
Skeptical Adversaria

2008, Number 4 (Winter)



The Quarterly Newsletter of The Association for Skeptical Enquiry



FROM THE ASKE CHAIRMAN

Michael Heap

Further to the establishment of a 'Skeptics in the Pub' in Leicester (see the programme of meetings on page 7 of this issue) complementing the London SitP, we now hear of plans to set up another SitP in Birmingham!

This announcement comes from Jon Donniss (jonnodonniss@yahoo.co.uk) who writes, 'We are looking at putting together a Birmingham Skeptics in the Pub to both rival and complement the London and Leicester equivalents. I would like to see if people would be interested, if anyone can help out and so on'.

I have emailed Jon to give him our support. He informs me, 'The main guy who will set it up is Mark Brady (bradym@blueyonder.co.uk), so please keep him in the loop too if possible'.

A free downloadable book for Christmas!

A message to ASKE members from Dr. G.M. Woerlee:

'Several years ago I wrote a book called *Mortal Minds*, published by Prometheus in the USA. This was a discussion of the biological basis of the near-death experience, the paranormal, out-of-body experiences, etc.

'More recently I published a book called *The Unholy Legacy of Abraham* in the UK. A revised version of this book has recently been published in the USA with a different publisher.

'This book is a study of the ways belief in religion is apparently "proven" by the functioning of the body, natural laws, and chance. It is also a study of the consequences of literal interpretation of

the holy texts of the three Abrahamic religions - Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

'I have arranged that an E-Book version of *The Unholy Legacy of Abraham* can be downloaded for free during the coming month. This may be of interest to the members of ASKE.

'This free E-Book version of *The Unholy Legacy of Abraham* can be downloaded at the address: <www.unholylegacy.woerlee.org>.'

Best wishes,

G.M. Woerlee

Edward VIII and 'The Yorkshire Yogi'

ASKE member Brian Robinson draws our attention to the following feature on <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7767919.stm>>.

'Further evidence has emerged that King Edward VIII was seeing a mystic during the abdication crisis, prompting the Archbishop of Canterbury to intervene.

'Previously undisclosed archives tell the story of a king in the grip of a man known as "The Yorkshire Yogi".'

'Dr Alexander Cannon trained as a medic, and dabbled in alternative treatments, mystic techniques and black magic.

Contents

<i>From the ASKE Chairman</i>	1
<i>Logic and Intuition</i>	3
<i>One of Us</i>	3
<i>Skeptics' Corner</i>	4
<i>From the Bookshelf</i>	4
<i>Language on the Fringe</i>	5
<i>The European Scene</i>	6
<i>Of Interest</i>	6
<i>Logic and Intuition: Answer</i>	11
<i>The ASKE Psychic Challenge</i>	11
<i>About ASKE</i>	12

'Lambeth Palace was tipped off that the King was receiving hypnotic treatment from Dr Cannon for a drink problem.'

The new archive evidence was examined by reporter Sean Stowell in BBC Radio 4's 'The Archive Hour' on 06.12.08.

Yet another ‘healer’ has been caught ‘at it’

In the Summer 2008 issue of this newsletter I recounted the story of a Mr Mervyn Wright who, in his capacity as ‘a healer’, was jailed for 5 years for indecently assaulting and raping girls and young women.

Well, it’s happened again. James Hands, 69, has been jailed for 4 years for sexually abusing women while treating them for a variety of illnesses at his home in Ottery St Mary, East Devon, over a 10-year period.

The court also heard he joked to one woman that he was “Hands by name, hands by nature” and complimented another on her legs.

According to the website <<http://www.thisisdevon.co.uk>>, ‘the former car salesman, who had been practising as a complementary medical practitioner for about 13 years, carried out sickening sexual acts on the semi-naked women for his own gratification’.

‘One “very sick lady” was touched in a very intimate manner, which Hands claimed was necessary to apply herbal medication.

‘The court also heard he joked to one woman that he was “Hands by name, hands by nature” and complimented another on her legs. To two others he boasted that in Australia, where he had

trained as a healer, the “confident” women would happily receive treatment while naked.’

As well as receiving a prison sentence, Hands was placed on the Sex Offender Register and banned for life from practising as a complementary therapist.

Aging theory a myth?

‘The notion that antioxidant supplements such as vitamins C and E could slow ageing has been dealt a blow by a scientific study¹ showing that the theory behind the advice is wrong’ writes James Randerson, science correspondent of the *Guardian* (01.12.08). He continues, ‘Antioxidants have long been peddled as preventative pills that have the ability to slow ageing and protect against diseases such as cancer. But the research has shown that the proposed molecular mechanism behind how they are supposed to work is false ...

The dominant theory about how ageing happens ... blames glitches in cells caused by the damaging by-products of our metabolism. As cells break down sugars to release energy they also unleash reactive forms of oxygen such as superoxide. These supposedly cause the damage that is the hallmark of ageing’.

A team from University College London found that Nematode worms given enhanced antioxidant powers to deal with tissue damaging ‘free radicals’ did not live any longer. Dr David Gems, a member of the research team, has

concluded that ‘trying to boost your antioxidant levels is very unlikely to have any effect on ageing. You can drastically change the natural defence levels and there’s just no effect on ageing’. He added that molecular damage was probably caused by numerous different chemicals within the cell.

The study implies that claims that ‘antioxidant’ diets and creams have anti-aging benefits may be groundless.

The study implies that claims that ‘antioxidant’ diets and creams have anti-aging benefits may be groundless.

Also, according to Mr Randerson, ‘Gems’s findings coincide with a recent US study on the effectiveness of antioxidants against cancer. The clinical trial on nearly 15,000 men tested whether vitamin C and E supplements were effective against the disease. After following the subjects for several years, researchers found no statistical difference in the number of cancers between the groups taking the vitamins and those on placebos’.

¹Doonan, R. et al. (2008) Against the oxidative damage theory of aging: Superoxide dismutases protect against oxidative stress but have little or no effect on life span in *Caenorhabditis elegans*. *Genes and Development*, **22**, 3236-3241.

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

An oft-quoted law of economics is that there is no such thing as a free lunch. But this puzzle appears to defy this.

Who's paying for Sally McGregor's toffees?

The year is 2015 and Scotland is gradually breaking away from the United Kingdom and establishing its independence.

The UK Parliament has announced that from now on, the Scottish pound will only be worth 90p in the rest of the UK. In retaliation the Scottish Parliament has decreed that the UK

pound will only be worth 90p in Scotland.

Sally McGregor lives in a village just within the Scottish border. Every week she buys a £1 bag of toffees. One week she buys her toffees from the shop on her side of the border. She pays for them with a Scottish £10 note and accepts as change a UK £10 note (worth only 9 Scottish pounds in Scotland). A week later she pops over the border with her UK £10 note and uses it to buy another £1 bag of toffees, accepting as change a

Scottish £10 note (worth only £9 in England). She carries on doing this indefinitely.

So, Sally is paying £1 for her toffees each time and the shopkeepers on both sides of the border are receiving £1 each time. Yet Sally always keeps her £10!

So, who's paying for Sally McGregor's toffees?

See page 11 for the answer.

ONE OF US

The Home Office got into trouble recently over its press release on statistics on knife crime, 6 months after launching its £5M anti-knife crime initiative in 10 police force.

The announcement claimed that the Tackling Knives Action Programme was already having a big impact, with fewer knife wound injuries and fewer young people carrying knives. It stated that hospital admissions were 27% lower for assault by a sharp object (including knives) for July to September 2008 in the areas targeted compared to the same period in 2007.

The press itself has an inglorious record when it comes to interpreting statistical information on behalf of its readers.

The press release incurred the wrath of the aptly surnamed Sir Michael Scholar, head of the UK Statistics Authority, which oversees the Office for National Statistics. According to Sir Michael, 'These statistics were not due for publication for some time, and had not therefore been through the regular process of checking and quality

assurance'. They may not be wrong but they may not be reliable.

The press release also boasts of 17% fewer serious knife crimes against young people in October 2008 than in June 2008 in the 10 areas targeted. This in fact represents a mere drop of 17 recorded offences from 98 to 81 and could therefore be a random fluctuation.

The media, including the national press, were rightly critical of the Home Office, and the minister in charge, Jacqui Smith, was forced into an apology.

Yet the press itself has an inglorious record when it comes to interpreting statistical information on behalf of its readers. Ben Goldacre provides us with telling examples of this in his book *Bad Science* (London: Fourth Estate, 2008).

Unfortunately, self-criticism (i.e. criticism of the press by the press) is not a virtue that is often practised by reporters and columnists. There are, however, some courageous exponents, Dr Goldacre in his *Guardian* column 'Bad Science' being one of them. Readers need no reminding that he is most definitely 'One of Us'. So on this

occasion let us present the esteemed award of being 'One of Us' to a columnist from a rival newspaper, the *Times*.

Step forward Mr Tom Whipple! Mr Whipple pens a weekly column in the *Times* entitled 'Bad Statistics' in which he regularly exposes the fallacies behind the interpretation of statistical data, often by fellow newspaper writers.

'A newspaper's relationship to trends is much like a crank clairvoyant's relationship to ghosts. Any rattle or shake is grasped as proof, any conflicting evidence as argument that we're not looking hard enough.'

On 12.12.08 Mr Whipple starts his piece with the memorable declaration 'A newspaper's relationship to trends is much like a crank clairvoyant's relationship to ghosts. Any rattle or shake is grasped as proof, any conflicting evidence as argument that

we're not looking hard enough. But, in their more reflective moments, psychics and newspapers alike probably suspect that it is all nonsense.' Well said!

Mr Whipple then proceeds to dissect recent reports in the Telegraph newspapers that 'As we face the most frugal Christmas for years, churches are witnessing a steady rise in attendance.' And 'Thousands of people are turning to religion during the recession, the reasons for which may be 'A belief in the value of frugality, modesty and charity. An appreciation of the role of the

family. Even a dislike of vulgarity, perhaps.'

The initial evidence cited for this trend was a straw poll by the *Sunday Telegraph* revealing that 'church attendance was up last Sunday, the first of Advent'. The following day, the *Daily Telegraph* reported that '*Back to Church Sunday*, an annual service in September, when church members invite a friend, attracted 37,000 new congregants this year, almost twice the number in 2007.'

Wow! Except that, as Mr Whipple points out, '*Back to Church Sunday* has

been going for just 4 years, and in each of those years more churches have joined the programme. So what would be surprising would be if, in a year when the scheme was still growing, the scheme didn't grow. And still no one has explained what any of this has got to do with the credit crunch'.

Readers are invited to send their bad statistics to <badstats@thetimes.co.uk>.

SKEPTICS' CORNER

It's very useful to have feedback from new members when they receive their copies of the ASKE newsletter and the *Intelligencer*. Below are the 'somewhat spur of the moment' thoughts of new ASKE member Ed Buckner.

Hi, good to hear from you. I read all the material you sent with interest. Scepticism and atheism seem to go together don't they? Yet if you look carefully at the history of science from the 11th to the 16th century, a lot of the progress was driven by people in the Church. The reasons for this are very complex and still not well understood. My view is that a 'higher superstition' can drive out 'lower superstitions', much more effectively than scientists

can because (a) the truth is often banal, subtle and complex, whereas the higher superstition is mysterious and interesting and (b) the higher superstition is much harder on the lower superstition by punishing it with burning, excommunication and so on. And since the higher superstition requires only a handful of strange beliefs, science can carry on as normal. The main problem with the Church in late medieval Europe was not the superstition, but Aristotle,

whose view of logic and science was fine in many parts, but terrible in others, and the exaggerated reverence that the medieval philosopher-theologian-scientists held in him went on far too long.

In many areas, after the collapse of scholasticism there was no progress at all until the 19th century. It is possible that, with the demise of organised religion, we are a more superstitious society than 100 years ago.

FROM THE BOOKSHELF

Barbara Melville

'Death from the Skies!!!: These are the Ways the World Will End' by Philip Plait. Published by Viking (the Penguin Group, USA) in 2008. ISBN-13: 978-0670019977.

The universe boasts many opportunities for death, highlighted by erroneous and sometimes outright sensationalist press. What's the truth about this hostile universe? Asteroids, black holes, supernovae and gamma-ray bursts are a few of the candidates up for scrutiny in Philip Plait's *Death from the Skies!*. Each chapter tells the tale of how a possible threat might succeed, such as what would happen if a black hole

swallowed up the Earth. This is the uncomfortable part. Then, we sigh in relief as the likelihood of these occurrences is revealed. The upshot is we don't need to be too concerned. At least not until the inevitable, if far off, demise of the Sun.

Death from the Skies! is unsettling without falling victim to hyperbole, complementing the possible dramas with a healthy helping of the facts. This book

is not, however, a quick showcase of events. Each threat is explored fully and presented in easy-to-read language, with references to interesting pieces of research. There is also a reassuring list of statistics at the back of the book. You don't just learn that an asteroid hitting the Earth would be rather unfortunate. You already knew that. But did you know what asteroids are made of, why *Armageddon* got it so horribly wrong

and what we could actually do to prevent one from hitting us?

Plait is president of the *James Randi Educational Foundation*, author of *Bad Astronomy*, and a seasoned astronomy blogger. His passion and concern really come across: while he's happy to embrace that the hostilities in the universe are compelling, he doesn't want people to worry, and this overall message is perhaps what makes the book

so engaging. The subject matter of *Death from the Skies!* gives it more of a page-turning quality than his previous book *Bad Astronomy*. (I consider both to be good books; I just feel *Bad Astronomy* is more of a reference to dip into when required.)

Who would enjoy this book? While it will almost certainly attract those who follow his other writings, I'd imagine the appeal is far wider, encompassing

beginners and enthusiasts alike. I could also name a few journalists and filmmakers who could benefit from reading a copy. The good news for those dipping their toe in is that it's light-hearted and no prior knowledge of astronomy is assumed. For those new to scepticism, this book will hopefully cultivate interest in both astronomy and critical thinking.

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.

Babytalk!

Linguists differ as to the degree to which we humans are 'hard-wired' for language. Read a Chomskyan text and you'll find the view that we are conceived with a huge, rigid and very largely species-uniform raft of general principles and constraints. Individual languages are merely built on these foundations, and even unrelated languages cannot differ structurally as much as one might expect or as much as they may superficially appear to differ. Read the British linguist Geoff Sampson for the contrary idea that we acquire languages through our general analytical intelligence and that they can vary within considerably wider limits.

The acquisition of specific languages, naturally, occurs mainly some time after birth. For instance, much of babies' linguistic behavior is not tied to the specific languages used around them, notably in the 'babbling' stage where they try out a wide range of sounds, some found only in languages which they will never hear used. And infants brought up bilingually take some time to realise that two distinct systems are involved. On the other hand, there is now empirical evidence that as neonates and even in the womb we can already distinguish between different phonemes

produced by our mothers and by others talking within earshot.

There are also 'psychics' who sidestep the evidence involving actual speech and assert that they can communicate telepathically with babies.

Fringe 'linguists' go well beyond this. For instance, David Oates, the promoter of 'Reverse Speech', holds that infants learn to construct sentences which construe and are meaningful **backwards** even at an age when they cannot yet do this in forward speech! As Jane Curtain and I (and other researchers) have found, the evidence for RS generally is highly dubious, to say the least – and 'infant RS' is one of the **most** suspect aspects of the theory! The reversals 'found' by Oates in infant speech have not been phonetically verified, and they often involve spatial and other concepts which young children have clearly not yet acquired. (Of course, even the early **forward** speech of infants is often over-interpreted by doting parents!)

There are also 'psychics' who sidestep the evidence involving actual

speech and assert that they can communicate **telepathically** with babies. Sceptical psychologists Chris French and Krissy Wilson tested the 'powers' of one such in 2007; he also took on the James Randi Challenge (*see Note 1*). In both cases he failed miserably. (In future instalments I'll talk about other issues of this kind, involving (a) people who cannot communicate unaided and (b) intelligent non-human animals such as African grey parrots.)

The Chinese non-discovery of the world in the 15th Century

Many readers will be aware of Gavin Menzies' books *1421* and *1434*, in which he argues for the view that Chinese navigators led by the famous admiral Zheng He explored as far as Australasia and even the Americas in that period. Some Chinese scholars and even the Beijing government have embraced his ideas out of nationalistic fervour; but the evidence for all this is by no means as strong as Menzies claims. His use of linguistic data, in particular, is flawed in the same way as that of most other amateur enthusiasts (non-standard etymologies based on the equation of unsystematically and superficially similar words in Chinese and far-flung languages). Even on

simple linguistic facts, Menzies is often astray, relying on unqualified sources. For instance, he writes that Malayalam is a 'dead' language: it is in fact spoken today by tens of millions in Kerala in southern India and in a substantial diaspora.

Like many other thinkers of this kind, Menzies is not really interested in scholarly criticism.

Like many other thinkers of this kind, Menzies is not really interested in scholarly criticism. He says in correspondence: 'I would be prepared to answer questions but am not prepared to answer the critics, because I think they are activated by malice, need psychiatric help and are extremely ignorant about the language and history of China ... We have an old saying "don't wrestle with chimney sweepers nor [argue] with lunatics"...'! Some might apply this

saying to his own views; but I did ask him some questions about the evidence for his claims about language matters. He pointedly failed to respond.

Mayan doomsday imminent?

Many non-mainstream thinkers are currently focusing on the now familiar fact that the 5000-year Mayan 'Long Count' reaches an end-point in December 2012. In a recent book, Daniel Pinchbeck presents an unusually complex case for the genuine significance of this crisis. He follows the eccentric José Arguelles, and argues that Mayan ideas about the upcoming changes coincide not only with similar traditions in other, supposedly unrelated, cultures but also, dramatically, with modern scientific notions. Humanity, he says, should modify its world-view so as to be ready for these changes and to move into a radically different future, embracing ecological imperatives (no?!) and accepting overtly spiritual aspects of existence.

Predictably, Pinchbeck's presentation is often fatally one-sided. He simply accepts the reality of spiritual entities and paranormal phenomena; and he displays exaggerated respect for 'deep ecological' thinking, for traditional myths and for earlier fringe writers. It seems highly unlikely that a major crisis specifically centred on December 2012 really looms!

Update on the Phaistos Disk!

The recent conference in London was a success. We are urging the Greek authorities to allow thermoluminescence dating of the Disk, and if this occurs we are to gather again in Crete in 2010 to discuss the outcome. Watch this space!

Note

1. See:

<<http://badpsychics.com/thefraudfiles/modules/news/article.php?storyid=860>>

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

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>> or
email: <c.french@gold.ac.uk>.

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?

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):

17 Jan, (4.00p.m. onwards): Special meeting, no speaker

Ten years of London Skeptics in the Pub

19 Jan: Rebecca Watson

Women's intuition and other fairytales

16 Feb: Nick Davies

Bad news: What's wrong with the media

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:

20 Jan: Daniela Rudloff

Mental 'shortcuts': Necessary evil?

17 Feb: Madsen Pirie

Unfair trade?

17 Mar: Cara Laney

Are 'recovered' memories authentic?

21 Apr: Kevin Byron

Science and uncommon sense

19 May: Stephen Law

Empirical evidence against the god hypothesis

16 Jun Richard Wilson

'45 Minutes from attack!': WMD and other state-sponsored conspiracy theories

21 Jul: Richard Wiseman

Investigating the impossible: A skeptical approach

20 Oct: Nick Davies

Bad news: What's wrong with the media.

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.'

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.'

Centre for Inquiry London

The Centre for Inquiry London now has a website: <<http://cfilondon.org>>. The following events have been announced:

17 Jan 2009: Weird Science

21 Mar 2009: God in the Lab

25 Apr 2009: Science and Religion

Full details below.

Legal Note: CFI reserves the right to change or cancel events without notice.

Weird Science

A day exploring the science of the weird, and weird and flaky science with Ben Goldacre, Richard Wiseman, Chris French and Stephen Law.

Date: Saturday, 17th January 2009. 10.30am-4pm.

Venue: Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London, WC1R 4RL

Fee: £10 (£5 for students and members of SPES, GLHA, BHA and New Humanist subscribers).

To book tickets, send a cheque payable to 'Centre for Inquiry London' to: Executive Director Suresh Lalvani, Centre for Inquiry London at the above address. Alternatively, payment can be made by PAYPAL. Use the 'become a friend' link at <www.cfilondon.org> and follow the instructions.

11-12a.m. Richard Wiseman

Investigating the impossible: A skeptical approach.

For over 20 years, psychologist Richard Wiseman has delved deep into the mysterious world of the paranormal, carrying out high profile, and often controversial, investigations into the impossible. In this talk, Wiseman describes some of his more colourful adventures, presenting a scientific look at a range of seemingly paranormal phenomenon, including fire-walking, ghostly encounters, and ESP.

12a.m.-1p.m. Chris French

Eight years of weird science at Goldsmiths.

The Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit (APRU) was set up by

Professor Chris French in 2000 in the Department of Psychology at Goldsmiths. Anomalistic psychology may be defined as the study of extraordinary phenomena of behaviour and experience, including (but not restricted to) those that are often labelled 'paranormal'. Over the last eight years, members of the APRU have investigated a wide range of weird and wonderful topics, including alien contact experiences, sleep paralysis, haunted houses, dowsing, and telepathy. This overview will present the results of such investigations - and also reveal why Uri Geller cannot stand Richard Wiseman!

2-3p.m. Stephen Law

Is creationism scientific?

Polls consistently indicate about 100 million Americans believe the entire universe is six thousand years old and that all species were created as described by Genesis. Even more amazingly, many of these people also believe that this theory is consistent with the scientific evidence. Indeed, there are multi-million dollar research centres in the U.S. run by PhD-qualified staff, that aim to defend young-Earth creationism. How have so many people become so deluded about what is, and isn't, good science? What are the basic confusions? Stephen Law illustrates with his own pet theory - that dogs are spies from the planet Venus.

Stephen Law is Provost of CFI London, Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at Heythrop College, University of London, and author of philosophy books including 'The War For Children's Minds' (about faith schools), 'The Philosophy Files' (for children 12+) and 'The Philosophy Gym' (which includes dialogues such as 'The Strange Case of The Rational Dentist' and 'What's Wrong With Gay Sex?').

3-4p.m. Ben Goldacre

Listen up flakes: Science is seriously so much more interesting than anything you can make up with your woolly new age claptrap.

Ben Goldacre is a writer, broadcaster and medical doctor from the UK who is best known for his 'Bad Science' column in *The Guardian* newspaper,

examining the claims of scaremongering journalists, quack health products, pseudoscientific cosmetics adverts, and evil multinational pharmaceutical corporations, as well as wider themes such as the medicalisation of everyday life and the psychology of irrational beliefs.

God in the Lab

A day with leading scientific researchers into faith, looking at hearing voices, possession, the effect of faith on pain perception, etc. What goes on in the brain of someone hearing voices? Come and see the MRI scans. Is religious belief hard-wired into us? Yes, says one of our speakers, and provides empirical evidence. With Emma Cohen, Mike Jackson, Justin Barrett and Miguel Farias. Organized by CFI London Provost: Stephen Law:-

<think@royalinstitutephilosophy.org>

Date: Saturday, 21st March, 10.30am-4pm.

Venue: Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL

Fee: £10 (£5 for students)

To book, send a cheque payable to 'Centre for Inquiry London' to: Executive Director Suresh Lalvani, Centre for Inquiry London, at the above address. Alternatively pay by PAYPAL. Use the 'Support CFI UK' link at <www.cfilondon.org> and follow the instructions.

11-12a.m. Emma Cohen

Emma Cohen is an anthropologist at the University Of Oxford who is looking at possession and other examples of beliefs that depend upon mind-body dualistic assumptions, such as beliefs in a soul and in an after-life.

12-1p.m. Mike Jackson

Mike Jackson will be presenting some interesting recent fMRI scan results on people hearing benign spiritual voices. He has a lot of relevant clinical case material and a general theory of these phenomena, and their relationship with psychopathology, which he'll be sharing with us.

2-3p.m. Justin Barrett

Born believers: The naturalness of childhood theism.

Recent best-selling books may give the impression that children only believe in gods because of a combination of possessing a tragically gullible mental *tabula rasa* and abusive indoctrination practices. Nonsense! Recent scientific study of children's conceptual structures reveals that children's minds are naturally receptive to god concepts. In this presentation, relevant scientific evidence is presented. Children are 'born believers' in the sense that under normal developmental conditions they almost inevitably entertain beliefs in gods.

Justin Barrett is Senior Researcher, Acting Director, Centre for Anthropology & Mind, and Lecturer, Institute of Cognitive & Evolutionary Anthropology, University of Oxford.

3-4p.m. Miguel Farias

The strength of belief: Neuroimaging of religious-based analgesia.

Religious lore is full of stories of physical pain withstood and vanquished through the power of religious belief. However, until recently there was very little scientific evidence of religion helping in the alleviation of pain, and what could be the neural and psychological processes involved. In my talk, I will describe an experiment where we showed for the first time how religious belief may have an analgesic effect and help people deal better with pain.

Miguel Farias is a researcher at the Ian Ramsey Centre and assistant director of the MSc in Psychological Research, at Oxford University. For his doctorate, he studied the psychological characteristics of people engaged in New Age spirituality. After that, he joined forces with neuroscientists and philosophers at the Oxford Centre for Science of the Mind to unravel what happens in the minds and brains of religious believers when they are subjected to pain.

Science And Religion

A day exploring the relationship between science and religion with Simon Singh, Mary Warnock, Jack Cohen and Stephen Law

Date: Saturday, 25th April, 10.30 a.m.-4 p.m.

Venue: Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London, WC1R 4RL

Fee: £10 (£5 for students)

To book tickets, send a cheque payable to 'Centre for Inquiry London' to: Executive Director Suresh Lalvani, Centre for Inquiry London' at the above address. Alternatively payment can be made by PAYPAL. Use the 'become a friend' link at <www.cfilondon.org> and follow the instructions.

10.30a.m. Registration

11-12a.m. Jack Cohen

Why I believe in evolution - or in Omphalos!

The evidence for evolution converges from at least three directions: from the fossils, from the DNA sequences, and from contemporary examples (Darwin's finches, African cichlids, bacterial and insect resistance). 'Creationism' and 'Intelligent Design' are out because they don't explain, they haven't the Authority, and Grand Canyon/Flood ideas are simply absurd. But there are other choices, particularly if you Believe: the Plymouth Brother Philip Gosse wrote 'Omphalos' a few years before Darwin's 'Origin...' (his son Edmund wrote 'Father and Son'). The problem is that the rock column is genuinely and persuasively ancient, while the Bible insists on some thousands of years of history. God made Adam mature, with a navel (omphalos) and that's the clue... It's such a pretty idea, and makes so much more sense than the standard Creationist's story! If only there were a God, that's how It would've done it!

Jack Cohen is an internationally known reproductive biologist, who consulted for test-tube-baby and other infertility laboratories, and has worked in Assisted Conception Units. He was reproductive biologist in the Zoology Dept at Birmingham University for thirty years, later in Warwick Maths Institute for five where he was an Honorary Professor. His last position, at Warwick University, bridged the Ecosystems Unit of the Biology Dept and the Mathematics Institute, and his

brief included bringing more science to more public awareness – which he still attempts.

12-1p.m. Simon Singh

Big Bang: The gospel according to Monsignor Georges Lemaître.

Simon Singh, author of best-selling scientific and mathematical books including 'Big Bang', 'Fermat's Last Theorem' and 'Trick or Treatment?: Alternative Medicine on Trial', will talk about the Big Bang model and how science develops its theories. He will also explain how the concept of the Big Bang was initially developed by George Lemaître, who successfully combined his careers as a cosmologist and a priest.

2-3p.m. Stephen Law

Empirical evidence against the God hypothesis.

Stephen Law will look at what appears to be powerful empirical evidence against the existence of the Judeo-Christian God, and at how the faithful respond to that evidence. (See 'Weird Science' above for his biography.)

3-4p.m. Mary Warnock

Religion as humanism.

Baroness Mary Warnock is one of the Britain's leading public figures. She is perhaps best known for her recently expressed views on assisted suicide, and her role in the production of the Warnock report, an inquiry into human fertilisation by the Committee of Inquiry into Human Fertilisation and Embryology, which she chaired.

Center for Inquiry

12th World Congress: Science, Public Policy, and the Planetary Community

April 9-12, 2009, Bethesda, MD, Hyatt Hotel (just outside of Washington, DC) According to the congress homepage - (www.centerforinquiry.net/worldcongress) -

'2009 marks the bicentennial of both Charles Darwin's and Abraham Lincoln's birth and the 150th anniversary of the publication of *On the Origin of Species*. There can be no more fitting opportunity to discuss and consider the appropriate relationship between science and public policy.

Please join us as scientists and scholars from around the world analyze the role of science, explain how it works, explore its connection to public policy, and examine its significance for the global community.

'Speakers already confirmed include NASA climatologist Drew Shindell, Roger Bonnet from the International Space Science Institute, author and social critic Christopher Hitchens, acknowledged authority on evolutionary biology Michael Ruse, skeptical investigators James Randi and Joe Nickell, renowned psychologist Elizabeth Loftus, (*and renowned psychologist Richard Wiseman – Ed.*) and many others.

'Discounts for CFI Friends of the Center. Join today!'

<www.centerforinquiry.net/support>

Sense about Science

From the SAS team: Alice, Ellen, James, Leonor and Tracey
Dear All,

It's that time of the year when we're all in a panic that Christmas is in 20 days and we still haven't thought about Christmas shopping. Well, Sense about Science is here to help! (No, we're not volunteering to go out and do all your shopping before you start thinking of sending us long lists.) We have put together, with the help of some of our supporters and friends, a Christmas list of recommendations. There are a lot of great books on there but also things you might not have thought about; ever considered getting someone membership of the Cloud Appreciation Society? Or a CD of rainfall?

And you don't even have to brave the shops. From the comfort of your own home you can go to

<www.senseaboutscience.org.uk/index.php/site/other/273/>

browse the recommendations and pick the perfect gift for your troublesome aunt Anna, complicated cousin Colin, or favourite friend Fred. Then go to Amazon.co.uk and voila! Christmas shopping completed. And you will be making two gifts in one, as whatever you buy through Amazon we get 5% of

that amount, as long as you go to Amazon via the link on our website. To make sure that no-one can miss this, I made sure to put the link all the way down the right-hand side of the website, between Christmassy pictures to set the theme.

Of course Christmas isn't all about presents, it's also an opportunity to embarrass one of the Sense About Science team by making them dress up. Last year Japanese tourists enjoyed the spectacle of Alice dressed up as an elf in front of Eros in Piccadilly Circus. To choose your staff member this year simply make a small donation via our website at

<<http://www.senseaboutscience.org.uk/index.php/site/about/9/>>

and email James at

<jemmanuel@senseaboutscience.org>

to tell him which member of staff you would like to see dressed up. The person with the most votes will be snapped and star on our website as proof of compliance. Place your vote now!

It also a chance to say a big thank you for all your support over the past year and we really look forward to working with you all in the coming year.

Merry Christmas!

Dr Leonor Sierra

Scientific Liaison

Sense About Science

25 Shaftesbury Avenue

London W1D 7EG

Registered Charity No. 1101114

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7478 4380

<www.senseaboutscience.org>

P.S. Sense About Science is a small charity promoting evidence and good science for the public. We depend on donations, large and small, from people who support our work. You can donate, or find out more, at:

<www.senseaboutscience.org/donate>.

'I've got nothing to lose by trying it': Weighing up claims about cures and treatments for long-term conditions

This is a guide, published by Sense About Science with the Multiple Sclerosis Society, Motor Neurone Disease Association, Alzheimer's Society and Parkinson's Disease Society. It explains how to tell the beneficial from the bogus in the face of the miracle cure stories, new wonder-drugs and breakthrough therapies that are increasingly promoted. The guide can be downloaded from the Sense about Science website:

<<http://www.senseaboutscience.org.uk/index.php/site/project/267>>.

Society for Psychological Research

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

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

From the British False Memory Society

The latest BFMS newsletter, Volume 16, No. 2, is now available on our website and can be accessed by clicking on the following link:-

<http://www.bfms.org.uk/Text_Assets/2008%20November%20Newsletter.pdf>.

In this issue we are fortunate to have articles by two of our Advisory Board members. The first by Dr Kimberly Wade with Dr Cara Laney is entitled 'Time to rewrite your autobiography?'. We also offer you the chance to get to grips with the fascinating subject of sleep paralysis with extracts from 'What is Sleep Paralysis?' written by Professor Chris French and colleagues.

As always we welcome your feedback. If you have any comments or contributions to make regarding the newsletter please email us.

Regards

Donna Kelly, Administrator

BFMS

Bradford on Avon

Wiltshire BA15 1NF

Tel: 01225 868682

Three websites of interest

Little Atoms is the official podcast of *The Skeptic* (UK). The following is from to the Home page:

<<http://www.littleatoms.com/home.htm>>

'Little Atoms is produced and presented by Neil Denny, Padraig Reidy and Anthony Burn and broadcast every Friday from 19:00 to 19:30 GMT on Resonance 104.4FM. Little Atoms is a live talk show about ideas. Each show features a guest from the worlds of science, journalism, politics, academia, human rights or the arts in conversation. If the show has a dominant and recurring theme, then it coalesces around the ideas of the Enlightenment, by which we mean freedom of expression, free inquiry, empirical rationalism, scepticism, the scientific method, secular humanism and liberal democracy. These ideas find their antithesis in superstition, religious fundamentalism, fanaticism, medievalism, totalitarianism, censorship and conspiracy theory. Our guests bring ideas that are challenging, sometimes controversial, often polemical, but always interesting.'

The website provides a lengthy list of other websites of interest to sceptics. This includes 'Quackometer', dedicated to exposing quack medical claims:

<<http://www.quackometer.net/>>.

The lack of feminine representation in scepticism is something to be concerned about. A website dedicated to this is therefore to be welcomed, namely <<http://skeptchick.org/blog/>>.

LOGIC AND INTUITION

The answer is as follows:

Since the solution to this puzzle is beyond my expertise I consulted my friend Mike Pilling, a chartered accountant with a degree in Economics. He has this to say:

‘On the basis of the exchange rates set out in the example, should they remain in force, Sally McGregor will be a toffee billionaire in a matter of weeks. However, the answer lies in the fact that exchange rates are set by market forces not politicians. It is a conceit of politicians that they can ‘set’ exchange rates without regard to market forces. In the example, south of the border the politicians have made the arbitrary

decision that 100 SP (Scots pence) be worth only 90 UKP (UK pence). In retaliation the kilted ones decide that 100 UKP should be worth only 90 SP. This means that in the land of haggis neeps and tatties you can exchange 100SP for 111 UKP (approximately).

‘Forget Sally McGregor. Within minutes every entrepreneur on each side of the border will be rushing to buy SP for 90 UKP south of the border, nipping across to the nearest bank in Gretna Green and exchanging their SP for UKP at 111. Thus 90 UKP becomes 111 UKP each time the border is crossed.

‘The problem is, for every buyer, there must be a seller, and it will only be a matter of minutes before the market starts to correct. At the end of the day, the effective exchange rate is set by the demand and supply of the national currencies. If governments attempt to ‘fix’ exchange rates the usual result is a two-tier system, with most commercial transactions taking place at an ‘unofficial’ free market rate.

‘It’s been a while since I’ve dabbled in economics, but I hope that sounds convincing!’

THE ASKE PSYCHIC CHALLENGE

Tony Youens

For some time now ASKE has, in one form or another, offered a cash prize to any psychic who can demonstrate under proper observing conditions his or her claimed powers.

It perhaps comes as no surprise to sceptics that very few have stepped up to the plate and those that have always try to argue for less stringent controls. Others just don’t seem able to follow simple instructions such as clearly stating what they can do, under what conditions, and with what degree of accuracy.

The prize money currently stands at £14,000 and whilst you might think that in these times of financial austerity such an amount would prove tempting it seems psychics can cheerfully ignore it. There are probably at least two reasons for this,

- (i) They are unaware of its existence, and
- (ii) They can easily make this kind of money from their endless supply of willing customers.

Therefore in order to make this work we need a bigger reward combined with greater publicity and the first step is to increase the amount of money pledged.

Amounts of between £500 or £1,000 seem popular (of course any multi-millionaires reading this might care to contribute the odd million). To be clear ‘pledgers’ are not required to send in money, just sign a pledge stating the amount they are prepared to put up. The only time you would have to part with your cash is when someone actually wins, i.e. successfully demonstrates a paranormal power. For most sceptics the odds of this happening are considerably less than the Pope winning the 100m hurdles at the 2012 Olympics.

Step 2, which is in part dependent on step 1, is to increase the publicity; but if successful we find another problem arises. In order to test claimants we need members who are willing to help design and carry out the tests. Certain claims, e.g. telepathy between two people., will need more than one person. Again those taking part will not be expected to part with their own money. Rule 6 makes this clear:

‘All of the applicant’s expenses - transportation, accommodation, materials, assistants, and/or all other costs for any persons or procedures incurred in pursuit of the reward - are the sole responsibility of the applicant. ASKE will not bear any of the costs.’

Ideally we should form a ‘challenge committee’ who can administer any test and make sure protocols are correctly followed.

It’s time for ASKE to revitalise this challenge by offering a truly eye-watering reward and having a proper structure in order to carry out the testing. A very large reward is more likely to draw media attention, which in turn might make more people question psychic claims.

Any interested members should contact me at <tony@tonyyouens.com>.

POSTSCRIPT

Who said it?

1. 'All professions are conspiracies against the laity.'
(a) *Mark Twain* (b) *Adam Smith* (c) *George Bernard Shaw*
2. 'Every political movement ultimately expires from an excess of its own principles.'
(a) *Thomas Macaulay* (b) *Richard Nixon* (c) *Mikhail Gorbachev*
3. 'I have come to the conclusion that politics are too serious a matter to be left to the politicians.'
(a) *Charles de Gaulle* (b) *Dwight D. Eisenhower* (c) *Idi Amin*

Of whom was it said?

'It costs a lot of money to keep that man in poverty.'

What is it?

'(Its whole aim) is to keep the populace alarmed -- and hence clamorous to be led to safety -- by menacing it with an endless series of hobgoblins, all of them imaginary.'

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: aske1@talktalk.net
website: <<http://www.aske-skeptics.org.uk>>

Answers

Who said it?

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

Of whom was it said?

Mahatma Gandhi (attributed variously to Sarojini Naidu, Louis Mountbatten, Winston Churchill, et al.)

What is it?

Practical politics: H.L. Mencken