in his recognition of those human behaviours which inhibit the determination of reality, and the need for a new approach.

He makes a strong argument for the teaching of scientific method in our schools as well as teaching the nature of the world revealed by that process. It is

the unwillingness to apply that method which has resulted in the persistence of our plethora of beliefs. We are not endowed by evolution with that aptitude, which after all is only 400 years old. We have to learn it.

Unsubstantiated beliefs have been part of our nature for a million years. This is why there are so many of them, and why they are so widespread.

Shermer writes: 'Science is the only hope we have of avoiding the trap of belief-dependant realism. It is the best tool ever devised to determine: does belief equate with reality?'

The prologue of this book is available on Shermer's web page [www.michaelshermer.com/] and gives some idea of what lies within.

There are liberal notes for each chapter and a comprehensive index.

I would recommend this book to anyone, sceptic or not, who wishes to better understand our human nature.

emotions will access your body's energy, restoring it to a balanced state'.

Ms Ortner is described in the article as 'a college drop-out' who 'began tapping because she was unhappy in her dull job as an estate agent'. 'I became ill and couldn't go back to work for weeks'. Since then she has never looked back. Her website, which includes pay-per-view lectures, has 300,000 subscribers; and her DVD *The Tapping Solution* (\$29.95) is a best seller in the US. It is claimed that this has helped people with phobias, post-traumatic

stress disorder and nicotine addiction, children who are bullied, and 'obese women who have intentionally gained weight to make themselves unattractive to men'. Who would deny that tapping has bestowed great benefits on Ms Ortner?

Celebrities who have signed up to tapping include Madonna, Lily Allen (to help curb her craving for sweet and fatty food) and Kelly Hoppen (*Who's she?* – *Ed.*) for anxiety (tapping along such lines as "I acknowledge my nervous

system and all the ways in which it fails me').

His fee for writing his article aside, it isn't altogether clear that Mr Mills has benefited from his treatment. 'Weeks later, he tells us, 'I feel less stressed about tasks The trouble is, I keep putting off doing the tapping'.

Note

¹ The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association, Fifth Edition, due out in May 2013.

LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

Maverick Linguists

In every discipline, at any given time, there are some major specific issues on which there is a (provisional) 'orthodox' scholarly consensus; that is to say, there is little disagreement on these particular points in the relevant intellectual mainstream. However, there are also, very typically, small minorities of highly-qualified and knowledgeable scholars who **do** disagree with some such mainstream-consensus views. Most (not all) of these thinkers are respected by the large majority who accept the consensus view, even though they are very generally considered to be mistaken. (Some of them – again not all – identify as skeptics; see earlier instalments and below on 'skeptical heroes'.) The views which the members of such minorities espouse may have been superseded in the 'core' of the mainstream for reasons which these 'mavericks' find inadequate; or they may be novel positions which may or may not eventually find favour; or they may simply represent different (perhaps idiosyncratic) interpretations of the evidence. For instance, Halton Arp and some other well-qualified astronomers reject the otherwise very generally

accepted standard interpretation of quasar red-shifts as associated with a cosmogenic 'Big Bang'.

Some other well-qualified astronomers reject the otherwise very generally accepted standard interpretation of quasar red-shifts as associated with a cosmogenic 'Big Bang'.

Some linguists also fall into this category. Many of them are historical linguists who disagree especially with the orthodox chronology for the diversification of human languages from their ultimate single or multiple origins. It is very generally agreed by historical linguists, on the evidence available, that an ancestral 'Proto-World' (or multiple ultimate ancestor languages) must have been spoken so long ago – at least 70,000 years ago, probably more like 150,000 – that it (or they) cannot possibly be reconstructed in any detail, given the observed range of rates of linguistic change.

In opposition, a number of recent and contemporary maverick linguists have proposed considerably smaller

time-depths for Proto-World, and have gone on to suggest that the ancestor language therefore **can** be reconstructed in part. These linguists include Marge Landsberg, Merritt Ruhlen, Vitaly Shevoroshkin and Morris Swadesh. Some of this work is now dated, and most of it involves methodology which, at least nowadays, is regarded by most linguists as too loose and approximate to be reliable. However, this sub-tradition shows little sign of actually dying out.

There are also numerous amateurs who uphold similar views – often regarding their own 'favourite' ancient languages as close to Proto-World (Leonardi, discussed below, is one such). These amateurs frequently adduce the mavericks' views in support of their own, typically misidentifying them as fully mainstream (because they hold academic positions and have written articles printed in refereed journals and books issued by respected publishers) – and often also misinterpreting the mavericks' views as closer to their own than they are.

The theory of a recent Proto-World is in fact difficult to reconcile with (in particular) the modern archaeological evidence that members of *Homo sapiens* had already spread as far as remote

Australia 60,000 years ago, sailing at least the last few hundred kilometres. These people, who became the Aborigines, were presumably already using languages which were related to other human languages, as are the contemporary Aboriginal languages.

A few maverick historical linguists and well-informed amateurs, notably Patrick Ryan, are even more unusual; they accept the consensus deep-time dating for Proto-World but **still** claim that it can be reconstructed to a worthwhile degree.

Iconoclasm in Israel

There are also scholars who do not identify as skeptics (as do 'skeptical heroes' such as Ian Plimer and Derek Freeman, on whom see my earlier comments) but whose novel standpoints arouse ire among the advocates of mainstream-academic or popular positions which are embraced partly for non-scholarly reasons.

Various minority religious groups, notably the British Israelites, deny the ethnic continuity between the ancient Hebrews/Israelites on the one hand and contemporary Judaism on the other.

Negative reactions to such opinions are perhaps especially fierce when religious or ethnic/nationalistic sentiments are involved. There are several communities which are both religious **and** ethnic in nature; the two best known are the Sikhs and the Jews. Sikhs/Jews who abandon their religions (such as the Jewish scientist and author Isaac Asimov) are thus still considered Sikhs/Jews by other Sikhs/Jews. In the case of Judaism there is now an associated nation-state, Israel (the name is, of course, taken from the Old Testament Hebrew state), instituted in the 'Holy Land' in the late 1940s after many centuries during which there was no Hebrew/Jewish state in the area. The

impetus towards Jewish statehood was so strong that the Hebrew language, long confined to religious literature and scholarship, was successfully revived as a modern spoken tongue and adopted in place of the languages previously used by the new settlers, such as Yiddish (a Hebraicised form of German).

Israel continues to welcome ethnic Jews from other countries but itself has significant non-Jewish populations – notably the Palestinian Muslims, many of whom are descended from people who were already settled in the area when Israel was re-established. This situation generates not only conflict but also internal tension involving the two roles of Israel: on the one hand, a modern democratic multi-ethnic nation defined chiefly by its geographical boundaries, and, on the other, the 'national home' of the 'Jewish people'.

Various minority religious groups, notably the British Israelites, deny the ethnic continuity between the ancient Hebrews/Israelites on the one hand and contemporary Judaism on the other (they refuse to refer to the Hebrews as 'Jews'); but far more impact is made by current **mainstream** scholars who advance broadly similar views but with more convincing evidence and reasoning. One such scholar is Shlomo Sand, who teaches history at the University of Tel Aviv. Sand's iconoclastic 2008 Hebrew-language book (available in a 2009 English translation as *The Invention of the Jewish People*) argues that most contemporary Jews are descended not from the ancient people of Israel as is usually held (especially in Israel itself) but rather from converts drawn from populations scattered across Europe and the Middle East where diaspora Jews formed significant minorities in earlier centuries. (Judaism still accepts converts, but today they are not numerous; many of them turn to Judaism on marrying Jews.)

Sand's view is that the formation of a modern 'Jewish people' involved the development of an essentially false

historical tradition, partly in response to the rise of nationalism in early modern Europe. He has been attacked by some Jewish reviewers and critics committed to the orthodox position; but not all of these authors have paid adequate attention to his arguments and evidence. Sand's position may possibly be mistaken in whole or part; but he is a well-informed scholar, and his theory should obviously be considered on its merits.

Commentators are tempted to regard Jews who reject the orthodox position on Judaism and Israel as traitors to race and religion – or even as conspiratorially associated with continuing anti-semitism.

One factor in this reaction to works such as Sand's is the understandable sympathy (on the part of both Jews and others) with the huge numbers of Jews who fell foul of anti-semitism and fascism in the 20th Century and earlier. Commentators are tempted to regard Jews who reject the orthodox position on Judaism and Israel as traitors to race and religion – or even as conspiratorially associated with continuing anti-semitism.

Other novel accounts of Hebrew history – and of the language – also meet with fierce opposition. David Leonardi (part of whose re-analysis of early Hebrew was discussed in this column in early 2011) reports that very few works challenging the 'accepted wisdom' are approved or even tolerated in Jewish intellectual circles, and that such books may struggle to obtain publication in Israel. He finds himself able to refer to only one earlier work along the lines of his own. Leonardi (himself based in the USA) argues that the 'Masoretic' amplification of Hebrew spelling of around 700 CE (which persists today and is generally accepted as yielding a largely correct representation of the early language)

seriously misrepresents the structure of ancient Hebrew and thereby frequently distorts the meaning of biblical texts. Interestingly, he is a genuine believer himself, and suggests that God created spoken and written Hebrew fully formed; but his view of the specifics places him 'beyond the Pale'. In my

own view, Leonardi's case for his account of early Hebrew is in fact much weaker than he suggests; but it should surely be critiqued without any nationalistic or religion-based assumptions.

Similar issues arise in the context of other religions, ethnicities and

nationalities. For example, some otherwise astute Hindu believers will not countenance objections to accounts of Indian history which they find congenial. I will discuss another such case next time.

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/>.

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/>

Via the website you can access articles, news, and commentary on a range of topics of interest to sceptics.

The 2012 World Skeptics Congress

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

This will be held from 17-20 May 2012 in Berlin. (M. Heap is representing ASKE so get in touch if you want to participate or have any ideas.) The conference is jointly sponsored by the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI), the Gesellschaft zur wissenschaftlichen

Untersuchung von Parawissenschaften (GWUP, Germany) and ECSO.

ECSO will now be giving annual awards to individuals who have made distinguished contributions to scepticism. The first of these will be announced at the Berlin congress.

OF INTEREST

The Nightingale Collaboration

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

Keep updated on the Nightingale Collaboration's latest activities and campaigns against medical quackery and pseudoscience. Better still, sign up online for email copies of the Newsletter. Details of the following successes can be found at the above website:

- Another complaint about reflexology has been upheld by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) on three issues.
- Boots has been told by the ASA to stop making medical claims for pills with no active ingredient following a complaint by Simon Perry.
- The ASA identified 10 points in a 'master complaint' concerning craniosacral therapy and upheld them all, including one that the ad could

discourage people from seeking essential treatment for conditions for which medical supervision should be sought.

Burzynski Clinic

<http://rhysmorgan.co/2011/11/threats-from-the-burzynski-clinic/>

A schoolboy blogger in Wales has been threatened by the Burzynski Clinic in Houston, Texas for questioning their unconventional treatment of cancer patients. See also:

<http://freethoughtblogs.com/butterfliesandwheels/2011/11/why-burzynski-matters/> and <http://josephinejones.wordpress.com/2011/11/29/burzynski-blogs-my-master-list/>

'Fizzy Drinks Make Teenagers Violence'

<http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/health-news/fizzy-drinks-may-lead-to-teenage-violence-2375523.html>

Research in the US on 1,900 students aged between 14 and 18 suggests that those who consumed at least five cans of cola or similar drinks a week are significantly more likely to have carried a gun or knife, or been involved in a fight. However, Peter Kinderman, professor of clinical psychology at the University of Liverpool dismissed the study as an 'overly simplistic interpretation' of the role of fizzy drinks in violent behaviour. 'The causes of violence in young people are complicated. There are a large number of risk factors that have nothing to do with the consumption of these drinks.'

Is ‘the Placebo Effect’ really so Powerful?

There has been a recent flurry of interest concerning the above question. See:

<http://theness.com/neurologicablog/index.php/the-rise-and-fall-of-placebo-medicine/>

Further references are:

Hróbjartsson, A & Gøtzsche, P.C. (2001) Is the placebo powerless? An analysis of clinical trials comparing placebo with no treatment. *New England Journal of Medicine*, **344**, 1594-1602.

<http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJM200105243442106>

Hróbjartsson, A & Gøtzsche, P.C. (2004) Is the placebo powerless? Update of a systematic review with 52 new randomized trials comparing placebo with no treatment. *Journal of International Medicine*, **256**, 91-100.

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15257721>

With comments and rejoinders at:

<http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJM200110253451712>

Sense About Science

www.senseaboutscience.org

From Dr Tabitha Innocent:

tinnocent@senseaboutscience.org.

Food Hospital

You may have seen Channel 4’s ‘Food Hospital’, tackling claims about food and diet. Sile Lane will be in 20th December’s episode. We helped develop three videos for the accompanying website, on understanding statistics, clinical trials and media reporting. (See: <http://foodhospital.channel4.com/the-truth-about/videos/>.) Thanks to those of

you who gave expert advice for this and also to those who have been helping us manage the increase in reactive work, including *For the record* pieces responding to news stories – all here: http://www.senseaboutscience.org/for_the_record.php

Ask for Evidence update

www.senseaboutscience.org/askforevidence

The Ask for Evidence campaign has featured in newspapers, professional publications, and newsletters

everywhere from the *Metro* to the Royal College of Anaesthetists’ bulletin and last week’s article in *The Times* by Colin Blakemore.

As a result, many people are contacting us to find out how to question claims they have seen, or to tell us about their evidence hunting. We are collecting these cases on our website. They include a massage in schools programme, the benefits of wheatgrass juice, and glucosamine supplements for joint pain. See:

http://www.senseaboutscience.org/pages/a4e_examples_of_evidence_hunting.html.

And, if you have questions about a claim or an evidence-hunting experience to share, get in touch with Victoria Murphy:

vmurphy@senseaboutscience.org.

Ask for evidence postcards

I know that many of you have been encouraging friends and family to ask for evidence, and have told us it would be useful to have something you can hand out to make requesting evidence simple. We think this is a great idea and have decided to produce a trial series of ‘ask for evidence’ postcards and e-postcards, for people to fill in with claim details and a request for evidence. To do it we need to raise £3,800. Our supporters and advisers were really good at fundraising for the campaign initial launch: can you help us again? Donations can be made at www.justgiving.com/senseaboutscience or <http://www.senseaboutscience.org/pages/donate.html>.

Join us to tell MPs why libel reform is essential for open discussions about science and medicine

The parliamentary scrutiny committee on the Draft Defamation Bill last month urged the Government to strengthen proposals for reform, supporting some recommendations from the Libel Reform Campaign, which Sense About Science runs jointly with English PEN and Index on Censorship. Our biggest battles will be to make sure there is a

robust public interest defence and that libel reform does not get pushed off a crowded parliamentary agenda, so please come and meet your MP and hear from science writers, medical researchers, publishers and community and consumer groups on Wednesday 9th November 2011, 6pm, Committee Room 10, House of Commons. For more information contact Mark Brook on mbrook@senseaboutscience.org or see <http://www.senseaboutscience.org/news.php/210/come-to-parliament-on-wednesday-9th-november>.

‘Celebrities and Science’ review for 2011

We are now compiling this, so if you spot any celebrity quotes that you think we should include, please send them to Victoria (see above).

TAM 2011 Videos Online

JREF (the James Randi Educational Foundation) is making videos of many TAM talks and panels available free of charge at Randi.org. The first two videos from TAM 2011 Las Vegas are available now.

‘Winning Hearts and Minds’: Sadie Crabtree

<http://www.randi.org/site/index.php/swift-blog/1468-tam-2011-video-sadie-crabtree-on-winning-hearts-and-minds.html>

‘Our Future in Space’ panel, with Pamela Gay, Lawrence Krauss, Bill Nye, and Neil deGrasse Tyson.

<http://www.randi.org/site/index.php/swift-blog/1477-tam-2011-panel-our-future-in-space.html>

Neutrinos Travel Faster than Light Again

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-15791236>

The team behind the finding in September that neutrinos may travel faster than light has carried out an improved version of their experiment - and found the same result. But see comments by Jim ‘I’ll eat my boxer shorts on live TV’ Al-Khalili at:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/nov/23/faster-speed-of-light-boxers-also>

Social Psychologist Invents Data

<http://chronicle.com/article/As-Dutch-Research-Scandal/129746/>

‘The discovery that the Dutch researcher Diederik A. Stapel made up the data for dozens of research papers has shaken up the field of social psychology, fuelling a discussion not just about outright fraud, but also about subtler ways of misusing research data. Such misuse can happen even unintentionally, as researchers try to make a splash with their peers—and maybe, with the news media, too.’

Zombies Bring Challenge to Celebrity ‘Psychic Medium’

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FHmTIKIEIXo>

Courtesy of the James Randi Educational Foundation.

Las Vegas: the Zombie Apocalypse Store

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/travel/video/2011/nov/17/las-vegas-zombie-store-video>

‘Apparently, the biggest problem in Las Vegas is not the gambling but the undead. Fortunately there is the Zombie Apocalypse Store which will take care of all your apocalyptic survival needs. Items for sale include 3D bleeding zombie targets, Tasers disguised as mobile phones and knives that probably shouldn’t be left in the car if you’ve been drinking.’

Spiritualism on ‘The One Show’

<http://bit.ly/tvsnoh>

Featuring Chris French, Richard Wiseman and Rob Brotherton.

Sally Morgan

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2011/oct/27/sally-morgan-psychic-powers-halloween>

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2011/oct/31/sally-morgan-rejects-halloween-challenge>

Sally Morgan, the TV clairvoyant who styles herself as ‘Britain’s best-loved psychic’, has turned down an invitation to prove her supernatural powers. She was asked to demonstrate her abilities in a challenge by Liverpool Skeptics. Morgan’s lawyers, emailed Simon Singh, who organised the scientific test of her powers, to make clear that she would not take up the challenge.

<http://simonsingh.net/2011/10/sally-morgan%E2%80%99s-lawyer-sends-me-an-email/>

Simon has indicated that the Halloween challenge will become an annual event.

Meanwhile, Sally Morgan gives us a stunning demonstration of her lack of psychic ability at the following YouTube site:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K14sIoE8qT4&mid=53>

Halloween

<http://www.channel5.com/shows/live-with-gabby/episodes/episode-86-34>

Deborah Hyde, the new editor of the *Skeptic*, on ‘Live with Gabby’.

Padre Pio

<http://heresycorner.blogspot.com/2011/11/pios-fraud.html>

Padre Pio, the celebrated Italian stigmatic, may not have been all that he appeared, nor everything that the Roman Catholic Church has subsequently declared him to be. A new book claims that the bloody wounds on his hands that

helped propel him to sainthood were neither miraculous nor a psychosomatic phenomenon, but something much more prosaic – carbolic acid.

David Barrett on Scientology

<http://www.gold.ac.uk/apru/lectures/>

An audio recording is available at the above website of David Barrett’s APRU talk ‘The Church of Scientology – A Scientific or an Esoteric Religion?’

Belief in Conspiracies:

<http://ind.pn/vhUwmK>

Article in the *Independent*

A New Libel Action

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/man-faces-libel-allegations-over-amazon-book-review-6259431.html>

This one involves Richard Dawkins. See also:

http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/0956471404/sr=8-1/qid=1321309300/ref=olp_product_details?ie=UTF8&me=&qid=1321309300&sr=8-1&seller=

http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/0956471404/sr=8-1/qid=1321309300/ref=olp_product_details?ie=UTF8&me=&qid=1321309300&sr=8-1&seller=

Solicitors from Hell

http://www.solicitorsjournal.com/story.asp?sectioncode=2&storycode=19233&c=1&eclipse_action=getsession

The website, set up to report solicitors he alleged had provided inadequate service, has shut down after a court order. The High Court’s order brings to an end proceedings started by the Law Society ‘to protect the interest of the legal profession and of the wider public because the site was not a credible source of reliable information about solicitors’.

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*? Would you like to contribute a regular column in your specialty or area of interest – e.g. an ‘On the Fringe’ feature? Or would you like to take over one of the regular features in the *Adversaria*?

UPCOMING EVENTS

THE ANOMALISTIC PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCH UNIT AT GOLDSMITH'S COLLEGE LONDON

<http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/apru/speakers.php>
tamas.borbely@gmx.com

Seminars are held on Tuesdays at 6:10 p.m. in Room LGO1 in the New Academic Building, Goldsmiths College, 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 changes to the programme. Visit:

<http://www.gold.ac.uk/apru/email-network/>

and

<http://www.twitter.com/ChrisCFrench>

and

<http://feeds.feedburner.com/apru>

SKEPTICS IN THE PUB

Website for all venues:

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

Go to the above website and then choose the venue you are looking for to access the upcoming events (and information on any associated local sceptic group). Current venues are now so numerous there is almost bound to be a meeting near you.

CENTRE FOR INQUIRY LONDON

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

Beyond the veil: A closer look at spirits, mediums and ghosts

<http://www.cfilondon.org/2011/11/24/beyond-the-veil-2/>

A day conference at Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1R 4RL on 14.1.12.

This conference takes a closer look at spirits, mediums and ghosts. Introduced by Dr Stephen Law of Heythrop College, University of London and Editor of Think (Royal Institute Philosophy) Provost of Centre for

Inquiry UK. Starring Chris French, Hayley Stevens, Lunch Break (*Some mistake surely – Ed.*), Paul Zenon, Richard Wiseman and Ian Rowland. Tickets £10 or £8 concessionary.

QED MANCHESTER

10-11th March 2012

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

Speakers include David Aaronovitch, Sarah Angliss, Ophelia Benson, Edzard Ernst, Deborah Hyde, Robin Ince, Steve Jones, Maryam Namazie, Joe Nickell, Richard Saunders, Massimo Polidoro, and Ian Ridpath.

LOGIC AND INTUITION: ANSWERS

Imagine you are with your partner or a friend. As you approach the moving walkway one of you stops to do up the lace, the other carries on and stops on the moving walkway to tie the lace. It is

clear that by the time both of you have finished tying your laces, the one who tied on the walkway is well ahead of the other. So shoelaces should be tied on the walkway. (But your safety comes first; I

once got my untied lace caught in a moving walkway, luckily with no untoward outcome.)

Congratulations!

Congratulations are in order for ASKE member Ray Ward, who scored the highest total of four competitors in a recent episode of Radio 4's *Brain of Britain*.

GOOD HEAVENS!!

Universal Awareness: A Theory of the Soul By Michael Heap

ISBN/EAN13:1463659458 / 9781463659455

No, this is not a hoax. Michael Heap has written a book outlining a theory of the human soul that offers possible answers to question that we all ask ourselves, such as ‘Why was I born the person I am?’, ‘Have I lived before?’, and ‘What happens to me when I die?’. The arguments and ideas presented are not based on any religious faith, divine revelation or belief in the supernatural, and are consistent with modern scientific knowledge. The book (pp. 219 + xv) is intended for the lay person and is thus an easy read. It is a print-on-demand paperback publication (CreatSpace) which, at present, may be ordered from [CreateSpace](http://www.createspace.com/3640356)¹. It is also available from [Amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)¹ or from the author directly at m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk (Price £8.50 + p&p).

1. <https://www.createspace.com/3640356>

2. http://www.amazon.com/Universal-Awareness-Theory-Michael-Heap/dp/1463659458/ref=sr_1_cc_1?s=apparel&ie=UTF8&qid=1322583041&sr=1-1-catcorr

ABOUT ASKE

Founded in 1997, 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>

Association for Skeptical Enquiry
email: aske1@talktalk.net
website: <http://www.aske-skeptics.org.uk/>

For an electronic copy of this newsletter contact m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk