

# THE SKEPTICAL INTELLIGENCER

The Quarterly Magazine of ASKE  
THE ASSOCIATION FOR SKEPTICAL ENQUIRY  
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*Incorporating the Skeptical Adversaria: the ASKE Newsletter*

*Edited by Michael Heap*

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### Editor's Announcement

ASKE's *Skeptical Intelligencer* is widely circulated electronically to skeptical groups and individuals across the globe. Formal and informal articles of interest to skeptics are welcome from people of all disciplines and backgrounds. Details about house style are available from the Editor. We also welcome writers who would like to contribute a regular column - e.g. an 'On the Fringe' feature. In addition, all members of ASKE are welcome to make announcements, post requests, and advertise their services in the *Skeptical Intelligencer* and on the ASKE website free of any charge.



## FROM THE ASKE CHAIR

### Michael Heap

#### The many Rs of criminal justice

Controversial decisions made by the England & Wales Parole Board frequently make headline news. Recently, Colin Pitchfork, who raped and murdered two schoolgirls in the 1980s, has now been released under licence, despite the considerable distress experienced by the families of his victims and a call by the Government for the Parole Board to reconsider its decision (*note 1*). Pitchfork, who in 2009 had a sculpture on display in the Royal Festival Hall until it was removed following a public outcry, is reported to show no sign of *remorse* for his crimes, and in fact has been described by some professionals as ‘a remorseless psychopath’. However, a spokesman for the Parole Board said that it was ‘bound by law to assess whether a prisoner is safe to release. It has no power to alter the original sentence set down by the courts. Legislation dictates that a panel’s decision must be solely focused on what *risk* a prisoner may pose on release and whether that risk can be managed in the community. It is the opinion of the Parole Board that Pitchfork no longer presents a risk to the community’.

Also at the time of writing, it has been revealed that Stuart Campbell, jailed for life in 2002 for the murder of his young niece, will be eligible for parole later this year. The distress and outrage of family members and the public generally (Campbell’s brother has actually written a book about him revealing the history of his violent nature) is compounded by the fact that Campbell continues to deny murdering his niece; he has never revealed the location of her body and shows no remorse. Will the Parole Board take account of these matters in its deliberations or will they adhere strictly to their brief as summarised above? They may well opt for the latter, in spite of ‘Helen’s Law’, passed this year, which makes it more difficult for murderers to

be released if they refuse to disclose the whereabouts of their victim’s body.

In the years when I worked in a secure hospital, once in a while, like other members of staff, I would contribute a talk to the hospital’s academic and training programme. One of the topics I chose to discuss was remorse. I remember announcing this to a colleague, a forensic psychologist whom I respected, and he immediately expressed surprise by saying, ‘But Mike, I thought the research evidence shows that remorse is unrelated to risk of reoffending’. I wasn’t too taken aback by this, because assessing risk of violent and sexual *reoffending* (or *recidivism*) is among the most important tasks of forensic psychologists and other professionals, particularly those working in prisons. It helps no one, least of all our politicians and the Parole Board itself, when a convicted criminal on license commits a serious violent offence.

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***Risk assessment procedures have been developed and refined that rate the offender on a host of actuarial, dynamic, and clinical factors known to correlate with reoffending.***

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As well as ‘idiographic’ considerations, such as the prisoner’s general behaviour and demeanour, standard risk assessment procedures have been developed and refined that rate the offender on a host of actuarial, dynamic, and clinical factors known to correlate with reoffending. Expression of remorse is not commonly cited amongst these, one possible reason being that remorse can easily be faked. Consequently (perhaps), remorsefulness doesn’t come as high as it might on the agenda of the offender *rehabilitation* process. Yet, think how deeply hurtful it is to victims of crimes when the perpetrator ‘shows no evidence of remorse’, either when their guilt is announced in court or while they are

serving their sentence, and especially when they are due for release or are released. Is this not a relevant consideration? Don’t the victims’ feelings matter? And who decides on the priorities?

Returning to my presentation on remorse, I offered to give this because I was aware of how rare it was for the patients at the secure hospital to display any spontaneous feelings of remorse for the—often terrible—suffering they had caused other people, and I wanted to understand why. I thought it was very unfortunate, but maybe in the case of patients, their serious mental illnesses prevent them, in the main, from experiencing empathy towards their victims.

Even so, I found the same with many defendants and convicted persons on whom I undertook pre-trial or pre-sentence assessments. I often asked offenders if they were sorry for what they had done; many said they were, but what they appeared to be expressing was *regret* (e.g. ‘I wouldn’t be in here now if I hadn’t done what I did’). *Remorse*, in the sense that I use the term, is an empathic emotion that we experience solely because of the suffering we have brought on others. Some offenders expressed remorse because of the trouble they had caused their families, but seldom did I witness obvious signs of distress arising from their awareness of the their victims’ suffering. Perhaps this is something they avoided thinking about, and once they were serving their sentence some would begin to experience remorse. Certainly, true remorsefulness is by no means unknown amongst serving criminals.

My motivation for presenting my talk was to make the point that it is a *good thing in itself* for any offender to experience emotional pain through their having committed their offence, regardless of whether or not this is predictive of reduced likelihood of re-offending. I believe this to be a natural human sentiment and one I share with

most people. Regret, guilt and shame (note 2) are better than nothing at all, but they do not quite guarantee remorse itself.

I once explained to a newly qualified clinical psychologist that it is a bad thing for there to be great disparity between, on the one hand, how the Criminal Justice System deals with suspected and convicted criminals and, on the other, what the public believe and expect should be done. She disagreed, saying that the public's knowledge of such matters is limited to what they read in the *Sun* newspaper. Oh dear! The Criminal Justice System belongs to the people, all of whom, including offenders themselves, are victims of crime or potential victims; how those who work in the system dispense justice on our behalf concerns all of us (note 3). It has to be seen to be fair, which means a significant degree of *recompense* for the victim and this includes *retribution*; if not, people may feel justified in taking matters into their own hands, the avoidance of which is one of the reasons for making the dispensing of justice a state responsibility. I think the same goes for remorse; that is, experiencing the pain of remorse (and, if not, then regret and shame) is a *good thing* period. Even if it proves to be only a minor deterrence against reoffending, it is still to be pursued as an end in itself and not simply a means to an end. It may ease the pain of those victims of crime who have come to feel that the world is a cruel and unfair place.

This sentiment may not have the influence it should have in informing policy and practice in the disposal and treatment of offenders. One development, not considered for all offences of course, that is worthy of mention is *restorative* justice, which recognises the perspective of the victim and his or her needs, and appears to be largely successful in this respect. But, relatively speaking, it is not well-funded, and reduction of recidivism, as usual, seems to be the central focus in measuring outcome (which tends to be positive, though not dramatically so, and variable).

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*As with many interventions of this nature, evidence that the effect of victim awareness and empathy training translates into reduced reoffending is mixed.*

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Another development is providing offenders with 'victim awareness' or 'victim empathy' training, as always with the explicit aim of reducing the number of future victims. This may be undertaken in the community or in a custodial setting, e.g. prison or young offender institution, and comes under the domain of rehabilitation. I believe that the public expects that attempts will be made to improve the mind-set of offenders in this way, and various courses of 'treatment', often in groups, are administered by staff

both in prisons and in the community. As with many interventions of this nature, evidence that the effect of victim awareness and empathy training translates into reduced reoffending is mixed. But let us leave the topic of rehabilitation until the next time.

### Summary

Political expediency may prioritise the assessment of risk of reoffending (it costs more money if offenders are incarcerated beyond the period that they pose a threat to the public, whereas it costs reputations and votes when prisoners released on licence reoffend). But maybe this is done at the expense of giving due consideration to other aims of criminal justice that are not so easy to measure, such as public trust and the satisfaction of victims of crime that they have received fair justice.

### Notes

1. <https://tinyurl.com/zkmv8brf>
2. Does public exposure potentiate shame? That is, does the offender have to be apprehended and publicly tried and punished (rather than 'get away with it') for them to experience the full weight of shame?
3. A recent report has concluded that confidence in the Criminal Justice System is dwindling, with more than half of people interviewed saying they would not report a crime again after their experience of being a victim: see <https://tinyurl.com/v8ycf3c>.



## LOGIC AND INTUITION

### The three sisters

Here's a puzzle I made up, but I'm sure it's been invented already.

There are three sisters on our street called Anne, Barbara and Carol. One of them always tells the truth and one of them always lies. The third one sometimes tells the truth and sometimes lies. I saw them coming towards me the

other day, and I as they passed by, I overheard Anne say, 'I always lie'. 'Yes you do!', said Barbara. Who is the one who always lies, the one who sometimes lies, and the one who never lies?

### The two runners

Tom and Ivan regular race each other over a 400m running track. Without

exception Tom always crosses the finishing line 20m ahead of Ivan. They decide that it would be nice, for once, to be seen finishing the race together. So the next time they meet they agree to set off with Ivan on the starting line and Tom 20m behind him. Have they chosen the right way of achieving their desired aim?



## THE EUROPEAN SCENE

### European Council for Skeptics Organisations

Address: Arheilger Weg 11, 64380 Roßdorf, Germany

Website: <http://www.ecso.org/> (which has an email contact facility)

Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/skeptics.eu/>  
ECSO also has a Twitter handle, @SkepticsEurope.

The ECSO website now has a comprehensive calendar of skeptical events taking place across Europe, replicated at the ESP website (below).

### The ESP - European Skeptics Podcast



Building a bridge for skeptics

<http://theesp.eu/>

Find out what is happening on the skeptical scene throughout Europe by visiting this site. The latest podcast (July 2<sup>nd</sup>), as usual, covers a multitude of diverse topics. Also check the Events Calendar for Europe at:

[https://theesp.eu/events\\_in\\_europe](https://theesp.eu/events_in_europe)

### The 18<sup>th</sup> European Skeptics Congress, Ghent 2019

All the thought-provoking talks and lectures delivered at the 18th ESC can now be viewed on YouTube. For the link, visit <http://www.ecso.org/>.



## MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

### How to respond?

There is currently much discussion in skeptical circles about the publicity given in mainstream media to those promoting irrational ideas, false, discredited and unsupported claims, pseudoscience, conspiracy theories, and the like. Particularly vexatious is the practice of including in the article or presentation opinion provided by ‘an expert’ or ‘skeptic’ ‘to ensure balance’.

How would you respond to this request to ASKE that was received a few weeks ago from a television company ( ..... indicates material redacted to help preserve anonymity)?

‘I’m contacting because we’re currently working on a video which follows an individual who says her life has been changed since the pandemic, because that’s when she found natural healing and crystals. In the video she makes claims that fluoride is purposely put in our water, that the covid vaccine isn’t beneficial and ultimately her intention is to turn her back on society and western medicine in order to return to ‘mama gaya’ (sic) (mother earth).

‘As a broadcaster we need to balance her points of view and I wondered if you have any skeptics ..... who happen to speak ..... that may be able to help? We’d be looking for someone who would be able to scrutinize alternative medicine and crystal healing and highlight the dangers/ risks it could pose.’

***My first reaction was to think how I could help this broadcaster locate a suitably qualified person who would be willing to assist.***

My first reaction was to think how I could help this broadcaster locate a suitably qualified person who would be willing to assist. But then (cf. Daniel Kahneman and *Thinking Fast and Slow*) I decided that a different response was in order. Thus I replied:

‘Thank you for your email. You are telling me that there’s a woman ..... who believes in the healing power of crystals and other “natural remedies”; that fluoride is purposely put in our

water (it **is** in some areas of the country—it’s called fluoridation and it helps in the prevention of tooth decay), and that there are no benefits to Covid vaccination. I am guessing that her claims about fluoridation relate to a longstanding conspiracy theory that it’s a method whereby governments can subdue the population.

‘This person is free to believe what she chooses, but I can’t understand why, despite the consensus that there little or no evidence to support her pronouncements, they are considered to be of such significance that she is being given the privilege of appearing on television to announce them to the world and to have expert opinion on hand to comment on them. Not only that, publicising claims like these is potentially harmful: thousands of mainly unvaccinated Covid patients are presently occupying hospital beds and in the UK hundreds are dying each week; seriously ill people who would otherwise survive are rejecting the proven remedies of conventional medicine in favour of discredited treatments on sale by the ‘alternative

medicine' industry; and the benefits of fluoridation for dental, and consequently, general health are being denied to children because of unfounded fears fuelled by conspiracy theorists. (Ten years ago I researched the background to these claims. I spent hours reviewing the evidence, arriving at a balanced set of informed conclusions, and writing it all up in an article that you will find at <http://www.mheap.com/Flouride.html>.

When I had done so, no magazine, newspaper, radio or television company contacted me for an interview or invited me to take part in a public broadcast. I didn't expect them to: my article is boring, unsensational and merely confirms the existing consensus, then and now.)

'I think your programme is misleading, misconceived and unhelpful and I am sure this is the opinion of members of our group and of skeptics generally.'

I was tempted to add 'The nut that squeaks the loudest gets the most grease'—not my words, but those of a woman with mental health problems whom I used to see professionally. But I resisted on the grounds of

offensiveness (Get thee behind me Satan!).

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***'I think your programme is misleading, misconceived and unhelpful and I am sure this is the opinion of members of our group and of skeptics generally.'***

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I received a reply from the journalist 'addressing my concerns' ('On the topic of crystals and natural healing we hope to include a GP or a young (*sic*) doctor to comment on the fact that these practices have not been proven by science') but did not accept the invitation for further discussion.

Now I am wondering if I've been a bit mean and high-handed about this matter. I hope I have the general approval of ASKE subscribers.

#### **When is 'a new hospital' a new hospital?**

It's becoming increasingly difficult to 'leave politics out of it' when writing about topical subjects that are of likely interest to skeptics and it would indeed amount to censorship not to publicise

this piece of apparent egregious deception:

'A communications "playbook" for the government's NHS building programme instructs that major refurbishments and new wings/units by trusts "must always be referred to as a new hospital". The instructions also state that trusts should reiterate ministers' commitment to open "48 new hospitals by the end of the decade". Questions have been raised about how many new hospitals will be delivered in reality, and the fact that many of those planned are not full hospital builds. Sajid Javid (Health Secretary) has been criticised for describing the Northern Centre for Cancer Care - which is part of the Cumberland Infirmary in Carlisle and the first of the 48 schemes to open—as "a new hospital". Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals Foundation Trust did not describe it as a hospital.'

Listen to the Health Service Journal podcast for further details (*note 1*).

#### **Notes**

1. <https://tinyurl.com/vmf595f3>



## LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

### **Mark Newbrook**

#### **False linguistic identity: the case of Galician Celtic**

During the pandemic I (like many others) attended many virtual talks and walks. Some of these involved Galicia, the far north-western province of Spain, immediately north of Portugal. The very well-informed guides referred repeatedly to the 'Celtic' heritage of the region.

As these guides acknowledged, the modern speech of Galicia, often called 'Gallego', is a Romance language-variety intermediate between Spanish and Portuguese; some place-names, notably the city-name *A Coruña*, actually display a mixture of the two

languages. (If Galicia were politically part of Portugal, Gallego would be regarded as a dialect of Portuguese.) The area was **once** Celtic-speaking, but – apart from some place-names and other local words and a few grammatical features found only in Iberian Romance – there is now no trace of Galician Celtic, which was last actually spoken in the area a thousand years ago and is not at all well recorded.

Nevertheless, some Galicians have striven to gain Celtic identity for themselves and for neighbouring Spanish provinces to the east. In 1986, as a result of this activism, Galicia was actually admitted to the Celtic League,

joining Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, Brittany and the Isle of Man (and their overseas offshoots) as the seventh full member of this political and cultural organisation.

Of course, none of the Galician activists were able to speak or understand any relevant Celtic language. The parallels drawn with Cornwall and Man, where Celtic had died out much more recently and had been revived in C20, were thus highly tendentious. And although even in the continuously Celtic-speaking lands only minorities are personally competent in the languages (Welsh, used by 30% now in Wales, is much the

strongest), the languages **are** current in at least some communities in all these countries, and relevant cultural features are salient (although some supposedly iconic features such as festivals, music, literature and costumes actually date back only some 200 years in their current forms).

After the 1986 decision, there was, predictably, an upsurge of dissent in the British Isles and Brittany. The above facts were noted, and it was also observed that English and French display more Celtic elements than does Gallego. It had been suggested that despite all this ‘a Celt is whoever thinks they are a Celt’. This would surely create a dangerous precedent in this context, as indeed some urge has occurred in a ‘trans’ context (‘I’m a woman if I think I am’); and in fact the term *Celtic* has **no** coherent **non-**linguistic meaning. And the best-informed international Celtic scholars, notably Peter Berresford-Ellis (a strong supporter of the ‘Celtic Revival’), argued that the 1986 decision was simply a mistake. Only a year after Galicia’s admission to the Celtic League, the decision was reversed.

Obviously some in Galicia still hanker after acceptance as Celts – and Wikipedia, nothing if not provocatively, describes the Galicians as a ‘*Celtic-Romance ethnic group*’! But in factual terms it won’t hold up! If Galicia seeks anything resembling independence, it must be on other grounds!

On the ‘Celtic Revival’, see firstly Berresford-Ellis’ book (*note 1*).

### **Linear, linear**

Excavations in Crete dating back to C19 (the best-known archaeologist was Arthur Evans) unearthed texts in various hitherto-unknown scripts, mostly written on tablets of baked clay. The two best represented scripts are known as Linear A and Linear B; they share certain features. Linear A was used earlier; there is a 50-year period (1450-1400 BCE) when neither appears to be attested, which is not necessarily anomalous if they were exclusively or very largely used to write different languages (see below). Unlike Linear

A, Linear B is also attested in mainland Greece.

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For many years both scripts remained undeciphered despite intense study, but in 1952 the philologist John Chadwick and his colleague the brilliant amateur Michael Ventris surprised the learned world by announcing the early stages of a decipherment of Linear B – as the hitherto undiscovered archaic ‘Mycenaean’ Greek, written in a script quite different from the very familiar later alphabet. Although this was not **quite** as big a surprise as has subsequently been claimed, there **had** been a near-consensus that Greek was not the most likely language to have been in use in the area at these mid-M2 BCE dates. Disgracefully, some serious scholars had indeed been excluded from archaeological digs for suggesting that these tablets might be written in Greek.

Despite initial resistance, the 1952 decipherment of Linear B as representing Greek was eventually accepted in the mainstream. Crucially, some of the hitherto unattested forms deciphered confirmed prior philological proposals about the early phases of the language. And, although some specific Linear B texts could not be read as Greek, those which **could** yielded few real anomalies. Ventris died in an accident in 1956, but Chadwick and his colleagues continued to defend and advance the decipherment.

Linear A has remained undeciphered. Attempts to read it as Greek on the basis of the similarities between the two scripts have been unsuccessful. Other proposals have failed to attract support. For example, Cyrus Gordon, an American linguist of some note who ‘went feral’ towards the end of his career (for instance

interpreting the Paraíba Stone found in Brazil as written in Phoenician), claimed that he could read Linear A as Ugaritic, an ancient West Semitic language similar to Phoenician and Hebrew. As my old professor Anna Davies put it: ‘nobody believed him’. Nevertheless, most scholars are convinced that the texts are in **some** unidentified non-Greek language – often named ‘Minoan’ by way of a ‘place-holder’ – used in the area before Greek became current there.

Now, the Cambridge archaeologist Ester Salgarella, using ‘an interdisciplinary methodology integrating linguistic, epigraphic, palaeographic and archaeological evidence’, and ‘placing the writing practice in its sociohistorical setting’, reports having discovered how Linear B developed out of Linear A and believes that she has shown that the differences between the scripts themselves are more subtle than has hitherto been believed and involve a cline. To achieve this, she has employed two ‘models’: one examining the structural characteristics of the two writing systems, the other assessing palaeographic features for comparative analysis (*note 2*).

Salgarella’s book is very expensive and few will read it (although one could of course seek it in or via a university library, if one had access to same). But highly qualified critics are impressed with it. It should be stressed, however, that this work does **not** in any way lead us further towards a decipherment of Linear A, nor was that the intent.

The only issue with Salgarella’s book involves some summaries which have circulated online (*note 3*) These contain some errors which must have arisen out of limited expertise; they should not be regarded as in any way authoritative. In the first summary (a), there is a grossly mistaken identification of both scripts as ‘languages’; there are naïve and inaccurate descriptions of Chinese characters as ‘ideograms’ (false; they are logograms) and ‘picture words’ (true only for some); and there is a statement that logograms are ‘picture-signs standing for commodities’ (only

some are ‘picture-signs’, only some represent commodities). The second summary (b) includes, among other things, the seriously confused comment ‘Linear B, which was translated only with the help of the famous Rosetta Stone [MN: totally irrelevant], has very similar phonetic values to those of its predecessor Minoan’ [= Linear A] [MN: how can this be **known** ahead of the beginnings of a decipherment?]

The first summary also fails to note that the similarities between the scripts are already familiar, which as noted is part of the basis for thinking that the Linear A material cannot be in Greek because if it were it could already be read in part (although identical symbols **can** represent very different **sounds**; Tolkien’s invented ‘tengwar’, as a set, have this characteristic).

In a very different vein, Sergej Jatsemirskij published a learned but ill-conceived book called *Minoan, Etruscan, and Related Languages: A Comparative Analysis* (2020). Sadly, Jatsemirskij died aged 37 before the book appeared. He believed that he could provide specific descriptions of ‘Minoan’ words written in Linear A, and that he had established a pattern of language relationships linking ‘Minoan’ with Etruscan (supposedly used in the Aegean before being transplanted to Italy) and with other languages currently lacking firm affiliations. He starts his book off by **assuming** most of this, and throughout the work he uses the long-discredited ‘etymological’ method of decipherment, in which the undeciphered script (in this case Linear A) is uncritically assigned to some language (in this case, a member of the proposed Tyrsenian family, which would include Etruscan), and then conjectural interpretations of supposed words in the script as being words in the assigned language are put forward as some sort of ‘proof’ that the association between script and language is correct. This is circular reasoning. Two common features of such ‘decipherments’ based on the etymological method, are both well illustrated here: the ‘decipherer’(a)

never provides any convincing evidence that the initially proposed association between the script and the chosen language is genuine, only these conjectural interpretations of words in the script, and (b) focuses only on interpreting **isolated** words, while never being able to provide a convincing interpretation of any **lengthy continuous text** in the script.

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***We skeptics ... hear such comments frequently, in all disciplines ('They couldn't prove Galileo wrong, and they know they can't prove me wrong, hence their silence!').***

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In his Foreword Jatsemirskij states that he was inspired to write the book because his hypothesis (expressed in his dissertation) about Linear A encoding a Tyrsenian language ‘has never been objected to by classical philologists or by specialists in comparative and general linguistics’. The most likely explanation for the absence of such objections is that most scholarly linguistic specialists with expertise in this area would have felt that it was beneath them (and a waste of valuable time) to object to such a clearly flawed hypothesis. We skeptics, who take on the role of commenting on material which most scholars would deem beneath their notice, hear such comments frequently, in all disciplines (‘They couldn’t prove Galileo wrong, and they know they can’t prove **me** wrong, hence their silence!’).

### **Semantics revisited**

I refer to my discussion of David Starkey in *Skeptical Intelligencer* 23:4. Starkey was condemned for pointing out that slavery is one thing and genocide another. But, as I observed, word-meanings may vary or change. A recent BBC report on the behaviour of the Chinese government towards its ethnically Uighur citizens (*note 4*) uses the term *genocide* in a widened sense, including not only measures to prevent Uighur women from giving birth (sterilisation, abortion, etc.) but also

‘the deliberate infliction of harm on Uighurs in detention, and the forcible transfer of Uighur children out of their community’. If these latter actions do amount to (attempted) genocide, it is in an extended sense. One could debate such points. But in any case it remains clear that slavery *per se* is not genocidal.

In a talk entitled ‘New Works On Colonial Violence’, promoted by London’s excellent Wiener Holocaust Library on 26/1/21 in association with Holocaust Memorial Day the following day, Michelle Gordon & Michael Taylor argued that the very term *slave* (as opposed to, say, *enslaved person*) identifies the people in question as non-human animals. I regard this claim as tendentious or worse. Firstly, non-human domestic working animals are never described as slaves. Secondly, most words referring to human beings in their varied roles and statuses contain no morpheme identifying them as human. One speaks of a serf, a servant, or indeed a monarch, soldier, lawyer, labourer, etc. Forms such as *jailer man* (as in the Wings song ‘Band On The Run’) are marked; they often serve only to make lines of verse scan or rhyme. There are of course forms such as *postman* – now often replaced by gender-neutral words such as *postie* – which do display a morpheme identifying the bearer as human; but there is no generalisation to be made here which would support Gordon & Taylor’s case.

I sent a polite, positive email c/o the Wiener, not making these points but merely identifying myself as a linguist and offering to engage in discussion; I received no response.

Another recent development is the official use of expressions such as *person with asthma* rather than *asthmatic* (noun). The idea seems to be that describing someone as ‘an asthmatic’ suggests that their illness defines them and hides their other (often positive) characteristics. I suggest that this is exaggerated.

## **Cancel culture and political correctness revisited (1)**

Examples of extreme reactions to harmless behaviour and usage continue to multiply. See my other piece in this issue for the ‘sombrero’ incident (involving ‘appropriation’). And a student was aggressively reprimanded for mentioning (**not** using; a familiar and clearly valid philosophical distinction) ‘the N-word’ in class discussion, on the ground that even in that linguistic context it might ‘trigger’ the emotions of fellow-students to whom it might be applied by racists. Such terms are apparently not to be mentioned even when quoting others for the purpose of criticism. A hospital banned the use of the unmodified expression *breastfeeding* on the ground that it excluded males – as if the recommended replacement, *chest-feeding*, could possibly refer to a male action (*note 5*). (The same document, however, stated that using **only** gender-neutral language might marginalise or erase the experience of women! How can one win?!) And, in one particularly laughable case, a linguistics lecturer was accused of ‘homophobia’ because he was seen carrying a book with the word *homophones* (‘words pronounced the same’) in its title!

Attempts to stand up for free speech on campuses have themselves become the subject of intense debate. Some have declared themselves fearful of the threat to university autonomy posed by government proposals for institutionalised resistance to ‘cancel culture’ (*note 6*); it has been suggested that the importance of a small number of incidents is being exaggerated, and indeed that protecting females and members of minority groups from feeling ‘oppressed’ (however unreasonably) is more important than encouraging the exchange of divergent well-considered viewpoints – even when expressed without slurs, the appearance of prejudice or support for discrimination – regarding matters of fact or theory. In fact, some universities provide staff and students with lengthy documents warning against giving

offence by, for instance, suggesting that some analyses or theories seen as associated with specific groups are inferior to others. There are also attempts to protect students from having to search databases using ‘offensive’ terms or even from accidentally coming across them and being ‘triggered’. A key notion here is ‘decolonizing’ (see below) (*note 7*). There may be repercussions for anyone who resists, challenges or ignores these warnings, and some background texts proclaim that any questioning of these principles is itself inherently racist, sexist etc. and must not be allowed a place in discussion. The struggle continues! For much more on all this, see a hard-hitting recent book (*note 8*).

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***A linguistics lecturer was accused of ‘homophobia’ because he was seen carrying a book with the word homophones (‘words pronounced the same’) in its title!***

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One salient phenomenon in this area involves the increasing extension of ‘denialism’ from specific scientific positions (the reality of anthropogenic climate change, etc.) to the entire edifice of science, often now wrongly castigated as exclusively ‘western’ and indeed as racist. The same applies to other disciplines such as history and philosophy in their modernist forms.

I myself first encountered this kind of thing in the 1980s, when I found that some of my Asian students regarded local semi-mythological traditions about the origins and histories of their own languages as more reliable than anything which empirical linguistics had unearthed about such matters. Then I found that Afrocentrist writers such as the Ethiopian Ayele Bekerie were presenting traditional metaphysical belief-systems (typically unargued) as legitimate alternatives to mainstream philosophy. More recently, ‘science deniers’ (aka ‘science fallists’), especially some from African

backgrounds, have begun to urge that if science will not accept the truth of traditional non-European notions and incorporate them into its theorising it must be completely abandoned as a racist, colonialist mode of thought and replaced by a new ‘decolonized’ science (analogous to ‘decolonized’ programmes in history, literature, etc. for which there may sometimes be more of a case). For instance, a traditional African belief that cursing a named person in a specific manner leads to their being killed by lightning-stroke must be accepted as true (seeking to test it is colonialist), and this ‘fact’ must be incorporated into the relevant scientific theories (*note 9*).

Proponents of such views are angered by the counter-suggestion that anthropologists might of course study how and why such beliefs arise and continue to be accepted but that physical scientists are justified in ignoring them unless worthwhile empirical evidence in their support can be presented. But, as has been pointed out (not for the first time), it is the applications of ‘colonial’ science which have given these shrill advocates of change the modern facilities which enable them to develop their ideas, communicate long-distance and indeed thrive or even survive. No useful alternative paradigms can be grounded in what often amounts to unsupported traditional superstition.

In due course I intend to comment on Gad Saad’s book on these matters, in which he refers to relativist views of science, including the notion that a Japanese metaphysical idea that men ‘give birth spiritually’ and a tribal African perception of the Sun as a dancing hyaena are just as ‘valid’ as established scientific findings on such matters, and that therefore the scientific findings have no special status in respect of truth!

### **Notes & references**

1. Peter Berresford-Ellis, *Celtic Dawn: Celtic Survival in the Modern World* (Constable, London; 1993).
2. Ester Salgarella, *Aegean Linear Script(s): Rethinking the Relationship*



- between Linear A and Linear B (CUP, 2020).
3. See:  
(a) <https://tinyurl.com/mna5tmjx>;  
(b) <https://tinyurl.com/2xsdu4f9>.
4. 'Uighurs: Credible case; China carrying out genocide':  
<https://tinyurl.com/yncfx5s8>
5. "'Chestfeeding": Hospital trust becomes first in UK to adopt gender

- inclusive language for perinatal services':  
<https://tinyurl.com/5cvv3fdk>.
6. 'Plan for campus free speech post prompts autonomy warning':  
<https://tinyurl.com/hf8j6p9p>.
7. See for example:  
<https://tinyurl.com/xwv9j962>.
8. Helen Pluckrose & James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories: How Universities*

*Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity - And Why this Harms Everybody* (Swift Press; 2020).

9. See for example 'Aggressive fallist from the "Shackville TRC" claims science must be "done away with entirely" and "start over again":  
<https://tinyurl.com/yyb545ju>.



## CONTRIBUTED ARTICLES

### I TOO AM OFFENDED (BUT I WILL NOT SEEK TO 'CANCEL')

Mark Newbrook

In my recent publications and talks on the subject of 'Cancel Culture', I have referred to the attempts of some religious believers (especially Muslims) and of (often self-appointed) representatives of hitherto disadvantaged populations (females, gays, trans people, members of various ethnic groups (*note 1*)) to silence ('cancel') any voice which continues to express critical ideas which are deemed offensive. The idea is that 'giving offence' in this way, especially to members of such groups, is so unacceptable – even if one is carefully stating the truth or putting forth an arguable viewpoint, and even if the other party's taking of offence appears unreasonable – that it must be outlawed, by law if necessary. (I am **not** speaking here of the use of **words** now deemed offensive, of the making of prejudiced **assumptions** about others, or of palpable **discrimination**.) Many such 'cancellings' have already occurred, and in many settings it is now socially awkward or worse to oppose this trend. And the targets are not confined to alleged racism, sexism, 'homophobia', 'transphobia', etc.; they also include 'appropriation': the adoption of aspects of the culture of a group to which one does not belong, even by way of solidarity – for example, where a white American produces artwork celebrating

African-American culture or expressing support for an anti-racist agenda, or where a white person wears a Mexican sombrero hat (this latter involves a real if extreme case which arose at a university in England!).

Obviously, most skeptics and other modernists object to this tendency, demanding (for themselves and others) the right to criticise (politely and rationally) any belief system, whatever its origin, and to 'appropriate' cultural memes when this seems reasonable. But – except in extreme cases such as incitement to violence/abuse, or culpable libel – 'good skeptics' do **not** seek to 'cancel' opposing viewpoints (even if they in turn are offended by same; see below), but rather to put forward their criticisms and to present their own alternative viewpoints. As has been urged by writers such as Frank Furedi and Salman Rushdie, the freedom to express one's viewpoints and to criticise other viewpoints must be protected. Rushdie said: if you do not like a viewpoint, ignore it, criticise it or express your own contrary viewpoint – but do **not** seek to 'cancel' it. Skeptics can thus legitimately claim a moral advantage here vis-à-vis the intolerance of many of their 'opponents' (*note 2*).

And what is often not recognised here is that skeptics and modernists can **themselves** be offended by ideas of

certain types, including both 'cancel culture' itself and specific aspects of the cultures and notions of those very groups who seek to 'cancel' skeptical criticism or comment (or of any other groups or individuals). It is not only religious believers and other would-be 'cancellers' who can be offended. The idea that skeptics, atheists etc. (who do not themselves seek to 'cancel' opposing ideas) have no legitimate principled feelings which could be genuinely offended – while not uncommonly expressed in religious circles – is simply false. It needs to be pointed out to many adherents of these various belief systems that sincere, thoughtful skeptics, atheists etc. may be just as offended by some of their ideas as they themselves may be offended by modernism or atheism (even though most adherents will not be deterred thereby from upholding their own ideas – and nor should they).

It is this which is my focus here. I take my examples from Muslim and conservative Christian doctrine and attitudes. As far as these belief systems are concerned, the following ideas can obviously give offence to skeptics and atheists:

1. From an atheist perspective, Islamic and Christian doctrines are almost certainly false. This in itself does not make them offensive, but what **does**

give offence is the fact that frequently they are wrongly and often bombastically presented as certainly (not even **almost** certainly) true, on the basis not of decisive argumentation or evidence but of faith, which itself **cannot** be decisive – if for no other reason, because different people to all appearances have equally strong faith in **conflicting** world-pictures; e.g. those of Hinduism and Islam.

2. Children are often indoctrinated by their families with Islamic or Christian doctrines, which is especially damaging and offensive in countries where this is reinforced by school systems. A skeptic would probably hold that the teaching of specific religions as embodying truth should occur only outside school, with schools instead teaching comparative religion (including atheism and agnosticism, which have no ethnic affiliations and which some religious leaders unreasonably want to see excluded) and **not** allowing exemption from these classes on the grounds of the religious affiliation of the child's parents (although of course parents could urge their children to ignore these lessons or indeed to absent themselves from them, 'copping' marks of zero and in the latter case – if the law so provided – sanctions on the parents). (With Richard Dawkins, I regard it as a platitudinous truth that children do not yet have a religion themselves. Their ethnic backgrounds and their parents' religions do not confer religions upon them, and schools and other institutions should not proceed as if they did. In particular, the extreme Muslim idea that everyone is born Muslim and that converts to Islam are in fact 'reverting' is purely a matter of dogma.)

3. In some societies where Islam or conservative Christianity dominate, legal systems grounded in religious precepts or customs (Shariah, etc.) compel believers – and in many cases citizens or other residents who are **non**-believers – to follow those precepts on pain of judicial penalties. And, in some mainly Muslim states where non-Muslims are exempt from some such laws, it is impossible or at best very

difficult for ex-Muslims to abandon Islam formally and thus free themselves from the relevant laws (unless they are fortunate enough to be able to emigrate), because apostasy is prohibited or strongly discouraged. In my view, all such systems are so offensive in respect of human rights that the relevant countries – like other countries with egregiously bad human rights records – should not be granted full diplomatic recognition or included in extradition treaties, unless they reform.

Because the actual welfare of largely powerless individuals is involved, this aspect of the matter is thus one where the generation of justified offence might indeed lead at least to indirect attempts at the suppression of the relevant policies (perhaps even to the censoring of endorsement of said policies in cases where this amounts to incitement to abuse).

4. Advocates of both Islam and Christianity often claim moral high ground, asserting in an offensive manner that atheists are incapable of being systematically morally good because they have (a) no authoritative source of knowledge of good and evil and (b) no fear of divine punishment for acting 'immorally'. However, thoughtful people of all religious persuasions and none surely have a largely consistent intuitive grasp of right and wrong, whether or not they find themselves able to accept any objectivist theory of meta-ethics (if indeed they are aware of such things). Agreed moral principles in no way depend upon religious doctrines and do not need them by way of support. And where there **is** a disputed issue – for instance on the question of when, if ever, abortion is morally acceptable – believers often disagree among themselves, with no one able to find a clear and decisive statement in 'holy writ', even within one religion. Their religious faith does not resolve the matter.

In any event, there is a strong philosophical argument (which has been most succinctly enunciated by

Bertrand Russell and which most philosophically-aware atheists and such accept) which appears to demonstrate that what is morally good or bad cannot possibly be determined by any pronouncements on the part of a god, even a creator god. The failure of most educated believers even to engage with such arguments is intellectually weak and arguably offensive.

In addition, good-hearted atheists appear to have **better** reasons for acting on their notions of moral good and evil in terms of actual behaviour than do 'god-fearing' believers. At the very least, they are **not** selfishly motivated by dread of subsequent punishment by a vengeful god. And, if such a god really does exist and really is omniscient, he will **know** that some believers have obeyed him only or very largely out of fear – which will surely not impress him in any case.

Christianity and Islam also involve arbitrary moral injunctions and in particular prohibitions. Believers are told that they must not eat certain meats (while eating other meats without penalty), drink even moderate amounts of beer, have gay sex, work on certain days of the week, etc., etc. In the Garden of Eden story, God issues an unexplained and unreasonable command to the first humans to the effect that they must not seek knowledge, and curses their entire species when they disobey. And, through his reported pronouncements, the god of Islam and Christianity instils feelings of guilt and anguish and the fear of future punishment (infinitely disproportionate in scale) in the minds of essentially innocent people living the normal lives of the exceptionally intelligent and sensitive animals which they are, in particular engendering an obsession with the supposed need to obtain divine redemption and forgiveness for 'sin' (which is presented as unavoidable). On this account God created us as we are and then holds us to blame for our supposed shortcomings.

Furthermore, the god of Islam and Christianity is reported as behaving in even more unjustifiable ways, for

instance by ‘punishing’ the innocent descendants of those deemed wrongdoers, or by creating animals whose young eat host-animals alive from within. The common description of this god as ‘merciful’ is worse than tendentious.

Many of the communities in question are also characterised by discrimination against females, who are forced into supposedly equal-but-different but in fact subordinate status.

The extreme offence generated in many non-adherents by these features of the two main monotheistic religions leads to a propensity to ‘misotheism’ (hatred for God). This propensity is seldom actually manifested because most such people are atheists (partly indeed for this very reason) and would thus find misotheistic considerations a waste of time and energy. But some critical believers do become misotheists, an existentially dreadful state for such a person. And both believers and atheists who manifest misotheistic tendencies are targets for the most vehement and offensive accusations of ‘blasphemy’. For some believers, the worst ‘sin’ of all is taking the misotheistic view that even if one is persuaded that their god does exist one will not worship or obey him, because he is an immoral and selfish tyrant.

A German maxim states: ‘Wer ein böses Weib hat, der bedarf keines

Teufels’ = ‘He who has a bad wife needs no Devil’ (sexism noted). For ‘a bad wife’, read ‘the Christian/Muslim god’. Enormous offence is given to many skeptics and other unbelievers by the doctrines, attitudes and policies at the cores of these religions. And we demand the right to express our outrage, however much offence this generates in turn in the minds of believers. But our feelings of being offended do not lead us to seek to proscribe or censor the ideas of believers. We are better people than that.

The same applies to any equivalent issues involving viewpoints in domains other than religion, as outlined above.

#### Notes

1. It is obvious that some fairly well-defined groups of people (males, members of certain ethnicities, heterosexuals, ‘cis’ people, religious believers in places where their specific religions have high status, etc.) have historically been unfairly advantaged and are still advantaged to a degree. Such advantages are often referred to in this context as ‘privilege’. This clearly bears on the matter at hand in the sense that members of ‘privileged’ groups can presumably cope better with being offended (etc.) than can members of disadvantaged groups; but I do not consider that this factor weakens the case for the view that no-one has the

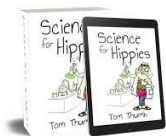
right to be **protected** from being offended by statements of fact or opinion.

2. The freedoms thus claimed by skeptics include, for instance: the freedom to proclaim the view (which many skeptics hold) that members of **any** ethnic group can be racist (‘reverse racism’, contrary to the statements of many recent non-white commentators, genuinely **is** racism) and the parallel view that females can be sexist, the freedom to criticise or object to core religious doctrines and such, despite the fact that some believers regard such criticism as ‘blasphemous’ even if it is presented without deliberately gross usage (this applies most crucially to misotheism; see later), the freedom to draw attention to weak argumentation, bias, etc. in feminist and pro-trans viewpoints, in Afrocentrist and other such culturally-motivated pseudo-historical claims, in traditional national or tribal metaphysical accounts of the world, etc., etc.

*Mark Newbrook took an MA and a PhD in linguistics at Reading University and spent many years as a lecturer and researcher in Singapore, Hong Kong and Australia; he has authored many articles/reviews and several books, including the first-ever general skeptical survey work on fringe linguistics (2013).*

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## REVIEWS AND COMMENTARIES



**Science for Hippies** by Tom Thumb. Road Junky Books, April 2021. ISBN: 979-8-7263-098-7.

*Available through Amazon. ‘Alternatively, if you’d rather avoid Amazon, you can just send me \$10 by PayPal to tom@roadjunky.com and I’ll send you the PDF’ (TT).*

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### Reviewed by Richard Rawlins

Tom Thumb states he is not a scientist and does not even have a university education, but there is a distinct whiff of wacky baccy when you open this most

enlightening contribution to the sum total of human knowledge.

This small paperback is certainly an idiosyncratic contribution - its style of

chummy conversational communication will not appeal to those used to more formal modes of discourse, but with the flavour of a commune comes a

breath of fresh air. After time in India before an epiphany in Israel, Tom claims to (still) be a ‘hippie’ seeking enlightenment – but he now recognises the value of the scientific method in achieving that laudable aim, and his exposition cannot be faulted on technical grounds. He recognises that ‘science doesn’t really “prove” things, and with separate chapters on major concepts such as Ben Goldacre’s attempts to have all medical trials reported; how Derren Brown achieved some of his effects; the Dunning-Kruger effect; alternative medicine and the placebo effect; and even quantum physics - Tom has achieved his objectives.

Tom recognises his book could be considered ‘naïve, simplistic and ignoring problems and complexities’ – but as an ‘introduction to science’, Tom hits the mark in a freshly stimulating style. Just enough scepticism and only a pinch of cynicism. He tells us he was motivated on account of the many conspiracy theories he was coming across, and is particularly concerned at recent Covid conspiracies. Tom points out ‘science is neutral’ and his book goes on to explain why, and how - from the perspective and with the

experience of a self-declared ‘story-teller’.

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***Tom recognises ‘science is hard and writing about it only a little easier’ – but he sagely considers the important questions of the day.***

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Tom recognises ‘science is hard and writing about it only a little easier’ – but he sagely considers the important questions of the day: Why is intuition amazing? Are scientists in the pay of big corporations? Is there really such a thing as ‘natural’? Why do we find it so hard to change our minds? Does science take the magic out of life?

At a first reading, Tom seems to be offering simple fun and light relief, yet there is a serious underpinning: ‘In meditation practice, we’re sometimes invited to feel love for all sentient beings, to wish them all happiness. But putting universal compassion into practice is more than just a feel-good mantra. It’s about making the effort to understand the world and the creatures who live in it. We all need love - and science.’

The probability of the author’s name being a pseudonym is high – but he should not be shy. He resides in Cambridge, East Anglia (probably). His associated web site continues the themes raised in the book, but without knowing anything of Tom’s true persona, or even being sure he is one person (I feel a conspiracy coming on), we cannot assess anything other than his journalistic skills - which do seem well developed. He is not an ingenué. He might counter that his words are mightier than his persona and that such a revelation would diminish his impact. I am not so sure - ‘science’ deals with ‘truth’ as best it may, and books by pseudonomic authors raise questions of propriety and unaccountability which are not helpful. Discuss, and see [www.scienceforhippies.com](http://www.scienceforhippies.com).

With plentiful references for further reading, this book will amuse a senior readership and deserves a place in a present list for the younger. Real hippies probably will drift on by in a haze – their loss, man.

*Richard Rawlins (his real name) is an orthopaedic surgeon, member of The Magic Circle and author of Real Secrets of Alternative Medicine.*

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## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### OF INTEREST

SKEPTICISM, SCIENCE  
AND RATIONALITY  
(GENERAL)

#### **Sense About Science**

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

#### **Good Thinking**

Make sure that you are on Good Thinking’s Newsletter email list:

<http://goodthinkingsociety.org/>

#### **Websites of interest**

‘The Full Fact Podcast’: We are the UK’s independent charity fighting bad information and bringing you weekly

podcasts with our impartial fact checking team. We also release a three-minute Fact Blast on Saturdays to keep you well informed going into the weekend. Examples:

‘Lord Sumption makes several errors about Covid on BBC Radio 4’s Today programme’

‘Richard Tice makes misleading claims about Covid vaccines and fertility’

‘And the EU doesn’t have a 40% tariff on African food imports.’ At:

<https://podfollow.com/the-full-fact-podcast/view>

Also: ‘Debunking Denialism is a website dedicated to the refutation of pseudoscience and denialism by applying scientific skepticism and defending evidence-based science.’ At: <https://debunkingdenialism.com/about/> And from Australia, *This much is True*: ‘Radio National program that ranges from “fringe ideas to full-blown conspiracy theories, we dive into the rabbit hole to find out why it’s so human to fall for them. We hear what motivates those who spread misinformation and what is it like for the families when someone they love goes all in on a cult.

We meet people who got out of QAnon and learn how to immunise against false information.” At:

<https://tinyurl.com/4fd3rt6>

### **Bellingcat**

The talk ‘Bellingcat - The Citizen Intelligence Agency’ by Eliot Higgins, hosted by Conway Hall and delivered virtually on 19.04.21 is now available for online viewing at:

<https://tinyurl.com/5afmhsw3>

### **Statistics**

For those of you who were unable to attend or view the presentation ‘Naughty Numbers’ by David Spiegelhalter on 27.7.21, hosted by HealthWatch-UK, it is now available for viewing at:

<https://tinyurl.com/hdn4nyus>

### **Pseudoscience and misinformation**

‘People who trust science are more likely to be duped into believing and disseminating pseudoscience, finds a new paper in the Journal of Experimental Social Psychology.’

<https://tinyurl.com/4w24t5na>

and

<https://tinyurl.com/4yk94w>

### **Research integrity**

‘The integrity of research, especially medical and social science research, is at risk from what is known as the “reproducibility crisis” (i.e. it being very difficult or impossible to replicate a scientific study). Today, the Science and Technology Committee launch a new inquiry, scrutinising the causes of the phenomenon, and investigating solutions for reliable research practice.’

<https://tinyurl.com/365mr9z2>

### **Science fraud**

(See also ‘Medical science fraud’)

‘Evidence of Fraud in an Influential Field Experiment About Dishonesty.’

<https://datacolada.org/98>

## MEDICINE

### **When is ‘a new hospital’ a new hospital?**

A communications ‘playbook’ for the government’s NHS building programme instructs that major

refurbishments and new wings/units by trusts ‘must always be referred to as a new hospital’. The instructions also state that trusts should reiterate ministers’ commitment to open ‘48 new hospitals by the end of the decade’. Questions have been raised about how many new hospitals will be delivered in reality, and the fact that many of those planned are not full hospital builds. Sajid Javid has been criticised for describing the Northern Centre for Cancer Care - which is part of the Cumberland Infirmary in Carlisle and the first of the 48 schemes to open - as ‘a new hospital’. Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals Foundation Trust did not describe it as a hospital. Listen to the Health Service Journal podcast at:

<https://tinyurl.com/vmf595f3>

### **Evidence-based medicine**

The Decline and Fall of Science-based Medicine: ‘The philosophy of science-based medicine (SBM) is a response to perceived shortcomings in the practice of evidence-based medicine. EBM is the movement that strives to make medical treatments less dependent on the authority and experience of doctors, and instead put authority in the best available clinical evidence for that treatment. The central problem with EBM is that gathering evidence is hard and prone to many difficulties....’

<https://tinyurl.com/dauz649w>

### **Medical science fraud**

The Science for Profit Model—How and why corporations influence science and the use of science in policy and practice: ‘Science has been at the centre of attempts by major industries, including tobacco, chemical, and pharmaceutical, to delay progress in tackling threats to human and planetary health by, inter alia, obscuring industry harms, and opposing regulation. Some aspects of this influence are well documented, others remain poorly understood, and similarities between industries remain underexplored. This study, therefore, aims to synthesise the literature to develop an evidence-based typology and model of corporate influence on science in order to provide

an overview of this multi-faceted phenomenon.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/9w63au9e>

See also: ‘Time to assume that health research is fraudulent until proven otherwise? Health research is based on trust. Health professionals and journal editors reading the results of a clinical trial assume that the trial happened and that the results were honestly reported. “But about 20% of the time”, said Ben Mol, professor of obstetrics and gynaecology at Monash Health, “they would be wrong. As I’ve been concerned about research fraud for 40 years, I wasn’t that surprised as many would be by this figure”.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/466bx7w4>

And: ‘Fraudulent Trials in Systematic Reviews – A Major Public Health Problem: Research seminar hosted by Professor Ian Roberts, Co-Director of the Clinical Trials Unit at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine. Video presentation at:

<https://tinyurl.com/4eraz95f>

Meanwhile: Hawthorn Medical Institute (Victoria, Australia) faces scrutiny over clinical trials.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/3zftbv3t>

### **Aduhelm**

Aducanumab, sold under the brand name Aduhelm, is a medication designed to treat Alzheimer’s disease that was approved for medical use in the United States in June 2021 in the absence of evidence that the drug is effective. This led to the resignation of three advisers to the FDA. Aduhelm was the first new treatment approved for Alzheimer’s since 2003. Controversy continues. For an overview, see the Wikipedia entry at:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aducanumab>

### **Plasma treatment**

‘A single injection of platelet-rich plasma compared with a sham injection did not significantly reduce Achilles tendon dysfunction.’

<https://tinyurl.com/3tbn7kwx>

### **Myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME)**

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has taken the decision

to pause publication of its updated guidelines on the debilitating condition myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME) after the resignation of four members of the guideline development committee concerning its proposal that graded exercise therapy 'should no longer be recommended and that cognitive behavioural therapy, previously seen as having a curative role, should only be offered to support patients in dealing with the anxiety of being ill.'

<https://tinyurl.com/2xfee25d>

and

<https://tinyurl.com/2vn2ttes>

### **Havana Syndrome**

'US Vice-president Kamala Harris's tour of Asia was impacted by reports of Havana syndrome on 24.8.21. A trip from Singapore to Vietnam was delayed by several hours amid an investigation into two possible cases in Hanoi, administration officials said....Havana syndrome is the name for a series of mysterious health claims first reported by American diplomats and other government employees in the Cuban capital in 2016. Some reported hearing a loud piercing sound and feeling intense pressure in the face. Pain, nausea, and dizziness sometimes followed. Similar, unexplained ailments have since been reported by Americans in other countries, including Germany, Austria, Russia and China. A number of theories have been floated to explain it, including targeted microwave or sonic attacks, perhaps as part of an espionage or hacking effort.'

<https://tinyurl.com/89k3fvda>

### **Website of interest**

'Complementary and Alternative': 'Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) are treatments that are outside of conventional medicine. Most CAM treatments have either not been shown to be effective or have been shown to be ineffective. Unfortunately, some CAM providers make misleading claims about the effectiveness of their treatments. This could result in members of the public undertaking these treatments when they are actually not suitable. This site aims to highlight these misleading claims in

complementary and alternative medicine and therefore to protect the public from being misled into taking them.'

<https://tinyurl.com/s7zvnuxy>

### **Alternative medicine**

'Olympic athletes excel at their sports but are susceptible to unproven alternative therapies.'

<https://tinyurl.com/44kxbzjc>

### **Homeopathy**

From the Newsletter of the campaigning organisation Good Thinking, August 2021. 'The Professional Standards Authority (PSA) has announced new Standards for voluntary registers of healthcare providers, causing the Society of Homeopaths (SoH) to withdraw from the accreditation scheme. According to the PSA, the SoH's failings in this regard "led to risks to the public from homeopathy being offered as an alternative for serious conditions such as depression, arthritis and autoimmune conditions that require medical supervision." The PSA - the government body which oversees and accredits healthcare bodies - has included in their new Standards a 'public interest' test, which will weigh up whether the evidence for the benefits of a treatment covered by a register outweigh any risks. The new Standards come after a public consultation on the scope of the Accredited Registers programme.'

<https://tinyurl.com/yz84pdna>

### **Traditional medicine fraud**

'A claim has been shared in multiple social media posts that Sri Lankan regulators have purportedly approved a brand of traditional medication as treatment for Covid-19. But this claim is false: an official told AFP no traditional medication has been approved as treatment for Covid-19 as of July 7, 2021; and warned against using unproven remedies for the disease.'

<https://tinyurl.com/4dhnnnb7>

### **Cancer quackery**

'The incredible true story of the cancer patient who didn't have cancer: At an

integrative medicine seminar she had won a special blood test as a door prize. Thinking of having some bloods done anyway, she had taken advantage of the free offer, only to receive a call telling her she had cancer. It was only after an expensive course of intravenous vitamins that her sceptical cousin asked why no one had at least ordered a CT scan to find the cancer. She convinced her GP to order the scan, which detected two tiny lung nodules. The GP sent her to a surgeon who ordered a different scan, by which time the benign nodules had disappeared. The surgeon told her she did not have cancer but she did not believe him.'

<https://tinyurl.com/w82rh589>

### **COVID quackery, misinformation, etc.**

'Australian clothing firm Lorna Jane has been fined \$5 million in the Federal Court for claiming its clothes prevent the transmission of COVID-19. The court labelled the claim "predatory and exploitative".' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/3a2w9tvc>

And: 'CNN's Randi Kaye attempts to track down Dr. Joseph Mercola to find out why he continues to spread misinformation about Covid-19 and the vaccine. See how he reacted (video).' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/7j383t8b>

Meanwhile: 'The Catholic Church has condemned an anti-vax priest after he urged parishioners to avoid getting a COVID-19 vaccine. Father George Roth, who holds anti-vaccine conspiracy beliefs, sparked outrage by telling worshippers that vaccines were 'bio-terrorism' and urging them to "do all you can" to avoid them.'

<https://tinyurl.com/4baa4b2f>

And: 'A Facebook post cheered on airline crews for walking off of their flights to protest their employers' vaccine mandates — but there's no evidence such protests are happening.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/m7r53fpc>

Similarly: 'False claims went viral on Friday about Air Force pilots and the Pentagon's Covid-19 vaccine mandate

for members of the military. In a video monologue that has been viewed more than 1.1 million times on Twitter, a bodybuilder named Justin Y. O'Donnell claimed that "my dad just let me know" that the secretary of defense had sent a nighttime text message to all active members of the military demanding that they get a Covid-19 vaccination by 10 a.m. the next day or face a court martial. After receiving this text, O'Donnell claimed, "Twelve F-22 pilots, the most highly trained pilots in the world, walked off the job." He added that "16 crew members for B-52 bombers walked off the job." The viral story is thoroughly false. In fact, it originated on a misinformation website that publishes ridiculous fiction written to read like actual news.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/55rwyb2z>

Yet more: 'Amazon is selling the book version of Plandemic, to be released in October 2021 and available for pre-order in its Kindle and hardcover format. Released in 2020 amid a global crisis characterized by uncertainty and conflicting news, the Plandemic documentary was mass-shared, despite being debunked by scientists and medical professionals around the world.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/yhma9ete>

And more: "An Ohio judge has reversed a court order that forced a local hospital to treat a Covid-19 patient with the anti-parasitic drug ivermectin. On Monday, Judge Michael Oster of Butler county issued an order that sided with West Chester Hospital, citing a lack of "convincing evidence" that the drug - used in small doses in humans against external parasites such as headlice, and in larger doses for animals including cows and horses - could significantly improve the patient's condition. The patient, Jeffrey Smith, was admitted to intensive care on 15 July. He has been on a ventilator since 1 August. At a hearing on Thursday, Julie Smith, his wife, testified that neither she nor her husband were vaccinated against Covid-19.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/twjfy2rd>

### Chiropractic

'The family of a patient who suffered a broken neck and died during medical treatment have hit out after his chiropractor was controversially cleared of misconduct and allowed to carry on working.'

<https://tinyurl.com/2wkyk3sb>

### 'Mass hysteria'

'We report the first outbreak of a new type of mass sociogenic illness (MSI) that in contrast to all previously reported episodes is spread solely via social media. Accordingly, we suggest the more specific term "mass social media-induced illness" (MSMI). In Germany, current outbreak of MSMI is initiated by a "virtual" index case, who is the second most successful YouTube creator in Germany and enjoys enormous popularity among young people. Affected teenagers present with similar or identical functional "Tourette-like" behaviours, which can be clearly differentiated from tics in Tourette syndrome.'

<https://tinyurl.com/9jaf84rd>

### Germ theory denialists

'Yes, you read that correctly: germ theory denialists—also known as people who don't believe that pathogenic viruses and bacteria can cause disease.' Read all about it at:

<https://tinyurl.com/5fyw5f9d>

### Sports supplements

'The Federal Court of Australia has ordered Evolution Supplements Australia Pty Ltd to pay \$11 million for unlawfully advertising a range of unapproved sports supplement products, including references to steroids, Selective Androgen Receptor Modulators (SARMs) and pre-workout products containing DMAA and other amphetamine derivatives, in breach of the Therapeutic Goods Act 1989.'

<https://tinyurl.com/49by5mhm>

### DNA Vibe Jazz Band

'The DNA Vibe Jazz Band device promises to relieve pain and do other wonderful things. It has nothing to do with DNA, Jazz, or evidence.'

<https://tinyurl.com/xta8hj9m>

## CONSPIRACY THEORIES

'Conspiracy theories are more "entertaining" than the truth — and this helps explain why people believe them.'

<https://tinyurl.com/zxubzh72>

## PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHIATRY

### Repressed memories

'Trauma, Memory, and Law': A series of podcasts by Dr Lawrence Patihis of the University of Plymouth.

<https://tinyurl.com/ne3yyypb8>

### Dissociative Identity Disorder

'A critical analysis of myths about dissociative identity disorder': academic paper at:

<https://tinyurl.com/f6ndee9s>

## RELIGION

### Satanic abuse

'A gang of people kidnapped a child after one of them believed the infant had been the victim of satanic abuse. Three people have been found guilty of conspiracy to kidnap the child on Anglesey in November 2020 while three others admitted the charge.'

<https://tinyurl.com/fbyrtcm7>

## MISCELLANEOUS

### Crop circles

'Mystery crop circle appears on Dorset field.' (*Except there is no mystery—Ed.*)

<https://tinyurl.com/3w9w6njf>

### Astrology

'In an extremely shocking move, the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) has launched a two-year Master's course on Astrology (Jyotish) for the academic year 2021-22.'

<https://tinyurl.com/knkb36dc>

### UFOs

'Since 1947, UFOs have been caught in cycles of periodic, animated interest from government officials, enthusiasts, and scientists. But results are always inconclusive.' Review of history of UFO sightings at:

<https://tinyurl.com/hm7e46tb>

## UPCOMING EVENTS

Some events of interest to skeptics are now being presented live (in some cases with the option of viewing online). Most Skeptics in the Pubs are still not offering any talks, but Skeptics in the Pub Online still has an excellent programme of online talks on Thursday evenings. See:

<https://www.facebook.com/SkepticsinthePubOnline/>

And from the Australian and New Zealand Skeptics: 'Every year, Skeptics in Australia and New Zealand hold their separate annual conventions. This year it will be different. The two groups are joining hands across the water by holding a joint event – speakers in both countries, and elsewhere in the world as well.' Delegates can choose to either attend in

person or view events online. Dates, Nov 20-21, 2021.

<https://www.skepticon.org.au/>

Conway Hall is hosting live and online presentations that often have a skeptical flavour.

<https://tinyurl.com/y7dmgktl>

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## LOGIC AND INTUITION: ANSWERS

### **The three sisters**

If Anne always lies or always tells the truth, she would not say, 'I always lie'. So she must only sometimes lie (which she must have done on this occasion). So Barbara is lying when she agrees with Anne, and therefore must be the

one who always lies. Without uttering a word, Carol is revealed to be the consistently truthful one.

### **The two runners**

Tom will have to run 420m to finish the race. By the time he has run 400m, he will have caught up with Ivan who, true

to form, will have only run 380m of the 400m track. So Tom will overtake Ivan and, as usual, will finish the race ahead of him. The correct procedure is for Tom to set off at the starting line, with Ivan 20m ahead of him.

## **About ASKE**

Founded in 1997, ASKE is an association of 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 magazine and newsletter. 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 or email:

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