
Skeptical Adversaria

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FROM THE ASKE CHAIRMAN

Michael Heap

Much of this issue is about risk and requires a reasonable working knowledge of the concept of probability. This is not difficult to acquire in my opinion (otherwise I wouldn't have managed it myself), and is a useful resource for anyone who surveys the world of information through a sceptical lens.

So, let's think a bit about probability and what it means when we say 'X has a such-and-such probability (or chance or likelihood) of happening'.

I think it was last year that the public were shocked and dismayed by a particularly horrific murder that occurred on the victim's own doorstep. Several men were convicted and it was announced that one of them, Mr X, had only just been released from prison (I believe on parole), despite, according to the press, being assessed as '80% likely to re-offend violently'.

I find it more helpful to treat a probability, such as a percentage, for what it is – a proportion of something.

What does it mean to say that 'Mr X is 80% likely to re-offend violently'? Is this some property that the person possesses that you can detect on examination, like observing, for example, that he has 20% loss of power in his right arm or that he has first-degree burns to 30% of his skin? Hardly.

In his book *Taking Chances: Winning with Probability* (Oxford University Press, 2003) John Haigh considers various approaches to the

question 'What is probability?' and then has this to say:

'To think of probability as describing a degree of belief reconciles all these approaches. The stronger the degree of belief in the event, the larger the probability associated with it' (page 2). One of the examples he uses to illustrate this is the statement 'The probability that Shakespeare wrote Macbeth is 80%'.

Mr Haigh is a Reader in Mathematics and Statistics at one of our prestigious universities and I hesitate to make even a token gesture of disagreement. However, I do not find his explanation helpful in some of the tasks I undertake in my professional work.

I find it more useful to treat a probability, such as a percentage, for what it is – a proportion of something. So in response to the statement 'Mr X has an 80% chance of re-offending' I would retort '80% of what?' Viewed in this way, clearly the statement doesn't make any sense.

In fact the original statement will not have simply reflected someone's subjective belief based on years of experience in these matters. It is highly likely that somebody, probably a probation officer, undertook a risk assessment on Mr X for the Parole Board that came up with the figure 80%.

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But what does this 80% mean; what is it 80% of?

The answer is that that it is the proportion of offenders scoring the same or higher than Mr X on the risk assessment protocol who later commit a violent crime (sometimes a time period is specified).

The most common forensic risk assessment procedures consist of lists of factors that have been demonstrated to correlate with re-offending. In brief, the assessor scores the person on each of

these factors (e.g. on a scale from 0 to 2) and adds up the scores. The authors of the instrument provide tables giving the re-offending rates of people whose total score is equal to that of the offender being assessed.

Strictly one should say ‘80% of people with Mr X’s risk profile go on to re-offend’.

Many of the known risk factors are ‘static’ or ‘historical’; that is, they cannot change or are unlikely to (and if they do it may be for the worse). Examples are age of first offence, number of violent offences, number of failed relationships and a history of drug or alcohol misuse. There are also ‘dynamic’ factors (which may change) such as evidence of genuine remorse, responsiveness to treatment for any mental health problems, and realistic plans for future management.

Thus, there is an evidence base for forensic risk assessment but the correct way of expressing the outcome is not to say, for example, ‘Mr X is 80% likely to re-offend violently’. Strictly one should say ‘80% of people with Mr X’s risk profile go on to re-offend’.

It is difficult to know whether Mr X will be amongst the 80% who do re-offend or amongst the 20% who don’t. There is a myriad of ‘idiosyncratic’ factors, many difficult to quantify, that may push him into the 20% rather than the 80% group.

So, to take an example from another sphere of life, namely the weather, what does it mean when the weather forecaster says, ‘There is an 80% chance of rain’? She might be attempting to say something about her confidence in her own belief about whether it will rain or not. However, if she is being more objective, her real meaning will be something like ‘Whenever these particular meteorological conditions are in place, rain occurs on 80% of occasions’.

Please make sure that you apply yourself to the intriguing puzzle that,

with the help of Mr Haigh, I have set you in this issue’s ‘Logic and Intuition’.

Mental illness and homicide

Active symptoms of a major mental illness are a known risk factor for violent re-offending. Whether directly or indirectly, the media have a habit of regularly conveying the impression that increasing numbers of mentally ill people are wandering the streets attacking and murdering innocent people (*see note 1*). Whenever such a murder happens there is an official enquiry, shortcomings in the relevant services and personnel are noted, and recommendations for improvements made. Thus media attention to individual cases of homicide by mentally ill people are likely to be given much more prominence than other killings. Invariably the commentators resort to the usual cut-and-paste clichés - ‘This is yet another case where care in the community has gone wrong’, etc.

‘Care in the community’ is a concept of which few journalists manifest any real understanding. But more importantly, far from there being an **increase** in homicides by mentally ill people, in England and Wales **there has been a steady fall** since the 1970s. This is set against a steady rise in murders by people who are not mentally ill.

These findings are published in the *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 2008, **193**, 130-133 (see tinyurl.com/5tphtt). According to the authors, ‘The introduction and increasing use of antipsychotic medication, the greater awareness of the treatment of psychosis by primary care providers after deinstitutionalisation, and the creation of regional health authorities with responsibility for defined populations, may all have contributed to the observed decline in abnormal homicide since the 1970s’.

The assessment of psychopathy

One commonly used risk assessment procedure for violent offending is the Revised Psychopathy Check-List (the PCL-R) due to Robert Hare, Professor of Psychology at the University of British Columbia. This is a 20-item instrument

that in forensic psychology and psychiatry is recognised in North America and the UK as the gold standard for determining whether someone is a psychopath. This decision is based on a single score (although there are at least two main composite factors that can be rated separately). Particularly in North America, if you are a criminal then your score on this instrument can significantly influence decisions affecting your freedom or incarceration. Serving convicts have taken psychologists to court to contest, item-by-item, their PCL-R assessments – a sure sign that something is wrong with the system.

These instruments are elaborate methods for quantifying one of the fundamental laws of psychology, namely that past behaviour predicts future behaviour.

The PCL-R also measures risk of violent re-offending. However, all the items are static or tend to be so: they do not change or change little over the person’s lifetime. So a convict’s score, say, at the start of his sentence is likely to be the same when he is due for parole or release. More popular risk assessments incorporate dynamic factors but their total scores still tend to be heavily weighted by static items.

In short, these instruments are elaborate methods for quantifying one of the fundamental laws of psychology, namely that past behaviour predicts future behaviour. This is not a bad way of summing up the essence of ‘psychopathy’: metaphorically speaking, a leopard can’t change its spots.

Notwithstanding all of the foregoing, formal, custom-made risk assessment scales are the best methods we have of quantifying risk of violence and are superior to personality tests and ‘clinical judgement’, whether by an experienced forensic psychiatrist or the lady who

cleans his office – it may not make much difference.

I was not therefore too impressed by the following announcement which ASKE member John Birchall drew to my attention recently.

It seems that asking a person a single question can help determine whether he is a psychopath. The test has been used by ‘a famous American psychologist’ who has found that serial killers often gave a certain answer. The question is as follows:

‘A woman, while at the funeral of her own mother, met a guy whom she did not know. She thought this guy was amazing. She believed him to be her dream guy so much, that she fell in love with him right there, but never asked for his number and could not find him. A few days later she killed her sister. What was her motive for killing her sister?’

See page 12 for the answer (along with the answer to the ‘Logic and Intuition’ puzzle).

Note

1. Recently the media, including BBC’s Radio 4 morning news, reported a ‘shock horror’ story about the ‘horrific’ number of dangerous mentally ill patients who escape from secure hospitals. According to Radio 4 there are more such escapes than from prison. In fact there are no escapes from high secure hospitals at all, only from medium and low secure units. Moreover, most of the ‘escapes’ recorded are in fact ‘absconsions’ by patients who are on leave (escorted or unescorted). Leave (for example a few hours spent shopping) is an essential part of the rehabilitation of these patients and is only granted to those who have attained mental stability and have been carefully risk assessed. Very occasionally a patient will overextend his or her leave period, visit relatives, go to the pub, etc but they are nearly always returned to the unit without much delay or incident. Their leave entitlement is

then withdrawn until they are again deemed ready to go out. The risk to any single member of the public of harm from a sectioned patient who is out on leave, legitimately or absconding, is finite but miniscule - I imagine less than being struck by lightning.

Incidentally, a few years ago the secure unit in which I work was enclosed within a metal fence over 5 metres high, despite the fact that nobody had ever escaped or made any serious attempt to escape from the building. This was a requirement of hastily convened government requirements. This fence cost the National Health Service one million pounds while hundreds of people were dying because of infections picked up in general hospitals because of unhygienic conditions there.

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*?

LOGIC AND INTUITION

The puzzle in this issue requires some arithmetical calculations. Please do not let this put you off. The calculations are **very simple**, as is the puzzle, and if you solve it correctly you will witness a minor miracle. You will also for evermore be wary of any sentence that starts ‘Statistics show...’ (The example provided is fictitious).

Lies, damned lies and.....

Greenbank is a sprawling crime-ridden estate in the suburbs of a large city. It is divided into West and East Greenbank and its population is further divided (by those who consider these things to matter) into ‘white’ and ‘non-white’.

In West Greenbank, exactly half of the 1000 adults (18 or over) are white

and the rest are non-white. Of the 1000 adults in East Greenbank 90% are white and the rest are non-white.

Two researchers investigated the history of offending (criminal convictions or police cautions, warnings, etc) amongst the adult population of Greenbank. One researcher surveyed West Greenbank and the other surveyed East Greenbank.

In West Greenbank more non-whites than whites had a criminal record – 30% of the former and 24% of the latter. In East Greenbank 65% of non-whites had a criminal record as opposed to 50% of whites.

The conclusion seems inescapable: a non-white adult living in Greenbank is more likely to have a criminal record than a white adult. The local weekly

newspaper eagerly conveyed this information under an uncompromising headline once the results were announced.

Astonishingly, the following week a letter from the researchers was published

in the newspaper expressing alarm and pointing out that their survey had clearly shown that non-whites living in Greenbank were *less* likely to have a criminal record than whites.

Surely this can't possibly be the case - can it?

See page 11 for the answer.

ONE OF US

The question of whether our government should make a big investment in nuclear power stations to provide for our future energy needs is one that may divide sceptics and it is not a subject on which ASKE is likely to adopt a particular stance.

That is, of course, except to be vigilant for any tendency to irrational, thinking, misleading claims, misinterpretation of science, bias due to self-interest, *ad hominem* attacks, and so on.

Most objections to nuclear power concern risk to the environment, risk to health and relative costs. I may be wrong but my impression is that amongst opponents and supporters of nuclear power, it is the former who tend to be the more strident and the more likely to allow ideological thinking to cloud their judgement of the pros and cons of investment in nuclear energy.

Step onto the platform climate change expert Mark Lynas! Mr Lynas is one of those people who was formerly committed to a particular opinion but took to the trouble to carefully study the scientific evidence and, as a result, changed his mind, publicly announcing that he had done so. Of course, this does not mean he is right and there are plenty of examples of individuals who have announced they have changed their

minds about something simply because they wanted to be seen to be doing so. But when it is genuinely done it is something that certainly marks out the person as 'one of us'.

In an article in the *Sunday Times*, on 28.09.08, Mr Lynas writes:

'(E)nergy is something I care about. The last time I checked my carbon budget, I came in at a fifth of the national average.....

'Just a month ago I had a Damascene conversion: the Green case against nuclear power is based largely on myth and dogma. My tipping point came when I discovered just how much nuclear power has changed since I first set my mind against it'.

Mr Lynas has concluded that two important claims made by opponents of nuclear power are not supported by the scientific evidence. First is the idea 'that it is, without exception, dirty, dangerous and unnecessary'. 'Science has moved on. The old figures just don't stack up any more'.

He goes on to say,

'I searched the scientific literature for evidence to support the other great green charge levelled at nuclear power: it kills its neighbours. I sifted through piles of rigorous epidemiological studies from all over the world, searching for proof that people who live near nuclear sites are more prone to cancer and leukaemia. None of the reputable journals turned up a link.

In return for his honesty, Mr Lynas has been subjected to *ad hominem* attacks by his former colleagues in the green movement. For example, 'On Radio 4's Today programme, Green Party leader Caroline Lucas accused me of having "lost the plot". When I argued back, she accused me of "just being silly". I was a traitor'.

And in conclusion he writes:

'These are just two examples of eco-myths: there are many more. If only we were allowed to discuss them without being flayed for heresy'.

Exactly!

BIG CAT SIGHTINGS AGAIN

According to some people, one of the risks that we face in this country is being attacked by large members of the cat family which are roaming wild in our countryside and occasionally making their way into our towns and cities.

The *Rossendale Free Press* has previously provided me with material for use in this newsletter and recently it has again featured items that are of sceptical interest. (Rossendale is a collection of industrial towns, villages

and farms in the Pennine hills and valleys of East Lancashire.)

The most recent one concerns sightings of UFOs, which are something of a local tradition now (along with the annual world black pudding throwing

championship and the famous clogdancers, the Britannia Coconutters – see their website

<www.coconutters.co.uk> which includes details of how to become a 'nutter' and a moving poem entitled

‘Owr Dick’, celebrating 40 (now over 50) years of coconutting by their leader Dick Shufflebottom).

The Ministry of Agriculture was aware of 16 big cats having escaped into the wild since 1977. Of those, 14 were recaptured within 24 hours.

Well interesting things happen in the place where I was born (*but that wasn't one of them - Ed.*). Another one is the reported presence of big cats (i.e. lions, pumas, lynxes, etc.). The latest one to put in an appearance is the Huttock Top Beast. Under the headline ‘Valley “puma” on the prowl’ on 08.02.08, Mr Philip Ainsworth of Bacup is reported to have seen a large animal ‘four or five feet long with a tail that was about three feet long’. The sighting was at night time on Saturday 02.02.08 in his neighbour’s garden. The next day he found ‘the paw prints it had made in the grass’. These measured ‘four to five inches long and you could see the shape of the pads and the claw marks’.

Also included in the article is the testimony of Mr Terry Bork of nearby Huttock Top Farm. ‘I have lost two ducks, a Chinese goose, five hens and two cockerels. It left the mallard and took two females. This is not a fox, because a fox would have taken the bird it wanted and ripped the heads off the others’.

Big cat sightings are not new in Rossendale. According to the *Free Press* article, in January 1995 a ‘lynx-like’ cat was seen near Ramsbottom, one of several sightings that have been reported in that area, and in October 1996 two terrified schoolgirls came face to face with Rossendale’s ‘mysterious panther’ in Bacup. ‘The sleek dark-coated animal they described was similar to one observed by then Burnley FC coach Brian Taylor and his wife the previous month’.

The article omits reference to the Rossendale Lion, sighted by 14-year-old schoolboy Owen Jepson in August 1984.

‘I just saw its back legs and tail as it jumped over some rushes’, Owen reported. ‘The tracks were cat prints. I got a book out of the library and decided that it only matched up with a mountain lion’. Later a farmer, Geoff Dootson, living several miles north of this sighting, found several of his sheep had been killed and stripped of their flesh and a cow was mauled. He caught sight of a ‘sable-coloured’ creature, similar to a lion. David Nutter, acting police chief of Rossendale at the time, issued a public warning but a search proved fruitless and tracks discovered on top of a local hill were pronounced by an expert to have been left by a dog. No more was heard or seen of the Rossendale Lion.

I wrote on this topic in the July 2001 issue of the *Adversaria* and the 2003 issue of the *Skeptical Intelligencer* and I won’t simply repeat what I said then, except to remind readers that sightings of big cats are common in the UK but the capture of one, alive or dead, is exceedingly rare.

I was therefore interested in an article in the Spring 2008 edition of *The Cat* (‘The missing lynx’ by Tom Briggs, pp 23-24). Quoted in the article is Neil Arnold, founder of Kent Big Cat Research, who has been recording sightings for 18 years and receives 200 such accounts each year. Mr Arnold will be speaking on this topic at the London Skeptics in the Pub meeting on Monday 17th November 2008 (see page 9 of this Newsletter).

According to Mr Briggs, ‘Almost every county in the UK must have at least three or four black leopards – maybe producing two or three young a year – possibly a couple of pumas as well and that’s without counting the smaller cats such as lynx, so I believe there are a lot more than people think’.

Has the body, living or dead, of any of these animals ever been obtained? The article in *The Cat* refers to three cases, one in 1980, one in 1991 and one in 2006.

The first was a puma captured near Inverness. ‘Tame and refusing to eat

anything other than cat food, the puma, later named Felicity, lived out her days at a wildlife park. She can now be seen stuffed in Inverness museum’ (*Sunday Herald*, Jan 20, 2002).

‘We get numerous calls at London Zoo reporting big cat sightings and so far all of them have proved incorrect – it usually turns out to be a large domestic cat’.

The second case was a lynx, the body of which was found by police in a Norfolk gamekeeper’s freezer when they searched his house after reports he had been killing birds of prey. The lynx, he said, had been shot while roaming near Great Witchingham-about 12 miles (19.3km) north west of Norwich.

The third case is that of a live lynx that was rescued in the back garden of a house in Golders Green, North London. London Zoo’s Head Keeper of Big Cats, Ray Charter, and a colleague, Terry March, visited the scene. Said Mr Charter, ‘We get numerous calls at London Zoo reporting big cat sightings and so far all of them have proved incorrect – it usually turns out to be a large domestic cat’.

According to an RSPCA spokesman, ‘We believe someone was keeping this animal illegally and it has escaped. We are appealing for information from anyone who might know who the owner of this cat was’. I have not found any reports that the owner *was* traced.

It seems that the most plausible explanation for the presence of these three creatures is that they escaped from their owners or were released by them. One commonly cited impetus for releasing privately owned big cats is the 1976 Dangerous Wild Animals Act which may have caused a number owners, who were unable or unwilling to comply with the conditions of the Act, to release their ‘pets’ into the wild.

In February 1994 big cat sightings were debated in the House of Commons. Responding to an adjournment debate

initiated by Keith Simpson, MP for Mid-Norfolk, Elliot Morley said that the Ministry of Agriculture was aware of 16 big cats having escaped into the wild since 1977. Of those, 14 were recaptured within 24 hours and “the vast majority if not all” of subsequent reports had been due to misidentification.’ So, having escaped they were easily re-captured. Interesting?

The Huttock Top Beast will forever remain ‘a mystery’.

Some people (like Mr Briggs above) maintain that released or escaped big cats have been breeding and colonies have been established throughout the UK. A more ambitious claim is that big cats are actually indigenous: they have always been around but they are so elusive that they are rarely captured. The most fanciful notion is that they are supernatural.

Meanwhile, back in Rossendale things have been hotting up. Following an appeal by the *Free Press* for readers to report more sightings, more sightings have been reported. An anonymous reader contacted, saying that he had seen ‘a black panther’ on the moors around Rawtenstall (around 4 miles from the previously mentioned sighting and on the

same day). The man returned with his camera to photograph paw prints in the snow and noticed ‘nine or ten carcasses of sheep’ nearby. A ‘sighting’ the day after was reported by Jacqueline Coakley in Newchurch (further towards Bacup); the creature was completely black with a long tail. What the *Free Press* calls ‘Sighting 4’ was actually the report of some dead geese in the Bacup area; ‘It can’t have been a fox because a fox wouldn’t have left anything’ declared Glynn Taylor. Kevin Heap of Bacup reported being ‘50 yards from the beast’; ‘It was definitely a puma-like cat. It was a little bit smaller than an Alsatian’. Things went quiet, then under the headline ‘Was dead fox found on the moors one of the beast’s latest victims?’ the paper reported the discovery of a freshly killed, half-eaten fox by Mick Lyons while walking on the moors above Edenfield (several miles from the first reported sighting). According to Mr Lyons, ‘I had spotted some large footprints in the snow; they were larger than anything I had seen before but I didn’t have my camera.

In the 30.05.08 issue of the paper another beast (‘a large, jet black animal’) was sighted in a field by Laura Elson and yet another (‘jet black, like a panther’) featured in the 18.07.08 issue.

This was at the location of the first reported sighting in February.

Well, it would be very interesting indeed (and quite possible) if a big cat, such as a puma were roaming around Rossendale (or anywhere else in Britain). But it would also be very interesting (and quite possible) if one wasn’t. Mr Ainsworth, who first reported a sighting, is hoping to capture footage of the creature using hi-fi infra-red cameras. I am prepared to bet that the authenticity of this animal will always remain unconfirmed and that the Huttock Top Beast will forever remain ‘a mystery’.

Sources

The stories reported in the *Rossendale Free Press* may be accessed on the newspaper’s website

[<www.rossendalefreepress.co.uk>](http://www.rossendalefreepress.co.uk)

See also:

[<http://www.zsl.org/info/media/press-releases/378,378,PR.html>](http://www.zsl.org/info/media/press-releases/378,378,PR.html)

[<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1329632/The-Beast-of-Cricklewood-is-caged.html>](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1329632/The-Beast-of-Cricklewood-is-caged.html)

[<http://www.scottishbigcats.co.uk/escapeandcaptures.htm>](http://www.scottishbigcats.co.uk/escapeandcaptures.htm)

[<http://home.cinci.rr.com/twilightwolf/black%20dog%20time.htm>](http://home.cinci.rr.com/twilightwolf/black%20dog%20time.htm)

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Comments on ‘Big Cat Sightings Again’ by Niall Taylor

Niall Taylor is a veterinary surgeon in Glastonbury and an ASKE member.

I’m not sure there’s much I can add to (Mike’s) excellent piece - and that very fact is probably the most useful fact I can add! One thing that is striking about articles and clippings on the subject is the outspoken opinions of people involved with this type of case. A couple of muddy footprints or a few dead chickens and suddenly everyone is an authority.

A vet in general practice is no better qualified than anyone else to judge whether a distant sighting in a foggy twilight is a puma or a stray dog, yet one witness following such a sighting stated

that by reason of being a vet he was able to do just that – ‘As a vet I think I can tell the difference between a puma and a dog’. Well why? He didn’t say that he was a vet who specialised in zoo animals so why should he be any better at identifying big cats than anyone else who has watched a few episodes of Big Cat Diary.

In one suspected big-cat attack a spokesperson from the abattoir that received the carcass of the animal victim stated quite categorically that there was no way it had been a dog which had made the attack. Yet, examining the

same carcass, a DEFRA vet (with presumably a similar lack of training and experience in looking forensically at wounds inflicted by big cats) stated that the attacker was most likely a large dog. On what did either party base their conclusions?

The farmer whose ducks had been attacked stated that the attacker couldn’t possibly have been a fox as a fox would have taken one duck and ripped the heads off all the others. What a strange thing to say; is there some rule book, a set of standard operating procedures perhaps that foxes are sworn to follow

when launching attacks on unsuspecting poultry? Unlikely, outside of a Roald Dahl story.

A 14-year-old boy gets a book out of the local library and suddenly he's an expert on trailing big cats. Someone claims to have seen a strange beast that looked like a cross between a Great Dane and a calf yet at the same time states it definitely wasn't a dog. Surely if it looked like a Great Dane there is at least some possibility that it could have been just that.

I have personally witnessed (see, I'm doing it now!) a large scale attack which left upwards of a dozen sheep dead and horribly disfigured and several more suffering injury and severe exhaustion. The scale and the shocking nature of the injuries almost demanded a 'larger than life' explanation. How could anything as mundane as a pet dog be guilty of such carnage? But a few words with the farmer confirmed just that: two normally very friendly, medium sized dogs, working together, overtaken by their

instinct to chase and kill, had done it all. And not a panther in sight!

**Regardless of the simple facts
however, people seem to just
love to believe in things bigger
than themselves with or
without real evidence**

It's not impossible that there are big cats living and hunting in the UK. Many of the explanations for how they came to be roaming the countryside are perfectly plausible. Animals escaped from private collections or set loose following a tightening of the Dangerous Animals Act; pet 'cats' taken on as youngsters then discarded once the novelty wears off and the play starts to get too rough; and so on. Our countryside provides good potential habitats with many isolated areas of moor and mountain, a mild climate, and plenty of wild life and small farm animals (obligingly coralled in fields and huts) to hunt. Lions live

and breed quite happily in outdoor parks such as Longleat and the lynx was once a native species.

Regardless of the simple facts however, people seem to just love to believe in things bigger than themselves with or without real evidence. It's this that is fascinating about these stories, in the same way Princess Diana couldn't possibly have been killed in something as mundane as a drunken car crash: higher powers had to be involved. Crop circles are far too exotic to have been created by a couple of cider-fuelled locals with a plank, some rope and a wicked sense of humour; surely extra-terrestrials must be at the bottom of it. The tsunami is murderous, brutal and indifferent; surely a divine power must be at work, not mere plate tectonics.

Humans: love them or loathe them, we're a funny, perverse and fascinating lot and it's that very contradiction which draws me to scepticism and keeps me coming back for more.

LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

Mark Newbrook is currently a research associate affiliated with Sheffield University. His main areas of research interest are dialectology, controversies in historical linguistics, and sceptical linguistics generally.

Minerva and the Disk

Minerva, named for the Roman goddess of wisdom (equivalent to the Greeks' Athene), is a journal of world archaeology and ancient art, widely available through the better newsagents and very much worth reading for those interested in early civilisations. It is edited by Jerome Eisenberg, and though it is un-refereed it maintains a high standard.

In the latest edition, Eisenberg himself addresses the question of the Phaistos Disk. This is a flat disk of baked clay, 16 cm in diameter, which was presented to the learned world exactly a century ago by French archaeologists digging the Minoan

palace complex at Phaistos in south-central Crete (built about 1700 BCE). It is inscribed on each side with a text apparently running from right to left and spiralling in from the rim to the centre (though some read it the other way!). There are 240 characters in all, representing 45 distinct types, some pictorial and some apparently abstract; they are divided into 61 groups by broken radial lines. Very remarkably given the early date, the signs were impressed into the clay when it was soft by means of a set of cut punches. Neither the Disk itself nor the characters resemble any other items yet discovered in the Aegean (including the undeciphered 'Linear A' documents

found at Phaistos and other Minoan sites), and both the intended use of the artefact and the interpretation of the text remain mysterious.

Most qualified scholars who have analysed the text(s) on the Disk consider (reasonably) that it is written in a syllabic script (one symbol per syllable) rather than an alphabet or a Chinese-style logographic script (one symbol per word) – but probably cannot be deciphered (too brief). However, many less qualified authors continue to advance 'decipherments', sometimes in non-linguistic terms (calendars etc) but more usually finding novel syllabic or non-syllabic writing systems—and often

languages or locales favoured by themselves for extraneous reasons.

The authorities in Crete refuse to allow thermo-luminescence analysis of the Disk, which would probably settle the matter.

Minerva is staging a centenary conference on the Disk in London in October-November 2008. I myself am to speak at this conference on some recent fringe 'decipherments' of the Disk, including that of the French Canadian writer J-L Page, whose bizarre bilingual book links his 'decipherments' of the Disk and other mysterious texts with his own version of the 'Orion' theory of the Giza Pyramids, etc. Page regards most of the Disk symbols as logographic/ideographic and pictographic, but it is not even clear which (known or reconstructed) language he thinks is represented, and he does not propose any phonological (spoken) forms at all.

Eisenberg, however, belongs to a group of scholars who have proposed that the Disk is a forgery and is only about 100 years old. His article supports this view with analysis of the possible motives of those involved in forging it and with close comparison of the forms and sequences of the symbols and those found in other ancient scripts. Eisenberg has a standing interest in the forging and faking of ancient artefacts, on which there is a considerable scholarly

literature (recall the 'Sarcophagus of James' case in 2002-03). He clearly has a case and his claims will be discussed at the conference. But he is not a linguist or epigraphist, and his views have already received trenchant criticism from these disciplines. Naturally, the French archaeological establishment will also be reluctant to accept Eisenberg's view, even though the perpetrators of any forgery are long dead. The authorities in Crete refuse to allow thermo-luminescence analysis of the Disk, which would probably settle the matter (though TL analysis has itself been challenged as a method after yielding bizarre dates in cases such as that of the mysterious and possibly 'salted' site at Glozel in France). Watch this space!

And now, the Indus Valley (non-) script

But the most major outstanding ancient epigraphic mystery involves the 'Indus Valley Script' (IVS), found on tablets in the ruins of Mohenjodaro and Harappa in Pakistan and dated around 2500-2000 BCE. The Indus Valley Civilisation, if IVS is genuinely a script, is one of the oldest literate civilisations known, and the issues go well beyond linguistics. The unidentified language represented could be Indo-European (probably early Sanskrit/pre-Sanskrit), Dravidian (the main language family of Southern India – the best known modern language in this family is Tamil) – or something else again, for there are other language families in India, and there are still other

families which could conceivably have been present; it could also be an unknown language. IVS is the subject of a vast scholarly literature but has not accepted decipherment/interpretation, although there have been over 100 'decipherments', many by fringe writers and those with cultural and political axes to grind. An authoritative decipherment would obviously be of vast interest.

However, there are many superficially script-like systems which do not in fact appear to be true scripts representing the words and structures of one or more specific languages (e.g. 'Old European', promoted by the feminist archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, and some African systems; see also above on non-linguistic readings of the Phaistos Disk). And there **have** been complex civilisations lacking written language as such, notably that of the Inca (probably; ideas are changing here!). Now, Indologists Steve Farmer, Richard Sproat and Michael Witzel have proposed that IVS is in fact a non-linguistic symbol system which was used by an elite in a multilingual situation and does not encode any particular language. They support this view with many arguments, including the total absence of long texts in IVS (the longest known text has only 17 characters, and very few have more than ten). This would make IVS unique as a true script. The fur will be flying on this one too! For Farmer et al., see <<http://www.safarmer.com/fsw2.pdf>>.

THE EUROPEAN SCENE

ASKE is a member of the European Council for Skeptical Organisations. It has an Internet Forum on which you can read comments on sceptical issues from contributors and post your own. To access this, log on to <<http://forum.ecso.org/>>.

Contact details for ECSO are:

Address: Arheilger Weg 11, 64380 Roßdorf, Germany
Tel.: +49 6154/695021
Fax: +49 6154/695022
Website: <<http://www.ecso.org/>>.

However the new website is also now up and running: <new.ecso.org> (user name, skeptiker; password, joom1a).

The 14th European Skeptics Congress, 2009, will be hosted by the Hungarian Skeptic Society in Budapest in September 2009. The ECSO website

will have updates on this but why not visit the Hungarian Skeptic Society website, which is very informative and is in English?
<<http://www.szkeptikustarsasag.hu/en/index.php>>

OF INTEREST

Victory against quackery

Chris French has circulated the following message from Ben Goldacre, Bad Science columnist of the Guardian

‘Just to let you know, I’ve today emerged rather victoriously from a million dollar libel case with a vitamin quack.

‘He’s helped kill large numbers of people with AIDS in South Africa (6 million HIV positive) by taking out full page adverts advising against AIDS drugs, and peddling his vitamin pills. His right hand man introduced Thabo Mbeki to HIV denialism. Essentially this is common or garden miracle-pill quackery transplanted out of the west and into a context where it matters. I pointed this out and he sued. Now he’s pulled out - it’s my view that he was clearly going to lose - and he’s going to have to pay our one million dollar legal bill, which is good. See:

<<http://www.badscience.net/2008/09/matthias-rath-pulls-out-forced-to-pay-the-guardians-costs-i-think-this-means-i-win/>>

‘It’s my view that this vile man deserves as much publicity as possible. It was front page of the *Guardian* today, with a double page spread inside, the leader and a comment piece, which is pretty good going, but anything you could do to spread the word would be greatly appreciated. He is fairly active in the US. The South African media will be going large over the next couple of days I think.’

The Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit at Goldsmith’s College London

Seminars are held on Tuesdays at 6:10 p.m. in Room 256, Richard Hoggart Building, Goldsmiths, University of London, New Cross, London SE14 6NW. 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>>

Email: <c.french@gold.ac.uk>.

7 Oct: Susan Blackmore

Is God a Dangerous Meme?

21 Oct: Karen Douglas

Conspiracy Beliefs: A Social Psychological Perspective

11 Nov: Kimberley A. Wade

Time to Rewrite Your Autobiography?

18 Nov : David Luke

Psychoactive Plants and Psychic People: Does Psilocybin Really Cause Psi?

9 Dec: Christine Mohr

Magical Beliefs and the Two Cerebral Hemispheres

Spring Term

20 Jan: Rupert Sheldrake

Morphic Resonance, Collective Memory and the Habits of Nature

3 Feb: Nick Pope

The Real X-Files

24 Feb: Simon Singh

Trick or Treatment? Alternative Medicine (and the Media) on Trial

3 Mar: Julian Baggini

Do Psychology and Philosophy Need Each Other?

17 Mar: Bernard Carr

Can Science Accommodate Psychic Experience?

A message from Chris French

‘The APRU is currently collecting data online for a study investigating the possible relationships between handedness, certain personality factors, anomalous experiences and paranormal belief. If you could spare around 20 minutes to complete four questionnaires relating to the above (plus a few demographic questions), we will be eternally grateful. More details and a link to the actual questionnaires can be found at:

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

‘Incidentally, thanks to all of you who wrote in with descriptions of your sleep paralysis experiences in response to a previous email appeal (any further descriptions would still be most welcome). I will reply to you individually when I return from vacation’.

The Dana Centre, the Science Museum, London

25 Nov: The nature of out-of-body experiences.

The chair for the evening will be Narendra Ramnani and the programme will be as follows:

Chris French: *Introduction to OBEs*

Henrik Ehrsson: *OBE, Illusions of Body Ownership and the Brain*

Ray Tallis: *Philosophy, Implications and Interpretations*

Skeptics in the Pub, London

Skeptics in the Pub, London, meets (usually) once every month at The Penderel's Oak, Holborn. A £2 donation is requested to cover the guest speaker's travelling expenses and sundries. All are welcome. Turn up at any time during the evening. The room is open for food and drink from about 5.30pm and talks start at 7pm.

The event was founded in 1999 for all those interested in the paranormal, alternative medicine, psychic powers, pseudo-science, UFOs, alien abductions, creationism, Fortean phenomena, cult religions, water divining, lost civilisations etc. A guest speaker is invited each month to present a topic of interest, which is followed by an informal discussion in a relaxed and friendly pub atmosphere. The UK-Skeptics forum is a good place for continuing discussions after the meeting. There is also an associated Facebook group you can join (see website):

13 Oct: Paul Taylor

Why don't creationists just shut up?

17 November: Neil Arnold

Beasts on the Loose (big-cat sightings)

Monday 8th December 2008

Chris French and Nick Pope

Skeptics versus Believers

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.

Skeptics in the Pub, Leicester

Website:

<http://leicester.skepticsinthepub.org/>

Email:

<leicesterskeptics@googlemail.com>

Facebook:

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

A message from Simon Perry:

We're now going back to a pub called 'The Park' on Hotel Street; this place will hold hundreds. The address of the new pub is:

The Park
5-9 Hotel Street
Leicester
LE1 5AW

Programme

The following presentations will begin at 7.30 pm:

21 Oct: Emma-Louise Rhodes

A Sceptical Look at Spiritualism

18 Nov: David Allen Green

The Skeptic in the Courtroom

16 Dec: Michael Heap

Authenticity and its Influence on Behaviour, Attitudes and Beliefs

20 Jan: Daniela Rudloff

Mental 'Shortcuts': Necessary Evil?

Social Skeptics

'Following feedback from a number of regulars, we're now going to hold a social meet at 7:30pm on the first Tuesday of each month in the Swan & Rushes (yes, the last venue). There won't be a speaker, topic or anything - there will just be some sceptics in a pub. Just show up any time from 7:30pm onwards and look round for people talking about woo. The first one will be on Tuesday the 2nd September.'

Sceptical reading

'There is now a 'sceptical reading' section where you can see a list of books you might be interested in. If you follow these links to Amazon and buy a book, SitP will get some commission on the sale. If you buy from Amazon anyway - please use the link as we get commission no matter what you buy. All the money goes to SitP and will be used

for funding speakers or generally promoting scepticism.'

Society for Psychological Research

Details of the forthcoming programme, maps, etc. available at:

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

Spotlight on Skeptics - Some Perspectives on Psi-Denial

The Society for Psychological Research has organised a study day under the above title. This venue is St Philip's Church, Earl's Court Road, London W8 on Saturday, 25th October 2008 from 10 am to 5 pm

Cost: Members £30; Non-members £35; Students, Over 60s or Unwaged: £2 discount. Tea, coffee and biscuits will be served, but bring your own lunch (or go to a local restaurant or pub). Advance booking is recommended, as space is limited.

The speakers for the day are as follows:

Guy Lyon Playfair

The Rise and Fall of Organised Scepticism

Robert McLuhan

The Psychology of the Skeptic: What Militant Skeptics Feel and how they Think

Rupert Sheldrake

How Skeptics Work: Some Case Studies

Chris French has been invited to comment on the presentations

The meeting is described on the website as follows: 'From the earliest days psychological researchers, some of them experienced investigators and experimenters, some with expertise in related disciplines, some just apparently honest people who have reported incidents personally witnessed by them, all have had to endure some ill-informed and hostile attacks from critics who often seem prepared to say anything, however insecurely based, to discredit findings that favour the reality of paranormal phenomena. This will be the theme addressed by our three speakers.'

'Please return a cheque for your fee as soon as possible, marking the envelope 'S.P.R. Study Day'. Receipts will not be sent, but confirmation of

receipt of your fee will be available by telephone from the SPR office. Alternatively, you may telephone the SPR office to pay with a credit card: 020-7957-8984. Advance booking is recommended, as space is limited.

'Send to: The Secretary, Society for Psychological Research, 49 Marloes Road, Kensington, London, W8 6LA'

International Conference on the Phaistos Disk

31 Oct – 1 Nov 2008 at the Society of Antiquaries of London, Burlington House, Piccadilly.

The Phaistos Disk is one of the great treasures in the Archaeological Museum in Herakleion, Crete. It is also one of the most famous unsolved mysteries in the field of archaeology. Innumerable attempts have been made to decipher the 16cm disk and its 45 different symbols, including scholarly discussions of its relationship to other ancient scripts such as Greek, Anatolian, Semitic, and even Indian, Chinese, and Polynesian. Attributions have linked it to deities in Greek mythology, the Hittites and Philistines, and Osiris and Isis in Egypt. It has been interpreted as an adventure narrative, a poetic verse, a magical curse, a board game, and even musical notes for a stringed instrument. Pseudo-archaeologists have claimed that it is a message from extraterrestrials and even a portal or 'stargate' with which a wormhole can be created to enable one to achieve teleportation to cosmic distances. However, the authenticity of this enigmatic object is now in doubt as new light is cast upon its origin, 'discovery', and symbols. At the conference those proponents of its authenticity will have the opportunity to present their latest findings and to challenge the claims of its being just a clever forgery created specifically to boost the reputation of its discoverer.

Conference website:

<www.minervamagazine.com>

E-mail:

<phaistosdiskconference@minervamagazine.com>

Fax: (44) 20 7491 1595

Nine Lessons and Carols for Godless People: A Rational Celebration of Christmas

19th Dec, 2008 at The Bloomsbury Theatre

Doors open 7pm/show 7.30pm

Stop Press: The first show (Dec 19) has already sold out its 500+ seats, but a new show has just been added on Dec 18. You can book tickets at:

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

'Last year, **Robin Ince** made the mistake of appearing on ITV's London Talking to debate 'Is Britain becoming more secular?' By the time he got to the studio, the subject had changed to 'Who is taking the Christ out of Christmas?'

'Suffice to say, he got quite cross during the barrage of lies from radio shock jocks and misinformed fundamentalists. Robin tried to make it clear that, as an atheist, he wasn't against Christmas as a time for gluttony and reflection; he was just against the journalists and manipulated fundamentalists shouting about winterval and other myths. This was beyond Stephen Green of Christian Voice's comprehension, so he kept muttering, "I don't think he does want Christmas blah blah blah".

'Well, to prove that he does enjoy this season of laziness, alcoholism and regret, he is presenting a rational celebration of the Christmas season in the guise of Nine Lessons and Carols for Godless People. Rather than talking of Jesus' birth, acclaimed science author Simon Singh will talk about the birth of the universe. Instead of talking about gold, frankincense and myrrh, Bad Science Columnist Ben Goldacre will talk of alternative medicine and

charlatans, while Josie Long will talk about the wonder of the stars.

'So far the confirmed speakers are **Stewart Lee, Phill Jupitus, Mark Thomas** (who might be bringing along his grandfather's travelling harmonium for a carol sing-a-long), **Natalie Haynes, Chris Addison, Ben Goldacre, Christina Martin, Simon Singh, Josie Long** and **Richard Dawkins**.

Music will be provided by Tim Minchin, Darren Hayman, Robyn Hitchcock, Phil Harris, Gavin Osborn, Colin Watson (aka Waen Shepherd), Jo Neary and more TBC

'The evening will also include projections of classic archive footage of **Carl Sagan** and **Richard Feynman**.

'Robin Ince will host the night.

'It's not just for agnostics and atheists. Hopefully it will be a night celebrating the wonder of the universe. So as long as you're not a crazed fundamentalist you can enjoy it. If you are a crazed fundamentalist, then please come and hold a placard up outside and shout like a halfwit'.

American Bigfoot is Monkey Suit

From Niall Taylor:

Marvellous piece following claimed discovery of the carcass of a 'Bigfoot' in the US. See:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/7571483.stm>.

According to the report suspicions were raised when Bigfoot experts found that during the thawing process the head was found to be, 'unusually hollow in one small section'. The subsequent finding that the feet were made of rubber

was the final (toe) nail in the coffin. The final conclusion - a frozen monkey suit.

Apparently phone calls to the finders are not being returned.

Makes one glad to be alive!!!

The Church of England and Charles Darwin

The last issue of the Newsletter had some harsh words to say about the leaders of the Church of England and their preposterous carryings-on over the ordination of women bishops. More recently they have adopted a commendable stance on a matter that rightly vexes the sceptical community: creationism.

Under headlines referring to an apology by the Church of England to Charles Darwin, The Rev Malcolm Brown, who heads the church's public affairs department, issued a statement to mark Darwin's bicentenary and the 150th anniversary of the seminal work *On the Origin of Species*, both of which fall next year. Brown said the Church of England should say it is sorry for misunderstanding him at the time he released his findings and 'by getting our first reaction wrong, encouraging others to misunderstand (Darwin) still'. However, the Church of England said Brown's statement reflected its position on Darwin but did not constitute 'an official apology'.

The comments are included on a Church of England website presenting Darwin's ideas:

<http://www.cofe.anglican.org/darwin>.

LOGIC AND INTUITION

The answer is as follows:

Lies, damned lies and.....

To settle the argument, all we need do is establish what percentage of white adults in Greenbank have a criminal

record and what percentage of non-whites have.

There are 500 whites in West Greenbank, of whom 120 have a criminal record. There are 900 whites in

East Greenbank, of whom 450 have a criminal record. Hence 570 of the 1,400 whites in the whole of Greenbank have a criminal record, or 41%.

There are 500 non-whites in West Greenbank, of whom 150 have a criminal record. There are 100 non-whites in East Greenbank, of whom 65 have a criminal record. Hence 215 of the 600 non-whites in the whole of Greenbank have a criminal record, or 36%.

Therefore the survey shows that a non-white adult in Greenbank, selected

at random, is *less* likely to have a criminal record than a white adult.

This strange result is an example of Simpson's paradox, named after the British statistician Edward .H. Simpson. It might help you to make sense of it if you consider that the division of Greenbank into West and East is arbitrary so far as the main conclusion of the survey is concerned.

The assessment of psychopathy

According to the author of this puzzle, you are a psychopath if you say that the woman killed her sister so that there would be another family funeral at which the mysterious man might show up again! If you thought of this answer please don't take any of this seriously.

POSTSCRIPT

Who said it?

1. All great truths begin as blasphemies.

(a) *Galileo Galilei* (c) *Charles Darwin* (b) *George Bernard Shaw*

2. Science without religion is lame; religion without science is blind.

(a) *Albert Einstein* (b) *Charles Darwin* (c) *St Augustine*

3. God is really another artist. He invented the giraffe, the elephant and the cat. He has no real style. He just goes on trying other things.

(a) *Richard Dawkins* (b) *Pablo Picasso* (c) *Camille Saint Saëns*

4. No compulsion is there in religion.

(a) *St Augustine* (b) *Galileo Galilei* (c) *The Koran*

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

ASKE, P.O. Box 5994, Ripley, DE5 3XL, UK
email: askel@talktalk.net
website: [<http://www.aske-skeptics.org.uk>](http://www.aske-skeptics.org.uk)

Who said it? Answers

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