
Skeptical Adversaria

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FROM THE ASKE CHAIRMAN

Michael Heap

This issue of the Newsletter contains a review by Mark Newbrook of a book that I have recently written. It was not my plan to have it reviewed here and Mark's review was originally for another publication. However, it proved too long and as Mark has obviously put a lot of effort and thought into it, I thought it was quite appropriate to include it here.

The Overextension of Power and Responsibility

In a local newspaper, I recently read of a mother's outrage at being informed that, following tests on children at her son Hayden's school by the local 'Children and Family Team', he was found to have an unhealthily high body-mass index (he was 'very overweight') and had 'an increased risk of diabetes, heart disease, cancer and depression'. Hayden himself is reported as saying, 'I'm not fat. I am happy the way I am'.

Systems, organisations, groups, and individuals, to which society grants some form of power and responsibility, almost invariably attempt to over-reach the compass of their legitimate influence. Over time they increasingly claim authority in areas of human life that extend beyond those envisaged in their original remit or, more significantly for sceptics, their capabilities. Governments themselves and our education, health, welfare and legal systems suffer – or, perhaps, more appropriately 'profit' – from this malaise.

A case in point is the imminent arrival in our bookstores of the Fifth Edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association. Since the DSM was first published in 1952, the size of the

publication and the number of disorders classified have both increased dramatically (DSM-IV lists 297 disorders in 886 pages). There is concern that everyday problems in life, and those frailties and vagaries that in the past have been accepted as part of the rich spectrum of human nature, are increasingly coming to be regarded as 'disorders' to be corrected by the ministrations of the psychiatric profession. This trend shows no sign of abating with the fifth edition, which will see the further expansion of diagnostic categories (e.g. 'attenuated psychosis syndrome') and new diagnoses such as 'apathy syndrome' and 'parental alienation disorder', along with increased emphasis on biological theory at the expense of social influences.

Recently the Society for Humanistic Psychology of the American Psychological Association, wrote an open letter to the DSM committee summarising their concerns and requesting a scientific review of the document. The SHP has set up a coalition of organisations that endorse this request, and about 40 have now signed up. Thousands of concerned individuals have also signed a petition at <http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/dsm5/>.

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But back to Hayden and his body-mass index. Should the government do something about it? Shadow health minister Diane Abbott thinks it should but has failed to do so – see: (<http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/health-news/childrens-obesity-is-a-national-emergency-7555060.html>).

Politicians and government agencies are indeed exercised about the tendency of the nation's young people to run to fat, blaming poor diet, lack of healthy

physical activity, and lengthy periods spent sitting in front of a television or computer screen. (Perversely, they do not mention the ever-lengthening periods of time children and young people are forced or encouraged by the government to sit at desks in a state of

complete immobility trying to absorb masses of irrelevant and soon-to-be-forgotten information ‘delivered’ by teachers and lecturers when they could be otherwise occupied in more healthy, fulfilling activities.)

All experience and evidence about weight control should tell us that there is probably little a government can do about the population’s body-mass index. But no political party will ever admit this.

LOGIC AND INTUITION

I had some correspondence following the puzzle in the last newsletter, questioning the validity of the answer I gave. I was very grateful for this as I had to think more deeply about the puzzle and it gave me more insight into my own thinking processes (and I suspect those of others too).

Recall that the puzzle is as follows: 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?

The answer I gave was as follows: Imagine you are with your partner or a friend. As you approach the moving walkway one of you stops tie 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

This is the correct answer but I had to satisfy myself that it was so by resorting to algebra (nothing elaborate, mind you). Then I realised that all the time there was a much simpler explanation. If you *stop* on a journey for, say, 10 seconds you add 10 seconds to

your journey time. If you just *slow down* for 10 seconds you add less than this.

D’oh!

Quick Question

There’s only space for a quick question this time. It’s one that is sometimes used at university interviews. Why is a manhole cover round? Answers can be found at:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manhole_cover.

FROM THE BOOKSHELF

Universal Awareness: A Theory of the Soul by Michael Heap. Self-published through CreateSpace, 2011; pp. xv + 221. ISBN/EAN13:1463659458/ 9781463659455.

Available at <https://www.createspace.com/3640356> and Amazon (list price £8.60 or \$13.50). Will also shortly be available in Kindle form.

Book’s website: <https://sites.google.com/a/sheffield.ac.uk/soul/>.

Reviewed by Mark Newbrook

Michael Heap is a clinical and forensic psychologist and a very active skeptic. This book represents the (provisional) outcome of his long-standing interest in one of the predominantly philosophical ‘Identity Problems’ and with associated issues. Whether or not readers find themselves able to accept his specific, radical views, Heap is knowledgeable in the relevant disciplines, and his book is challenging, well-constructed and well-written; it warrants close and unbiased examination.

The key problem here centres on the obvious fact that the relationship between each human being’s consciousness and her/his own body, mind and person is utterly (and permanently) different from the relationship between that consciousness and the bodies, minds and persons of all other human beings, as perceived by the human being in question. Each of us is directly aware of (many aspects of) our own mind, and we experience that mind as embodied in a physical body of which

we are also aware and which we can to a significant degree control purely by choosing to do so. In contrast, our awareness of other minds is indirect; we observe other human beings (born before or after us) who are apparently similar to us in these respects, but we have no direct access to their minds or direct control over their bodies, and we learn about their thoughts, feelings and physical sensations by attending to what they do, say, etc. and comparing them

with our own thoughts, feelings and sensations.

It should be said that we are not necessarily very good at either of these enterprises. As my Australian friend Broderick Smith sings in 'My Shiralee': 'No-one knows someone else / It's hard enough to understand yourself'. Much remains mysterious to us even as adults – especially in respect of our understanding of other minds across cultural divides.

Many (perhaps most) of us have at some time wondered why our consciousness and mind is inherently associated with this particular body and this particular person...

More importantly in context: many (perhaps most) of us have at some time wondered why our consciousness and mind is inherently associated with this particular body and this particular person – who, in modern societies, has a name and many other public attributes – rather than with some other person, known to us or not (maybe even non-human). What determined that the consciousness which produced this book 'is' Michael Heap whereas my consciousness, which produced this review, 'is' Mark Newbrook, rather than vice versa? (On p. 7, Heap suggests that this question appears to make sense only when applied to oneself rather than to others, but I do not find myself able to agree with him here.)

We are all potentially confronted with one aspect of this issue every time we say something like 'If I were David Cameron'. If I really were David Cameron, with his different genes and life-experience (as opposed to having become the current British Prime Minister in my own persona), could I still possibly be 'me' at all? Indeed, some would argue that such utterances, interpreted literally, are meaningless, and in fact that the general question

'Why am I me?' is meaningless or at any rate unanswerable.

Heap commences with this major general problem – which, perhaps almost inevitably, he does not actually solve, at least in my opinion (although in Chapter 22 especially he suggests that he has effectively solved it). He goes on to consider other major issues regarding selfhood. For instance, do our consciousnesses survive our physical deaths, perhaps as disembodied or reincarnated 'souls'? (One might go on to ask: Would the relevant consciousness still really be ours if we had no memory of this present life after reincarnation? But see below on Heap's forthright rejection of reincarnation.) Did our consciousnesses also exist before we were born? Or do we live only once, so that our consciousness began for the first and only time with our birth (but then why at that moment, with those parents, rather than earlier or later and/or with other parents?) and will irrevocably end with our death? Etc., etc.

Ranging over philosophical and scientific aspects of these matters, but without becoming formidably technical, Heap addresses all these questions. (My own main area of expertise, empirical linguistics, does not really arise here, but some rather general points in the philosophy of language do arise, and Heap's discussion is informed by these points.) In an appendix, Heap provides annotated suggestions for further reading; his list (perhaps reasonably) omits obviously non-mainstream material but displays a bias towards recent work, which is justified in respect of the science but perhaps less so in respect of the philosophy (what of Jung and such?). Deliberately (as he states), Heap does not include heavy formal referencing in the text. (The book also lacks an index, presumably because it is self-published and creating an index is very time-consuming and/or technically complex in these circumstances.) Notably, Heap challenges readers to think each issue through before he

launches into his own discussion; for example he asks them, initially, to consider whether and how any one person, or others who encountered him/her, would know if he/she had been born as someone else. He also encourages readers to develop their own ideas regarding these matters more generally, whether or not these ideas might resemble his own.

Some of Heap's points involve key background issues. For instance, he points out in Chapter 1 that consciousness is in fact required in order to ask these questions (shades of Descartes!). But the very notion of consciousness is not transparent or simple. As he notes, many central aspects of consciousness involve intentionality; we are conscious (etc.) of things (within our minds and bodies or in the wider world), not (in all respects) merely conscious. And (very relevantly in context) our consciousness – while neither fully continuous (we sleep, etc.) nor completely aware of its own history (we forget much over time) – is maintained throughout our life. This is one of the main defences of the notion of personal identity against the 'Ship of Theseus' argument (discussed by Heap) as it relates to the wholesale replacement of our physical parts over time. However, as Heap acknowledges, it is not clear that these defences are wholly satisfactory. In Chapter 11 he seeks a 'way forward' out of this quandary in terms of 'discrete conscious events', but, as he also admits, this position, if valid, would call into question the continuity of the soul/self over time, a price which many thinkers would not wish to pay (partly on the grounds that it runs contrary to our experience of ourselves). And in any case the question of how far each person can actually be identified with their consciousness remains.

Taking up these points, Heap's early chapters deal with the relationship between the 'host' (the increasingly well understood physical body and especially the human brain – which is, in biological terms, uniquely highly developed, at

least as far as we know), the 'soul' (if this exists), and the person. This section might have profited from attention to critical theological discussions of the ideas of Christians and such regarding the soul, which are themselves very varied (for example, some Christians, while obviously accepting survival of death, do not even believe in souls but hold that we do not exist at all in the period between our death and our physical resurrection at the end of time). The work of Keith Ward is especially interesting in this respect. Heap is well aware of the ontological issues in this area; he points out, for example, that having a memory is not exactly like having a 'thing', alienable or inalienable. Indeed, with Ward, he regards the mind as something we do rather than 'have', a set of processes and activities – thus arguably avoiding the major problems associated with dualistic accounts of persons which arise in the context of modern scientific knowledge. And in taking the view that the individual mind is a function of the physical person and therefore presumably ceases to operate on death (and did not exist before birth/conception), he also avoids the further issues involving individual survival with which Christian thinkers such as Ward – and Buddhists with their 'no-soul' doctrine and their belief in reincarnation – are forced to grapple. (Another important thinker in this context is Raymond Tallis, who rejects the 'Dawkinsian' identification of person and body but admits that he can offer no developed interpretation of personhood which does hold up.)¹

In Chapter 5, Heap rehearses familiar objections to reincarnation, including especially the fact that reports of reincarnation inevitably involve quite different personas, who typically have no 'memories' of their previous lives or at best very limited 'memories' accessed in unusual circumstances. (Again, see below for his stronger statement regarding the supposed incoherence of the notion of reincarnation.) He also

points out that the idea that one is very unlikely to have been born with one's specific, unique characteristics involves a fallacy.

Later (Chapters 9-10) Heap provides a discussion of the issues of preserved and multiple identity involved in 'matter transmission' as featured in the Star Trek TV shows and movies. Even if such processes ultimately prove to be impossible in principle, some of the philosophical problems raised here may still be of interest. In Chapter 12, writing here mainly as a scientist, he calls into question the highly relevant notion of 'now' and also raises the issue of whether or not one can ever really return to the same place (an issue which goes back to Heraclitus). And in Chapters 16-20 he discusses the role of the person within the universe as a whole, insightfully interpreting the 'individual' acts of persons (such as the writing of a symphony) in terms of the multiple influences which combine (not by any means always through any conscious thought processes) to enable and encourage such acts. (I am reminded here of a reported conversation between Isaac Asimov and a commentator on his acclaimed short story 'Nightfall' who argued persuasively that the story had grown in part out of events and notions of which Asimov had not himself been consciously aware when writing it.)

I personally find Heap's theory counter-intuitive, but I suspect that it could not be refuted.

Towards the end of his book (commencing in Chapters 21 and 22), Heap develops an account of the universe as an organic four-dimensional whole, all parts of which exist permanently (although the passage of time within the universe is still considered real), and many parts of which ('hosts') possess consciousness. He goes on to argue that the mental processes which constitute souls (involving consciousness) should be

attributed to the universe as a whole rather than to individual hosts (compare his discussion in Chapters 16-20 as outlined above).² These processes can be experienced individually only at the individual level and at specific times; but they pertain to a 'Universal Soul' which is shared by all conscious beings acting as hosts. (It should be noted here that the above-mentioned observation made in Chapters 16-20 does not imply this stronger claim.) Although we do not individually survive physical death, we survive in the sense that what we commonly take to be our 'own' soul/mind is in fact the 'Universal Soul' and this obviously (on Heap's theory) does survive, as it is not subject to temporal restrictions at all. Heap acknowledges that most people will find it difficult to accept this theory, because, once again, it is counter to our 'normal' interpretation of our mental lives; but that does not itself show that the theory is mistaken.

In Heap's theory, the 'Universal Soul' obviously includes all persons who are living at any given time, already deceased at that time or yet to be born (this particular aspect of the theory is in fact introduced earlier, in Chapter 13). Each individual host is potentially aware of the consciousnesses of all these other hosts past, present and future, even if such awareness can actually occur only 'one conscious event at a time'.

I personally find Heap's theory counter-intuitive, but I suspect that it could not be refuted; it seems to import no logical error, nor is it easy to imagine any empirical evidence which would actually disconfirm it (though this latter point might, obviously, be itself deemed a weakness). But – despite what Heap says in support of his view – I can see no convincing positive evidence or argumentation suggesting that the world of conscious beings really does operate in this manner.

Even if I were shown to be mistaken here, it does not seem to me that Heap's theory would succeed fully in resolving the major general problem with which

we started. As Heap himself says, on his view awareness can still actually occur only 'one conscious event at a time'; and thus, if Heap's view is correct, I consider that I could still, surely, wonder legitimately why I am experiencing myself as me (Mark) in the particular period in question, rather than as another host which exists in that same period. In correspondence, Heap suggests that I am mistaken in so considering, because the 'Universal Soul' itself – despite the 'one conscious event at a time' proviso – is experiencing being all hosts simultaneously. He admits that this is a difficult notion to explain convincingly; and at present I myself remain unconvinced that it makes prima facie sense and thus, obviously, am unable to accept it as a potentially valid analysis of the facts.

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Thus, in my opinion, Heap does not actually solve the central problem with which we began, or indeed produce a really plausible account involving the survival of individual death. But his radical proposal is of enormous interest, and I do not suggest that other readers may not find it more persuasive.³

The rest of Heap's book deals mainly with determinism versus free-will and the nature of causality more generally. His views on these matters are again of interest, but they are partly

grounded in his analysis of the universe as outlined above, and those who reject or strongly doubt this analysis will find the novel aspects of his discussion less than persuasive.

There are, inevitably, various relevant issues which are wholly or largely omitted from Heap's book. Some of these do not arise if his general account of the universe is correct; and in any case one cannot reasonably expect a short book expounding a specific theory to cover all such issues. It may nevertheless be useful to mention here a few points which Heap omits, such as (a) the question of why some individual consciousnesses might reside in persons with very special statuses (notably God, if such a being exists), (b) the plausibility or otherwise of solipsism (the view that the apparent similarity of other persons to oneself is illusory, because the entities which appear to be other persons are in fact generated by one's own unconscious mental processes; the experiencer is the only real person), and (c) the issue of 'multiple personalities' embodied in the same physical body. Those who would endorse other answers to Heap's questions (or who consider that no answers currently recommend themselves) might devote large sections to such issues.

Readers who find Heap's theory unconvincing will obviously regard his basic Identity Problem as still unsolved; and those who find the theory unconvincing and who are also unsettled by their awareness of mortality will remain unsettled.

Notes

1. It might have been of some use here to examine cultural differences in the perception of these matters; for instance, the 'western' idea of the person being centred, homunculus-like, in the brain and looking out at the wider world through the 'windows' of the eyes and other sense organs is not reflected in, say, Chinese thought about these matters.

2. Heap's model bears some similarities with some other, currently popular models of the universe in which consciousness plays a more central role than more traditional views suggest.

3. By way of clarification, Heap stresses that his proposal does not involve reincarnation as a new specific person, as accepted in the relevant religions. Indeed, he claims (p. 144) that the theory of reincarnation can be dismissed as absurd (apparently in advance of any empirical considerations) – as can the notion of 'genetic memory', which he labels 'pseudo-scientific'. While accepting neither reincarnation nor genetic memory as genuine, I must say that I myself regard these negative judgments, especially the former, as overstated. Heap's proposal does imply that we experience any suffering that we inflict upon others, but this occurs because we and our victims share a soul, not by way of the adjustment of 'karma' in later incarnations. If this were true, the ethical and meta-ethical implications would potentially be major, as Heap himself says.

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*?

Savage Genesis: The Missing Page by Stan Hall. Stan Hall, 2011; pp. 320.

Reviewed by Mark Newbrook

The late Stan Hall, a Scottish engineer, was a non-mainstream historian and in particular a supporter of the claims of Juan Moricz about a 'golden library' allegedly discovered in caves (difficult of access) in Ecuador; he started from the endorsement of these claims by Erich von Däniken. Hall, who claimed that in general he accepted only evidence which he had viewed in person, was sufficiently impressed by Moricz's account of his 'discoveries' to embrace this material unseen, and wrote books on the topic (*Tayos Gold*, etc.). Indeed, he regarded Moricz's 'library' as the 'missing page' which validated and unified his own theories involving world catastrophes in relatively recent times (which, he believes, resolve the creationism-evolution debate) and his 'hyper-diffusionist' accounts of early human civilisations (seen as sharing many cultural and mythical features and thus as having a single, determinable common source, centred in South America and yet again identified as Plato's 'Atlantis'). This, his last book, discusses these theories, as they are informed by Moricz's ideas; however, given the unavailability of the originals of Moricz's material, reviewers might prefer to focus on Hall's overall stance.

...the main modern language of interest to Hall, regarded by him indeed as ancestral to humanity, is Hungarian. Hungarian is one of the 'favourite' languages of fringe historical linguists...

One such review of Hall's book, by Noel Rooney, appeared in *Fortean Times* 281 (November 2011; pp. 56-57). Rooney is fairly positive about the book but rates it only at 5 out of 10, mainly (it seems) because he regards it as of interest chiefly to readers with certain

special interests. In this context, he himself finds Hall's overt mysticism irrelevant and off-putting in an essentially empirical context. (Hall also appeals to sheer intuition in respect of empirical issues; see for example p. 21.) Rooney adopts a neutral stance on major-planet catastrophism, choosing not to refer to the consensus judgment that the views of Immanuel Velikovsky, Hall's main inspiration on this front, have been thoroughly 'debunked'. (Hall's own catastrophist views are in fact 'Neo-Velikovskyan', partly shared with advocates of 'Saturnism' and the 'Electric Universe'; for a summary of these ideas, see my 'Non-standard astronomical theories', *Skeptical Intelligencer* 13 (2010), pp. 2-7.)

But Rooney has very little indeed to say about another major component of Hall's work: his historical linguistics (including epigraphics, the study of scripts); he refers to this aspect of the case only briefly and attempts no assessment. This may be because, like most commentators on such works, he himself may lack an adequate knowledge of the discipline. Specifically, the main modern language of interest to Hall, regarded by him indeed as ancestral to humanity, is Hungarian. Hungarian is one of the 'favourite' languages of fringe historical linguists (with or without personal Hungarian connections) because of its uncertain 'genetic' provenance, its arguably anomalous geographical location, and the ensuing air of 'mystery' which has come to surround it. Hungarian appears dauntingly unfamiliar to speakers of Indo-European languages such as English, and few non-specialists are willing to grapple with the relevant claims. Rooney, indeed, identifies Hungarians as one of the special groups who might be interested in reading Hall closely.

I am concerned that other readers not versed in the subject might take Hall's linguistic material seriously; and, as a linguist, I therefore take it upon myself here to address this issue. Like some earlier writers of this kind, Hall regards Hungarian as closely associated with the ancient languages of Mesopotamia, Akkadian and Sumerian, and as implicated along with these languages in world-wide transoceanic cultural diffusion. He apparently conflates these two unrelated Mesopotamian languages into one, perhaps because they were written using the same script. Sumerian is another language favoured by many hyper-diffusionists, because it is the oldest known human language (writing may indeed have been first invented in Sumeria) and because it is 'genetically' isolated: it has no known relatives, which is hardly surprising given its early date and the fact that it was later abandoned in favour of Akkadian and other languages and left no 'offspring'.

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Hall supports his view of Sumerian-Hungarian as an ancient cultural and linguistic nexus chiefly through lists of words allegedly shared by the two languages. Indeed, he applies this approach on a broad front, taking up similar hyper-diffusionist proposals by earlier non-mainstream writers such as L.A. Waddell and Barry Fell, and, on his own account, identifying further links between superficially and unsystematically similar words found in many languages – some of them, such as 'Indo-Sumerian Catti', invented by

himself – around the world. By ‘unsystematically’ I mean that the correspondences between sounds proposed by Hall are often inconsistent; for example, on p. 94 he equates ‘New World Catti’ [h] with ‘British Catti’ [h], [hw] [g], [k] etc., as it suits him in each pair of roughly synonymous (reconstructed) words, and without any explanation of this variation (thus, NWC [h] corresponds with BC [k] in the word for ‘great fathers’, with [h] in ‘house’, etc.) As is usual in this tradition of work, Hall goes on to deduce that the relevant languages, some actually attested (but apparently unrelated) and some invented, were in fact historically connected, and that their users experienced influential contact in early historic times. The book is replete with such claims and arguments, many of them featuring Hungarian words.

If he hoped to interest people with the relevant knowledge in his linguistic ideas, he should have learned the basics of the subject...

However: as I have repeatedly explained (see for example my ‘Etymology and Philology’), superficial and/or unsystematic similarities between words and/or word-parts taken from different languages, especially short ones, are in themselves no evidence of a genuine connection – even if their meanings are also similar. I am disappointed that even at this late date so few authors of this kind are aware of this consideration, but this is because they wilfully fail to consult linguists; some of them, indeed, appear altogether unaware of linguistics as a discipline. Although otherwise quite widely-read,

Hall himself fails in just these respects. If he hoped to interest people with the relevant knowledge in his linguistic ideas, he should have learned the basics of the subject; and then, if he still held to his views, he should have attempted to show either a) that his own equations **are** in fact systematic (that is, that most of the apparent inconsistencies as exemplified above can be explained away) or b) that the conventional standards of evidence, in particular the requirement for systematicity, should be loosened so as to render his equations at least arguable. (But any such major loosening of the standards of evidence for the common origins of words would have the consequence that very many alternative philological-cum-etymological proposals, including Hall’s, would be roughly equally plausible. In that event, the reasonable conclusion would probably be that we could not say much at all about philology or ancient etymologies with any confidence. Linguists would regard this conclusion as a last resort and as not warranted by the actual evidence.)

Although this methodological/theoretical problem looms largest on the linguistic front, much the same point can be made about Hall’s equations of cultural traits and mythical motifs. And indeed it applies again in respect of his stance on scripts; for instance, on p. 97 he links superficially similar characters from Cretan ‘Linear A’, the Indus Valley Script and Easter Island Rongo-Rongo, **none** of which have been authoritatively deciphered (thus the meanings and/or the pronunciations of these characters are simply not known!). Hall also includes an appendix (pp. 314-317) consisting of a paper by R. Cedric Leonard in which further such equations are proposed, also involving the ‘script’ found on tablets at the Glouzel site in

France. This material is generally considered to have been forged in the 1920s or at least produced in relatively recent times, but it is treated here as demonstrably genuine and 12,000 years old.

Hall’s general hyper-diffusionist world-view centred upon Hungarian, Mesopotamia and South America is by no means adequately supported by the evidence which he himself offers.

In sum: there is no reason to accept Hall’s view that Sumerian and/or Hungarian were important source-languages for early cultural diffusion, or indeed any other major linguistic or epigraphic aspect of his theories.

Much more could be said in criticism of Hall’s notions. See, for example, p. 148, where he naïvely accepts Geoffrey of Monmouth’s claim that his fanciful ‘history’ of Britain was translated from a reliable Welsh-language source (and goes on to extrapolate from his text where it suits him to do so). But I think it should already be clear from the above that in various domains – especially linguistics – Hall is badly astray. Whatever the facts may be regarding Moricz’s ‘library’, Hall’s general hyper-diffusionist world-view centred upon Hungarian, Mesopotamia and South America is by no means adequately supported by the evidence which he himself offers.

1. http://www.askeptics.org.uk/etymology_and_philology.html

MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

Michael Heap

TTouch: A Variation of Therapeutic Touch for Animals

<http://ttouch.com/>

Recently there was an exchange of emails on ASKE.net concerning TTouch. It was instigated by Dave McKeegan who reported, 'A friend has recently acquired a mongrel puppy, and has a training book which advocates a technique called "TTouch". I haven't been able to find any sceptical assessments on the net. The sites I have found have been promotional, and include buzz words such as "holistic" - so I'm naturally suspicious'.

Dave goes on to say, 'I'm sure there is some benefit to be gained from handling your dog, but the claims made seem quite grand, with little evidence for their effectiveness. Anyone know anything about it?'

What better person to comment on this than veterinary surgeon and ASKE member, Niall Taylor? Here is his reply:

'There isn't a lot on the web about TTouch in the form of sceptical commentaries although this article in Brennen McKenzie's blog mentions it briefly along with other 'touch' type therapies:

<http://skeptvet.com/Blog/2011/07/pressure-wraps-for-anxiety-in-dogs/>.

'There comes a point though when doing detailed critiques of every single little new made-up technique just becomes counterproductive as you'd end

up spending forever on stuff which has no possible foundation for effectiveness other than owner and practitioner feel-good.

Of course many conditions in animals will get better on their own, hence the large numbers of claimed successes for this type of nonsense.

'It's really a variation on radionics. Although it's called 'touch' the people who profit from it are very keen to emphasise extremely light touch only or even no touching at all and are emphatic that it is not a form of massage; in other words it's waving your hands around over an animal. So, what's wrong with stroking your pet if it's upset you may well ask, and I could reply 'well, nothing at all'. But then they have to go that stupid step further, like all these types do, and invent some ludicrous pseudoscience to make it sound cool and classy. So there is talk of energy pathways, intelligent cells, 'balancing', 'holism' etc., etc., etc... - all the usual nonsense.

'So, if your friend has a dog that's a bit nervous perhaps or has minor anxiety issues then maybe a session in a calm atmosphere with a third party making gentle, unthreatening approaches to the dog might be of some use (although how

it behaves in the TT 'clinic' might be very different from how it behaves elsewhere - at home or at the vets). But if there is something really wrong with the dog, a musculo-skeletal condition in particular, then she needs to get some proper help from someone who knows what they're talking about - a behaviouralist or a vet - and not get drawn in by meaningless and costly technobabble.

'Of course many conditions in animals will get better on their own, hence the large numbers of claimed successes for this type of nonsense. I've written an article on why bogus therapies appear to work in animals (with an emphasis on homeopathy but the same would apply to TT and all the other nonsense that's out there). It can be read here:

<http://aillas.blogspot.com/2008/08/does-apparent-effectiveness-of.html>.

'Of course, once someone has spent time looking into this stuff and forked out shedloads of cash on it then you can be sure they are going to be convincing themselves there's a benefit whether there is any actual improvement or not! Bit tough on the animal that though.

'Hope that helps.'

Congratulations!

Congratulations are once again in order for ASKE member Ray Ward, who has emerged as this year's worthy champion of Radio 4's *Brain of Britain*.

LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

Invented by Linguists!

A little while ago I discussed invented languages of the two main broad types; but some ‘normal’ languages are actually ‘invented’ as discrete entities (with some ‘help’) by linguists themselves. For example, linguists working in the early-mid 20th Century in what was then Rhodesia became aware that several important local tribal languages were historically related; they gave this sub-family the name *Shona*. This word was not itself current at the time as a language-name among the speakers of these languages, who thought of themselves as using various separate (though obviously similar) tongues. However, post-colonial administrators in Zambia (formerly the northern part of Rhodesia), seeking symbols of national identity in a linguistically and culturally diverse state, adopted ‘Shona’ as a language. Their educationists developed and promoted standardised usage (grammar, etc.) under this name.

In relatively authoritarian states, some politically inconvenient linguistic facts can clearly be handled, given time, by manipulation of this kind.

In 1979-80 I met some Zambian students at the University of Reading (born around 1958) who confidently identified themselves as native speakers of Shona, with no indication of any controversy. The languages of their tribes were now regarded as minor local ‘dialects’ of Shona, used mainly by older rural people. This view of the matter persists to this day. In relatively authoritarian states, some politically inconvenient linguistic facts can clearly be handled, given time, by manipulation of this kind.

Back in 1937, Stewart McAllister argued that Shelta (Irish Tinkers’ Cant), which is of unknown origin but may be in part deliberately anagrammatised Irish Gaelic, was in fact created – this time from scratch, and for unknown reasons – by (unidentified) linguists, because he thought that it was too ingeniously constructed to have arisen naturally among non-linguists.

And (Supposedly) by Churches

Some non-mainstream claims involve the conscious, deliberate and often conspiratorial concoction of known languages or language data out of other known or reconstructed (or invented) languages or data. These claims form part of the wider non-mainstream tradition of ‘pseudo-history’. The authors in question hold that covert forces which have long controlled the most important institutions of the world further their own agendas by jealously guarding the true knowledge of the remote past which they alone possess and promulgating the (in fact false) alternative ideas which most people accept as accurate. The deliberate manipulation of linguistic forms and entire languages is one aspect of this activity. Orthodox scholars are either part of the conspiracy or dupes. The authors discussed here believe that, in contrast, they themselves have unearthed the truth despite the existence of the conspiracy. The medieval and modern Roman Catholic Church is often identified as the main culprit.

Writers making such claims include Edo Nyland (almost all European languages are Basque, deliberately corrupted), Polat Kaya (no, they are Turkish, heavily anagrammatised) and Ior Bock (Finnish Swedish; see my earlier comments¹). I once set Nyland and Kaya bickering on a bulletin-board, each accusing the other of ignoring the ‘obvious facts’.

Such theories are highly implausible, but they are almost immune to effective disproof. However unlikely a set of linguistic changes might appear, it **could** occur if it was deliberately planned as part of a project of language concoction.

Discontinuous Religions

Last time I discussed Shlomo Sand’s iconoclastic book *The Invention Of The Jewish People*, in which he argues that most contemporary Jews are not descended from the ancient people of Israel. There are some other cases where a modern (non-ethnic) religious group claims identity with an ancient group but where the evidence arguably does not support the connection. The best instance of this involves modern paganism/Wicca, whose followers – an early proponent was the Welsh nationalist ‘Iolo Morganwg’ in the early 19th Century with his focus on ‘druids’ – have become increasingly numerous and vocal in ‘the West’ over the last two hundred years as ‘western’ society has become more accepting of non-Christian beliefs.

Some hostile Christians mistakenly imagine that Wicca is essentially the same belief-system as Satanism.

Some hostile Christians mistakenly imagine that Wicca is essentially the same belief-system as Satanism. (This error may be of long standing; see below on ‘witches’.) In fact, Satanists accept an essentially dualist-monotheist theology but align themselves with the Devil rather than with God, whereas pagans are polytheists or pantheists, and often indeed ‘syncretists’: like the ancient Romans, they readily accept the deities of other religions – both partly polytheistic ‘non-western’ religions such as Hinduism and monotheistic religions such as Christianity – as their own

divinities (many of them female) in other guises. Those monotheists who are familiar with genuine pagan notions typically reject such links, for obvious reasons; but a few, notably C.S. Lewis, have seen paganism as the groping of pre-Christian thought towards the truth which was (in their view) fully revealed in Christianity. (Indeed, the mature Lewis, returning to Christianity after a period as an atheist, believed that only pagans and monotheists have coherent places in the intellectual world; even thoughtful atheists are confused and patently wrong.)

Many contemporary pagans are also proponents of a form of environmentalism in which the Earth and its inhabitants (human and other) are perceived as spiritual entities and thus as all the more worthy of respect. This aspect of paganism is a salient feature of 'New Age' thought, along with partly westernised versions of Buddhism, Hinduism etc.

The thinkers who developed modern paganism in the 19th and 20th Centuries argued that they were reviving ancient paganism, especially belief-systems which prevailed in the 'Celtic' and Germanic lands of Europe before the spread of Roman power. (The notion 'Celtic' is itself problematic; the only well-grounded use of the term refers to a sub-family of the Indo-European **languages**.) We know much less about these ancient belief-systems than we would like: accounts of other religions by classical writers are fragmentary and often coloured by their own ideas, and some of the civilisations in question were themselves largely illiterate. Some modern pagans rely on old Germanic texts in runic script (frequently re-interpreting these texts in mystical ways) or on invented scripts such as Iolo Morganwg's 'Coelbren'. Seriously

'fringe' pagan thinkers employ wholly mystical means of enquiry, in some cases involving the 'channelling' of ancestral spirits.

Most modern pagans believe that ancient paganism survived through the 'Dark Ages' into medieval and modern Europe, despite the banning of non-Christian beliefs and practices after the Roman Empire adopted Christianity as its official religion in the 4th Century. Notably, they hold that those people (mainly women) who were viciously persecuted as 'witches' (supposedly Satanists) in these periods were in fact continuing pagan practitioners whose activities obviously had to be covert – and were thus seen as even more suspicious. (In fact, the evidence suggests that far fewer women were executed for witchcraft than is often claimed; but many such deeds certainly were perpetrated.)

Hutton argues in his various books that the evidence for the continuity of European paganism in the period 500-1800 CE is not at all persuasive.

Ronald Hutton is a cultural historian (he is a professor at the University of Bristol) who was himself brought up as a pagan and thus 'has a foot in both camps'. In his research in this area, he has striven hard to ensure that the beliefs of contemporary pagans are respected even where they appear to be historically inaccurate. (Not all researchers have made such efforts, and some pagan thinkers therefore now resist academic enquiry.) Hutton argues in his various books that the evidence for the continuity of European paganism in the period 500-1800 CE is not at all persuasive. Paganism rapidly became a

minor and shrinking system, increasingly confined to remote areas, and eventually died out altogether. Modern pagans have thus re-invented their religion, drawing on information (of mixed quality) about ancient thought and embellishing it with their own specific concepts, some of which do not resemble any known earlier notions.

One especially interesting aspect of this issue involves Iceland, which converted *en masse* to Christianity in (or around) 1000 CE (partly so as to reduce the impact of the hitherto ubiquitous and murderous feuds which had long plagued what was always a perilously small community; see for instance the events dramatised in *Njal's Saga*). The remote island nation had been the last serious outpost of Norse paganism – belief in Odin, Thor etc. – as written up in the Eddas (the level of literacy was high in Iceland). Modern 'Nordic' pagans have revived this belief-system under the name *Asatru*. (See my earlier reference² to attempts by Asatru-followers to 'claim' the mysterious remains of Kennewick Man.) But even in this exceptionally favourable case there is little evidence of the actual survival of Icelandic paganism during medieval and early modern times.

Predictably, few pagans accept Hutton's ideas; but his case appears strong. Of course, his position does not impugn modern paganism itself as a religion; its merits must be assessed by philosophers of religion, like those of any other such belief-system.

Notes

1. *Skeptical Adversaria* 2010 (2).
2. *Skeptical Adversaria* 2009 (3) and 2010 (2).

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/>

and

<http://www.facebook.com/events/341195479234459/>

This will be held from 17-20 May 2012 in Berlin. 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

SCIENCE (GENERAL)

Sense About Science

www.senseaboutscience.org

No sceptic can afford not to visit this site regularly to be updated on recent activities, articles, projects, and so on (much too numerous to mention here).

Also see an account of Sense About Science's 2011 annual review of celebrities' misleading claims, including Simon Cowell's intravenous vitamins:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2011/dec/28/scientists-simon-cowell-promoting-nonsense>

More 'Responsible' Science Reporting is Needed, Leveson Inquiry Hears

<http://www.bmj.com/content/343/bmj.d8051?etoc=>

'The media must ensure that they report science and scientific studies much more carefully and understand their "huge responsibility" to do so, the Science Media Centre has said in its evidence to the Leveson inquiry into the ethics of the press.....'

'.....When the media get it wrong,' it added, 'the impact is devastating and causes real harm to individuals and society. The furore over the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine, which started in 1998 after a rogue doctor claimed a link between the vaccine and autism, is the best known

example of how poor media reporting can cause harm.'

Threats to Science and Scientists

http://apps.facebook.com/theguardian/science/2012/feb/19/science-scepticism-usdomesticpolicy?fb_source=message

Nina Fedoroff, the President of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), confesses that she is now 'scared to death' by the anti-science movement that is spreading, uncontrolled, across the US and the rest of the western world.

The Good News Club: The Christian Right's Stealth Assault on America's Children By Katherine Stewart

<http://www.publicaffairsbooks.com/publicaffairsbooks-cgi-bin/display?book=9781586488437>

A chilling exposé of the well-funded, highly coordinated effort by US Christian Nationalists to use public schools to advance a fundamentalist agenda.

Slump in UK Universities offering Science Degrees

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2012/jan/26/number-universities-media-studies-up?INTCMP=SRCH>

Scientific Misconduct

<http://www.bmj.com/content/344/bmj.e377?etoc>

Scientific misconduct is worryingly prevalent in the UK, shows BMJ survey. One in seven UK based scientists or doctors has witnessed colleagues intentionally altering or fabricating data during their research or for the purposes of publication.

Twenty-First Century Enlightenment

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=AC7ANGMy0yo

Matthew Taylor explores the meaning of 21st century enlightenment, how the idea might help us meet the challenges we face today, and the role that can be played by organisations such as the RSA (Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce).

The RSA is 'an enlightenment organisation committed to finding innovative practical solutions to today's social challenges. Through its ideas, research and 27,000-strong Fellowship it seeks to understand and enhance human capability so we can close the gap between today's reality and people's hopes for a better world': (<http://www.thersa.org/>).

Physics on the Fringe

<http://www.newscientist.com/article/mg21228440.200-outsider-physicists-and-the-ohmygod-particle.html?full=true>

Margaret Wertheim is a science writer based in Los Angeles. Her new book *Physics on the Fringe: Smoke Rings, Circlons and Alternative Theories of Everything* is published by Walker.

She begins by referring to the very high energy cosmic ray event in 1991 over a USA military testing ground. There's a bit about such rays here: https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/Oh-My-God_Particle

'For the past 18 years I have been collecting the works of what I have come to call 'outsider physicists'. I now have more than 100 such theories on my shelves. Most of them are single papers, but a number are fully fledged books, often filled with equations and technical diagrams...

'...Outsider physicists have their own organisation, the Natural Philosophy Alliance (<http://www.worldnpa.org/main/>), whose database lists more than 2100 theorists, 5800 papers and over 1300 books worldwide. They have annual conferences, with this year's proceedings running to 735 pages.

'...While I do not believe any outsider I have encountered has done any work that challenges mainstream physics, I have come to believe that they should not be so summarily ignored'

There's a good comment on Wertheim's book by Michael Shermer: <http://www.skeptic.com/eskeptic/11-12-14/> comparing 'outsider theories' to string theory.

Of relevance to this is the paper by Peter A. Jackson and John S. Minkowski 'Subjugation of scepticism in science' that appeared in the 2011 issue of the *Skeptical Intelligencer*.

Transparency Needed on Donors to Climate Sceptic Lobby

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2012/jan/26/transparency-donors-climate-sceptic-lobby>

Mark Lynas's *The God Species*

<http://www.facebook.com/groups/sheffieldsitp/10150584880609842/>

Aaron Thierry provides a critique of the talk to Sheffield Skeptics in the Pub by Mark Lynas on planetary boundaries (plus additional posts).

Neuroscience and the Law

http://royalsociety.org/uploadedFiles/Royal_Society_Content/policy/projects/brain-waves/Brain-Waves-4.pdf

According to a new Royal Society report, lawyers and neuroscientists should work together more. For further discussion visit:

<http://ukhumanrightsblog.com/2011/12/13/will-neuroscience-revolutionise-the-law/>.

MEDICINE (GENERAL)

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.

Ian Chalmers and the Cochrane Collaboration

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01cjtwd>

Listen to Radio 4's 'The Life Scientific' (28.3.12), featuring the work of Ian Chalmers, a founder of the Cochrane Collaboration, at the above site.

Doctors Urge Australian University to Rethink Plans for Chiropractic Course

<http://theconversation.edu.au/theres-no-place-for-pseudo-scientific-chiropractic-in-australian-universities-4576>

'It's difficult enough to counter the massive amount of misleading information provided to consumers through the media and online. But the task becomes much harder when tertiary institutes give an undeserved imprimatur to pseudo disciplines by offering them as courses. Central Queensland University (CQU) is the latest to do so, announcing it will offer a Bachelor of Science degree (Chiropractic) from

2012.....' (Professor John Dwyer, Founder of the Australian Health Care Reform Alliance & Emeritus Professor at University of New South Wales.

Friends of Science in Medicine (Australia)

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Friends-of-Science-in-Medicine/285730358155159?sk=info>

'Friends of Science in Medicine — a recently formed group that includes more than 400 prominent scientists, doctors, academics and consumer advocates from Australia and overseas — wrote to the vice chancellors of Australian universities last month. They outlined their concerns about what they called the “diminishing of the standards applied to the teaching of science in our universities” and “the increased teaching of pseudoscience.”'

Universities Respond to the Above

http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/06/world/asia/australian-universities-defend-alternative-medicine-teaching.html?_r=1

Australian universities defend their teaching of alternative medicine in reply to the above after a group of the country's top scientists and doctors urged them to abandon this increasingly popular subject.

Attitudes to Health Risk

http://www.bma.org.uk/health_promotion_ethics/riskwhatisyourperspective.jsp

The BMA Board of Science has published a new guide that examines people's attitudes to risk, provides an overview of risk concepts, and considers the range of health risks in the UK in the 21st century. This report aims to provide an introduction to understanding risk in medicine and public health in a way that is relevant to doctors in their everyday practice, whether in the context of the patient-doctor relationship, or public health communications.

Should Homeopathy be banned on the NHS?

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/poll/2012/mar/19/homeopathy-banned-nhs?fb=ative>

Lively online discussion.

Andrew Wakefield: The Continuing Saga

<http://www.bmj.com/content/344/bmj.e310?etoc>

Andrew Wakefield, the doctor who was struck off the UK medical register after triggering a worldwide health scare by linking the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine with autism, has launched a libel action against the British Medical Journal, its editor in chief, Fiona Godlee, and the investigative journalist Brian Deer.

Meanwhile, Patricia Finn a vaccine rights lawyer in New York, is under threat of criminal charges. 'Ms Finn has garnered a reputation for helping parents to protect their children from vaccines that are viewed as potentially dangerous, and also represents families of victims who have suffered adverse reactions to vaccinations. Among the anti-vaccine community Finn is touted as a hero, but those in favor of vaccinations view her as a villain.

'According to Finn's website, her law office "focuses on protecting clients' First Amendment rights," and that the attorneys are "especially dedicated to the rights of parents and individuals who have religious beliefs in conflict with mandated vaccines." Those clients in particular require help to receive exemptions relating to school, immigration, adoption, and the workplace.'

For a (serious) strip-cartoon account of the Andrew Wakefield case, as well as other medical controversies, visit <http://darryl-cunningham.blogspot.com/>.

The Homeopathic Treatment of Burns

<http://www.violinist.com/blog/laurie/2012/1/13039/>

'The ultimate in valuing symptomatic treatment over all else.'

The Quackery of Nutritionists

<http://www.quackometer.net/blog/2012/01/which-uncovers-dangerous-advice-from-nutritionists.html>

<http://www.dcsience.net/?p=4997>

Two excellent blog posts about the dangerous quackery of nutritionists.

The Tesla Energy Shield

http://www.bibliotecapleyades.net/ciencia/a/esp_ciencia_universalenergy10.htm

'For sheer barefaced quackery the good old Tesla energy shield takes a lot of beating'.

PSYCHIATRY AND PSYCHOLOGY

Psychiatric Drugs

<http://www.bmj.com/content/344/bmj.e856>

A review of meta-analyses has concluded that psychiatric drugs are, in general, as effective as drugs used in other medical specialties.

Psychologists Fear US Manual will widen Mental Illness Diagnosis

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2012/feb/09/us-mental-health-manual?INTCMP=SRCH>

'Hundreds of thousands of people will be labelled mentally ill because of behaviour most people would consider normal, if a new edition of what has been termed the psychiatrists' diagnostic bible goes ahead, experts are warning. Psychiatrists and psychologists in the UK are speaking out against the publishing of DSM-5, an updated version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual that categorises every type of mental disorder, including some that the psychologists say should not exist.'

Psychoanalysis

<http://www.bmj.com/content/344/bmj.e1188?etoc>

Does psychoanalysis have a valuable place in modern mental health services? No.

A French Film on the Psychoanalytic Approach to Autism

http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/20/health/film-about-treatment-of-autism-strongly-criticized-in-france.html?_r=4&pagewanted=1&smid=fb-share

'*Le Mur*, or *The Wall*, a small documentary film about autism released online last year, might normally not have attracted much attention. But an effort by French psychoanalysts to keep it from public eyes has helped to make it

into a minor cause and shone a spotlight on the way children in France are treated for mental health problems' (above link).

Now a tribunal in Lille has ruled that the controversial parts must be removed and film maker Sophie Robert has to pay damage to the psychoanalysts:

http://www.lavoixdunord.fr/actualite/L_info_en_continu/Metropole_Lilloise/2012/01/26/article_le-mur-documentaire-sur-l-autisme-de-sop.shtml

You can watch below a complete version (with English subtitles) of the documentary *The Wall or Psychoanalysis Put to the Test for Autism*, directed by Sophie Robert, at:

<http://www.supportthewall.org/2011/12/watch-the-wall-le-mur-by-sophie-robert/>.

There is also an extract (and comments) at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v0YtvDZx6T0&feature=related>.

False Memory Archive

<http://www.falsememoryarchive.com/>

'Have you ever remembered something a certain way, only to find that it never happened? As part of a collaborative project between the Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit at Goldsmiths and artist Alasdair Hopwood of the WITH Collective, we have set up a False Memory Archive. A false memory is a distorted or entirely invented recollection of an experience... and we all have them. The False Memory Archive is part of a research project supported by a Wellcome Trust Arts Award. False memories can be submitted anonymously through the project's website' (from Chris French). See also <http://bit.ly/wHK17N> for a *New Scientist* feature on this.

Satanic Abuse

<http://bit.ly/ukbWaj>

There is an excellent piece by Will Storr investigating the strange and tragic case of Carole Myers. When she was found dead at 41, Carole Myers left a statement saying she had suffered Satanic child abuse at the hands of her parents. But did she?

The Jerusalem Syndrome

http://www.wired.com/magazine/2012/02/ff_jerusalemssyndrome/all/1

A fascinating account of why some religious tourists believe they are the Messiah.

How your Cat is making you Crazy

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/03/how-your-cat-is-making-you-crazy/8873/>

'Jaroslav Flegel is no kook. And yet, for years, he suspected his mind had been taken over by parasites that had invaded his brain. So the prolific biologist took his science-fiction hunch into the lab. What he's now discovering will startle you. Could tiny organisms carried by house cats be creeping into our brains, causing everything from car wrecks to schizophrenia?'

ONLINE RESEARCH

<http://homepages.gold.ac.uk/apru/conspiracy/>

'Rob Brotherton (r.brotherton@gold.ac.uk) is conducting a survey (see above link) investigating people's beliefs and opinions about themselves and about the world around them, including conspiracies under the supervision of Professor Chris French and Dr. Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic at Goldsmiths, University of London. You will just have to complete four short personality measures, and the study should take less than 20 minutes in total to complete. You may have taken part in similar research of ours before but you are still eligible to take part in this new study, and your participation would be greatly appreciated.'

<http://homepages.gold.ac.uk/apru/reasonsforbeliefs/>

Duncan Colvin (d.colvin@gold.ac.uk) is Another of Chris French's postgraduate students, and is collecting data for a project investigating people's reasons for belief (and disbelief) in various phenomena and would be extremely grateful if you would spare a few minutes of your time to complete his questionnaire (see above link).

<http://homepages.gold.ac.uk/apru/sleep-religion-paranormal/>

The above link is to a study involving answering questions regarding your demographic details, your religious and paranormal beliefs, and a particular type of sleep-related experience. However, you do not need to have had any unusual sleep-related experiences in order to take part in the study. You can take part whether or not you have had any such experiences. The questionnaire should take approximately 20-30 minutes to complete. The study is part of a 3rd year undergraduate project in Psychology, under Chris French's supervision.

<http://homepages.gold.ac.uk/apru/paranormal-coping-emotion/>

Judy Lam, another of Chris French's students (*Where does he get them all from?* – Ed.), is collecting data for a project investigating paranormal belief, coping, and emotional intelligence. She would be extremely grateful if you would spare a few minutes of your time to complete her questionnaires at the above link. If you have any queries or comments regarding the project please send them to Judy Lam: (ps901jl@gold.ac.uk @ gold.ac.uk).

<http://carlossalvarado.edublogs.org/2012/03/05/new-survey-study-of-psychic-experiences-and-synesthesia/>

This survey of psychic experiences and synaesthesia is by Carlos Alvarado (carlos.alvarado@atlanticuniv.edu).

SCEPTICISM (GENERAL)

Books on Scepticism

<http://www.palgrave.com/products/title.aspx?pid=504210>

'From the ancient world to the present day, anomalous experiences - such as apparitions, premonitions, out-of-body and near-death experiences - provide stories that continue to mystify and intrigue. In this lively introduction, the authors investigate what these stories signify, and why some people turn to the paranormal for explanation. From defining anomalous experiences to examining the psychological models and methods that have been used to explain

them, this text will help open up these strange tales to analysis. Whatever your level of study, this introduction will guide you through the key areas of this fascinating subject.' (*Get on with it* – Ed.)

A bargain at only £9.99 or just £7.99 on Amazon (<http://amzn.to/wzXf3j>). Not due for release in the US (<http://amzn.to/wi51Uk>) until 10.4.12; available from amazon.com for just \$16 (full price, \$25) (above link).

<http://bit.ly/ufkeqI>

'Skeptical Blog Anthology' edited by Kylie Sturgess and the Young Australian Skeptics (above link).

<http://www.randi.org/site/index.php/component/content/article/37-static/1414-ebooks.html>

Free eBooks from the James Randi Educational Foundation at the above link.

Anomalistic Psychology

<http://bit.ly/sSjHL3>

See Chris French's invited guest blog for Nature's 'Soapbox Science' entitled 'The rise of anomalistic psychology - and the fall of parapsychology?'

The Museum of Hoaxes

<http://www.museumofhoaxes.com/>

Fascinating online collection of hoaxes of great interest to sceptics and well worth visiting.

The Red Flags of Quackery

<http://sci-ence.org/red-flags2/>

'If you come upon a treatment or product that seems too good to be true, consult this handy guide to finding pseudoscience, scams, and quack medicine. Remember, it only takes one match to be considered suspect!'

Project Barnum

<http://www.projectbarnum.co.uk/>

'Project Barnum was created to provide information pertaining to the use of psychological tricks by self-titled Mediums and Psychics while on stage, or in private readings. This is achieved through the distribution of free resources and sharing of educational materials. Project Barnum will also provide advice

for those who think they have already been misled.'

Pseudoscience

http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2012/feb/07/astrologers-parallel-universes?CMP=twf_fd

See Chris French's Guardian column on the argument from spurious similarity (using misguided claims of astrologers and those claiming that ritual Satanic abuse is widespread as examples).

MORE UNUSUAL CLAIMS

Alex Clark on Psychics who Say they can Talk to the Dead

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/theobserver/2011/dec/18/television-psychics-dead-paranormal-spiritualist>

Psychics and Mediums

http://radio.seti.org/episodes/Skeptic_Chack_Prog_Not_Stiction

Seth Shostak interviews Chris French on psychics for Big Picture Science.

Psychic Dogs Again

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-16676728>

Rupert Sheldrake's claim that dogs can tell when their owners have decided to return home. But see M. Heap's criticisms of both Sheldrake's and Wiseman et al.'s experiments in the case of the psychic dog (and suggested improvements in the experimental design) at:

<http://www.mheap.com/story1.html>.

Big Cat Fever in Gloucestershire

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2012/jan/20/woodchester-wild-cat-dna-tests?INTCMP=SRCH>

Are there big cats such as panthers stalking the county of Gloucestershire? 'The still-warm remains of a deer found by a dog walker at Woodchester Park, a suitably atmospheric site comprising an overgrown 18th- and 19th-century landscape park and a never-finished Gothic manor house, could solve the mystery once and for all. Those who examined the corpse say it bore the hallmarks of a cat killing. After dozens of sightings, experts hope samples from corpse may finally uncover truth about Woodchester beast' (20.1.12, above link).

<http://www.thisisgloucestershire.co.uk/trace-big-cat-DNA-scientists/story-15105889-detail/story.html>

'DNA tests on dead deer in Gloucestershire show no trace of big cats. Extensive tests on two carcasses found near Woodchester Park and Dursley have drawn a blank on a big cat but point to a fox instead' (2.2.12, above link).

<http://www.thisisgloucestershire.co.uk/Video-captures-footage-big-cat-Gloucestershire/story-15156718-detail/story.html>

'Is this the wildcat of Woodchester? The video footage....has astounded big cat trackers who believe it is thriving in the Stroud Valleys' (7.2.12, above link).

<http://www.thisisgloucestershire.co.uk/trace-big-cat-DNA-scientists/story-15105889-detail/story.html>

'After three recent big cat sightings in the city, there were calls for police to patrol the streets. However fears that big cats could be a danger to people have been allayed by a tracker who believes one is living on the edge of Gloucester' (21.2.12, above link).

<http://www.thisisgloucestershire.co.uk/Big-cat-DNA-tests-reveal-s-domestic-moggie/story-15430601-detail/story.html>

Scientists from the University of Warwick have conducted a DNA test on hair taken from an empty building where a suspected big cat was sighted near Dursley. The hair turned out to be from 'a domestic moggie' (8.3.12).

Double-Blind Violin Sound Test

<http://www.violinist.com/blog/laurie/2012/1/30/39/>

'In a blind taste test, violinists can't tell the difference between old violins and new ones, according all the hype surrounding a recent study about player preferences among new and old violins published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the U.S.A. journal.' But is this a fair account?

First ever World Watching Paint Dry Championships to be held in UK

<http://www.metro.co.uk/weird/884763-first-ever-world-watching-paint-dry-championships-to-be-held-in-uk>

Facebook disses Effin Irishwoman

<http://www.lawbriefupdate.com/2011/12/14/facebook-disses-effin-irishwoman/>

A resident of the hamlet called Effin in Ireland has been told by Facebook that the name of her home is offensive and cannot be added to her profile.

Thousands of birds crash into Walmart parking lot

<http://cnews.canoe.ca/CNEWS/WeirdNews/2011/12/14/19122846.html>

Thousands of migrating birds crashed in Utah after likely mistaking a Walmart parking lot and other areas for bodies of water.

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/>

The following are CFI UK events at the Sunday Times Oxford Literary Festival
Tickets are on sale now at:

<http://oxfordliteraryfestival.org/>

Saturday 24th March at 12.00 p.m.

Prof Steve Jones: *Creationism and Evolution*

Wednesday 28th March at 2.00 p.m.

Nigel Warburton: *Little History of Philosophy*

Thursday 29th March at 12.00 noon

David Aaronovitch: *Conspiracy Theories*

Thursday 29th March at 10.00 a.m.

Stephen Law: *Believing Bullshit*

ETHNIC HEALTH INITIATIVE BPS HISTORY OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL DISCIPLINES

**Spooks and Spoofs: Relations between
Psychical Research and Academic
Psychology in Britain in the Inter-war
Period**

On 26th March, 2012 at 6 p.m. (note change of date) at UCL Department of Clinical, Educational and Health Psychology, Room 544, 5th Floor, 1-19 Torrington Place, London WC1E 7HJ.

Speaker: Professor Elizabeth Valentine

Website: www.bps.org.uk/hopcseminars.

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