
Skeptical Adversaria

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FROM THE ASKE CHAIRMAN

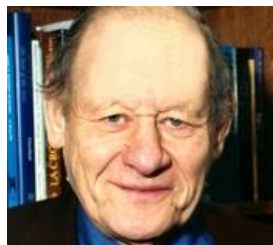
Michael Heap

Skeptics worldwide will be saddened by the death, on 20.10.12, of one of the leading figures in the world of humanism and scepticism, namely Professor Paul Kurtz (born 21.12.25).

At the time of his death Paul Kurtz was Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the State University of New York at Buffalo. He may be best remembered by sceptics as a co-founder, in 1976, of CSICOP, the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (now the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry), and its journal the *Skeptical Inquirer* (originally *The Zetetic*). Prior to this, in 1969, he founded the publishing house Prometheus Books, which publishes many of the books on scepticism with which sceptics will be familiar. And in 1991 he founded the Center for Inquiry. There are now 40 such centres worldwide, including one in London which, as many readers will be aware, organises meetings at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square. Yet another of his innovations was the Institute for Science and Human Values, which he launched as separately from the CRI in 2010.

He was a prolific writer and authored and edited more than fifty books on religion, humanism and scepticism, as well as many scholarly articles, including editorials that appeared in every issue of *Free Inquiry* magazine from its founding in 1980 until 2009.

Professor Kurtz and other leading members of CSICOP (Philip Klass, Kendrick Frazier, James Alcock, James



Paul Kurtz
(1925-2012)

Randi, and Ray Hyman) attended an international CSICOP conference in London in June 1985. This provided the first major impetus for the development of scepticism in the UK. Two years later, Wendy Grossman, who was present at the conference, brought out the *British & Irish Skeptic* (now the *Skeptic* [UK]). ASKE did not get off the ground until 1997. In 2000, Chris French set up the Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit at Goldsmith's College, and later took over the editorship of the *Skeptic*. By that stage the most influential and recognisable figure in scepticism was James Randi. Later, scepticism really took off in the UK with *Skeptics in the Pub* and the interest of well-known scientists and celebrities.

Professor Kurtz was a regular speaker at the biannual European Skeptics Congresses, including the 11th congress which was hosted by ASKE in 2003. I well recall conversing with him at the congress dinner, which was held in the restaurant of Shakespeare's Globe

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with its magnificent night-time panoramic view of the Thames and St Paul's. He told me that the scene brought back memories of when he was flown over London during the Second World War. I only recently learned that he was left-wing in his youth, but became wary of idealism while serving in the U.S. Army. He witnessed the Buchenwald and Dachau concentration camps after they had been liberated, and he met Russian slave labourers who refused to return to the Soviet Union at the end of the war.

Paul Kurtz was indeed a great man.

LOGIC AND INTUITION

The Boat and the Rock

Recall the puzzle in the last issue. You are standing in a boat in the middle of a lake holding a rock. You throw the rock into the lake. With respect to the land, does the water level rise or fall or stay the same?

When an object is floating on water, (even in the case of a rock in a boat) the quantity of water it displaces is equivalent to its own weight. When the rock is completely immersed in the lake, the quantity of water it displaces is equal to its own volume. Unless the rock is ***** (answer at the end of this section) it is denser than water, and will therefore displace less water when it is in the lake. So the level of the water goes down when you throw the rock into the lake.

And now for something completely different. The following puzzle came to my attention during the recent US presidential election campaign. I have not attempted to spot the obvious flaw but any reader with time on his or her hands is welcome to. I recommend pouring a stiff drink first.

Simple Economics

Suppose that every day, ten men go out for a beer and the bill for all ten comes to \$100 so each man pays \$10 for their share.

However, if they paid their bill the way we pay our taxes, it would go something like this:

- The first four men (the poorest) would pay nothing.
- The fifth would pay \$1.00.
- The sixth would pay \$3.00.
- The seventh would pay \$7.00.
- The eighth would pay \$12.00.
- The ninth would pay \$18.00.
- The tenth man (the richest) would pay \$59.00.

So that's what they decided to do. The men drank in the bar every day and seemed quite happy with arrangement, until one day, the owner threw them a curve.

'Since you are all such good customers, he said, I'm going to reduce the cost of your daily beer by \$20.00.

'Drinks for the ten men now cost just \$80.00.'

The group still wanted to pay their bill the way we pay our taxes so the first four men were unaffected. They would still drink for free. But what about the other six men - the paying customers? How could they divide the \$20 windfall so that everyone would get there 'fair share'?

They realized that \$20.00 divided by six is \$3.33. But if they subtracted that from everybody's share, then the fifth man and the sixth man would each end up being paid to drink their beer. So the bar owner suggested that it would be fair to reduce each man's bill by roughly the same amount, and he proceeded to work out the amounts each should pay!

And so:

- The fifth man, like the first four, now paid nothing (100% savings).
- The sixth now paid \$2 instead of \$3 (33% savings).
- The seventh now pay \$5 instead of \$7 (28% savings).
- The eighth now paid \$9 instead of 12 (25% savings).
- The ninth now paid 14 instead of 18 (22% savings).
- The tenth now paid \$49 instead of \$59 (16% savings).

Each of the six was better off than before! And the first four continued to drink for free. But once outside the

restaurant, the men began to compare their savings.

'I only got a dollar out of the \$20' declared the sixth man. He pointed to the tenth man, 'but he got \$10!'

'Yeah, that's right', shouted the seventh man. 'Why should he get \$10 back when I got only two? The wealthy get all the breaks!'

'Wait a minute,' yelled the first four men in union. 'We didn't get anything at all. The system exploits the poor!'

The nine men surrounded the tenth and beat him up.

The next night the tenth man didn't show up for drinks, so the nine sat down and had beers without him. But when it came time to pay the bill, they discovered something important. They didn't have enough money between all of them for even half of the bill!

And that is how our tax system works. The people who pay the highest taxes get the most benefit from a tax reduction. Tax them too much, attack them for being wealthy, and they just may not show up anymore. In fact, they might start drinking overseas where the atmosphere is somewhat friendlier.

For those who understand, no explanation is needed.

For those who do not understand, no explanation is possible.

*Answer to ***** in 'The Boat and the Rock':* pumice is less dense than water and will therefore float.

FROM THE BOOKSHELF

Fool or Physician: The Memoirs of a Sceptical Doctor [Kindle Edition] by Anthony Daniels.

Reviewed by Peter Lucey

I quote from Amazon: ‘Some men become doctors out of a noble desire to save lives, or because they seek money and prestige; Anthony Daniels did so because he was middle class, because he had to do something and because his father – not a man to be lightly gainsaid – pushed him into it’

Dr Anthony Daniels – no, not the actor who played the droid C-3PO in the Star Wars saga - is well known as a reporter and a commentator. His admirers have a website at: <http://blog.skepticaldoctor.com/>.

Dr Daniels has travelled widely, and writes prolifically, often and understandably under pseudonyms (Edward Theberton from Tanzania, Theodore Dalrymple from the UK). He has served as a prison doctor and GP in a deprived area of Birmingham – a collection of articles ‘If Symptoms Persist’ is a fine account of the reality of

our fellow-citizens’ lives. A street away perhaps, but a world apart.

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Sometimes unfairly viewed as right-wing, he is far more than that, though it’s fair to say he is less than starry-eyed about socialism (his ‘In the wilder shores of Marx’ is an excellent account of Cuba, Romania, North Korea and Albania).

This book, his second and an early autobiography, was long out of print but has now been brought to us again via Kindle and is a steal at £2.99. He takes us from university and medical training, including why he became a doctor – see

above, it struck a chord with me – to his early work and travel in the East End, Africa and elsewhere. Africa includes Rhodesia and South Africa, where he volunteered at a township hospital. He self-deprecatingly describes himself as a ‘well-meaning liberal’ whose ‘problem was to discover where in the world pure evil still confronted pure good, where I could demonstrate that I was on the side of the angels, but at the same time live comfortably and register with the General Medical Council’. His last move – in this account - is to the Pacific islands, including the mad Nairu, ‘Island of the Fat’.

A deeply humane man, not sceptical as in ASKE, but aware there are no glib fixes for most human issues. Highly recommended.

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The Atheist’s Primer by Michael Palmer. The Lutterworth Press, 2012, pp169. ISBN: 987 0 7188 9297 5.

Reviewed by Dougie Gibbard

At the front of the book Michael Palmer has listed The Atheist’s Creed of six BELIEFS. I suspect that most atheists would sign up to the first three beliefs but the second three seem to be more humanist than atheist in sentiment. There could be much discussion on these points but as a sceptic (I presume readers of this journal are sceptics), how do you feel about, ‘I BELIEVE THAT not everything is permissible. For while that which increases happiness is not always a good, that which increases misery is always an evil.’ Is it possible to be a power crazed sceptic who thinks

everything is permissible? And is there such an entity as evil? A tsunami may kill thousands but is it evil?

The introduction starts with a discussion of the so-called ‘new atheists’ and the debate between science and religion. Palmer thinks this has taken a new focus with the emergence of Darwinism and regrets that the debate has largely ignored the philosophical contribution to the development of atheism. His stated intention is ‘to bring some of these philosophical arguments to the fore, and to provide a selective overview of the extraordinary richness

of the atheistic literature, which extends from the time of the ancient Greeks down to our own day.’ He singles out David Hume, Nietzsche, Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud but there are 193 people in the LIST OF NAMES at the rear of the book! If you intend to become a professor in the Philosophy of Religion I think you are in for a great deal of reading.

Before Palmer ventures into the origins of atheism he discusses the meaning of this term. This is an interesting section and he tells us that this book is, for the most part, an

exercise in positive atheism; and that it is accordingly providing a survey of those arguments which assert that the claims of theistic religion are unjustified and that valid grounds can be given for why this is. There follows a discussion of the origins of western atheism. We sail through the Greeks, including briefly the sceptics, into Rome where, by about 150 BCE, Epicureanism has established itself. The time span takes in the life of Cicero whose dialogue *De Natura Deorum* reveals his sympathies with the sceptics and their criticisms of the claims of theistic beliefs.

The Christian era is dealt with next. The author tackles the question of the suppression of religious doubt and the exclusiveness of monotheistic dogma which lays claim to a unique revelation. This is nothing less than the incarnation of Jesus as the one true God. This was not a good time for sceptics to raise their heads above the parapet. In 529 Justinian closed the Athenian school of philosophy, the Academy, and later Pope Gregory introduced a policy to destroy all surviving pagan books, temples and statuary. Palmer raises and refutes the various arguments for God's existence, putting them into their historical perspective. He deals with the issue of evil and its problems for religious belief. He sums these up by suggesting that the Christians have not managed to explain why 'innocent' and excessive suffering exists in (their)

God's world; a conclusion which leaves the field to the atheist.

The bible is full of 'murder, rape, plunder, torture, slavery, genocide and ethnic cleansing' sanctioned by God.

The relationship between morality and religion is dealt with fairly, and understandably the author cannot resist mentioning that the bible is full of 'murder, rape, plunder, torture, slavery, genocide and ethnic cleansing' sanctioned by God. Furthermore, moral strictures from the Bible or Koran can lead to different conclusions. The statement 'thou shalt not kill' has led the Quakers to pacifism but has not prevented other groups from killing in no end of wars. The author also gives quotes from Bertrand Russell who suggests that Christ had a serious defect in that he believed in Hell. And again Russell comments on the unspeakable amount of misery that has been felt by people who believe they have sinned against the Holy Ghost.

The chapter on miracles can be frustrating in that so many occurred in the dim and distant past and are not falsifiable. It really would be amazing to have a scientifically verified case of someone being raised from the dead! Interestingly St. Paul is quoted (1 Corinthians 15, vv 14-15), 'if Christ has

not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.' Modern miracles are more in the vein of talking to the dead and bending spoons with one's mind. Let us sceptics be thankful for the likes of Joe Nickell and James Randi who himself seems to perform miracles.

So what is it that makes people accept a load of ancient nonsense as establishing the existence of a god? William James, having dismissed the famous classical 'proofs', suggests that people embrace religious beliefs on 'passional grounds' and that these beliefs are self-verifying in that they have a profound effect on the believer's life. Jung also suggests that the believer undergoes certain psychic experiences that are psychologically true for them and cannot be disputed. Unfortunately of course these confidently held beliefs often vary from religion to religion, which casts doubt on their authenticity.

If you are a student of philosophy, history and possibly psychology you will find much to interest you in this book. If you are already an atheist but feel like buttressing your lack of religious belief you might be better reading Dawkins, Dennett and Harris. As a humanist and sceptic I would add Paul Kurtz to that list.

Call for Contributions

If you have attended a conference or presentation, watched a programme, or read an article or book that would be of interest to readers, why not write a review of this, however brief, for the *Skeptical Adversaria* or the *Skeptical Intelligencer*? 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*? Please get in touch with the Editor if you would like to make a contribution to scepticism in this way.

MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

Michael Heap

Don't get too excited: the effect may wear off!

Many years ago, in my role as an NHS clinical psychologist, I had to see a man with a form of agoraphobia who, because of his panic attacks, could only walk unescorted to places within a short distance from his home. My method of helping him was simply to teach him ways of controlling his anxiety, to walk with him from his home, increasing the distance each time, and to encourage him to do this on his own. On our first excursion, he told me that when he first had the symptoms of agoraphobia he had his own one-man painting and decorating business but he was able to continue working because he felt safe when he was in his van and when he was somewhere where he had easy access to it should he start panicking. However, his van broke down, he could not afford the repairs and he had to take it off the road when the tax ran out. Hence he had to stop work. He believed that if he could get it repaired and taxed or buy a new van he would be able to resume working and build up his business again. This in itself would be of major benefit for his confidence to overcome his anxiety, which had understandably been severely eroded by his not being able to work.

Instead of the NHS paying me lots of money to treat him, perhaps the money could have been better spent on repairing and taxing his van.

One problem I have found working with agoraphobic patients in this way is that often their lifestyle is such that there are few reasons or incentives for their going out on their own in the first place. This was certainly true of the above person and it struck me at the time that,

instead of the NHS paying me lots of money to treat him, perhaps the money could have been better spent on repairing and taxing his van so he could resume work (and stop claiming benefits).

This was of course I pipe dream, which I immediately dismissed from my mind. However, my thoughts returned to this man with the recent publication by the Department of Health of a pilot study of 'personal health budgeting' begun in 2009 (*note 1*). This is a scheme for patients suffering from long-term medical conditions in England. A care plan is devised by the patient and the primary care trust that sets out the person's health needs, the amount of money available to meet those needs, and how this money will be spent.

The evaluation compared the experiences of people selected to receive personal health budgets with those of people continuing with conventional arrangements. The main findings were as follows:

- The use of personal health budgets was associated with a significant improvement in the care-related quality of life (the ASCOT-Adult Social Care Outcomes Toolkit), likewise psychological well-being as measured by the GHQ-12 (at 90% confidence). The GHQ-12 (General Health Questionnaire-12) is a list of 12 items relating to everyday mood, stress level, emotional wellbeing, etc., each of which the respondent rates).
- Personal health budgets did not appear to have an impact on health status *per se* over the 12-month follow-up period. No significant effects were found with regard to two clinical measures (HbA1C and lung-function tests, used where relevant) and there was no significant difference in mortality rates between the groups. Consistent with

these results, the study did not find that personal health budgets had a significant effect on the EQ-5D compared to the control group. (The HbA1C is a blood test to check that diabetes is under control; the EQ-5D is a questionnaire completed by patients about their current physical and mental health.)

- Cost benefits were generally found to be favourable for personal health budgets (the analysis of this is rather complex).
- Patients who received personal health budgets were generally positive about the scheme.

In response to the report, social care minister Norman Lamb announced that the government will invest £1.5 million to hand over personal budgets to the estimated 56,000 people in receipt of NHS Continuing Care. The rollout will be completed by 2014. It is estimated that £90 million could be saved if just half of patients eligible for NHS Continuing Healthcare sign up to the programme.

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Patients involved in the pilot scheme typically chose to spend the money on facilities such as carers and aids to mobility. However some opted for less obvious items. One gentleman, who was recovering from a stroke, was reported in the media to have spent his money on a drum kit and a sat-nav for his car, and a patient with motor neurone disease used his personal budget for a modified bicycle and membership of a gym. Other

headlines spoke of singing lessons and manicures.

Needless to say this has provoked some expressions of outrage, and sceptics collecting specimens of prejudiced and bigoted thinking may wish to download the comments of some readers of *The Telegraph* in response to that newspaper's article on the topic (*note 2*). That aside, and notwithstanding the attraction for sceptics of this kind of radical, thinking-outside-of-the-box approach, I have my own doubts. Firstly, changes in scores on rating scales and self-report questionnaires that measure very general conditions such as wellbeing and quality of life seem to me to provide a very weak basis for drawing any robust conclusions. Secondly, over the years I (and I imagine many others) have so often listened to or read the announcement that some new initiative 'is expected to save the NHS millions of pounds'. Surely if all of these initiatives had achieved this promise, the NHS would not be so constantly strapped for cash while forever devouring billions more?

(In the NHS) initiatives that are 'delivered' from on high by committees at Trust level often simply cause everybody more work for little in return.

My suspicion is that when the personal health budgeting scheme is rolled out it will become more expensive, and hence less cost-effective, than the pilot scheme. The reason is that it will become increasingly bureaucratized: excuses will be found for involving more NHS staff in its administration. It may also be vulnerable to short-cut exercises and cost-cutting measures that limit the available scope of the care plans. That's what I think, anyway, and if I'm wrong, I'm wrong.

I am reminded by all of this of what I learnt about sentencing initiatives when I was studying the criminal justice

system; in fact it's a pretty widespread phenomenon. Initially, a group of ingenious, enthusiastic, and hardworking colleagues devise and run an innovative scheme that produces some really good results (*note 3*). The scheme is adopted as standard practice on a wider basis, overseen at higher management levels. And then somehow its effectiveness becomes less evident, enthusiasm wains, and perhaps old practices start creeping back. Then, maybe, more novel ideas come along again and are taken up.

This is similar to a phenomenon that I recently read about in a paper that appeared two years ago in the *New Yorker* online (*note 4*). It is the tendency for scientifically demonstrated effects seemingly to become weaker (though still present) with replication over time. Firstly, the paper touches on the evidence that certain pharmaceutical treatments for mental health problems seemingly become less effective than original studies showed (I think this applies to psychological therapies as well). The paper then summarises research by Jonathan Schooler, formerly of the University of Washington, on the psychological phenomenon of 'verbal overshadowing'. First reported by Schooler in 1990, this is the paradoxical tendency for memory to be poorer for objects and sensory experiences that one has verbally described on initial presentation. Since then, with repeated replication by Schooler and other researchers, the effect size has shrunk. The phenomenon has been labelled 'cosmic habituation' by Schooler. The paper then goes on to describe other research that seems to follow the 'cosmic habituation' route, including studies of extrasensory perception, asymmetry and sexual selection in barn swallows, and treatments for certain medical complaints.

I emailed ASKE members on the *New Yorker* ASKE.net discussion network for their comments on the *New Yorker* article and was pleased to receive back the following thoughts from Niall

Taylor, a veterinary surgeon in Glastonbury.

From Niall Taylor on Lehrer (2010)

This is an interesting thought piece but the answers to the questions are really all within the article itself. The author is plainly trying to make thought-provoking journalism out of all the data he has used and quoted, but a lot of it is puff. In my opinion the nub of the idea is pretty simple really.

There are a lot of things thrown together here which really shouldn't have been. On the one hand we're talking about double-blind placebo-controlled trials (DBPCTs) for a pharmaceutical, next we're on to psychology and ecology and then to ESP. There is far too much in the blend here - the author himself is showing distinct selection bias in his attempt to compile a good story.

The author is plainly trying to make thought-provoking journalism out of all the data he has used and quoted, but a lot of it is puff.

Adam Linzmayer's amazing response to the ESP test was clearly some sort of fake - unintentional or not. ESP, and the precognition mentioned later, do not exist and basing a claim on changing results in trials of paranormal phenomena have nothing to do with the scientific process. All it means is that to start with Linzmayer was able to see the test cards and then in later trials he wasn't, not that a non-existent phenomenon changes with time for unknown reasons.

It's all very well for the article to claim, with regard to pre-cognition, 'The craziness of the hypothesis was the point: Schooler knows that precognition lacks a scientific explanation. But he wasn't testing extrasensory powers; he was testing the decline effect'. But this is just nonsense - how can you test for a

decline in something which doesn't exist?

Trials in psychology and ecology are difficult to conduct in a randomised and controlled way and would naturally be more prone to experimenter bias, particularly, as the article says, when the subject is trendy and both experimenter and journal are keen to get positive results in a fashionable subject because that is what sells. As Leigh Simmons states in the article, 'The journals only wanted confirming data. It was too exciting an idea to disprove'.

Even medical trials, though supposedly more strictly controlled, are prone to bias caused by the enthusiasm of the researchers and the drive of the pharmaceutical company to succeed. Even the most rigorous protocols are unable to eliminate the lack of interest in negative or inconclusive results in the early, heady days of the launch of a 'breakthrough' drug. It even says as much in the article, but these quotes come from near the bottom, after the weird, attention-grabbing, metaphysical 'we're losing our truths' and 'cosmic habituation' stuff:

'Jennions, similarly, argues that the decline effect is largely a product of publication bias, or the tendency of scientists and scientific journals to prefer positive data over null results'

and later,

'Palmer summarized the impact of selective reporting on his field: "We

cannot escape the troubling conclusion that some - perhaps many - cherished generalities are at best exaggerated in their biological significance and at worst a collective illusion nurtured by strong a-priori beliefs often repeated."

To my mind all this article is saying really is that the scientific protocol is flawed. It's worse in the 'soft' sciences but it still exists in DBPCTs, particularly as research in a particular field or on a 'revolutionary' theory is just beginning. It's only later, once the hype has died down (and, dare I say it, the patents have expired!) that less *a priori* enthusiastic workers find the real story, which inevitably is always going to be at least a little more down-beat than at the start.

.....the peer review process is less than perfect. Well, no one has ever claimed otherwise, but, let's face it, it's the best we've got!

I thought it was most enlightening when Jonathan Schooler said, 'I still want to know what happened to my results... I assumed that it would get easier to document my effect over time. I'd get better at doing the experiments.... So why did the opposite happen?'

Simmons is obviously a good and rigorous scientist and one who is content to admit that his original pet theory may not be all it was when he first started to develop it. But he doesn't seem to be

able to recognise this himself - to me it is obvious, if his original theory was flawed, the results would start to reflect this as he gets better at doing the experiments, not the other way around as he is expecting.

And that's it in a nutshell really - shock horror - the peer review process is less than perfect. Well, no one has ever claimed otherwise, but, let's face it, it's the best we've got!

Notes

1. Evaluation of the personal health budget pilot programme published on 30 November 2012 by the Personal Health Budgets Evaluation (PHBE) team, led by the University of Kent at:

http://www.personalhealthbudgets.dh.gov.uk/library/Resources/Personalhealthbudgets/2012/PHBE_personal_health_budgets_final_report_Nov_2012.pdf

2. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/healthnews/9712708/NHS-to-pay-for-singing-lessons-and-hotel-stays.html>

3. At least in the NHS this is often how successful initiatives get off the ground when they have good support from onsite managers. Initiatives that are 'delivered' from on high by committees at Trust level often simply cause everybody more work for little in return.

4. Jonah Lehrer (2010) 'The truth wears off: Is there something wrong with the scientific method?' at:

http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/12/13/101213fa_fact_lehrer#ixzz1BYjefYnF

LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

Infringing universals

Some astute science-fiction and fantasy writers invent (or develop outlines of) languages which infringe major genuine human-language universals. These are features which all human languages (apparently) possess even though they are neither logically necessary nor required by human physiology or by the very nature of the communication process. There is much debate about which such language universals or types of universal actually exist, and about whether these features have specifically linguistic explanations. Those universals which are accepted by **all** linguists are mostly rather general in character.

One such feature involves the open-endedness of syntax and word-choice. In any given language, it is perfectly possible to frame and use wholly novel sentences which conform with the grammar of that language – and are then readily understood by other competent users of the language. For example, the English sentence *A turquoise elephant ate my computer in 1997* has probably never been used before, but it is wholly grammatical and wholly intelligible (although the message communicated is somewhat unlikely in non-fantasy contexts!). And many grammatical structures are **recursive**: an indefinite number of tokens of a given structure can be ‘nested’ within each other, creating potentially infinitely long sentences, as in the poem ‘This Is The House That Jack Built’ or the Irish song ‘The Bog Down In The Valley’. These features explain why it makes no sense to ask how many sentences (as opposed to words) a language has.

However, communication systems lacking this feature are possible, especially for putative language-using non-humans but also, conceivably, for humans. In his ‘Torturer’ series of science-fiction novels, Gene Wolfe introduces a human society whose

usage, in contrast with the above, consists entirely of a pre-established, finite set of sentences. This situation has arisen out of very heavy-handed and effective political indoctrination, carried out over generations by the society’s government with a view to eliminating rival viewpoints in a manner reminiscent of that portrayed in George Orwell’s *1984* but linguistically more extreme. In communicative situations, these people therefore have very limited choices as to their utterances; all they can do is select, from this limited range of options, single sentences or combinations of sentences which (often rather approximately and indirectly) express their intended meaning. They are psychologically unable to vary the details of these sentences, even by replacing individual words without changing the grammatical structure. Their attempts to communicate with outsiders are predictably long-winded and riddled with awkwardness and uncertainty.

Smukke piger (a phrase which many English-speakers deem ugly in print) means ‘pretty girls’, to the amusement of many non-Danes.

Wolfe is in fact known for his ability to come up with intriguing specific notions and scenarios. Elsewhere in the same series he develops the concept of ‘fuligin’ – a colour which is darker than black!

Arbitrariness revisited

It is said that a Devon farmer, viewing his hogs wallowing in mud, remarked, ‘Rightly is they called pigs!’. Such comments reflect the folk-linguistic idea (obviously largely confined to monoglots) that at least some nouns and other words are ‘naturally’ linked with the items to which they refer and may

thus be especially appropriate. It is easy to show from cross-linguistic data that this is false and that (almost all) linguistic forms are arbitrary. For example, the Danish for ‘girls’ is *piger* (though admittedly the *-g-* is silent; the singular form in fact sounds rather like English *pee!*), and *smukke piger* (a phrase which many English-speakers deem ugly in print) means ‘pretty girls’, to the amusement of many non-Danes.

Sometimes, indeed, similar words in different languages have **opposite** meanings. When turning on taps on the continent one must note carefully the fact that Italian *caldo* means ‘hot’, not ‘cold’ (‘cold’ is *freddo*) – whereas German *kalt* does mean ‘cold’! The Portuguese word for ‘pull’ (often seen in notices on doors) is *puxe*, pronounced rather like English *push!* And the stem *mal-* means (roughly) ‘large’ in Greek but ‘small’ in Russian (which briefly confused me when I was studying both languages!). Etc., etc.

The few exceptions in spoken language to the principle of arbitrariness involve onomatopoeia (although even onomatopoeic words differ from language to language; French trains go *teuf* rather than *chuff*) and cross-linguistic instances of ‘sound-symbolism’ such as *ikiki* and *umumu* which I discussed a while ago.

Although **individual words/morphemes** are thus almost all arbitrary in form, many **compounds** are transparent and non-arbitrary if the meanings of their components are taken as given. For example, a *typewriter* is a machine by means of which one writes by typing. The forms *type*, *write* and *-er* (a grammatical suffix) are of course arbitrary, but **given** their senses the sense of the compound is clear. When it was first invented, the typewriter **might** instead have been given an arbitrary single-morpheme term such as *blimmel*, perhaps in origin a personal/trade-name

like *hoover* or else simply made up; but there is a tendency for such notions to be expressed through transparent compounds (note, for example, the existence of *vacuum-cleaner*, an alternative to *hoover* which has the same general form as *typewriter*).

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Because Chinese (of all kinds) has a very limited range of possible (monosyllabic) word-forms and thus limited resources for creating new simple words, it makes especially heavy use of transparent compounds. And, even where one member of a Chinese compound word is altogether arbitrary, the other is frequently transparent in context, typically referring to the **kind** of entity involved, as in Cantonese *sa-yu*, ‘shark’, literally ‘shark-fish’, and the Cantonese names for many other kinds of fish. (Although this pattern does of course occur in languages such as English, it is much less systematic and mainly involves entities less commonly referred to, as in *catfish*, *swordfish*, etc. as opposed to *salmon*, *tench*, etc.) Various non-mainstream Chinese writers have identified this feature of their language as particularly efficient, treating expressions literally meaning ‘pig meat’, ‘cow meat’ etc. as superior to wholly arbitrary single-morpheme forms with the same senses such as English *pork*, *beef* etc. But these authors generally overstate their case, ignoring other features in respect of which the morphological systems of European languages might appear **preferable**. For instance, forms such as *pork* and *beef*, which share no morpheme, are more recognisably different than their Chinese equivalents in situations where there is interference to communication, as on a poor telephone line. (In this context, see also my earlier remarks on the non-

arbitrariness of a small percentage of the logographic, monomorphemic characters used to **write** Chinese.)

Past or future?

A while ago I mentioned grammatical constructions which strike foreign learners of the languages in question as bizarre. Another such case involves languages in which verb tenses, in certain constructions, can have unexpected time reference; for example, past tense forms can refer to the future. Readers tempted to express disbelief at this information should consider that one such language is English. Along with many other Indo-European tongues, English uses past tense forms in ‘remote’ conditionals referring to possible future events which, it is deemed, are unlikely to occur in practice. An example: *If it rained (or were to rain) this afternoon, we would cancel our picnic.* (If rain were considered **likely**, we might instead say *If it rains this afternoon, we will cancel our picnic.* Even here, we use a **present** tense with future meaning! Only a foreigner would say *If it will rain...*)

Talking to foreigners

I referred in an earlier instalment to the unexpected linguistic abilities of some children. The same is sometimes true of adult foreign learners of a language. A woman attending a state function in London found herself sitting next to a man with oriental features. Assuming that his English was weak, she spoke to him using ‘foreigner-talk’ (‘Wantee saltee’, ‘You savvy that white man there, he French am-bas-sa-dor’). He was in fact a Chinese cultural delegate and later he addressed the diners in fluent English on intellectual matters. On resuming his seat, he turned to her and asked ‘Likee speechee?’

More fun with homonymy, homophony and homography

See my earlier comments on puns and such. Further remarkably apt names include those of the Belgian motor-racer Bernard de Drijver and the Southport-

born boxing ‘southpaw’ Trevor Southport!

An amusing error has led to the name of the Melbourne pub *The Grace Darling*, named after the 19th-Century Northumberland lifeboat heroine (not famous in Australia), being routinely reinterpreted as *The Gray Starling* – even though the correct name appears in large letters across the front of the building! (An aside: I once helped Lancashire Police at the scene of a crime by identifying an object which they found mysterious – but which had written on it what it was!)

I once helped Lancashire Police at the scene of a crime by identifying an object which they found mysterious – but which had written on it what it was!

Turning to cross-linguistic cases: Cantonese-speakers in Wales hear Welsh *Duw* (‘My God!’) as their near-homophonous *diu*, a rather stronger oath exactly equivalent to English *fuck*. And some cross-linguistic puns can be put to practical use. For example, a Frenchwoman once arrived in Stockholm as the new queen, and the welcoming crowds were urged to chant *Vi vil ha regn* (‘We want rain’), phonetically a close approximation to French *Vive la Reine!* (‘Long live the Queen!’).

Some place-names and other words have bizarre cross-linguistic origins. The word *Canada* was apparently an Algonquin word meaning ‘village’ (‘What is this place? – ‘It’s a village!’). A French term for a window over a door, *le vasistas*, allegedly derives from a visiting German architect’s query *Was ist das?* And the Russian for ‘railway station’, *voksal*, is based on the name *Vauxhall*, as in the London station: a visiting Russian official asked ‘What is that?’ and misinterpreted the answer as a generic word.

More recently, it was reported that a woman had been ‘driven into the

desert'; the interlocutor asked if a whip had been used, and was told 'No, a car'! This example reflects the changing sense over time of the verb *drive*, in response to technological developments. Driving a vehicle did originally involve a whip; the two meanings of *drive* are historically one but diverged with the invention of motor vehicles and are no longer regarded as connected by non-etymologists. There are many other cases of this kind – **and** cases where, in contrast, historically **un**connected words have come to be seen as linked; one such case is that of *ear* (hearing organ) and *ear* (of corn).

My mother once received a postcard from a friend who was holidaying abroad; the friend wrote, 'I will give you a ring when I get back', and Mum eagerly anticipated a gift of jewellery! And in 1995 my brother and I, driving from New Jersey to Connecticut, were bemused by a road-sign which appeared to direct motorists simultaneously to

'White Plains' and 'No White Plains' (later we discovered that *No* here stood for *North*).

Some puns work only in certain accents. A statement that some students had left a pile of **theses** on a table, uttered in a broad London accent, was interpreted (with shock) as referring to **faeces**; Cockney makes no distinction between the initial consonants of such word-pairs. In the same way, an English comedian, but not a Scottish one, who 'pronounces his Rs', can joke about Reg Varney (*On The Buses*, etc.) and his brother Manto (i.e., Mantovani). And very many puns and jokes work in speech in all or most accents but still not in writing: one involved a similar pretence that the writer Kingsley Amis and the cricketer Dennis Amiss were brothers.

The Latin sentence *Mea mater est mala sus* appears to mean 'my mother is a bad pig' (word for word; Latin has no word for the indefinite article *a*). But

with commas after *mea* and *mater* (and slightly different pronunciation; Latin spelling does not show contrastive vowel lengths) it emerges as 'Come, mother, the pig is eating the apples'!

A cross-linguistic pun often quoted with glee by Thais who know English involves an item on some restaurant menus, offering *fak* ('squash'/ 'pumpkin') with *prik* ('chilli').

Speaking of rings: when collecting data for my thesis on Wirral English, I interviewed a boy whose usage was not especially 'proper' but who surprisingly rejected the sentence *Give us a ring*, presented as addressed to one person; he stated that he would never use such a form. It later emerged in discussion that in fact he had no objection to the grammar (which was the intended focus) but preferred the word *tinkle* to *ring*! Caution must be exercised in such studies!

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 the ECSO website (below).

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 15th European Skeptics Congress

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

From the Swedish Skeptics Association. (Föreningen Vetenskap och Folkbildning):

The organisers invite science-friendly people worldwide to the 14th European Skeptics Conference, 23-25 August 2013, in Stockholm, Sweden.

Conference language

English

Speakers

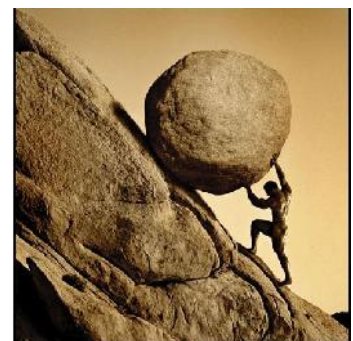
The organisers wish to hear from prospective speakers and people who wish to suggest speakers. They also welcome offers of partnership and support from likeminded organisations.

The 16th European Skeptics Congress

This will take place in London in 2015 and will be hosted by ASKE. It is hoped that other related organisations will also be involved. Please contact ASKE if you have any ideas or wish to be involved.

The Sisyphus Prize

This is to remind you of the 1 million euro prize awarded by the Belgian Skeptics Society SKEPP to anyone able



Sisyphus

to demonstrate paranormal abilities under strict scientifically controlled conditions. Details for entering this, including the pre-trial test in the applicant's country, are provided in the Autumn 2012 *Skeptical Adversaria* and on the ASKE website.

OF INTEREST

SCEPTICISM, SCIENCE AND RATIONALITY (GENERAL)

Sense About Science

www.senseaboutscience.org

From Tabitha Innocent:

In keeping with tradition, for this year's Christmas Reading Room we and a few of our friends have shared ideas from their Christmas wish lists to help you make sound, evidence-based selections:

<http://www.senseaboutscience.org/pages/christmas-reading-room-2012.html>

On the list are recommendations exploring politics, poetry and the ties between science and music, hippies, and Frankenstein... If you didn't buy last year's favourite, the 'egg-toaster', Ben Goldacre has continued the search for advances in toast making technology... And there's a persuasive case for why Scooby Doo should be everyone's 'Ask for Evidence' champion!

As a Christmas bonus, Amazon will donate 5% of the price of anything you buy to Sense About Science if you use the links on our website. So keep an eye out as we add more recommendations over the next week, and enjoy some festive browsing from the comfort of your sofa.

We're involved in judging a science writing competition launched by Europe PubMed Central for PhD and early career researchers. Please let people know about it. closing date 11th January 2013:

<http://europepmc.org/ScienceWritingCompetition>

John Maddox Prize

<http://www.nature.com/news/john-maddox-prize-1.11750>

'Two strong-minded individuals are the first winners of an award for standing up for science. The British psychiatrist Simon Wessely and the Chinese science writer Shi-min Fang are the two inaugural winners of the John Maddox Prize.'

But not everybody is happy:
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/me-bitterest-row-yet-in-a-long-saga-8348389.html>

SCIENTIFIC TOPICS

GM Crops

From Sense about Science to those who petitioned in favour of Rothamsted Research:

The GM wheat trial crop at Rothamsted Research has been harvested. It is far too early to talk about results yet, but the team at Rothamsted wanted to let you know about the harvest and to pass on their thanks. The protest group who said they were going to destroy the crop earlier in the summer did not have enough support to carry out their threat; this was because of you.

Professor John Pickett said: "The team and I were overwhelmed by all the messages of support we received from the petition signatories. You all have a significant role to play in ensuring this important, independent scientific study continues to progress so we can better understand whether this technology could help us deliver more environmentally sustainable food production in the future. We are only half way through our experiment and to ensure we get robust scientific results we need to continue the experiment next year and then get the data thoroughly analysed and independently peer reviewed for all to see. After all the great work done by Sense about Science this year, we hope next year's phase will pass without the threat to damage it."

Comments of support for the researchers from petition signatories, politicians and high profile supporters are at:

http://www.senseaboutscience.org/data/files/Dont_destroy_research/Dont_destroy_research_public_support_June_2012.pdf

The questions researchers worked hard to answer are at:

<http://www.senseaboutscience.org/pages/plant-science-qa.html>

There's a time line of the summer's events, including Rothamsted's offer to debate with Take the Flour Back before the protest, here:

<http://www.rothamsted.ac.uk/Content.php?Section=AphidWheat&Page=Protest>

Protestor Hector Christie was ordered to pay £3,850 in compensation to Rothamsted Research in August after breaking onto the site and causing property damage. He failed to disrupt the experiment. See:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-19373852>

Keep up to date with the work of the researchers at Rothamsted on their website:

<http://www.rothamsted.ac.uk/>

We've just launched the plant science panel. Leading research institutions and learned societies across the UK have come together to make themselves available in a public panel, where people can put down questions and opinions for response. You can direct people to us via Twitter, @senseaboutsci using #plantsci, or email plantsci@senseaboutscience.org. Can you help to publicise it further?

Meanwhile: 'France's six academies of science have found nothing of merit in the recent Seralini et al study linking GM maize to cancer. Here's an English translation of their joint statement:

<http://slidesha.re/RfnRrS>

The European Food Safety Authority found the same:

<http://bit.ly/Wp9mCP>

Evolution

<http://nothinginbiology.org/2012/10/02/evolution-vs-creationism-a-completely-unambiguous-logically-unassailable-scientific-test-now-we-can-all-stop-arguing-on-the-internet-about-it/>

'Evolution vs. Creationism: A completely unambiguous, logically unassailable scientific test. Now we can all stop arguing on the internet about it.'

Teaching Evolution in England and Wales

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-20547195>

'Failing to teach evolution by natural selection in science lessons could lead to new free schools losing their funding under government changes.'

Pseudoscience (or something)

<https://christosavatartrading.omnovia.com/register/50431352235586>

'How to activate your golden DNA template for ascension, self-actualization and facilitate... (you're fired - Ed.)

MEDICINE (GENERAL)

The Nightingale Collaboration

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

See the latest activities, including homeopathic products for sale at Holland & Barrett stores and complaints about advertisements in the online magazine *What Doctors Don't Tell You*, the General Naturopathic Council, Asthma Care Kent, coMra™, and James White Drinks Beet-it. Also see details of new EU-wide rules on health claims which came fully into force on 14.12.12 to join nutrition claims, which have been covered since 2009.

NHS Choices Page on Homeopathy

<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Homeopathy/Pages/Introduction.aspx#comment2153>

'Everything you need to know about homeopathy, including its uses and evidence base'. Very misleading and confusing for patients. Add your comments.

Alternative Cancer Treatment

From Sense about Science: Lots of you got in touch when, last week. The Express carried a terrible article advocating alternative cancer treatments. Sile spoke to them. They refused to change it. Cancer Research UK wrote a letter. They refused to print it. Oncologists and other experts responded in our 'For The Record' pages:

http://www.senseaboutscience.org/for_the_record.php/109/do-cancer-alternatives-really-work

The editor responded that the science view will have a chance to put forward its side at some future point. We asked whether, if the doctor prescribed him useless medicine and gave him the wrong advice, he would be satisfied to know that some weeks later someone else would be given good advice and the right pills. No joy there. Exasperated that they refused to edit the online version which was being linked to from many web discussions, we did it for them:

http://www.senseaboutscience.org/data/files/News/Better_than_the_Daily_Express.pdf

The corrected version has been viewed thousands of times now, and if you can link to it from further blogs and websites that would be great.

Edzard Ernst

<http://edzardernst.com/>

Edzard Ernst has a new blog (most recent piece is entitled 'How to fool people with clinical trials').

Vaccination

<http://www.npr.org/blogs/health/2012/10/17/162595455/how-the-taliban-is-thwarting-the-war-on-polio>

How the Taliban is thwarting the war on polio in Pakistan.

PSYCHIATRY AND PSYCHOLOGY

British False Memory Society

<http://www.bfms.org.uk/>

The October 2012 BFMS newsletter can be accessed on the BFMS website on the home page or in 'Keep up to date/newsletters'.

- Read the latest information on the 'Accredited Voluntary Registers Scheme' direct from the Council for Healthcare Regulatory Excellence which is soon to become the Professional Standards Authority for Health and Social Care.
- Thousands of pages relating to the Justice for Carol story have been

released by her treating hospital - see the update on this case.

- Why is Church of England Policy and Guidance on 'Responding Well to those who have been sexually abused' of concern. See review of this document on page 10.
- What to do if you are falsely accused - see The 10 Golden Rules.
- And more....

Misuses of Hypnosis

[http://www.lancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(12\)61655-9/fulltext](http://www.lancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(12)61655-9/fulltext)
The above article is by Niall Boyce in the Lancet on the late Professor John Mack, 'The psychiatrist who wanted to believe'.

Near Death Experiences

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2012/10/07/proof-of-heaven-a-doctors-experience-with-the-afterlife.html>

'Heaven is Real: A Doctor's Experience with the Afterlife'. When neurosurgeon Eben Alexander found himself in a coma, he experienced things he never thought possible - a journey to the afterlife.

On the other hand, from Sam Harris:

<http://www.samharris.org/blog/item/this-must-be-heaven>

'Let me suggest that, whether or not heaven exists, Alexander sounds precisely how a scientist should not sound when he doesn't know what he is talking about. And his article is not the sort of thing that the editors of a once-important magazine should publish if they hope to reclaim some measure of respect for their battered brand.'

And from Colin Blakemore:

<http://bit.ly/QAYNxN>

'What Dr Alexander and his PR people claim is that his description of the afterlife is more authentic because he is a neurosurgeon. But when there is no evidence except the word of the beholder, a scientist's accounts are no more reliable than those of anyone else. Would we literally believe the contents of a scientist's dream because he or she has a PhD?'

And from Jason Braithwaite on NDEs in general:

<http://www.ukskeptics.com/the-dying-brain.php>

Graphology

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/today/newsid_9762000/9762966.stm

Business news on Radio 4's Today programme on 23.10.12 featured some nonsense about using graphology to assess candidates for jobs. Emma Bache, who has a column in the Financial Times, says it is very effective and that she can tell a lot about people from the swirls and curls of their letters.

For a sensible and scholarly analysis of graphology visit:

<http://www.opp.com/en/blog/2012/october/does-graphology-work#.ULzGQYPtRX0>

DSM-5

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/nov/06/nail-biting-ocd-symptoms-dsm-handbook>

'Nail biting doesn't belong in psychiatry's list of OCD symptoms. The DSM handbook's approach to mental health is flawed – it encourages a rigid, normative vision of human behaviour...'

A proposal to classify happiness as a psychiatric disorder by R.P. Bentall:

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/1619629>

'It is proposed that happiness be classified as a psychiatric disorder and be included in future editions of the major diagnostic manuals under the new name: major affective disorder, pleasant type. In a review of the relevant literature it is shown that happiness is statistically abnormal, consists of a discrete cluster of symptoms, is associated with a range of cognitive abnormalities, and probably reflects the abnormal functioning of the central nervous system. One possible objection to this proposal remains--that happiness is not negatively valued. However, this objection is dismissed as scientifically irrelevant.'

RESEARCH

Sleep Paralysis

The following request from Emilie Andreassen is self-explanatory. If you are able to help Emilie, please contact her directly: EA630@live.mdx.ac.uk

'We are a group of students at Middlesex University studying Television Production. For our Final Year film we are looking into the possibility of making a documentary about Sleep Paralysis. We are now in the pre-production stage and are looking for possible participants that suffer from Sleep Paralysis for our documentary.'

'In our film we want to follow one person that suffers from Sleep Paralysis and see how this affects them and their lives. It will involve an interview, and also some filming of following the subject around during a few days to get some cutaways. This is our basic idea for now, all though things might change depending on what the story is for each participant.'

'We are looking for people that live within or around the London area, and that would be willing to share their story about Sleep Paralysis. Half of our crew have already experienced Sleep Paralysis themselves, so we are all finding this subject very interesting and we will also have a good understanding of the sufferers' stories.'

RELIGION

Religious Hoaxes

<http://www.livescience.com/23609-religious-hoaxes.html>

Sceptical feature on religious hoaxes throughout history.

Noah's Ark

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/12/a-boat-of-biblical-proportions/309173/>

For a new theme park, Creationists (with a little help from a geneticist, some Amish men, and generous tax breaks) are building a replica of Noah's ark—exactly as God instructed.'

PSYCHICS

Mediums and other 'Psychics'

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/blog/2012/oct/16/psychics-prove-powers-scientific-test?newsfeed=true>

In October Chris French, Simon Singh and Michael Marshall issued their 'Halloween Challenge', inviting Sally Morgan, Colin Fry, Gordon Smith, T J Higgs and Derek Acorah to put their claims to the test under controlled conditions. 'In case they are not willing to do so, we do have two professional psychics who are brave enough to be tested and we will be testing them on 21 October with the results being announced on 31 October.'

As we all predicted (*geddit?!)* none of the distinguished psychics stepped forward to demonstrate their gifts. The testing of the two professional psychics took place at Goldsmiths College under the supervision of Chris, Simon and Michael. Did you predict the result? Was it:

- The two psychics passed the test and declared that it was fair and provided scientific proof of their abilities? OR
- The two psychics failed the test and declared that it was unfair and proved nothing?

In case you need to find out go to:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2012/oct/31/halloween-challenge-psychics-scientific-trial>

or

<http://www.bbc.com/news/education-20145664>

Psychic Expo

<http://scepticschool.com/2012/10/16/cheltenham-psychic-expo-the-bad-the-ugly-and-the-really-ugly/>

Report of 'Psychic Expo' at Cheltenham, Australia. Just one feature amongst many on the sceptic school website - worth visiting regularly.

'Psychic' Sally Morgan

<http://slingh.posterous.com/psychic-sally-v-daily-mail-libel-trial-set-fo>

Back in January, Sally Morgan sued the *Daily Mail* for libel, after questions were raised about how she gives the

impression of being a medium. The case is still moving ahead, and we can look forward to a trial in 2013.

‘Psychic Devastates Dead Student’s Family’

<http://doubtfulnews.com/2012/10/psychic-screw-up-claimed-missing-student-would-be-found-alive/>

Harsha Maddula, a Northwestern University pre-medical student from Long Island, N.Y., went missing Sept. 22, last seen leaving an off-campus party in Illinois. Police and volunteer searchers were unable to find him, but Maddula’s family said reassuring words from psychics had raised their spirits.

OTHER UNUSUAL CLAIMS

Conspiracy Theories

<http://www.tvguide.co.uk/detail.asp?id=135557152#4hCSLQz4cdqWr523.99>

‘Comedian Andrew Maxwell marks seven years since the July 7 London bombings by taking four conspiracy theorists on a road trip from Leeds to London, recreating the journey the terrorists made ahead of their attack. Along the way, he aims to dispel the group’s misconceptions about the day’s events, consulting eyewitnesses, government officials and families of the victims in his quest to establish the truth.’

Mayan Catastrophe

<http://jondanzig.blogspot.co.uk/2012/12/mayan-catastrophe-versus-millennium-bug.html>

See Jon Danzig’s blog ‘Why the predicted world’s end on 21 December

is nonsense – but the “Millennium Bug” was not’.

Doomsday Prophecies

<http://bit.ly/UTYz6B>

Police swoop 10 minutes before 100 followers of a Brazilian doomsday cult were due to commit mass suicide over end of the world.

The Planet Nibiru

<http://earthsky.org/space/planet-nibiru-is-not-real>

‘Hear ye! Hear ye! Nibiru, the fictitious planet in the hyped-up 2012 doomsday scare, is not real! This putative world has made a big splash in the human imagination and cyberspace, but there’s not the slightest trace of a ripple of it upon our solar system and planet Earth....’

FREEDOM

Libel Reform

**KEEP LIBEL LAWS
OUT OF SCIENCE**

NEW!!!!

From Sense about Science:

‘Libel reform was discussed in the House of Lords. The good news first. Amendments to introduce restrictions on companies using the libel laws were passed. There was a good discussion about improvements that can be made to the public interest defence, introduced by Lords Lester and Taverne and Baroness Bakewell, which will be revisited at third reading. But there was also a really disappointing development

in that the bill was used as a backdoor way to implement recommendations from the Leveson inquiry on press regulation. This risks the Bill being dropped or mired for a long time in debates about Leveson. Meanwhile, we continue to hear from scientists and writers about the material they cannot publish due to threats of libel. Among other things, many of you will have seen that a book about scientology has been published internationally but not in the UK. We now need to press hard to protect the gains made so far. Fuller updates will be posted at <http://libelreform.org/> and for more immediate news follow #freedebate on twitter.’

See also article by Tracey Brown in the Guardian, warning politicians ‘Don’t hold the Defamation Bill hostage’:

<http://bit.ly/W3oAxB>.

‘Matthew Parris wrote along similar lines in the Times:

<http://thetim.es/Y5EeYP>

Academic Freedom

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=421600>

‘An academic who believes he was suspended from his research after merely mentioning a controversial incident has said his case has serious implications for academic freedom. Stuart Macdonald was professor of information and organisation at the University of Sheffield until his retirement last year.....’

UPCOMING EVENTS

THE ANOMALISTIC PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCH UNIT AT GOLDSMITH’S COLLEGE LONDON

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

or

<http://www.skeptic.org.uk/events/goldsmiths>

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>

THE 2014 EUROPEAN SKEPTICS CONGRESS

See 'The European Scene', earlier.

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.

LONDON FORTEAN SOCIETY

<http://forteanlondon.blogspot.co.uk/>
www.facebook.com/LondonForteanSociety

Keep your eye on the London Fortean Society website for meetings of interest to sceptics. The society meets on the last Thursday of each month, except July and December, upstairs at the Bell, 50 Middlesex Street, London E1 7EX, 7.30pm for 8pm start. £3 or £2 concessional.'

CENTRE FOR INQUIRY LONDON

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

See the website for upcoming events of interest to sceptics.

QED 2013

<http://qedcon.org/>

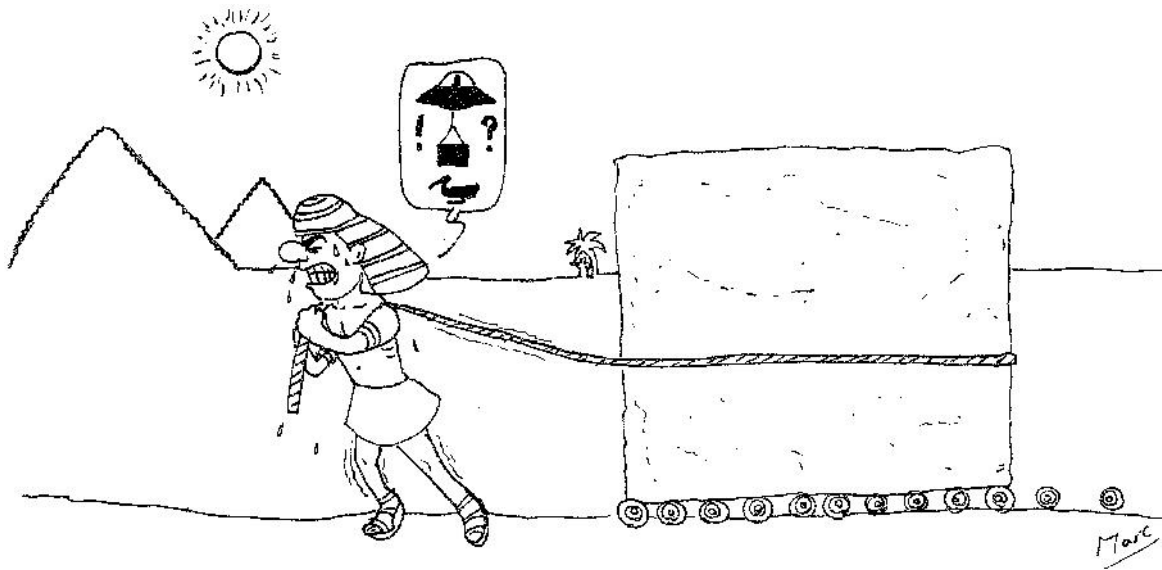
The next QED takes place on April 13th-14th 2013 and weekend tickets cost just £99, with a new, lower, concession rate of £59 for full-time students (with any recognised student ID).

Unfortunately the conference is now sold out but to be put on the reserve list in the event of cancellations please email reservelist@qedcon.org.

A FEW OF BERTRAND RUSSELL'S THOUGHTS

The following was posted on the Sheffield Sceptics in the Pub website and is worth sharing here.

1. Do not feel absolutely certain of anything.
2. Do not think it worthwhile to proceed by concealing evidence, for the evidence is sure to come to light.
3. Never try to discourage thinking for you are sure to succeed.
4. When you meet with opposition, even if it should be from your husband or your children, endeavour to overcome it by argument and not by authority, for a victory dependent upon authority is unreal and illusory.
5. Have no respect for the authority of others, for there are always contrary authorities to be found.
6. Do not use power to suppress opinions you think pernicious, for if you do the opinions will suppress you.
7. Do not fear to be eccentric in opinion, for every opinion now accepted was once eccentric.
8. Find more pleasure in intelligent dissent than in passive agreement, for, if you value intelligence as you should, the former implies a deeper agreement than the latter.
9. Be scrupulously truthful, even if the truth is inconvenient, for it is more inconvenient when you try to conceal it.
10. Do not feel envious of the happiness of those who live in a fool's paradise, for only a fool will think that it is happiness.



Cartoon by Marc van Wichelen <skepmarc@hotmail.be>

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>

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