
Skeptical Adversaria

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The Quarterly Newsletter of The Association for Skeptical Enquiry



FROM THE ASKE CHAIRMAN

Michael Heap

There has been an exciting development that will be welcomed by all readers and ASKE members in the Midlands. A ‘Skeptics in the Pub’ at Leicester!

Details of this are given in the ‘Of Interest’ section of this newsletter. This new venture has no doubt been inspired by the highly successful ‘Skeptics in the Pub’ in London that has been running for several years now, always with an impressive programme of speakers and an enthusiastic audience of regulars and visitors. Perhaps in due course we will see the development of a nationwide Skeptics-in-the-Pub network.

Rupert Sheldrake stabbed in Santa Fe

In April we received the shocking news from Chris French that Dr Rupert Sheldrake had been stabbed in the leg on 2.4.08 after giving a talk at the International Science and Consciousness Conference in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Dr Sheldrake was talking informally with a group of delegates when he suddenly felt a blow on his left thigh and on looking down was astonishment to see the handle of a dagger sticking out of his trousers. Fortunately medical assistance was immediately available from people attending the conference. Dr Sheldrake was taken to St Vincent Regional Medical Center, where he underwent an operation on his wound.

It transpired that the assailant was a Japanese man who had arrived from Japan only a few days before. According to Dr Sheldrake this person had spoken to him the day before his lecture, saying

that he was hearing voices. He was obviously in distress and several people at the conference had tried to help him. Dr Sheldrake also reveals that ‘Although the report in *USA Today* said that he was ‘disturbed’ by my lecture, which was on the extended mind, this was misleading; he was disturbed anyway. In any case, his English was probably too poor to understand much of what I said’.

From Dr Sheldrake’s account it seems that he sustained quite a serious injury. I am sure that all readers will be hoping that he is making a speedy recovery and that there will be no permanent consequences of this unfortunate incident. (Dr Sheldrake’s website is at < www.sheldrake.org>.)

Dr Park’s Seven Warning Signs of Bogus Science

On ASKE.net recently Peter Lucey drew our attention to the Seven Warning Signs of Bogus Science due to Dr Robert L. Parks on the website: <<http://chronicle.com/free/v49/i21/21b02001.htm>>.

Briefly, these are as follows

1. The discoverer pitches the claim directly to the media.
2. The discoverer says that a powerful establishment is trying to suppress his or her work.
3. The scientific effect involved is always at the very limit of detection.

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4. Evidence for a discovery is anecdotal.

5. The discoverer says a belief is credible because it has endured for centuries.

6. The discoverer has worked in isolation.

7. The discoverer must propose new laws of nature to explain an observation.

Dr Park is a Professor of Physics at the University of Maryland and the Director of Public Information for the American Physical Society. He is the author of *Voodoo Science: The Road From Foolishness to Fraud* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

LOGIC AND INTUITION

This puzzle will not stretch the abilities of those of you who are reasonably *au fait* with probability theory. In fact you are probably familiar with the problem. In that case, the challenge for you is to explain the answer in terms that reasonably intelligent, though mathematically naïve, people will understand. Unlike the puzzle in the last Newsletter, the narrative is factual.

In the November/December 2002 issue of the *Skeptical Inquirer* is an article by Phil Mole from Illinois entitled 'Are skeptics cynical? Popular misunderstandings of skepticism'. In his article, Mr Mole poses the following questions (I have introduced personalities into the problems).

(1) Raj and Liz each toss an unbiased coin 10 times and obtain the following series of heads (H) and tails (T):

Raj: H T H T H H T T H T

Liz: T T T T H T T T T T

Which of these two series is the more likely?

(2) Max tosses an unbiased coin 8 times and Ali tosses an unbiased coin 5 times with the following results:

Max: H T T H T T H H

Ali: H H H H H

Which of these two series is the more likely?

According to Mr Mole, the series obtained by Raj and Liz are equally likely, while Ali's series is much more likely than Max's.

However, in the Letters section of a later issue of the *Inquirer* (March/April, 2003), one reader, Mr Nagy, while praising his article, opined that Mr Mole 'is no statistician'. He pointed out that, by applying the binomial theorem, it is clear that Raj's sequence is more likely than Liz's – 25 times more likely in fact – and that Max's sequence is about 9 times more likely than Ali's.

Even in the absence of any knowledge of the intricacies of the binomial theorem, it seems obvious that if you throw an unbiased coin 10 times, a 5-5 split of heads and tails is much more likely than a 1-9 split.

And even a 4-4 split with 8 tosses is intuitively much more likely than a 5-0 split with 5 tosses.

That was Mr Nagy's position.

So who is right, Mr Mole or Mr Nagy?

See page 11 for the answer.

ONE OF US

It isn't often that a non-event – 'Dog *wasn't* bitten by man' - is given coverage in the newspapers, particularly when it concerns unusual claims such as ghosts, UFOs and so on. So it was pleasing to see the following story in the *Times* on 15.5.08.

The story was headed 'My UFO sighting – clear but no cigar shape' and had the ominous opening line 'I never believed in UFOs, until I saw one'. The author of the piece describes how he was driving home through Surrey one evening in 1997, when he saw 'a luminous orange object floating in the distance above the trees. It was the classic UFO shape, like a cigar, and it appeared eerie and otherworldly, almost as if it was translucent. Suddenly, it took a smart leap to the left, stopped and zoomed upwards. Then it disappeared and reappeared lower....I was absolutely terrified'.

The writer goes on to describe how he stopped his car and got out and then noticed others had done the same. Eventually he was able to identify what

the thing was: bearing the word 'Orange' on the side, it was clearly an illuminated blimp advertising the mobile phone company of that name.

'Psychologists have often pointed out that witness statements are unreliable and that people see what they want to see. I now know that to be true.'

'If I'd kept driving then I might have been convinced to this day that I'd seen a UFO. Airships just don't jump about in the sky. But, viewed through trees from a moving car on a bumpy road, this one did.

'Psychologists have often pointed out that witness statements are unreliable and that people see what they want to see. I now know that to be true - because, for ten minutes in 1997, I was that unreliable witness.'

The publication of simple stories like this encourages people to arm themselves with a useful degree of scepticism when they are constantly subjected to more newsworthy reports of sensational and unlikely claims. So congratulations to the author, Mark Barrowcliffe, on being 'one of us'.

Mr Barrowcliffe's story reminded me of another non-sighting of a UFO that was reported on television in the 1960s and which has stuck in my mind ever since. The UFO was seen by one or more passengers on an aeroplane in

flight and was captured on photographic film. Through the window is clearly visible some kind of flying craft that is travelling alongside the aeroplane at far too close a range to be a normal aircraft. But what is it?

I dare say that, had no one come forward with what was undoubtedly the correct answer, the incident would have remained not simply a mystery (which it would be if it were not explained) but a claim for convincing evidence of an

alien visitation. But at least one person realised what the 'UFO' was. It was the aircraft's tail plane!

But how on earth was this visible through a window *on the side* of the aircraft? The most likely answer is that for a time the aircraft was surrounded by some unusual atmospheric conditions whereby the light reflected from the tail plane was subjected to a profound degree of refraction sufficient for it to be incident upon at least one of the side

windows! At least this is what I recall of the explanation provided.

Note from the Editor: Readers are invited to send extracts from newspapers, magazines, etc. in which the writer gives a readable sceptical critique of a topic of interest to members of ASKE or, conversely, in which the person hasn't a clue what he or she is talking about.

SKEPTICS' CORNER

Getting people to part with their money

The ASKE email discussion network was buzzing with activity recently after one member drew our attention to a news item worthy of sceptical analysis.

The gist of the story can be found at <http://news.sky.com/skynews/article/0,,91059-1310373,00.html> and is as follows:

Italian police have issued CCTV pictures of a man who appears to hypnotise a supermarket cashier before stealing money from her till.

According to reports from the Italian news agency, Ansa, the man asked the cashier to change a 100 euro note and as soon as the till was opened he proceeded to hypnotise her into handing over money.

"She was asked something concerning the banknotes," a police spokeswoman told Sky Italia.

"(As) she opened up the till the man took away some money in a very natural way."

It is thought the man was working with a female accomplice, seen calmly leaving the supermarket behind the suspect.

When the cashier came to count the till money at the end of her shift, £600 was missing.

"It was very strange," she said.

It is not clear if there is only one recorded instance of this or several. The

account at the following website implies the latter:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7309947.stm>.

Before I go any further, I would like to tell you a true story. In 1967 there was a young man from the North of England – aged 18, but going on 14 – who had arrived the previous day in London at the start of his university career. He was doing some sightseeing around Piccadilly. This young man had been brought up to respect older people, to believe that everyone is essentially trustworthy, and always to help someone who is in trouble. A somewhat older man approached him and after some pleasantries explained that he was a visitor to London and, having just booked into his hotel, he had realised that he had lost his wallet. Being Sunday, he could not get to a bank and he was in dire straits. In no time at all the young man had handed over most of the hard-earned cash that his mother had given him to tide him over until he received his scholarship grant. He accepted the other man's assurances that he would post the money to his digs once he had been to the bank the following day.

Needless to say the money never arrived in the post. Possessed with such naïvety, there is only one way one can learn about life. The hard way.

Now, back to the story of the supermarket cashier. The ensuing ASKE discussion touched on several themes. Is it really possible to hypnotise people into handing over their money (or generally to do something against their will)? What about Mr Derren Brown's apparent ability to persuade a passer-by to hand over his money and house keys? Is he hypnotising the man or is he 'doing NLP' (neurolinguistic programming) or both? And what exactly *is* NLP?

The most recent report concerns a man in Vladivostok who was robbed of 4,500 roubles in the street by two gypsies who, he claims, hypnotised him.

Hypnosis and crime: anecdotal evidence

First let's deal with hypnosis and crime. There are a number of questions we can ask in relation to this but the two main

ones are ‘Can you hypnotise someone to commit a crime (e.g. rob a bank)?’ and ‘Can you hypnotise someone so they become the victim of a crime (e.g. you steal their money)?’

At the time of this discussion I was unaware of a website that gives summaries of numerous claims that people have been hypnotised and persuaded to hand over money and possessions. This is at

<http://legendsrumors.blogspot.com/search/label/Hypnothefts>

and at the time of writing, the most recent report (subsequent to ‘the Italian job’) concerns a man in Vladivostok who was robbed of 4,500 roubles in the street by two gypsies who, he claims, hypnotised him. I am grateful for Professor Ray Hyman for alerting me to this. We’ll hear from Ray again later.

The consensus now is that hypnosis does not have any coercive properties.

The following was my first contribution to the ASKEnet discussion; I have only amended it slightly.

‘I have been asked for my opinion by the defence in three criminal cases in which the accused claimed that he or she committed the crime under the influence of hypnosis or, as all the defendants were of African origin, some form of black magic or ju-ju.

‘One of them claimed that the heroin that was in his luggage when he landed at one of the UK airports had been planted by acquaintances prior to his departure from one of the African countries. They had first put him in a trance and he only ‘came round’ when his luggage was searched at Heathrow and the offending substance was discovered. I said in my report that this was implausible but, from his account, his acquaintances could have secreted the drugs in his luggage when they visited him in his hotel room prior to his departure - he fell asleep while they were there, having been to a late-night

party. He was convicted and received a long prison sentence.

‘The second defendant was a lady who worked on a supermarket checkout. She was observed on security camera to pass over the price scanner a large quantity of purchases being made by two women (also of African origin) without their being registered on the scanner. (It was obvious from the CCTV footage that at times she purposefully orientated the objects in such a way that the bar code did not pass over the scanner). The bill for the commodities was derisively small. The security guards intervened but the two customers fled, leaving their trolley full of goods in the car park. The cashier claimed to have no memory of the customers, even when shown the video footage, claiming that they must have hypnotised her or put some kind of influence on her. Again I said that this was implausible. She was given a community sentence.

‘The third case was that of a man who was working in the exchange bureau of some kind of finance company. A customer persuaded him to bring a large quantity of the firm’s cash to a nearby hotel, where he would take it away and return with the money plus a large surplus for the man’s employers. This that was the last the accused saw of him. The accused claimed that the man had hypnotised him or that he was under the influence of black magic. Again I said this was implausible and if the man had a defence it was that he was extremely gullible but acted in good faith. He received some form of community sentence.

‘There is a literature on allegations of crimes committed while hypnotised. The consensus now is that hypnosis does not have any coercive properties. If the defendant genuinely felt obliged to act in the way he or she did, one needs to examine factors in the situation itself that may have contributed to this, whether or not hypnosis was used at all’.

(I might add here that, in my own experience, more common than claims of crimes committed while the *defendant* was hypnotised are claims of such while

the *complainant* was hypnotised, the typical allegation being that of impropriety indecent assault, or even rape, by the defendant.)

Well, this was cue for some cross-examination by Max Blumberg.

‘Very interesting. You suggest that the evidence you put forward was that it was implausible. Is your opinion based on the literature to which you refer....? And if you have time, can you please give us an idea of the research approach(es) used in that literature?Personally, I would have thought the standard null hypothesis process applies – no hypnosis unless significant evidence otherwise. But were there ever even mixed findings? And if so, how did the H0 rejecters provide evidence for a hypnotic effect?’

The gains in suggestibility following the induction are, on the whole quite modest.

Research evidence

OK. There are quite a number of learned papers, chapters and books devoted to the topic of ‘hypnosis and will’ and I can’t really do justice to Max’s question in such a short space. Broadly speaking, the research on hypnosis has demonstrated that the experiences of responsive hypnotic subjects are ‘genuine’; that is, they are not just pretending and their responses do seem to them to be effortless rather than the result of some conscious strategy, such as self-distraction (when they are told they will not experience pain or they will be unable to remember something). However, what has been called into question is the traditional idea that all this is achieved by first putting the subject into some special state of consciousness or trance (the induction) that renders them highly responsive to suggestion. In fact, subjects respond to suggestions without the induction (this is known as ‘waking suggestibility’) and the gains in suggestibility following the induction are, on the whole quite modest. Significantly, it does not seem

to matter much what you do for an induction (the traditional eye-fixation plus suggestions of sleep, instructions to feel awake and energetic, 'motivating' instructions to do one's best to create the experiences suggested, and so on). Hence the role of the induction, so far as suggestibility is concerned, is simply to enhance motivation, commitment, expectancy, and so on prior to delivering the particular suggestion or suggestions of interest. To put it another way, 'hypnotised' subjects are no more suggestible than subjects who have the same motivation, commitment and expectations but who are not hypnotised. (We assume, of course, that both groups are drawn at random from the same population and do not differ in their waking suggestibility.)

**To put it another way,
'hypnotised' subjects are no
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Are there any laboratory experiments that have investigated whether people are more likely to obey instructions to commit dangerous or antisocial acts when they have been 'hypnotised'? Yes, although nowadays the ethical rules on experimenting with human subjects would probably disallow such investigations. Suffice it to say that hypnotised and non-hypnotised subjects have been compared in their willingness, amongst other things, to make slanderous statements, plunge their hands in a beaker containing acid and throw 'acid' at the experimenter, make homosexual advances, mutilate the bible, cut up the national flag (most of these studies were done in the USA), steal, and deal in heroin, the differences being non-existent or, if any, towards greater compliance by *non-hypnotised* subjects.

It is apposite at this stage to refer to the experiments of Stanley Milgram,

which demonstrated that human volunteers are willing to administer seemingly painful and even potentially lethal electric shocks to another person in the context of a scientific investigation.

Stage hypnosis

Does this mean that stage hypnotists don't really have to 'hypnotise' their volunteers to get them to behave in the extraordinary ways that they do? Yes! Prominent amongst those who don't do a traditional induction is the American illusionist and stage hypnotist George Kresge, *aka* 'The Amazing Kreskin'. Kresge specifically instructs his participants, whom he does not test for suggestibility, to remain awake and not 'go into a trance'. Similarly in this country, the magician Martin S. Taylor holds stage hypnosis shows 'without using hypnosis'. A third such person is ASKE member John Birchall, for many years a well-known stage hypnotist who now labels his performances as 'The Empowerment Show'. According to John,

'Any advertising that I send out to prospective customers or venues lists my show as 'The Empowerment Show'. Unfortunately some venues advertise me as a "Hypnotist". At the start of a show, my routine is as follows:-

"I will shortly be looking for volunteers to take part in my show. It is your chance to entertain your family and friends. Not everyone who volunteers will be suitable. If you volunteer and nothing happens don't think there is anything wrong with you - not everyone is suitable. For those who do take part no one will be asked to do or say anything against their will or morals.....Who said, 'Pity'?"

'I go on to explain that irrespective of the posters I do not perform a hypnosis show. I do not believe that there is such a thing. I perform an 'Empowerment Show'. The difference is that during my show I do not claim to have any power over those taking part. They are in complete control of themselves at all times. I can ask them to do certain things but they will use their

own imagination and talent to interpret my suggestions. They can refuse or stop at any time.

'I explain that some think that you have to be a bit thick or stupid to take part when in fact the opposite is the case. The best people are those with a well-educated, organised mind. Those who are not suitable are habitual liars and drunks.

'I then conduct a hands clasp test to see who has the required level of imagination. I tell those who are suitable that I will count to three and their hands will come apart. They can then sit down relax, concentrate and use their imagination. I do not make any reference to sleep.

**'At then end of the
performance I usually say to
them "None of you have been
hypnotised have you?" To date
no one has replied that they
have.'**

'Before I start my show I go along those who are taking part and touch them on the shoulder and remind them that they are in complete control of themselves and they will use their imagination and talent. I cannot make them do anything.

'At then end of the performance I usually say to them, "None of you have been hypnotised have you?" To date no one has replied that they have.

'Examples of some who have (a) stopped or (b) refused to act out routines are as follows.

'(a) On a number of occasions some individuals have volunteered and I have started the show. When they suddenly realise that they are performing before an audience they stop. Sometimes after performing for a while they decide that they want to go and watch.

'(b) Two notable examples:- I was once in Stafford when I told a young lady she could be a Chinese lady and sing a song in Chinese that was top of their hit parade. This she did with some gusto. I then told her she was now a

Russian. At this point she stopped and said no. I told her she could be a Japanese lady and tell us a joke in Japanese. This she did with no problems. At the end of the night she came over and apologised but said that part of her family was from Eastern Europe and they had been suppressed by the Russians and she did not want to have anything to do with Russians. On another occasion in North Wales I asked a young gentleman to be the world's greatest liar and tell the biggest lies ever. He refused. At the end of the night he also apologised and explained that in 'real life' he could not tell a lie. He realised that the show was no more than play-acting but he could still not tell a lie.'

Hypnosis and will: conclusions

The take-home message therefore is this: hypnosis itself has no property that renders the subject unusually obedient to the hypnotist's instructions; it is the social demands, pressures and expectations of the context in which hypnosis is conducted (laboratory, clinic, stage show, etc.) that determine this.

What about Derren Brown?

During the ASKE.net discussion, Alan Henness reminded us of Derren Brown's stunt on television whereby he seemingly persuade a passer-by to hand over his money and house keys. There is a video clip about this on:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ZohpDS2aMc>.

How does he achieve this?

'Putting subliminal messages into people's minds so that they do what he predicts is complete b***s.'**

Well, my answer is that I don't know. Neither do I know how the magician David Copperfield makes a jumbo jet disappear, but I am sure that the said object remains in its place or, if not, departs in the normal manner. Tony Youens knows more about such things

than most and made the point that those who do are able to explain Mr Brown's stunts in more conventional ways. 'If you've seen his stage show it is much easier to unravel his tricks than when you see him on TV. For example, putting subliminal messages into people's minds so that they do what he predicts is complete b*****s.' I absolutely agree.

A lot of people seem to think that Mr Brown is engaged in an activity called 'doing NLP'. This is clear from the thread on the above Youtube site, where you can access another video clip of someone providing an explanation of Mr Brown's achievement in terms of NLP concepts such as matching and mirroring of body posture and action, 'pattern interruption', and trance.

I spent years attempting to understand what people mean when they say someone is 'doing NLP' and came to the conclusion that the semantic elasticity of this expression allows it to cover more or less any form of human activity. However, there is no space here to enter into a critique of NLP. The Wikipedia account is quite good and there are also my three papers on <www.mheap.com>. Also for a good discussion of Derren Brown and NLP go to <<http://straightdope.com/mailbag/mnlp.html>>.

Our ASKE.net discussion included a contribution from Mark Newbrook, commenting on the linguistic ideas put about by NLP writers. I'm not going to include them here as Mark is planning to write a paper on this theme for the 2008 *Skeptical Intelligence*.

The Youtube thread includes some derogatory comments about the gentleman who handed over his possessions to Mr Brown. How could he be so gullible and easily conned? Actually, what to me is more striking and intriguing is the gullibility of many of the viewers, including the contributors to the Youtube discussion, who believe that Mr Brown is 'doing NLP' or 'doing hypnosis' with 'the handshake technique' and so on. But if

he is, then why don't we see and hear about many more people who have been trained to 'do NLP' helping themselves to people's possessions in the street and performing other remarkable feats like Mr Brown? (A similar question arises in the case of Uri Geller. Why only one such person? Surely we should have seen many more people on our television screens 'bending metal with the power of their minds'? Interesting....)

'The story about this hypnotic bandit going from cashier to cashier and merrily pocketing cash from the till makes no sense.'

To throw further light on the Derren Brown stunt I asked Ray Hyman for his opinion. Ray is a retired Professor of Psychology from Oregon and a magician who, in both capacities is well-known in international sceptic circles. Here's what he has to say.

'I have some qualms about speculating about the alleged robbery by hypnotizing the cashier. Before sceptics should attempt to "explain away" an apparently paranormal or extraordinary claim, they should make sure that the alleged "facts" are correct. In addition, they should make sure that they have all the relevant facts. I have not searched the "facts" of this case diligently. What I have uncovered raises questions. From what I could find, this bandit has succeeded with this same ploy all over Italy. The video clip....states that the bandit simply told the cashier to look into his eyes. He then apparently reached into the till and took over \$1,000 in cash. The cashier says she remembers nothing of this.

'If we accept these "facts" as true, then the Derren Brown video in which he talks his victim out of his house keys and wallet becomes irrelevant. At least if we accept the claptrap about NLP and mirroring. The bandit did not take the time to "mirror" or otherwise prime his victim. He merely told her to look into

his eyes and the deed was done. Even the most dedicated NLP devotees do not claim they can manipulate a person in this way.

‘The news reports state that this case is just one of several throughout Italy where the same crime by hypnosis has succeeded. Even the true believers in hypnosis and its powers would have to admit that something must be amiss.

‘A London newspaper reported almost the same story about a hypnotic bandit and a cashier that took place in Reggio Calabria, Italy in 1998.’

‘Hypnotic susceptibility, as measured by the accepted scale, varies greatly among people. Only a small percentage of the population is at the high susceptibility end of the scale. It is these individuals who they would claim might be victimised by such speed hypnosis. Even such highly susceptible individuals would require an induction procedure of greater complexity and duration than the simple “look into my eyes.” So the probability is high that the hypnotic bandit will encounter cashiers who will be immune to his simple and quick induction. These non-susceptible individuals would have easily noticed the bandit attempting to reach into the till and they would have raised the alarm.

‘So the story about this hypnotic bandit going from cashier to cashier and merrily pocketing cash from the till makes no sense. Even the fanatic believers in NLP or “speed hypnosis” do not claim that such consistent and speedy hypnosis can occur. Certainly not in a majority of randomly chosen cashiers.

‘Indeed, the story begins to sound like an urban legend. When I tried to find more information about this particular case by searching the web, I discovered something quite interesting. For example, a London newspaper reported almost the same story about a hypnotic bandit and a cashier that took place in Reggio Calabria, Italy in 1998. Then I found a similar story about a hypnotic bandit in the Boston Globe in 1898. Indeed in the late 1800s there seemed to be an epidemic of cases where hypnotic bandits were relieving citizens and bank tellers and cashiers of their money. I found a report from 1897 where a bank president claimed that he had been hypnotised into giving someone a huge amount of the bank’s money.

‘I have read some of the technical literature on the disputes about hypnosis and its alleged powers. But I cannot claim to have expertise in this particular area. I have studied the swindle known as “change raising”. This is the inverse of the swindle known as “short changing.” In short changing, the seller

or the cashier manages to get away with giving the buyer less change than he or she is entitled to. In change raising, the purchaser manages to confuse the cashier so that the cashier unwittingly provides the purchaser with more money than he is entitled to. Such confusion does not appear to have operated in the story of the hypnotic bandit.

From the victim’s point of view, the explanation ‘I did it because I was hypnotised’ may provide a useful explanation for allowing oneself to be conned.

‘Given the preceding comments, I would think that the first step should be to make sure that we have the correct facts.’ (Ray then makes some suggestions for following this story up, so watch future issues of the Newsletter.)

It strikes me that from the victim’s point of view, the explanation ‘I did it because I was hypnotised’ may provide a useful explanation for allowing oneself to be conned. But for that silly lad in London, whom I mentioned at the start, this was not an option.

 *Call for Contributions*

If you have attended a conference or presentation, watched a programme, or read an article or book that would be of interest to readers, why not write a review of this, however brief, for the *Sceptical Adversaria* or the *Skeptical Intelligencer*? Or would you like to take over one of the regular features in the *Adversaria*?

‘You don't know what your next thought is going to be’

I had a recent email exchange with ASKE member Dr Brian Robinson <musicweaver@btinternet.com> who raised a question about consciousness and free will. We would welcome any contributions to this discussion from readers.

From Brian Robinson

I was thinking this morning.....of something I read on the chronic thorny problem of ‘freewill’. It *might*(?) have been in Dennett’s book on religion as a natural phenomenon, and the statement was, ‘You don’t know what your next thought is going to be’.

True, but then I shall recognise the thought as ‘mine’, in contrast to, say, the hallucinating person suffering a psychotic illness who would ‘recognise’ the thought as someone else’s. However this reminds me of a TV interview I saw involving the late Michael Tippett, the composer. He very firmly stated, ‘The music doesn’t come from me’.

Very recently there seems to have developed a tendency to punish people for what they have thought, before the thought has translated into much action

I thought it might make a piece for ASKE but since I’m not a philosopher I wouldn’t be keen to write it as I’d be likely to make several schoolboy howlers, philosophically. Yet the matter has the most profound significance and not just in abstract academic circles - there are practical consequences for example in the way we treat criminals (or ineffectively mistreat them?). And now I’m aware I’m writing to a forensic psychologist and just as likely to make howlers.

Very recently there seems to have developed a tendency to punish people for what they have thought, before the thought has translated into much action (I know punishing thought has a long and inglorious history, cf the ‘Holy’ Inquisition, ‘deviationists’ under Stalinism, and so on, but we haven’t had

it so much in evidence in the West until lately). Orwell’s ‘thoughtcrime’ comes to mind.

My main reason for writing is to ask if you can think of a psychology paper (or book) dealing with this matter of where thoughts ‘come from’? You might say it’s the wrong question since I’m not framing it in terms of active verbs. Rather (something like): What is the brain doing when some of its activity makes other parts of its activity (‘myself’) experience thoughts?

If we really have no freewill, how can we presume to punish anybody, and on what basis do we assume that we’re right to say that from a certain age on, as adults we have to agree to be held, and to hold ourselves, ‘responsible’ for what we do? We could hardly have a society without that consensus.

I sometimes think that freewill is a bit like gravity: you can jump up a bit (or fly in an aeroplane) - i.e. to that extent you’re free - but in the end you have to come back to earth again. I find the question fascinating, and mildly perturbing ...

Any pointers to work done by psychologists would be most welcome - but there’s no hurry with it, I’ve been trying to get to grips with this for years!

From Michael Heap

I am eventually getting round to replying to your email on ‘my next thought’. I am not very well read on these matters but I can see that it is something of potential interest and relevance to people involved in scepticism. All I can come up with off the top of my head is the memory of some research that appeared to show that the conscious decision to make a movement is made AFTER the beginning of neuronal activity associated with instigating the movement. I could forward your query to ASKE members and if there is sufficient interest put

comments and exchanges in the next newsletter.

From Brian Robinson

Many thanks Mike. I’ve been trying to find the bit in some of Daniel Dennett’s books that set off the thought, but so far haven’t succeeded – it might have been an online article. I remember reading something about the point you mention (neuronal activity preceding the thought). I was really interested in it from the point of view of ‘free will’ and to what extent we’re responsible (as distinct from the social requirement to hold ourselves responsible) for our actions. As I said in my first email to you, it has implications for penal policy.....

Yes, I’d like to know if any ASKE members can point me in some directions regarding my question - thanks.

Postscript from Michael Heap:

In a paper published in the May issue of Nature Neuroscience — "Unconscious determinants of free decisions in the human brain" — Chun Siong Soon and colleagues at the Max Planck Institute in Germany show that brain activity may precede conscious decision-making by as much as 10 seconds. Subjects were asked to push a button with either the right hand or the left hand, which they were free to choose. Seven to 10 seconds before the conscious decision, brain activity sometimes appeared that correlated with unconscious decision-making. The correlation was slight. The specific hemisphere in which the brain activity occurred correlated with the hand used sixty percent of the time (no correlation at all would be fifty percent). This is not exactly what Brian had originally had in mind.

Any ideas on Brians comments?

LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

Mark Newbrook has offered to pen a regular column for Newsletter. Mark is from the Wirral, where he now lives again after studying classics at Oxford and linguistics at Reading and then working as a lecturer and researcher in linguistics in Singapore, Hong Kong and Australia. He is currently a research associate affiliated with Sheffield University. His main areas of research interest are dialectology, controversies in historical linguistics and skeptical linguistics generally. While in Australia he was the linguistics consultant to Australian Skeptics.

Tongues of men and aliens

There are many linguistic claims associated with UFOs, mainly arising from statements by abductees or contactees about their exposure to extraterrestrial languages. The independent researcher Gary Anthony and I continue to examine these as part of a long-term project. One aspect of this involves the spellings used for allegedly alien words. Some of these spellings seem designed specifically to support a claim. For instance, one such word is spelt *ghanasvan* or similarly. Note the initial digraph *gh*. This is rare in English and thus suggests exotic origin generally, but more specifically it is reminiscent of Indic or Celtic, which are language sub-families from cultures popular in New Age/fringe thought. And in fact the *h* is redundant: the spoken word as reported orally commences with [g] as in *go*, and *ganasvan* would have worked fine.

On a broader front, we had some interaction with Paul Potter, a UFO devotee who upholds the veracity of the very strange 'messages' which well-known abductee Betty Andreasson (now Luca) reportedly received from alien entities. Those which are not in English are simply strings of words familiar or otherwise, drawn or seen as drawn (often with some distortion) from Latin, Greek and other languages. Where a word exists in inflected forms in the source language, the citation (dictionary) form is virtually always the one which appears here. There is no grammar. In fact the sequences do not really exemplify language in use; they are lists of words.

Potter translates the 'messages', adding grammar as it suits him. They are mostly warnings of impending doom, often through the Sun surprisingly 'going nova'. His own attitude to learning can be seen in his web-site remark that any challenges to his ideas 'will be ignored with great aplomb'! But is there perhaps a plausible source for these texts that involves no aliens...? Maybe someone who doesn't actually know Greek or Latin but has dictionaries and a conversion table for the Greek alphabet like the one at the start of *Greek For Beginners*? Why would aliens communicate like this, anyway? If they know Latin and want to prove it, they can write in Latin, surely. .

There are in fact other cases involving UFOs where a string of the citation forms of words taken from a foreign language is presented as if it were a meaningful sentence. One such case arose in the Garden Grove abduction case of 1975, later acknowledged as a hoax. The sequence (allegedly channelled) was *nous laos hikano* (early Greek: 'mind', 'people' as in *we the people*, '[I] come'). A gloss 'I come in the mind of man' was offered; but all three forms are citation forms, and the grammar has merely been added by the translator. 'I come in the mind of the people' would be *eis ton noun ton tou laou hikano* (or similar, depending on the dialect).

Lexi-linking!

The very strange thinker 'Doc' Shiels, known in particular for claims involving monsters and witches in Cornwall, promoted the notion of 'lexi-linking', which involves words and corresponding types of real-world entities somehow

coming to be genuinely associated across a range of locations and situations on the basis of repeated usage. In other words, if people use a given word enough in connection with some concept (often not apparently connected), this gathers its own momentum; the world changes and the word-thing nexus arises again and again, seemingly by coincidence. Lexi-linking is thus a type of 'consilience'. Of course, **how** this could happen is not clear (though Rupert Sheldrake would have suggestions).

I came across this idea in Shiels' cryptozoological writings while researching an article on cryptozoology and linguistics. But it applies more widely. Loren Coleman's 'Fortean' colleague Jim Brandon decided that e.g. the place-name (*La Fayette(-ville)*) had become linked with a whole range of 'weird' phenomena in the USA. Part of this effect involves the stem *fay* or *fey* in its sense 'fairy', 'enchantment' etc. Brandon wrote an entire book on this notion (*The Rebirth Of Pan*).

I must say that I doubt if the statistics would support such a proposal. In such cases it is all too easy to be inadvertently tendentious once one has formed the idea of a link.

How special is special?

Every language is special in small ways. But, as the politically and culturally driven fringers of the linguistic world fail to see, no language is special in huge ways or in a class of its own.

However, some **are** unusual! A few languages use the apparently counter-intuitive Object-Verb-Subject as their **main** word order! And linguists have recently argued that in at least three Aboriginal languages the underlying

syllable structure is Vowel-Consonant rather than Consonant-Vowel. The latter is so much the norm that some theories assume it as a given. If this finding is

confirmed, not only will the relevant languages be rendered even more interesting but also a few theoreticians will lose some hair! (But this does **not**

repeat **not** mean that mainstream linguistic theory is all nonsense, as some nutters would have you believe!)

OF INTEREST

PhD in Parapsychology

Dr. Etzel Cardeña at Lund in Sweden is advertising a new opportunity for PhD study in Parapsychology:

<http://www.parapsych.org/lund.html>

The 'Erratic Boulders of SISYFOS Awards'

ASKE has received the following message from Jiri Grygar of the Czech Skeptical Society SISYFOS

'At the last ECSO Congress in Dublin I reported about the Czech Skeptical Society SISYFOS and its tradition of making annual awards, namely 'Erratic Boulders of SISYFOS'. On Monday, March 17, 2008 we had the jubilee Xth ceremony at the Faculty of Math & Physics of the Charles University in Prague. The report on the occasion may be read in English at the web address:

http://www.praguemonitor.com/en/297/life_in_the_czech_republic/20157/.

'The Czech version, with some pictures, may be seen at the web address: www.sisyfos.cz. The publicity of the event in the Czech press, radio and TV was very extensive.'

Participation in an Investigation of ESP

From Chris French

'As some of you may already know, the Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit is currently engaged in a collaborative research project with Dr Rupert Sheldrake investigating the phenomenon of 'telephone telepathy'. This is the fairly common experience of feeling that you know who is calling you on the telephone before you answer it - even on occasions when you had no particular reason to expect a call from that person. Obviously, sceptics and believers in the paranormal have different explanations for what is going

on in such situations, but Rupert Sheldrake claims to have demonstrated that a genuinely paranormal phenomenon may be in operation here. The only way to find out is to carry out well-controlled empirical studies and that is what we are doing.

'We are looking for volunteers to act as participants in this experiment, people who feel that telepathy is possible in relation to phone calls - knowing who is ringing before they answer the phone. Each volunteer is asked to find four people whom this might happen with. The test itself should take less than an hour and a half. During this period, the volunteer will be in one building, being filmed on videotape, and the four callers will be in another building. They will be selected at random by the throw of a dice for a series of ten trials. The person selected to make the call will be filmed on video while calling the participant.

'These videos are for research purposes only, and will not be shown in public unless those involved give their permission. All those who take part will remain anonymous in any publications or reports about this work. We have limited funding for this project but are offering a payment of £50 total to each group of people who take part, that is to say the volunteer and his/her four callers. We can also cover some travel costs, and can provide more details if requested.

'Note that we only want people who genuinely believe that they often have this experience to take part as the 'receivers' in this study. Obtaining null findings from a bunch of sceptics wouldn't really prove anything...

'If you might be interested in taking part (or know someone who might be), further details can be found at <http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/apru/telephone-telepathy.php>.

'You can sign up for this and other projects at <http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/apru/participate-research.php>'

Programme of seminars at the Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit, Goldsmith's College London

The next series of lectures has yet to be arranged. Seminars are held on Tuesdays at 4:10 pm in Room 309, Richard Hoggart Building, Goldsmiths, University of London, New Cross, London SE14 6NW. All talks are open to staff, students and members of the public. Attendance is free and there is no need to book in advance. For further information, visit

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

or contact Sally Marlow, email: ps604sm@gold.ac.uk.

Skeptics in the Pub, London

Skeptics in the Pub usually meets on the third Tuesday of every month starting at 7pm at The Penderel's Oak, Holborn. A £2 donation is requested to cover the guest speaker's travelling expenses and sundries. Non-sceptics are welcome. Turn up at any time during the evening. The room is open from about 5.30pm.

17 Jun: Dr. Ciarán O'Keeffe and Mr Steve Parsons

How not to investigate the paranormal

If you have any ideas on who you would like to speak at SitP, please drop us a line and we'll see what we can do.

Also, please feel free to forward this message to anyone you feel would be interested in coming along, or just turning up for a drink and banter with our friendly and intelligent crowd. They can subscribe to these mailings by either going to the Skeptics in the Pub website:

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

or emailing pub@skeptic.org.uk with "Subscribe" in the subject header.

Incidentally, to access the SitP Forum, where regulars exchange views and ideas about the talks (and scepticism generally) go to:

<http://skeptic.org.uk/forums/viewtopic.php?p=1979#1979>.

Skeptics in the Pub, Leicester

Yes, there is now a Skeptics in the Pub at Leicester. Meetings are held at The Rutland & Derby Arms, 23 Millstone Lane, Leicester, LE1 5JN.

Pub Tel: 0116 262 3299

Web:

<http://skeptic.org.uk/leicester/>

Email:

leicesterskeptics@googlemail.com

Facebook:

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

The following presentations will begin at 7.30 pm:

15 July: Mr Douglas Ellison

The Truth about Mars

19 Aug: Dr Chris French

The Psychology of anomalous experiences

Society for Psychical Research Lecture Series

Venue: Lecture Hall of the Kensington Central Library, Campden Hill Road, London, W8 7RX.

Time: 6.35pm

Cost: Members and Associates: Free; Non-Members: £5; Students, Over 60s or Unwaged: £2.

Tea, coffee and biscuits will be available at £1 per person.

Maps, etc. available at

<http://www.spr.ac.uk/expcms/index.php?section=4>

12 June: Dr Penny Sartori

A 5-year clinical study of near-death experiences in a Welsh intensive therapy unit

17 July: Dr Caroline Watt

Psychic experimenters and psychic healers: Research at the Koestler Parapsychology Unit.

LOGIC AND INTUITION

The answer is as follows

Argument (Mr Mole)

For n tosses of a coin, the probability of occurrence of *any* series of heads and tails is $\frac{1}{2}$ raised to the power of n . For Raj and Liz (10 tosses), this is 2^{10} or 1 in 1,024. This means that for every 1,024 tosses of the coin, the most probable occurrence of *any* particular sequence, be it Raj's or Liz's, is 1. Hence their series are equally likely.

In the case of Max, his series of 8 tosses has a probability of occurrence of 1 in 256, while Ali's series of 5 tosses has a probability of 1 in 32. Hence Ali's series will tend to occur 8 times more often as Max's.

Objection (Mr Nagy)

For 10 tosses of a coin, a 5-5 split of heads and tails is much more like than a split of 9 heads and 1 tail. The binomial formula gives a probability of a 5-5 split (Raj's series) of 0.2461 and that for a 1-9 heads/tails split (Liz's series) of 0.0098. So the even split will occur about a quarter of the time while the 1-9 split will occur about once in 100 times (i.e. is about 25 times less common). Surely, then, Raj's series is much more likely than Liz's?

For 8 tosses of a coin, the probability of a 4-4 split (Max's series) is 0.2734. For 5 tosses of a coin the probability of all heads (Ali's series) is nearly 9 times less, at 0.0312. Surely, then, Max's series is much more likely than Ali's?

Resolution (several writers)

Mr Nagy's letter provoked a number of replies in a later issue of the *Skeptical Inquirer* (July/August 2003). The following is largely culled from these.

'The human mind will focus at least as much on patterns as on number counts.'

Yes, when you toss a coin 10 times you are much more likely to have an equal number of heads and tails (5) than a 1-9 split. But the number of sequences that give you an equal split, namely 252 ($1,024 \times 0.2461$), is much higher than the number of sequences that give you a 1-9 split (10). So even when there *is* an even split, Raj's sequence still has a chance of only 1 in 252 of occurring.

Similarly, it is undoubtedly true that an equal split of heads and tails in 8 tosses of a coin is much more likely than 5 heads with 5 tosses. But there are 70 sequences that give you an even split with 8 tosses and only 1 sequence that gives you 5 heads with 5 tosses. So, even when there *is* an equal split, Max's sequence still has a chance of only 1 in 70 of occurring.

As one of the respondents (B. Zimmerman) said, 'The human mind will focus at least as much on patterns as on number counts. I have no doubt that if the order of example (1) were to be rearranged so that heads and tails alternated, John Doe (*i.e. any member of the public - Ed*) would estimate this to be a less than random sequence. Five heads followed by five tails would appear even less than random'.

Now you are ready to answer the next question. If you keep tossing a coin, does the probability of your having tossed an equal number of heads and tails increase or decrease with each toss? The answer will appear in the next issue of this newsletter.

POSTSCRIPT

Who said it?

1. I shudder to think of the ceaseless cascade of medicine which is pouring down British throats at the present time.

(a) *Prince Charles* (b) *Winston Churchill* (c) *Aneurin Bevan*

2. This movement among the Jews is not new.....this worldwide conspiracy for the overthrow of civilisation and for the reconstitution of society on the basis of arrested development, of envious malevolence, and impossible equality, has been steadily growing.

(a) *Oswald Moseley* (b) *Winston Churchill* (c) *H.G. Wells*

3. I myself have always deprecated appeals to the Dunkirk spirit as an answer to our problems.

(a) *Harold Wilson* (b) *Winston Churchill* (c) *Margaret Thatcher*

4. I believe that the spirit of Dunkirk will carry us through to success.

(a) *Harold Wilson* (b) *Winston Churchill* (c) *Margaret Thatcher*

Answers at the foot of the page.

About ASKE

ASKE is a society for people from all walks of life who wish to promote rational thinking and enquiry, particularly concerning unusual phenomena, and who are opposed to the proliferation and misuse of irrational and unscientific ideas and practices. This is our quarterly newsletter and we have an annual magazine, the *Skeptical Intelligencer*.

To find out more, visit our website (address below).

If you share our ideas and concerns why not join ASKE for just £10 a year? You can subscribe on our website, write to us at the address below, or email m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk

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email: askel@talktalk.net;
website: <<http://www.aske-skeptics.org.uk>>.

Who said it? Answers

1 (c); 2 (b); 3 (a); 4 (a)