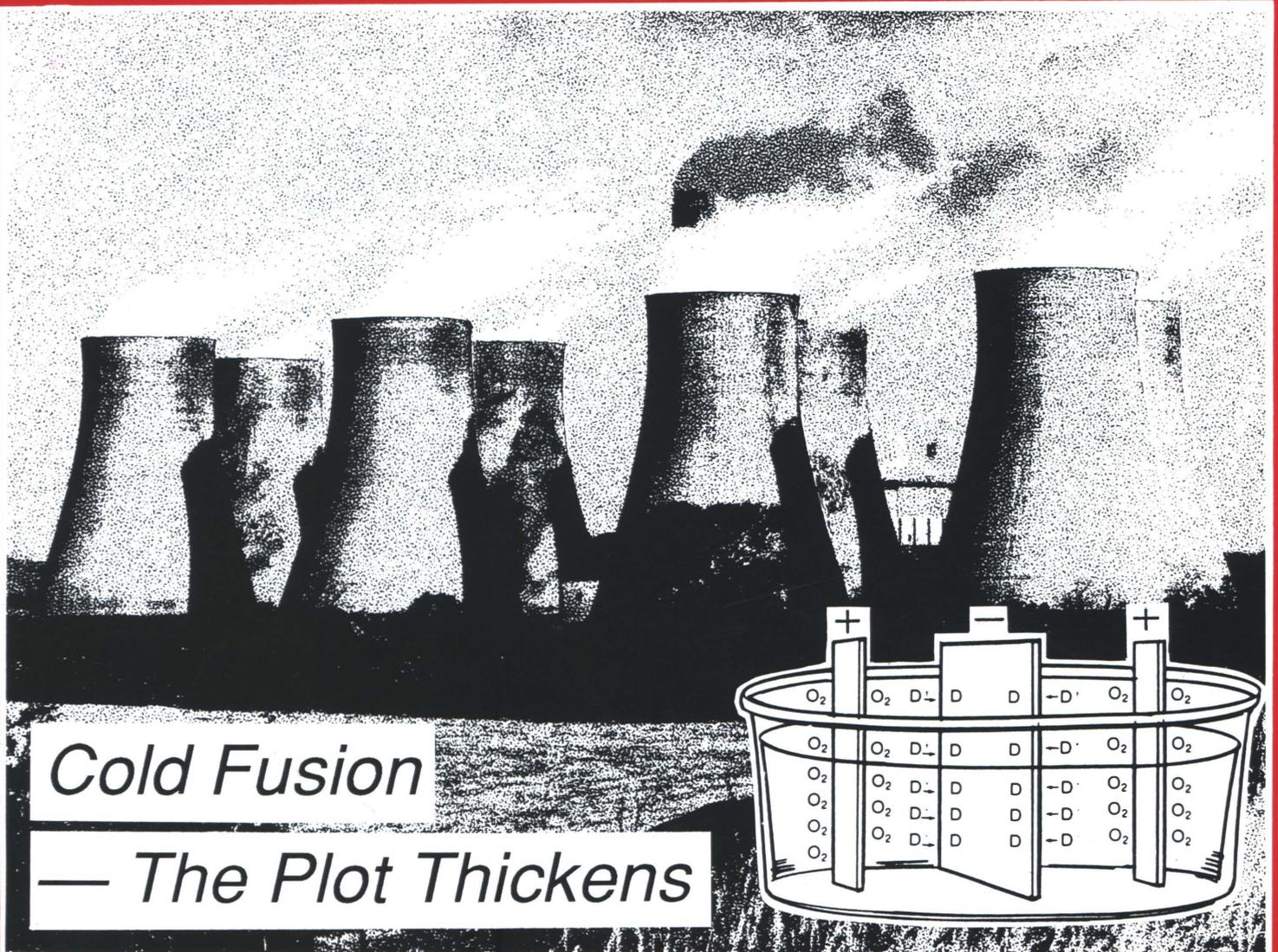


Volume 7 Number 3
May/June 1993

The Skeptic



Also in this issue:

Is meditation good for you?

Near-death experiences

Bhagwan: tales of a dodgy guru

£1.85

Hilary Evans' Paranormal Picture Gallery



The Convulsionaries of Paris

When, in the late 1720s, reports began to circulate of miracles at the tomb of a lately-deceased Paris priest, they were investigated more thoroughly and more skeptically than was usually the case, because questions of religious politics (I will spare you the complexities) were involved. Given the detailed accounts of what went on, and the reliability of those accounts, provided by doctors on either side of the controversy, simple denial seems an absurd response: yet at the same time they stretch credibility to the limit.

A distinctive feature of the affair was the craving by many of those involved—particularly females in their teens or twenties—for ‘relief’ (*secours*) which, they insisted, could be obtained only from what would be, for you or me, extreme physical suffering. This contemporary print depicts three such voluntary ‘victims’ but even greater torments are recorded. We are told that Gabrielle, a girl of 12 or 13, would lie on her back on the floor and demand that a sturdy man place the blade of a shovel on her throat, just below the trachea artery, and press down with all his strength; no matter how hard he pushed, she received only a pleasant and soothing sensation, which made her beg that the operation be repeated again and again. Later, her chest and stomach were pounded with a rock weighing more than 20kg, until those who gave her the relief were exhausted.

And Gabrielle was just one of scores who didn’t simply submit to these torments in some spirit of martyrdom, but positively craved the relief they brought. Even with all our knowledge of alternate states and the powers of suggestion, the history of the convulsionaries remains the most challenging instance of transcending the supposed limits of human tolerance—the more so, because so many of the events were witnessed by teams of experienced observers, including doctors and lawyers assigned by Parliament to report on the affair. Many would have liked nothing better than to be able to write the convulsionaries off as impostors; instead, they found that the reality exceeded the popular reports.

References

There are substantial accounts in French, but none to my knowledge has been published in England, and I know no account more complete or more recent than Madden’s *Phantasmas* of 1857! In French, one or two recent studies have been published, but none is more satisfactory than Mathieu’s *Histoire des Convulsionnaires* of 1864, which quotes extensively from the original sources which, amazing as they are, are somewhat indigestible for all but the most determined scholar.

Hilary Evans is co-proprietor of the Mary Evans Picture Library, 59 Tranquil Vale, London SE3 0BS

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Sorry if we've missed anyone out! Please keep the clippings coming!

Hits and Misses

Steve Donnelly

Wind of change

We are all aware of what a nuisance a ghost around the place can be. It can be extremely frustrating to experience strange knocking noises in the middle of the night or a headless figure clanking chains on the landing when you get up for a pee at 5 o'clock in the morning. But staff at Atlantic 252 radio station would gladly swap all of this for the ghost who is currently haunting their premises in Dublin. According to the *Daily Mail* on 28 May, the Irish broadcasters are afflicted with a ghost with regular habits and a digestive disorder that causes him to break wind—with considerable olfactory effect—every morning at 8.35. The radio station is housed in a former Victorian doctor's surgery and staff believe that the problem is caused by a long-dead former patient . . . At the third fart, the time will be eight, thirty-five, precisely.

Near power-down experience

Skeptics and believers may disagree over the significance of near-death experiences (NDEs) and in particular whether they reveal anything about the spiritual side of man. But if they do, then some recent findings by an American physicist may serve to widen our current definition of spirituality. According to the *Daily Telegraph* on 8 May, Dr Stephen Thaler a physicist working for McDonnell Douglas in Missouri, has witnessed an NDE in a type of computer called a neural network. Neural networks are modelled on the brain by having a large number of processing elements with a high degree of interconnectivity such that they not only have a structure similar to that of the brain but can also be trained to perform tasks. Dr Thaler devised a way of gradually destroying the neural network by severing individual

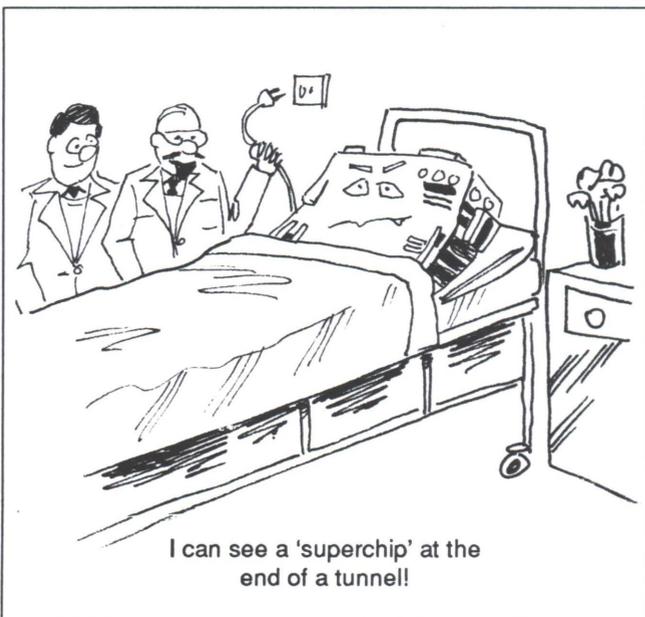
connections in order to test his theories about the experience of death (computer rights activists please take note). For a partially trained network he found that when he had severed up to 60 percent of the connections the network's output was gibberish, but when almost 90 percent of connections were disconnected it started to produce particularly interesting results. Its output became 'whimsical' because it was reminiscent of but not identical to things that it had been taught. He also discovered that from the network's point of view, time appeared to slow down. He relates these occurrences to those similar experiences of the dying brain: 'it is the unwinding of a brain and the reliving of all its most ingrained experiences.'

All together now

The American publication, the *Weekly World News*, mentioned in dispatches in *Hits and Misses* in the last issue, is continuing in its fine tradition of investigative journalism leading to the discovery and publication of stories that no other 'newspaper' publishes. Take the jumping Chinese for instance. You may find this hard to believe but those dastardly Chinese (yes, all of them) had planned to simultaneously jump up and down in 1991 and thus jolt the earth out of its orbit and send it hurtling off into space thereby freezing the entire population to death (themselves included). But they were foiled by a heroic group of folk at the Oaklyn Manor Bar in Oaklyn, New Jersey who—with the help of a few million loyal Americans—foiled the plot with a counter jump on their side of the planet on 21 September 1991. As if this heroism was not enough, according to the *Weekly World News* on 20 April, the boys at the Oaklyn Manor Bar have discovered that the Chinese are at it again and that their dictators will use the state radio network to order the entire population to jump up and down again simultaneously. They are planning once again to counter the menace and according to a spokesman from the bar: 'We stomped them before, by God, and now it's time for all Americans to stand up and be counted again.' What would we do here in Europe without the Americans to save us from world wars and jumping Chinese?

Head down

Sticking with the Chinese for a moment, a report from the *Shanxi Pictorial* by way of the *Sydney Morning Herald* brings the delightful story of 65-year-old Guan Feng who has dramatically improved his health and fitness by standing on his head for long periods of time. Prior to his discovery of *The Art of Standing Upside Down*—about which he has now written a book—his health was rather poor. He suffered from insomnia, malfunctioning body organs and had had two thirds of his stomach removed. But now, after spending periods of up to 192 minutes at a time upside



down, during which he drinks water, eats desserts and writes with a brush in his mouth (presumably not at the same time as eating desserts), he looks and feels ten years younger. One slight drawback—Mr Feng's height has changed from 169 to 167 centimetres.

Evening primrose

Any readers who suffer regularly from premenstrual tension (PMT) and who aren't keen on standing on their heads for long periods may be interested in the results of a recent study into the possible beneficial effects of evening primrose oil. For almost two decades, evening primrose oil has been promoted as a universal treatment for PMT, capable of reducing the painful symptoms that the monthly changes in hormone levels cause in some women. According to the *Times* on 14 March, however, a 10 month study by Swedish gynaecologists and psychiatrists found that, for the participants in their tests, paraffin oil (administered as a placebo) was just as effective at reducing the symptoms of PMT. The production and sale of evening primrose oil as a remedy for PMT and a number of other conditions is now a multi-million pound industry in the UK with more than 20 manufacturers of the product. It seems unlikely that the report, from Stockholm's Karolinska Institute, will make a significant impact on this market—or indeed that it will result in the creation of a similar industry for paraffin oil.

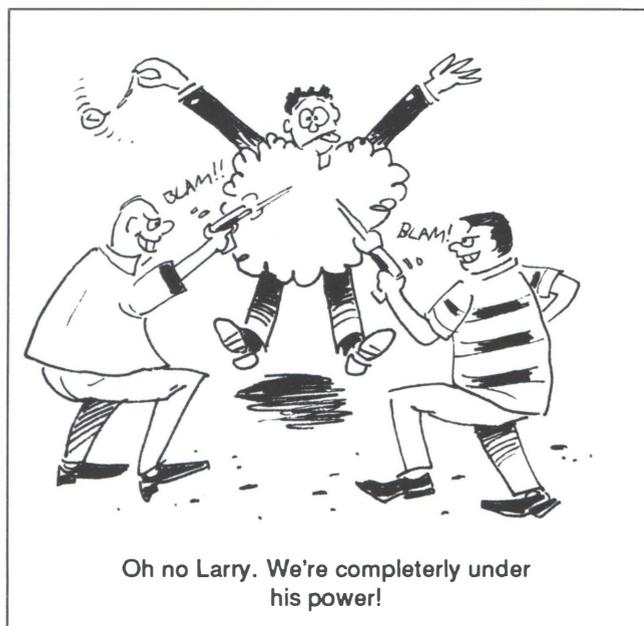
Heavenly acts

I hate to be the one to bring *Skeptic* readers the bad news but even though I found the news in an old clipping from November of last year I feel obliged to pass it on. According to the *Sun* on 10 November, it is finally official—there will be no bonking in heaven. The Pope apparently astonished worshippers in Rome by telling them unequivocally: 'There will be no sex in paradise. We will not take wives and husbands. There will be no need to exercise the act of procreation. The world will already be full of people.' When asked how the saved would pass the time he replied: 'We will be free to rest. We will watch and love and love God. We will live like angels'. But all hope is not yet lost—the Pope made no specific comments about drugs and rock-and-roll.

In a trance

Hypnotism and hypnotherapy have been getting a rather bad press recently, mainly due to the activities of a man from Romford in Essex. According to the *Guardian* and the *Independent* on 10 May, Colin Pike, a self-taught hypnotherapist, was charged on 9 May with hypnotising women who came to him for treatment and then sexually assaulting them and making videos of his acts. Mr Pike apparently used the title 'doctor' when advertising his free services in local newspapers and his case has raised considerable concern about the lack of statutory regulation of hypnotherapists. Meanwhile, in Italy, hypnotist Filadelfio Munafo demonstrated that his mesmeric powers were not as powerful as he had imagined. According to the *Sun* on January 15, when held up by two bandits, he thought he had had hypnotised them and that

their wills were firmly under his control. He was thus more than a little upset when they shot him twice in the legs and stole his Rolex and wallet.



Tim Pearce

Immaculate confection

Some Christians may believe that the true meaning of Easter has been lost and that for many people it is simply associated with the consumption of large numbers of expensive chocolate eggs. However it is not clear that an innovation by Richard Manderson of Canberra, Australia aimed at putting the Christian message back into Easter, will find favour with many religious believers. In the run-up to last Easter, Mr Manderson—with a sense of good taste for which the Aussies are renowned—marketed a chocolate figure of Jesus which bleeds red jam and is called the 'immaculate confection'. According to the *Glasgow Herald* on 29 March, it is a model of Christ nailed to a chocolate cross and comes complete with a crown of thorns and a look of agony. The advertising slogan that accompanies the confection reads: 'Put religion back into Easter with an edible icon'.

Starry-eyed

Religious fundamentalism is alive and well not only amongst Christian and Muslim communities but also in the orthodox Jewish community in Israel. According to the *Independent* on 7 May, ultra-orthodox rabbis have declared that Israel's planetarium is off-limits to believers because it dates the world's creation to billions of years ago. Traditional Jewish believers hold that God created the world 5753 years ago, the date being arrived at by adding up the generations in the Old Testament. The ban has arisen despite the fact that the planetarium offers two versions of creation, one for a secular audience in which the Earth's age is given as 15 billion years and the other for religious believers in which it is simply stated that the Earth was created a 'long, long time ago'.

Steve Donnelly is a physicist and a reader in electronics and electrical engineering at the University of Salford.

Ask Olga

Olga Destinée, astral agony aunt answers your psychic questions

Olga has been away in Bermuda awaiting the end of the World as prophesied in the ancient writings of 'Old Mother Shaftoe' the rights to which only Olga holds. Just before the appointed hour of destruction it was revealed to Olga that humanity would be spared so that it could 'redeem itself'. Another day of world calamity has been set and Olga (now dubbed the mother of all Destructions) will reveal it to humanity at the Birmingham Conference Centre where she has exhibition space at the 'New Order and Aquarius expo'.

Dear Olga

He was an ordinary man who liked going to the dogs, drinking beer and Thursday nights. But that was before he was 'touched' by aliens! Now he tells me he has got an IQ of 1,370 and has an altered body chemistry that only allows him to absorb nutrients from Yorkie bars. He's even cancelled his subscription to the *Sporting Life*.

Yes, I have to admit it, my husband has changed from an easy-going punter into a serious party pooper! Even with such a high IQ he still can't set the video to record 'Coronation Street'. He says that his mind is on higher things, things revealed to only him when he was ABDUCTED BY ALIENS!! I must admit he can answer most of the questions on 'Blockbusters'.

But in all the time since his abduction he has never revealed to me his experiences on DOLCIS IV. Don't most husbands tell their wives what happens when they get abducted and experimented upon by creatures from another dimension?

One night my Ron was staring into space and doodling on a piece of paper. I asked him what all the squiggly lines and boxes were meant to be, he told me that it was an 'automatic drawing of Hyperspace'. Well, I'm afraid I snapped and told him that if he didn't share some of his cosmic knowledge with me, he could cross Thursday nights off his social calendar. He then he told me a fantastic story of a UFO landing, an encounter, an operation and a UN/CIA/NATO/MFI/Maxwell cover-up of global dimensions. There is a period not accounted between when he was grabbed in the Quantocks by the 'entities' (as he calls them) and him remembering waking up doing 40 along the bypass just outside of Bodmin.

Can you help Olga? The man at the Boots pill counter says that Ron can be retrogressed by hypnosis—who else can I turn to but you? Can you retrogress Ron and reveal those revelations the Supreme Archgrandmaster of DOLCIS IV gave only unto him?

Miriam Hill



Donald Froom

Olga Destinée replies

My dear, how your letter strikes a chord with me. Yes, I have regressed often, my clients being from all walks of life—merchant bankers, a Spud-U-Like manageress, a car mechanic and a mass murderer in Pentonville jail. But the strangest experiences were those recounted by a mere shop-keeper:

He was a humble greengrocer delivering a basket of exotic fruits to the local hotel when he was abducted in broad daylight. Next day he was found nearly naked and babbling about 'The council of Elders' and 'the benign presence' by a hotel guest who was an atomic physicist at an East European University who swears he heard the words 'quark' and 'boson' from the lips of this delirious abductee. The following extract is taken from a printed manuscript *From Greengrocer to Atomic Physicist Overnight!* (Destinée Press), which I transcribed with my own hand when destiny brought the abductee to me for retrogression.

OLGA: After being taken into the ship—what happened dearie?

ABDUCTEE: All I can remember is the bright lights that blinded me...When my sight returned I found myself on a metal bed, dressed in a tight body stocking emblazoned with stars and comets.

OLGA: Listen to me sweetie, was there anyone else in the room?

ABDUCTEE: Oh yes. There is a tall gent with a white beard dressed in flowing white robes with matching white sandals who was over 9 feet tall but with a strange odour of sanctity about him.

OLGA: Who else was present my dear?

ABDUCTEE: A big white dog with a pink collar, a gnome like figure with a big nose, then there were two statuesque three-breasted women in high shiny boots. Next to them was a two-headed, mutant with an uncanny resemblance to Michael Caine. Further on there was a four-fingered, two-legged, five-eared...

OLGA: Yes dear—no need to describe everyone!

ABDUCTEE: The two three-breasted women stood either side of me and started unbuttoning my body stocking and tying my hands with their belts firmly to the cold metal frame of the bed...

There follows an account of alien sexual experimentation that is very detailed. I am a woman of the world, having had 3 husbands and 6 children, but Mr Potts who held the microphone over the abductee's prone body couldn't keep still during the steamier revelations and I had to take over.

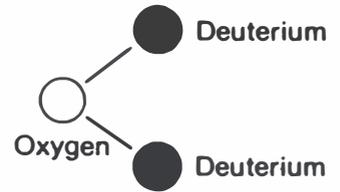
Miriam, learning the abductees' secrets can sometimes be like opening Pandora's box. Send your husband to me for retrogression, Although, I promise that he shall not end up as the above (incognito) abductee. He is presently Mr Destinée Number 4!

Olga Destinée

Cold Fusion Heats Up

Chris Tinsley

More on the cold fusion controversy



"Heavy" water
D₂O

DELIBERATE SCIENTIFIC FRAUD is comparatively rare. When it does happen, it is usually in the life sciences, where even the great Pasteur has recently been accused of it. In the physical sciences it is much less common, since experimental results are usually easier to check. Rushed or sloppy work is more common, but the peer-review system exists to try to stop such work reaching publication. All the strengths and weaknesses of the process by which science advances are illustrated in the Great Cold Fusion fiasco of 1989. History will have to decide whether—as I believe—Fleischmann and Pons were rushed to publish their findings, believing that they had a real and reasonably reproducible effect.

But now the 'failures to replicate' by MIT's Plasma Fusion Centre and Caltech and Harwell have themselves been criticised by well-qualified people, and in particular the work at MIT has been attacked from several quarters for sloppiness and some remarkable examples of 'data reduction', where different processes of manipulation were applied to measurements from the heavy water cell and its light water control.

It is true that the effect is very difficult to replicate. To obtain it, it is necessary to load the palladium to a ratio between the deuterons and the palladium atoms of at least 0.83, and even then the metallurgy is crucial. A recent example of this was an experiment where sixteen cathodes were employed from two batches of metal. With one batch, seven of the eight runs gave excess heat, and in the other there were no signs of it at all; there is speculation that micro-cracks seen in the failing batch may have prevented the effect from having occurred.

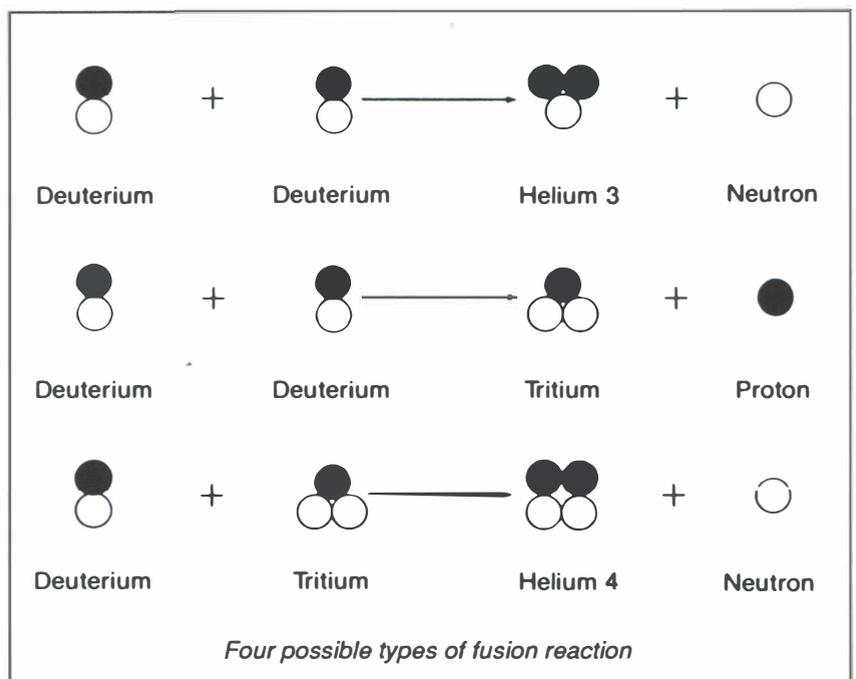
What is quite clear is that the parameters for inducing excess heat were not at first understood. Even now they are not very well understood. McKubre and his team at SRI in California are now satisfied that their very long and meticulous series of calorimetric experiments have shown them how to induce the effect at will, while Fleischmann and Pons themselves, working in their large well-staffed laboratory in France, were able to show videotape of several cells boiling away their electrolyte, as part of the paper they presented at the third international conference on cold fu-

sion in Nagoya, Japan, late last year. In a commentary, to be published in *Fusion Technology*, Professor Hagelstein of MIT calculates the energy released in the boiling episodes and shows them to be very greatly in excess of any possible chemical or storage effect. Indeed, the heat in the vicinity of the cathodes was sufficient to melt their plastic supports, indicating temperatures of about 300°C.

Replication of the effect is now well-established, two particularly good examples being by Takahashi of Osaka University—who uses pulsed input power—and Storms of Los-Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico.

A year ago, I was unconvinced. But there were certain aspects of the matter which I felt needed investigation: the event which perhaps persuaded the Utah duo to continue their work, when a cathode of about a 1 cm cube exploded with sufficient force to blow a four-inch deep hole in a concrete floor; the claims by two laboratories that used cathodes fogged photographic film; and that some experiments appeared to generate so much of the unstable isotope of hydrogen (tritium) that opponents were being driven to cry fraud. These sort of accusations were becoming, I thought, a little too frequent, along with words like 'delusion', 'incompetence', 'wishful science', 'true believer' and the like.

Could it be that honest scepticism and failure to replicate were causing opponents to over-react to the steady stream of



results coming in from around the world (but not from the UK)? And I was not happy that the complaints against the quality of work or the conclusions drawn from the failures to replicate were going unpublished, as they then were. Such news items as did reach the press were, it seemed, always followed by a negative comment from an eminent scientist who seemed not to have reviewed the work in question. The odour of rodent was getting stronger all the time. It was most especially odd to see that the cold fusion 'community' in the USA were reacting in much the same way as their own critics to the papers claiming and then confirming very considerable excess heat from the simple electrolysis of a solution of potassium carbonate in light water with a nickel cathode.

The fact that the deuterons trapped in the 'classical' palladium lattice were further apart than they are in the deuterium molecule—so that their claimed fusion was absurdly improbable—did not prevent some from claiming that there was no scientific rationale behind this light water work. The fact that the excess heat from light water came in very quickly (suggesting a surface effect) and not in erratic bursts, was actually suggested as indicating experimental error, as was the comparative ease with which the experiment was reproduced. It is instructive to consider whether, had this effect been reported before the heavy water work, it would have been followed up or ignored completely.

Should Davy or Faraday have noticed and developed it, the world might have been a very different place today.

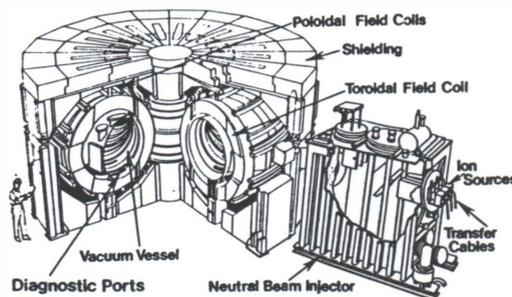
It is necessary to consider the complaints of such few opponents of cold fusion—which may well be a misnomer, but we are stuck with it for now—as are knowledgeable about the field. The first complaint is that in hot plasmas deuteron-deuteron fusion has as its usual products either helium-3 and a dangerous high energy neutron, or tritium and a proton. Only once in ten million fusions is helium-4 produced, and even then a high-energy gamma-ray is emitted.

Whatever is happening in cold fusion is nothing like this. To explain the excess heat we would expect to see a storm of lethal radiation from the reactor—the 'dead graduate student' problem. But there is no such radiation. A little at the fringes of detectability, but nothing dangerous. The second complaint is the lack of reaction products commensurate with the heat. Generally this is indeed true, though there is tritium and considerable helium; but rarely in the required quantities.

Nevertheless, the heat is there, replicated in published work over and over again. Theories have been advanced to explain it, some by physicists of considerable standing. These range from straight nuclear explanations based on our current understanding of quantum physics, to some quite exotic ideas involving fractional quantum states and the 'zero point' energy. The nuclear products have been found, again replicated and published. Perhaps we are trying to understand a submicron silicon microcircuit from the perspective of a thermionic valve expert.

In this context the light water effect is the most intriguing. A recent presentation by the heat-transfer specialist company Thermacore at MIT showed their efforts to demonstrate that the steady excess fifty watts coming for months from a light water cell had a trivial

What is fusion?



The picture shows the scale of the test equipment required when scientists attempt to produce nuclear fusion by conventional means. Fusion is the joining of two light nuclei to form a heavier one. Since they are both positively charged, such fusion is very difficult to achieve and requires high temperatures and pressures to 'squeeze' the atoms together but when it does occur energy is produced as, for instance, in the sun. Hydrogen, the lightest element, is normally used for fusion but hydrogen comes in three varieties (or isotopes): protium (a single proton), deuterium (one proton and one neutron) and tritium (one proton and two neutrons). The two heavier isotopes are much easier to fuse, though they still require very high temperatures and pressures for fusion and this is normally attempted using vessels known as Tokomaks (illustrated above).

It should make not a bit of difference to an atomic nucleus whether it is in a gas or a solid since the nucleus itself is in about the same size ratio to the whole atom as a golf ball is to a golf course. And fusion between two deuterium atoms virtually never produces straight helium-4 (two protons and two neutrons); usually a fast proton or neutron is emitted. This is why 'hot fusion' tokamaks (as shown in the figure) will never produce clean energy. The fast protons, being charged, can be controlled, but the fast neutrons cause damage to the reactor walls.

A number of scientists from laboratories all over the world claim that what is happening in cold fusion experiments is nothing like this. They claim that fast particles have occasionally been observed, as have large amounts of tritium and helium-4 but that the chief signature is the large amount of heat emitted. And their belief is that fusion *is* occurring, as too many have seen helium and tritium for them all to have been in error, or for contamination to explain it. They also claim that evidence is building for nuclear changes in the metal substrate. It may or may not be relevant to note that nuclear fission itself relies on slow neutrons and slow (cold) nuclei in the solid state.

explanation. These efforts were exhaustive and eventually fruitless; the fifty watts kept on coming. Thermacore's reputation is such that replication attempts are underway at several major centres. Dr Reiko Notoya of Hokkaido University actually had such a cell running in Nagoya, along with its control; it was hot to the touch. Following arguments about the equivalence of the cells, she brought them to a lecture at MIT, where they failed, the cathode having been contaminated with oil while being drilled. Nothing daunted, the redoubtable lady came back for another go, this time with more success. When you do not fully understand

what you are doing, then, as with Edison, persistence and care are the only weapons available.

Dr Robert Bush of California State Polytechnic University does claim to have discovered the source of the heat, that he has evidence that the potassium is picking up a proton to form calcium, and that if rubidium salts are used strontium is formed in the same way, in the right quantities. As yet no confirmation has been done of this published work, so far as I know, anyway. While this light water work has been virtually unreported outside the specialist press, it has attracted considerable commercial interest in the USA; with claimed gross excess energy ratios of up to 20:1 this is not surprising. Observers of the field believe that the first large-scale (kilowatt) systems will be seen demonstrated within about six months, and small free-standing self-energising systems perhaps a little later.

There is another different approach to this research, one in which there is no electrolysis. In general this method (most dramatically demonstrated by Yamaguchi of NTT and Kucherov et al of LUCH near Moscow—the latter's work being the subject of an extraordinary paper in the journal *Physics Letters A*) involves energising a palladium plate previously saturated with deuterium. These experiments seem to be reproducible with comparative ease, and considerable heat is released, along with nuclear products in profusion, but again not enough to explain the heat. The particular example of the LUCH work is particularly instructive: they used low-energy glow-discharge to trigger the reaction, and when studied under a microscope the plates showed what appeared to be areas of melting, with voids formed in the metal. Should Kucherov's work be replicated, (and we should not forget that, although all these experiments are slightly different in detail, they do tend to confirm one another) then this must be regarded as one of the most crucial findings of all.

There will now be many problems to solve, but we are presented with a difficult question. Does all this work mean that the world's energy problems are over? Ridiculous, of course not, I tell myself. But from a purely intellectual view I have to accept the reality of results replicated over and over by competent scientists. The argument 'it can't be happening, you can't explain it, therefore it is not happening' is an emotional one, and it is wearing a bit thin anyway. We went in less than three years from a reactor in Chicago which gave out minuscule quantities of heat to the death and maiming of thousands in Japan. We have seen two bicycle mechanics derive the basic laws of aerodynamics and realise man's ancient dream of flight, and almost the commonest element of the earth's crust become the basis of the electronics revolution. We know that some solid state phenomena lack any agreed theoretical basis. Faraday said that nothing is too wonderful to be true, and Feynman said that science is disbelieving the opinions of experts.

On a logical, intellectual level I must conclude that nuclear physics is incomplete when referring to the solid state—and I do appreciate that it should make no difference to a nucleus what state its atom is in—and that the world's energy problems are indeed over.

What is absolutely plain is that we must all take great care to maintain intellectual discipline. We must not accept

as definitive any scientific results which claim to disprove effects claimed by others, nor assume that the 'best' laboratories can be totally relied upon to do perfect work. We must not allow reason to override evidence, as the Academie Francaise did in about 1800 when they declared that the idea of stones falling from the sky was against reason and we lost so many meteorite specimens to the rubbish heaps, or when continental drift was derided in scientific journals as 'a fairy tale'. Planck ruefully concluded that new theories needed about twenty years before acceptance, and many instances exist of solid evidence being ridiculed by the science community before eventual acceptance. Science needs the careful researchers who validate reasonable theories, and it also should be more sympathetic towards the wild men of science who claim to have evidence which contradicts the current accepted wisdom—however dubious their rationale for trying the experiment.

Misunderstanding of scientific principles and misunderstanding of the mathematics of coincidence, together with sheer fraud, mysticism and attempts to apply science to subjective phenomena, are the causes of much delusion in the minds of many. In any effort to set the record straight in such matters we must avoid the assumption that phenomena that are odd or difficult to reproduce are the result of fraud or self-delusion.

Suggestions for further reading

'Nuclear Product Ratio for glow discharge in deuterium'. (Karabut, Kucherov and Savvatimova, *Physics Letters A* (1992) pages 265–272.

'Further Evidence for Cold Fusion—a report on the third international conference (D T Thompson), *Platinum Metals Review* 1993, 37(1), pages 14–16.

Numerous papers in *Fusion Technology*, the journal of the American Nuclear Society.

The ongoing and frequently hilarious quarrels on the computer network bulletin board 'sci.physics.fusion'.

Chris Tinsley is a computer engineer living in Nottingham.

Errata

We are sorry that the gremlins intruded in our presentation of Ray Ward's article on Cyril Burt (*The Skeptic*, 7.2).

The journal which Burt edited was called *The British Journal of Statistical Psychology*; the correct name of the author of *The Burt Affair* is Robert B Joynson; In two places, a line was missed out: in the fifth paragraph, the passage should read '...deceptions' and 'misdemeanours'. No potential supporter of Burt was invited, and his long-time colleague...'; and in the fourth paragraph the penultimate sentence should read 'As Hearnshaw admits, we know very little about his marriage, and it's just as possible...'. Finally, in the third sentence of the ninth paragraph, 'used to' should read 'used it'.

The editors apologise to the author and our readers for these errors.

Rajneesh: The Failed Guru

Brian Morris

The rise and fall of a modern 'god'

IN THE LATE 1970'S several of my friends suddenly found themselves a guru. In the wake of the Beatles and the counterculture this was hardly novel. Mystics, gurus and oriental cults were then the fashion—as they still are—and the Hare Krishna tribe still chanted and sang up and down Charing Cross Road. But the guru my friends embraced was not like any other. For the Bhagwan, as he was called, explicitly described himself as god (or, at other times, the Buddha) and advocated sex as a way of salvation. He offered, I was informed, real 'freedom' and the key to salvation was 'letting go' of the ego, of one's own individuality—by paradoxically offering oneself in total submission to the authority of the guru.

Prompted by my friends I read one of his books, *The Psychology of the Esoteric*. It was, I discovered, a strange mixture of pop psychology and religion, with a touch of existentialism thrown in, and pretended to enact a synthesis of all religions. The thoughts of the theosophists and the mystic Gurdjieff lurked in the background. The book was written in a very persuasive, readable style, and indicated both wide erudition and a rather naive understanding of the material world.

Philosophically the book was hardly original, simply propounding a form of religious idealism that had been advocated by Vedantist scholars like Sankara more than a thousand years ago. I was hardly convinced, and only bemused at Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh's love of paradox. Here was a man suggesting that we must all be seekers after truth, not the disciple of any guru: 'Do not seek a guru', he wrote; 'because gurus are crippling'. At the same time however he was demanding that his followers 'surrender' themselves to him, and he proclaimed 'I will transform you'. And my friends more than surrendered themselves to this 'Enlightened Master'. Here was a man suggesting like the Quakers that god was within each of us, yet at the same time announcing that anyone who believed in god was not only mentally retarded but utterly mediocre. He was a man who wrote that we should only observe and experience life: 'do not verbalise' he argued. Yet practically everything he said in his numerous public discourses was dutifully taped by his disciples and published. It was reckoned that around twenty-five new books by the Bhagwan were published each year. His books (talks) are still being published: they made him into a very wealthy man.

In reading his books I always had the feeling he was something of a religious con-man. This, in fact, was almost how he described himself. 'I am the best showman in the whole history of mankind' he declared. The Bhagwan was not renowned for his modesty. He was also an intellectual



fake, often quoting such figures as Jesus, Marx, and the Buddha with words which were either spurious or complete fabrications.

Mohan Chandra Rajneesh was born in 1931 in a small village near Jabalpur in India, the son of a cloth merchant. He came from a Jain background, and studied philosophy at Saugar University, taking his MA in 1957. Until 1966 he taught philosophy at the University. He then became a freelance lecturer and erstwhile guru, and in 1970 he moved to Bombay where he found support from some wealthy people. He made a name for himself by his outspoken criticisms of Gandhi and orthodox Hinduism, and he seems to have bowled many people over by his charisma and personal charm. Abandoning the role of 'acharya' (teacher), he took the title of 'Bhagwan', which means 'god' or 'the blessed one'.

Rajneesh was by all accounts a strange and eccentric guru. He lived in sumptuous luxury, and in his heyday owned a fleet of Rolls Royces. He advocated free sex, and had promiscuous sexual encounters with a host of admiring female devotees who, like one of my friends, swooned around him. He said he had loved more women than any man in history. 'In the beginning', he recalled, 'I used to keep count, but I've lost track'. He thus emphasised 'spiritual sexuality' as a way of salvation, and stressed the physical release of inhibitions through 'dynamic meditation'—all as a way of enlightenment. Sex, for the Bhagwan, was divine, and must not be repressed. It was all part of 'letting go', 'surrendering the ego', 'losing the mind'—all bound up in submitting oneself to the authority of the 'En-

lightened Master'—the Bhagwan himself. His disciples wore orange robes and decked themselves in a beaded necklace that held a medallion containing his portrait. Most of the teachings and the life style of this 'sex guru' flew in the face of orthodox Hinduism, which is highly puritanical, and it is not surprising that he attracted young people from Europe and America. Most of his Indian followers were wealthy, professional people.

In 1974 the Bhagwan moved to Poona, and there established his famous ashram; but again, it was quite unlike any other ashram. What people in Poona told me about the place is fully confirmed—and detailed—in Hugh Milne's book *Bhagwan: The God that Failed* (Sphere, 1986). For not only was there 'free-for-all-sex', but 'there was a conscious indulgence in wine, music, song, feasting and sensual massage'. A former bodyguard of the Bhagwan, Milne, like his guru, had numerous love affairs and sexual liaisons. The ashram was seen by Rajneesh as a kind of experiment, combining a range of Western therapies—bio-energetics, primal therapy, gestalt, encounter groups—with meditative practices drawn from all the major religious traditions, but especially the Sufi and Tantric traditions. (It is significant that nowhere in his voluminous writings on religion does Rajneesh mention Africa.) It was this 'diverse package' that was known as 'dynamic meditation', and its aim evidently was spiritual transformation, expressed as the awakening of a 'higher consciousness', as the 'experience of Buddhahood', or as the explosion of the 'life-force' or 'Kundalini energy' within the person.

As many of the devotees of Bhagwan were involved (it was alleged) in drugs and prostitution, and the ashram itself, as a profit-making religious charity, was being harassed for tax evasion, Rajneesh's whole enterprise soon came under the scrutiny of the Indian authorities. Although not mentioned by Milne, I was told in Poona that the Indian authorities also suspected CIA activities in the ashram. Inevitably, facing arrest and having generated a lot of ill-feeling among the people of Poona, the Rajneesh decided to shift his ashram to the United States. It was all done rather abruptly: only a few disciples knew about the move. There was then about six thousand sannyasins (disciples) living in or around the ashram in Poona. Thus it was that in June 1981 the guru Rajneesh moved with his devotees to Oregon, having bought the Big Muddy Ranch for \$5.75 million. Like Aurobindo

before him, the new city was to be built by his devotees and named after him, Rajneeshpuram.

The events surrounding the activities of the Rajneesh foundation in America are even more involved and bizarre than those in Poona. Corruption, intrigue, conspiracy charges, arson, racketeering, and attempted murder were all associated with the new 'commune' which suddenly fell apart in 1985. Under the leadership of the Bhagwan and his secretary and confidante Ma Anand Sheela—described by one recent journalist as a 'foul-mouthed harpy'—the ranch initially flourished. Gurdjieff Dam, a \$1.5 million earthen dam was constructed, along with the Krishnamurti Lake holding 350 million gallons of water. Free labour provided by the sannyasins soon had about 2700 acres of land under cultivation, and a sophisticated sewage system was established. The Oregon commune soon had its own shopping mall, restaurants, stores, clinic, and offices, as well as its own airport and university—The Rajneesh International Meditation University. The whole undertaking—the 'communal Buddhafield' as it was called—was organised as a capitalist enterprise, and around \$200 million were spent in less than four years developing Rajneeshpuram into a new-age, futuristic commune. It was quite unlike the sprawling, untidy, hippie communes of an earlier decade! Most members of the commune were white, middle-class professionals. Around two-thirds of them had university degrees, and almost all were in their thirties or early forties. There were no nurseries or schools, however, for children were

positively discouraged. As Judith Thompson and Paul Heelas write in *The Way of the Heart: the Rajneesh Movement* (Aquarian, 1986), their sympathetic account of the Rajneesh movement, women were asked 'to give up the distraction of having babies so that they [could] focus their attention on Bhagwan's vision'. But women played a central role in the administration of the commune, under the direction, it appears, of Ma Anand Sheela.

By 1983 'Rajneeshism' was being propagated as a new religion, the Bhagwan had taken a vow of silence, and between four and five thousand devotees were living on the ranch. Then things started to go awry. Relations between the commune and their Oregon neighbours, which had never been amicable, began to seriously deteriorate. Devious methods were employed by the followers of the Bhagwan to rig

Bhagwan cult returns as 'Club Meditation', Sex guru takes a last trip to eternity
The guru took his throne and returned to Poona, but not before the American authorities had charged him with illegal immigration and with threatening the health of the age of followers.

Parable of the Rolls-Royces
The guru's press officer, Ma Anand Sheela, a former correspondent, was an ally from the Ohio Commune. Sheela is a former member of a cult. Sheela is a former member of a cult. Sheela is a former member of a cult.

Golden guru
The guru is a former member of a cult. The guru is a former member of a cult. The guru is a former member of a cult.

Guru drops his God title
The guru is a former member of a cult. The guru is a former member of a cult. The guru is a former member of a cult.

Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh
The guru is a former member of a cult. The guru is a former member of a cult. The guru is a former member of a cult.

the local elections. The devotees were encouraged to build up an arsenal of handguns and semi-automatic weapons in order to protect the guru; and Ma Sheela regularly appeared in public or on national television, brandishing a magnum, and denouncing the local people of Oregon as 'bigots', or 'hicks' or 'monkeys'. Such antipathy towards outsiders was coupled with growing control and intolerance within the commune. A siege mentality developed. Visitors to Rajneeshpuram were strictly monitored, activities in the commune and contacts with outsiders strictly controlled, and an electronic surveillance system was installed—every telephone tapped and every room in the commune bugged. In 1984, it appears, an attempt was made by Ma Sheela and her acolytes to poison, with salmonella, a nearby town of nine hundred people. On top of this the Bhagwan was accused of conspiring to violate U.S. immigration laws.

In the autumn of 1985 the commune suddenly fell apart amid acrimony, confusion and paranoia. The community—the 'Buddhafield'—was dramatically split asunder, the schism largely focussing around what had all the signs of a lover's quarrel between Rajneesh and Ma Anand Sheela. In September Sheela abruptly left the commune for West Germany, along with a small group of leaders. She announced that she had grown tired of pandering to the whims and needs and irrationalities of a guru whom she dubbed a liar and a crook. This seems to have caused the Bhagwan to break his vow of silence, and the following month he accused Sheela of establishing her own 'fascist regime' within the commune, and fleeing the Rajneesh corporation to the tune of some \$55 million. He likened his secretary to Adolf Hitler, as someone who lusted for power and was wracked with jealousy. As in Poona four years earlier, the Bhagwan made another abrupt departure from his commune, this time destined for Bermuda. But he was arrested while fleeing the country, at Charlotte, North Carolina, where he was fined \$400,000, and given a suspended sentence of ten years. Around the same time Sheela was arrested in Germany, and after extradition and plea-bargaining with the U.S. authorities, was eventually sentenced to four and a half years imprisonment for immigration fraud, arson and attempted murder.

After travelling the world for a while seeking a safe haven—many countries, including Sweden, Germany and Britain refused to grant him a visa—the Bhagwan eventually returned to India. He died at Poona in January 1990, aged only 58.

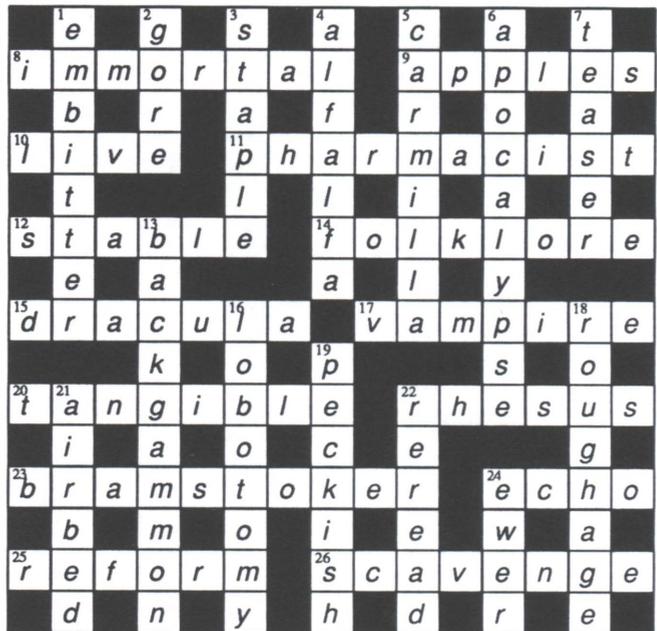
'Jesus saves, Moses invests, Bhagwan spends' was a favourite bumper sticker at the Oregon commune, displayed as Rajneesh drove silently among his admiring devotees in one of his 93 Rolls Royces. At Poona many people were appalled at the Bhagwan's somewhat arrogant display of wealth, when he totally ignored the poverty of Indian people just outside the ashram. But unlike Gandhi, Rajneesh was never really concerned with the material well-being of ordinary people—only with the spiritual salvation of the affluent. He described himself as a 'materialist spiritualist' and remarked 'blessed are the rich because they are already inheriting the kingdom of god'. He stridently supported and advocated the capitalist system and the work-ethic, and

held very anthropocentric views, considering humans as 'nature's highest peak'. In many ways Rajneesh updated the Protestant ethic, shifting the emphasis from production to consumption. His eclectic hedonistic mysticism is the religious counterpart to much post-modernist philosophy—simply a reflection of the culture of consumerism.

The biography of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh is a strange story. It recounts the sudden rise of a shrewd, intelligent, charismatic figure from obscurity to world fame—for at the peak of his popularity the Bhagwan had thousands of devotees, and assets well in excess of \$100 million, and he was hailed as another messiah. His demise as a guru was equally sudden, and he now stands discredited, although as 'Osho' his remaining devotees at Poona still attempt to keep his memory green. He is alleged to have never lived and to have never died. But perhaps Lord Acton was right: power tends to corrupt, and absolute power, even religious power, corrupts absolutely.

Brian Morris teaches anthropology at Goldsmith's College, London.

Crossword Solution



Hearty congratulations to Jane Skinner of Cambridge, who is the winner of our Skepticus crossword competition in issue 7.2 of *The Skeptic*. Our Conspiracy Theory Manager has arranged for the Rosicrucian Ascended Masters of the Cosmic Flame (in association with *MIS*, *Reader's Digest* and the Pope) to precipitate a copy of James Randi's latest Prometheus book *The Mask of Nostradamus* into Ms Skinner's personal library.

Prometheus Books specialises in books about pseudoscience and the paranormal. For a free catalogue, write to Prometheus Books, 10 Crescent View, Loughton, Essex, IG10 4PZ, or telephone 081 508 2989.

Beyond the Near-Death Experience

Rory MacCallum

A conversation with leading parapsychologist Susan Blackmore

THIS APRIL the Edinburgh Science Festival played host to, among other things, a day long meeting on parapsychology entitled 'Exploring the Limits of Human Experience.' Among the speakers was Dr Susan Blackmore, lecturer in psychology at the University of the West of England in Bristol. Dr Blackmore is widely regarded as an international authority on Out-of-Body-Experiences (OBEs). She was drawn into the topic when, as a student, she experienced the phenomenon for herself and she has already written one book on the subject: *Beyond the Body*.

At her lecture in April she addressed the subject of Near-Death-Experiences (NDEs) which she accounts for as hallucinations. However, rather than dismissing the phenomenon, she uses it to relate her own beliefs regarding her personal experiences. I interviewed her before her talk at the Royal Museum of Scotland. Over a microphone and ice-cream I asked her why she put NDEs and OBEs down to hallucinations after twenty years of investigating the paranormal, 'I suppose two reasons. The idea of there being a spirit world does not make any sense to me theoretically. That's not to say it's wrong. Ideas that appear nonsensical have in the past have proved right and they make sense in another way. But where this other world could be, what the soul could be, what it's made of, I can't make any sense of it. Secondly, the evidence which seems to suggest there is a spirit world is very bad. I have not in the twenty years of researching this subject come across any evidence that's compelling.'

Do other parapsychologists tend to support your view? 'No, most, I would suggest, think there is something that leaves the body in an OBE and that people see information paranormally at a distance while they're having OBEs. So I'm definitely out on a limb. Does the evidence support my theory? Well, I don't like the idea of my side and their side. There are favourite theories, of course. I think the evidence is building up to explain the NDE in terms of physiology and the psychology we already have. On the other hand, the evidence for paranormal events during NDEs is bouncing along the bottom as it always has. People are always coming up with anecdotal examples but they're not followed through. The backup isn't good enough.'

How common are NDEs and OBEs in the population? 'The OBE tends to happen when you're relaxed, half asleep or very tired, but it can happen at any time. Somewhere between 10–15% of people from all the surveys we've got have an OBE at some point in their life. It's quite common.



Susan Blackmore

As for NDEs, one way of answering that would be to look at Ken Ring's 1980 study of 100 people who had come close to death through various means. Of these, something like 60% had experienced peace, which is very common among NDEs. Rather less had seen the tunnel—around 37%. About 40% experience the OBE while 23% go into the tunnel. The figures go down as the experience progresses. 10% go into the world beyond the tunnel. By more recent data only around 5% of NDEs get the life review.'

But people seem to experience these things in a variety of ways. Not everyone sees the tunnel of light; as you say, some people appear to spontaneously leave their bodies. Does the variety of experience not mitigate your theory of it as just an hallucination? 'No, not really. And if you say "just an hallucination" that's not an explanation—it won't get us anywhere. There are people who say that, but I do not. I'm saying it is hallucinatory, but it's a whole bunch of very interesting hallucinations coming about for different reasons, under different circumstances. What I want to understand as a scientist is why it should occur at this time to this person and why there is a commonality to these hallucinations.'

'That may sound subtly different but is actually importantly different to the view of: "it's just an hallucination". It won't do just to dismiss it. The variety of experience is what we expect given the complexity of the brain and the different ways in which it starts to shut down. Basically with an NDE we're talking about either a severe stress or shock which would change brain function. Or the beginnings of the shut down which would tend to lead to death.'

'If you think back to 2001, *A Space Odyssey* when they pull out the plug and the computer starts singing 'daisyeee...' Presumably all you see in that film is they're pulling out different bits of the computer brain. Now, what happens in any individual brain—which bits get pulled out—will depend on what's happening at the time; the person's physical state, whether they've had a blow to the head, whether it's

primarily lack of oxygen. All that will affect which parts of the brain are affected in what order. That will determine what kinds of hallucinations there are. So, I think the variety is precisely what we expect.'

Many people claim to have psychic experiences while in the OBE state, like precognition. In your view, should these claims be discounted or do they warrant further investigation? 'Do I think the paranormal claims need investigating? Yes, certainly I do, but we're all trying our hardest. Let me take an example; say someone comes close to death, they're resuscitated and say they floated out of their body and saw a green teddy bear on top of a cupboard that no one knew was there. So, people go and look and there it is and: wow! The green teddy bear. Now, that's the kind of story we get all the time. Of course it needs investigating. If that's true and not just a coincidence then I'm wrong and our whole world view needs revising. Because the view I'm working on is saying there is no need for any paranormal explanation that sort of evidence would be a direct challenge to the kind of theory I'm trying to express. Yes, we need to work on them but it's very difficult. These claims are made and you chase them back to discover the person said that, but there was no one else there at the time or no one can remember. The evidence is lousy. Give me a good case and I'm always after it, but most of them disappear at the first hurdle.'

Something that seems apparent to me about parapsychological research in particular is people seem to have very entrenched views, especially as the matters dealt with have a spiritual aspect. 'I don't know about particularly, but it certainly is a problem. The issues involved here are life and death issues. Whether you're going to survive death; whether there is any point to being alive; whether there is a God who put us here and ordained what we should do; whether we have a soul. These are things people care deeply about and trying to do a science that addresses these issues, of course, you're going to get to peoples' deepest fears.

'I think the deepest fear of all is the fear of not existing and I think the idea we exist is an illusion anyway. The idea that there is a self in there that decides things, acts and is responsible and continues from day to day and goes to sleep in the evening and wakes up in the morning is a whopping great illusion. And it's bandied around with all these fears; it's protected with ideas of self that are cast on by language and everything else. No wonder people are terrified when you start saying it's not like that.'

But a lot of people who claim to have OBEs seem to be trying to illustrate that very point: by saying physical reality is illusory. 'But I don't think they do. A lot of people who have OBEs are just surprised. But some want to use it to support their view that: (a) I've got a self and this self is important, and (b) this self isn't my body, it's something more than my body. That it's not an illusion. I'm saying precisely the opposite. Even in our everyday lives we've got this ridiculous illusion we're something important, that we're in charge and that we are something that carries on. And that's not true. I don't think it's true, anyway. So the OBEer who believes they leave the body and goes to another world, they may be calling this a mystical or spiritual view but to me it's a kind of crass materialism. There isn't anything

more real than this and this is just a mental construction.'

So, do you think all other apparently psychic phenomena, like precognition and telepathy, have explanations which are other than paranormal? 'Roughly speaking I think all these things are psychic illusions, brought about in a similar way to visual illusions. The brain in trying to make sense of the world comes up with theories that are wrong. Our brains are very good at looking for connections between things, meaningful relationships—we look for them all the time. That's the basis of our ability to look for cause and effect and to understand our world. But it also leads us to being very bad at judging probabilities and if any two things come along that look meaningfully related we say there must be a connection and if we can't find one we say it must be psychic or precognition or whatever. In this way we get into building illusions. Once you've got the idea of psychic phenomena you start to use that theory to explain all kinds of chance things.'

We then have a drawn out discussion about whether the typewriter on the table before us exists or not. The conversation takes on a distinctly philosophical slant and Dr Blackmore goes on to assert on what she calls the 'genuine mystical experience', that: 'all there is, is the here and now. All the other stuff is a massive illusion. The self we construct is just an illusion because actually there's only brains and chemicals and this "self" doesn't exist—it never did and there's nobody to die. When you get there and you die you'll realise that it's fine and there's nothing to worry about. It'd be a lot easier if we realised that all along. That's mystical insight.'

This is very deep-seated stuff, though. Would you say you've come to these conclusions through science alone? 'No, I've come to it through natural mystical experiences and through twenty years of meditation; I meditate every day. My whole life is bound up in this; I don't see science as separate from it. Yes, of course it's come through my training—I did a degree in physiology and psychology and that's part of it. But it's much, much more than that.'

The ideas you come up with seem almost to point to a new body of learning. Perhaps there's a whole new method of approaching things we haven't even touched upon; that you're suggesting science isn't quite up to coping with these ideas. 'Is science up to it? The science we have at the moment isn't doing it very much, but it's doing it a bit. Quite a few psychologists are heading in this direction. I'm not alone—there are people in cognitive science, some physicists too, trying to see where this fits in. What a lot of scientists haven't realised is it fits in completely and there isn't a conflict. So, I can't see a break, but science is always evolving. Buddhism I'm particularly interested in and there's a lot of connections being made between Buddhism and psychology.'

But surely that's just a throwback to pre-science days? 'No, I think the Buddha had insights which we're only beginning to work out now. Some are now becoming perfectly obvious. One of his central insights was the transient nature of self. He basically said if you think you have a permanent self that's ever abiding then you are a complete fool. Words to that effect. I think what he was trying to say

has become increasingly clear in cognitive science, artificial intelligence and psychology: that the self is a construction. That is clear. We talk about the social construction of the self, the linguistic construction of the self and so on. I think he saw that perfectly clearly and we haven't caught up yet.

'So no, not a throwback to religion. I'm not evoking gods or other worlds. I'd hesitate to call Buddhism even a religion. It doesn't have a god or a life after death aspect. So, I don't think it's a throw back at all. Someone got there first but we're getting there in a different way, you see. Not through meditating under a tree for forty years but in more constructive way: by using the building blocks of science. And I think we're coming to the same place.'

So, looking more broadly, where do you think parapsychology is going as a science? 'It's a very interesting science. One problem it has is lack of money. A huge proportion of people are interested in the paranormal. They pick up books about it, watch TV programmes about it. Kids in school and students in university are all fascinated by it. But nobody who has the money wants to give it to such a fringe subject. So, we've always got problems in just getting any research done.'

'But, where do I think it's going? I don't think it's going to find any psychic phenomena, but if it does it will be extremely interesting. If there are any psychic phenomena at all they are going to change some other sciences quite dramatically. I think the way it will go is to understand the sort of experiences that lead people to believe there are

psychic phenomena. But by many peoples' definition that wouldn't be parapsychology. In that case you would have to say it would die, but I suspect it never will.'

At this point the tape runs out and Susan Blackmore tells me she has to change clothes, prepare her notes and get to the lecture hall, all in the next hour. In that time I wander through Edinburgh's old stone centre with thoughts about not existing and the 'transient nature of self' occasionally drifting their winding way across my consciousness. I meander to the Royal Museum of Scotland on Chambers Street where the hall is packed out with press and pundits alike, eager for the Doctor's words. During the proceedings an argument ensues between a heckler and an offended spectator who tells the antagonist to 'shut up' as they have 'paid to hear Dr Blackmore.' The doctor is unruffled: 'I like audience participation,' she says, 'it gives me the chance to think what I'll say next.'

And so it goes on, till the conclusion of the lecture. 'What happens when we die?' the Doctor asks rhetorically. Moving to a projector she flicks a switch and the theatre wall is lit up with one bold message. It reads simply: 'The End.'

Rory MacCallum is a freelance journalist living in Edinburgh.

Susan Blackmore's new book, *Dying to Live: Science and the Near Death Experience*, is published by Grafton in June 1993.

HOT STUFF!

IN ISSUE 69

- FT GUIDE TO CROP CIRCLE HOAXERS ... who's doing them, and why ...
- COLD FUSION - New Discoveries suggest we are on the brink of an age of limitless cheap power.
- KARMARPA CHAOS - intrigue and schism as ancient Tibetan Buddhist order enthrones its latest incarnated leader.
- "RED MERCURY": Alchemical Substance or sinister scam?
- THE MOA - long believed extinct - sighted in New Zealand.
- CANNIBALISM in the Far East.



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Meditation: Skepticism or Cynicism?

Adrian West

Why meditation is not to be feared

IN THE MARCH/APRIL EDITION of *The Skeptic*, Arthur Chappell presents a particular, and rather cynical, view of meditation in his article 'The Myths of Meditation'. While the article undoubtedly reflects his experiences and research into the subject, it is, I believe, rather misleading, and owes more to the great tradition of cynicism than to the openness and objectivity of healthy skepticism.

The open questioning of issues and beliefs promoted by true skepticism is a highly positive antidote to dogma and ignorance of all kinds, but requires great effort and personal integrity in order to remain balanced and objective. Cynicism, on the other hand, is a rather easy and sensational technique that can be used to convince the unwary of the validity of one's view, requiring merely that one makes some emotive and disparaging remarks on the topic, backing this up perhaps with a few selected examples. When this is done well it can be very convincing; I do it to myself quite regularly. Even in scientific journals this technique can be remarkably effective, although for determining truth it is of little value. Indeed, in this approach there is the danger of dismissing, all too easily, something of great value.



Mr Chappell's article is all the more misleading in view of the hidden implication that it authoritatively debunks all, or at least most, forms of meditation. I would stress that I have no grievance with Mr Chappell, whose article has much to commend it in terms of popular journalism, although somewhat less, I believe, to honest skepticism. My purpose in this response is simply to balance the rather negative nature of the article by drawing attention to some of the positive aspects of meditation. I shall do this firstly in a general way, and then with reference to some of the specific points raised in Mr Chappell's article.

Meditation is a particularly easy target for cynicism, because it deals with internal states of mind. It is rather difficult to demonstrate objectively what one's state of mind is, or how it has been affected by some event or practice, even though the effect for oneself can be quite dramatic. I am not referring to something especially esoteric or transcendental here. It can be as simple as being shouted at by someone at work, or treating yourself to a chocolate cake. The effect on your state of mind, or happiness, can be clearly noticed. Generally, people seem to believe that they have little control over their state of mind, and if anything, that they are blown hither and thither by external circumstances, happy one moment, sad the next; frantic and neurotic one day at work, and later relaxed and peaceful on holiday in the sun. That our states of mind change is, of course, clear, but a little reflection will show that we can have quite a significant say in what our state of mind actually is. Just start thinking about some unhappy recent event or argument, or perhaps someone who cut you up in the rush hour, or said something unkind to you at work, and dwell actively on that for a while. With a little practice at this kind of thing you can learn to develop a more aggressive, embittered and hostile state of mind quite quickly (we normally get a lot of this sort of practice.) In a similar way it is possible, though perhaps less intuitive, to actively develop *positive* states of mind.

If you are at all like me, then you will probably have periods where your mind is so full of quite trivial concerns that it is hard to think straight, let alone apply your mind clearly and calmly to the problem at hand for any sustained amount of time, even though you know rationally that this would be the best thing to do. The situation is compounded when we are in the grip of strong negative emotions.



Some forms of meditation are aimed precisely at regaining and improving that degree of control over mental focus, although it is easy to get the impression that they are trying to stifle thought. Perhaps the following quotes from the Dalai Lama will help to clarify this point:

Reasoning is needed when the mind is emotional and thoughts of anger, hatred and attachment are strong. Then it is hopeless to reason. When these feelings are the general atmosphere, then almost always there is tragedy.

We might have some very special reasons for the prevention of conceptual thought, but if we prevented all types of conceptual thought apart from distorted misconceptions, there would be no way of cultivating wisdom.

The ability to calmly focus the intellect, free from neurotic distraction, combined with some ability to actively develop positive states of mind is, I would argue, something worth trying to develop, and indeed is the explicit aim in the Buddhist traditions. This is the positive aspect of meditation. A great deal more could of course be said. A large number of people from over the last 2,500 years have spent much of their lives and energy working with these topics. Not all of them, I would contend, were deluded charlatans.

Of course, meditation does have a close relationship to techniques used for brainwashing, political indoctrination and advertising. This is unsurprising, since these are all methods of working on the human mind. It is interesting to note that although it may seem strange for Buddhist monks to spend several hours each day in meditation cultivating compassion and mental clarity, a large proportion of westerners spend a similar amount of time sitting attentively in front of a TV set, cultivating, perhaps unwittingly, a rather different view of reality. Perhaps we think that we are not all that much affected by that, or that the conditioning we receive from the media is a fair representation of reality anyway.

Nonetheless, with meditation, if you are particularly adept, you can probably convince yourself of anything you want to, in much the same way that you can if you are particularly good at arguing. And, just as with arguing, you just have to learn from your own experience and common sense, about when you have exceeded the limit of credibility. Clearly this is open to abuse (like most techniques of

any value) and if you abrogate your responsibility for yourself entirely to some group or mystic guru, no matter how charismatic, then unfortunate consequences may ensue. We could play the same game with the history of science, and look at the misguided and ignoble leaders there too, but this would be out of proportion to the great achievements such as the Sony Walkman and New York. To conclude on the basis of those examples however that there is little of positive value in either meditation or science would present an unbalanced view of the situation, even if one's Sony had broken down, or one didn't like New York.

Turning now to address some of the specific points raised by Mr Chappell, in the interests of brevity I will concentrate on some instances that illustrate the general flavour of the article. My specific references will be taken

from Buddhism, a reasonably established tradition, with which I have some familiarity. Looking first at the general tone typified by the statement 'The cult member who questions and doubts must be shown to the group to be giving in to his evil, Satanic mind...', this may correctly represent the working of some groups. Indeed to some extent, groups of human beings do seem to have this intolerant attitude to open questioning quite commonly, as you may know if you have ever had to deal with a fast-fit exhaust centre. However, it is not so extreme in all groups, even those involved in meditation.

The role of doubt, and its converse, faith, is a precarious one given that there are few absolute

truths available to us. We have to find a balance between blind faith on the one hand, and being paralysed by indecision on the other. This is just as true of buying a house as it is of the spiritual life (spiritual in the Buddhist sense). We also need to look at our own character here, and to try and distinguish healthy skepticism, based on the desire for truth and understanding, from a basic emotional unwillingness to come to any definite conclusion, which can be a sort of apathy. If we wish to make progress it is important to have some decisiveness about our direction, a provisional faith as it were. The subtlety of the distinction is often misunderstood, and perhaps abused too as Mr Chappell emphasises.

Secondly, 'We effectively create our own twilight zone through meditation', and associated comments on the creation of an imaginary reality in the head that 'creates a



Tibetan iconograph of the primary afflictive emotions:
Greed, Hatred and Ignorance.

dissatisfaction with material reality and can lead to hallucinations, delusions, and nightmares...'. Clearly there is great potential for this. Exactly how much of our normal perception is a clear, unbiased view of the real world, and how much is due to our own 'twilight zone' is unclear. Two people inhabiting the same environment can have very different experiences of that world. Indeed, even one person has a rather variable response to the same environment, dependent on 'which side of the bed they got out of that morning'.

Rather than be perpetually bemused by our, often rather immature, emotional responses to situations (like when I lose my pencil), meditation allows us to have some insight and control of our own emotional states. Often this is as simple as just taking time to be a bit more honest with yourself. Of course, again, this can be abused with the strong effects mentioned by Mr Chappell. It is interesting that the effects from these quite simple practices can be as strong as that; perhaps they could be put to good use? We can use these effective techniques positively to bring our emotional state into line with our rational understanding. For example, you may know rationally that hatred and excessive anxiety are not very productive emotions to have, yet perhaps you get engrossed in them anyway. Understanding something rationally is an excellent starting point, but it is only the very beginning of putting it into practice. A lot of time and effort is required to do this of course, but it is nice to have some confidence that it might be possible.

The quote 'This should not be taken as a higher plane of consciousness—but merely as a different way of seeing this one' rather depends on what the distinction might mean. However the caveat 'rather like wearing rose-tinted glasses', could also be rendered 'like taking off your rose- (or more commonly perhaps, dark-) tinted glasses'. Indeed, is it even possible not to view the world through some form of tinted spectacles? To be completely objective and rational? if not, then just how far are we from the mark?

Similarly with 'The methods used in the various kinds of mediation are surprisingly uniform'. This is true at a particular level, in much the same way that all sciences can look like hypothesis/prediction/experiment. English and French may sound surprisingly similar to an oriental.

Moving towards the end of the article, emotion seems to get the better of logic: 'If crime goes down on the basis of that logic, it might just as well be said to go down because such and such a percentage of pig farmers eat porridge on Thursdays, or something equally unprovable'. This seems rather odd, as proposing an experiment to demonstrate the correlation between pig farmers' dietary habits and some objective phenomenon seems rather straight forward, at least within the limitations of conventional science. The quotation here is offered as a refutation of the TM NLP's claim that if enough people chanted mantras together then crime/death/suicide rate would go down as a direct result. I too would certainly be skeptical about such a claim in practice, although in the limit, if everyone spent their time chanting mantras together then logically there could be less crime. This seems unlikely to happen though.

More serious is the assertion immediately following this, that 'meditation helps or hinders the meditator alone, and no-one else'. Surely if meditation can help us to understand ourselves more, to have some deeper insight into our drives and emotional states, even to have some control over these, then the possible benefits are clearly not only for the meditator. Perhaps there is even a chance of becoming more 'reasonable'.

I have taken some time to explain some of the positive aspects of, at least Buddhist meditation practice, and the rationale behind them. I hope that I have been able to balance the more cynical and negative generalisations in Mr Chappell's article, while acknowledging the dangers and abuses that he quite rightly emphasises.

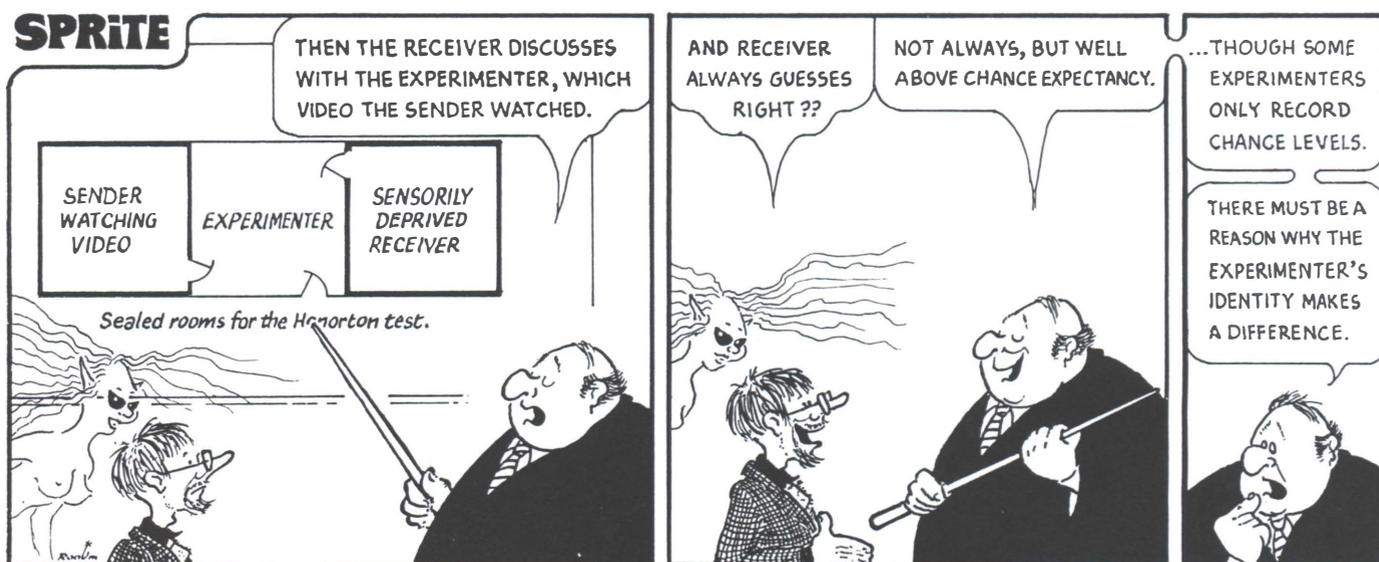
I personally believe there is great value in meditation, but a certain amount of common sense is required too. In this connection I'll finish with the following quote from the Nobel Peace laureate, the Dalai Lama, responding to a question from Stephen Levine:

Dalai Lama: Do you mean if a spiritual teacher teaches you, in a way that shows his cunningness and shrewdness because he is preparing a way to abuse you?

Stephen Levine: Very skillfully, too, I might add.

Dalai Lama: I think you should keep away from such teachers.

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Spirit Guides and After-Images

Colin Sutherland

Seeing is not necessarily believing

THE COURSE TUTOR was demonstrating a particular method of hypnosis at the front of the class. The room was very brightly lit by a low winter sun. Behind the tutor and his subject was a light cream-coloured wall. The session lasted about half an hour with the subject being brought slowly back to reality at the end. Then followed an unexpected discussion.

A woman sitting by me opened the discussion by saying to the tutor, 'has anyone told you that you have a spirit guide?'. 'You're the third person who has told me that', the tutor replied.

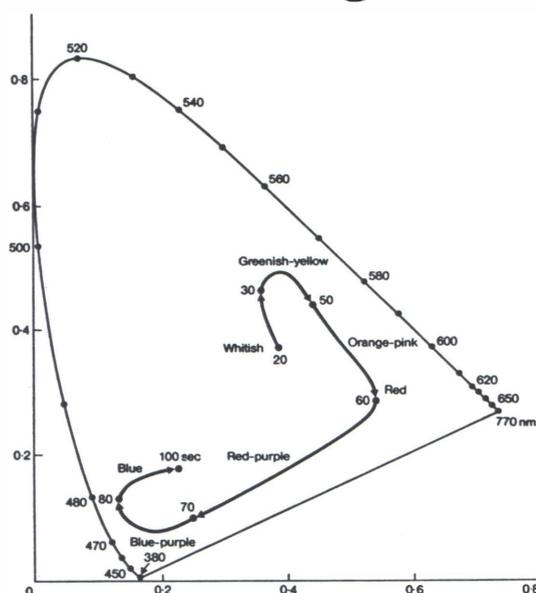
'It's a man with a beard and he is older than you. He is standing behind you now. And Elizabeth has one as well' (Elizabeth was the subject) 'and there has been energy flowing between the two of you all through the session, coloured energy. Surely you can all see this?' she said, appealing to the rest of us.

Those who spoke up, including me, confessed that we had not seen this psychic phenomenon or at least had not been aware of seeing it, and after a little bit of gentle sceptical humour the conversation returned to the hypnosis session we had just witnessed.

The woman was very, very convinced about what she was seeing, so I decided to take her seriously and I looked at the two sitting at the front and at the wall behind them. And lo and behold, I, too, saw the spirit guides and the energy passing between the tutor and Elizabeth. The spirit guide that stood behind the tutor did indeed have a beard but then so did the tutor. The spirit guide was also the same shape as the tutor and even had the shape of a piece of chair at one side just like the chair the tutor was sitting on.

My eyes quickly passed to Elizabeth and it required only a few seconds of staring at her to be able to see her spirit guide on the wall above. When I stared at one of them for any length of time and moved my eyes to the other, a wave of light moved between them.

The woman and I were, of course, seeing 'after-images', a well known phenomenon described in most books about vision and even in general physiology textbooks. I demonstrated it to her at the end of the class by standing at the front with my arms outstretched sideways. I asked her to stare at me for a few seconds and then to stare at the wall. It soon became quite clear to her that she was seeing an after-image of me.



The coloured after-image of a bright white light changes over time from whitish, through red, to blue

I have never come across such perfect conditions for after-images. The sun was lighting up the pale cream wall behind the tutor and Elizabeth and they therefore presented relatively dark images against this wall. A few seconds of looking at a person was all that was necessary to produce long-lasting after-images.

The effect is caused by light/dark adaption of the light sensitive cells in the retina. The brightness of the wall was causing a high rate of breakdown of pigments in the cells in the outer area of the retina, while the pigment in the cells of the central area (focused on the tutor) were increasing their pigment and hence their sensitivity. Movement of the eye to look at the wall behind exposed all the cells of the retina to the bright wall. The cells which were focused on the tutor were more sensitive and fired at a higher rate, causing a glare effect which was seen as a bright image in the shape of the tutor. Colour can also be involved, with the images being either the same colour as the object or a complementary colour or in fact passing through a sequence of colours, all depending on the specific conditions [1].

Could it be that the belief in ghosts and spirits has stemmed from peoples' experiences in certain lighting conditions that have been conducive to after-images? The explanation may be too simplistic. I find it amazing that the person involved did not realise that what she was seeing was in her eyes since the image moved with her eyes.

Reference

1. Brindley, G.S., *Physiology of the Retina and Visual Pathway*. Edward Arnold (Publishers) Ltd. 1970.

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Psychic Diary

Toby Howard

In praise of stone circles

NOT A SAUSAGE, I am sorry to say, did I feel as I placed my hands on the largest of the standing stones that make up the Castlerigg stone circle near Keswick. I stood in communion with the stone, hoping to feel the tingle of 'Earth energy'. After a few minutes, I gave up, feeling not a little embarrassed as I saw the other visitors to the circle staring with the sort of look reserved for the loony in the bus queue.

It was a serious experiment. Stories are legion about people and stone circles. They see mysterious lights in the vicinity; they feel flames of psychic energy shoot through them when they touch a stone; they see rays of energy beaming out of the stones; cool sparks engulf them like St Elmo's fire; dowzers' sticks rattle around uncontrollably; pendulums dance; strange images enter the mind—pagan sacrifices, Beltane fires with naked dancers, slaughtered beasts and masked shamen; the stones themselves arch their backs, or dance. There may be deep hums, and cracklings.

But, alas, for me it was the psychic equivalent of 'early closing' at Castlerigg. There were no buzzes, sparks, flashes, lights, or anything... but then, suddenly, the earth currents flowed, the planet and I were in tune, I was part of the Cosmic Dance—I had a vision of the disembodied spirit of James Dean! My heart jumped. Was I having my first true psychic experience? Well, not quite. A French tourist looking bored as only the French can, had slouched onto the scene, leaned against a stone, and lit a pungent *Gitane*, brooding beneath his shades and leather jacket.

So, the circle wasn't paranormal. But neither could it reasonably be described as 'normal'. Here were over 40 stones, painstakingly buried in the earth and arranged in a circle perhaps 100 feet across. By whom? When? For what? There are almost as many answers to these questions as there are researchers. Although some circles have astronomical alignments, this is not universal, and many circles are only roughly aligned in this way. According to Janet and Colin Bord in their indispensable *Atlas of Magical Britain* (Sidgwick & Jackson, 1990) one researcher believes that the Castlerigg circle was used for astronomical calculations, since on 2 February (Candlemas), the shadow cast by the largest stone points to the sunrise. According to the Bords, there have also been reports of mysterious lights around the stones. Whether or not 'earthlights' actually exist and have a scientific or a 'paranormal' explanation is, of course, a matter of some controversy.

Nevertheless, there is one inescapable fact. Most people find something compelling and fascinating about stone circles. To some they are of 'novelty' interest. To others they



Castlerigg Stone Circle, near Keswick

are 'sacred' places. Even vandals are interested: according to Hunter Davies in *A Walk Around The Lakes* (Arrow Books, 1989), when William Wordsworth took Coleridge to see the Castlerigg circle in 1799 they found the stones defaced with white paint. You'd think that with all that earth energy around, throwing buckets of white paint would short-circuit Gaia, but apparently not.

There are those who seek to promote the building of new circles today. One enthusiast is John Harrison, who in his pamphlet *Build your own stone circle!—A DIY Guide* exhorts 20th Century folk to build circles in their gardens and public spaces. His booklet is full of ideas even the most liberal skeptic would discount. For example: "charge" your circle with positive energies and "good vibes"; 'form a sort of healing/relaxing forcefield inside it'; 'a feeling of being at one with nature, and the rays of the sun refreshing you and filling you with feelings of peace, freedom, happiness, inspiration and optimism to face life in the 20th century.' You may not like the way this is expressed, but I admire Mr Harrison's sentiment.

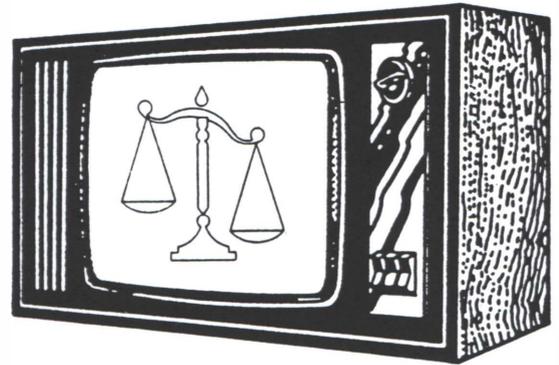
It is, of course, possible that stone circles do throb with Gaia energy, or some such power that can be picked up only by 'sensitive' individuals whose word we may choose to doubt, or to accept. A true skeptic would keep an open mind on the matter, and should someone eventually invent a Telluric Voltmeter which shows that such energies do exist, would be happy. I would not. I hope that there are no earth currents, no ley lines, no energy fields and no 'forgotten relationships with the living crystalline planet'. The fact that the stone circles, constructed by men and women just like us, perhaps more than 6,000 years ago, are still surviving, is surely enough.

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Skeptic at Large

Wendy M Grossman

Trial by television



IT ISN'T OFTEN that I've sat in a room and had 200 people yell at me, but that's what happened when I went to Norwich recently as the token skeptic on a TV programme about ghosts. This was 'Anglia Live', and the star turn—er, featured guest—was Andrew Marshall, author of the recent book *Living With Spirits*. Also featured on the show were a couple of Grimsby Ghostbusters (that's what they call themselves), and the Society for Psychical Research's Tony Cornell. Cornell and I have a lot in common: we both believe that psychology, the anecdotal nature of the evidence, and the will to believe, account for most stories. But I think the most likely situation is that if 90 percent of all the sightings can be explained by natural means, then there's no reason why the other 10 percent can't be, too. Cornell seems to believe that there is definitely 'something' going on.

The audience all had ghost stories to tell. One man saw a telephone table materialise. Well, he didn't exactly see it materialise; what he saw was a telephone table that someone else later told him wasn't there—and when he went back to look, it wasn't. Another woman had a habit of seeing ghostly vacuum cleaners (she said a Hoover, actually, but in this country, unlike the US, you can't tell whether that's a specific or generic statement). Most of the stories were more usual, centring on sightings of people. Marshall told one of the less salacious stories from his book, the one about waking up in the middle of the night with a great weight on him.

The show does a telephone poll every week, and the results, reported at the end, showed that 86 percent of the callers said they believed in ghosts. The host, a pleasant, intelligent, and humorous chap, turned to me and asked what my response was to this. Well, I said reasonably, I think it shows that people who believe in ghosts are more likely to pick up the phone. That's when they yelled; this unbelievable roar just sort of rolled over the studio.

It seemed to me perfectly logical, though. I wasn't arguing about people's beliefs in that statement, I was merely saying that the telephone poll surveyed a self-selecting sample. First, people who believe in ghosts are more likely to be watching the programme in the first place; second, those who feel strongly about ghosts are more likely to make the telephone call—most people who don't believe are more likely to say 'What rubbish' and go to bed (the show was broadcast late in the evening) than to call in and register a

'No' vote. The researchers told me that in fact they'd had a lot of trouble finding non-believers—their way of recruiting audience participants is to advertise for them on air and ask them to call the TV studio to volunteer. Had this been brought out during the programme, though, I suspect most of the audience would have taken it as further support of their views.

The problem here is a serious misunderstanding about the nature of evidence: most of these people think there is proof in numbers. So the fact that the researchers were having a hard time finding non-believers is simply greater proof that the believers are right in the first place. In this view, by saying that the poll proves nothing, I am denying the evidence. Some of this confusion is just human nature; we all have had experiences so powerful that our first reaction is that they must be miraculous—the impact on us is too great for them to be simply the random result of an uncaring universe. Some of it, however, comes from these very audience discussion shows.

Such shows, and there seem to be more and more of them all the time, treat all issues the same way, as social issues, for debate. On social issues—marriage, health care, violence on TV, whether people watch too much television—it is fair for all opinions to be equal, however demeaned and inferior other people's opinions may seem to our own. Matters where what matters is evidence rather than opinion, like homeopathy, spiritual healing, are badly served by this treatment.

For one thing, the truth about such things can't be discovered by debate. For another, the issues beliefs raise, which could legitimately be subjects of debate, are never tackled, so that nothing changes. It would make sense to argue, for example, about whether homeopathy should be available on the NHS that we all pay for, or whether spiritualist churches should be granted the same status as orthodox religious groups, or whether using graphology and astrology is fair recruitment practice.

Why do the shows? Well, there's always the chance you might raise some doubt in the mind of someone Out There who's never thought about these things, and those people are badly served if it all goes out unchallenged. And it was, er ... kind of fun.

Wendy Grossman is a member of the UK Skeptics, and a writer and folksinger. Her Compuserve ID is 70007,5537.



Reviews

The old New Age

Ronald Hutton, *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles: Their Nature and Legacy* (Blackwell, 1991, 397pp, hbk, £20)

Most of the time, academic writers on ancient religion completely ignore the wealth of New Age beliefs that have grown up around their own fields. This is a shame. We need accurate information to make our own judgments about ley lines and Druids, just as we do about Creationism and UFOs. Scientists, for whatever reason, seem to be better at providing this kind of information than historians. So Ronald Hutton is to be applauded for having written a survey of Ancient British religion and included discussions of fringe belief in it.

Hutton is a Reader in British History at the University of Bristol, although not a specialist in ancient history and archaeology. Nevertheless, he is clearly well acquainted with the fundamental texts of Ancient British studies. His book is divided chronologically from Stone Age to early Middle Ages. The title, however, is slightly misleading since he discusses Christianity as well as the pagan cults. Despite the fact that each major period of ancient history is allotted only one chapter, Hutton gives us a clear picture of the state of archaeology with respect to each era. He is not afraid of saying, 'we don't know' and 'we have no evidence'. After he has established a firm historical framework, he looks at the claims of various New Age ideas. The reader, then, has a background against which to judge these claims along with the author. For instance, Hutton considers modern witchcraft and its claim to be the descendant of ancient paganism. By searching the literature and archaeological record, he shows that there is no evidence for any continuity from ancient times for modern witch cults whatever the practitioners may believe.

But Hutton is not out to 'get' fringe believers. He looks on their claims with sympathy and judges them against what can reasonably be deduced from archaeology and literature. He does the same for claims by professional scholars who, incidentally, can sometimes be almost as far off the track as modern Druids. For example, the primeval matriarchy, that peaceful period when women ruled the world, as advocated by one senior archaeologist in America, is (sadly) convincingly shown by Hutton to be a myth reflecting more of today's preoccupations than yesterday's reality. Although maybe not an impossibility, the current evidence is simply too meagre and ambiguous to support the conclusions wishful thinkers want to draw.

If there is a negative criticism to be made, it is that the illustrations are terrible. The drawings, particularly of arti-

facts of the Roman period, are comprehensible to anyone already familiar with the objects, but are so poorly drawn they lose all their impact. What they can possibly convey to someone who is unfamiliar with the material, I have no idea. I know illustrations are expensive but surely there must have been a friend or a relative available who could have done better than this.

But all in all, a very good book for anyone interested in Ancient British religions and their relation to New Age ideas. The emphasis, however, is on the archaeological rather than on the mystical. The notes and further reading include references to most of the important works on each subject often with perceptive comments.

—Marjorie Mackintosh

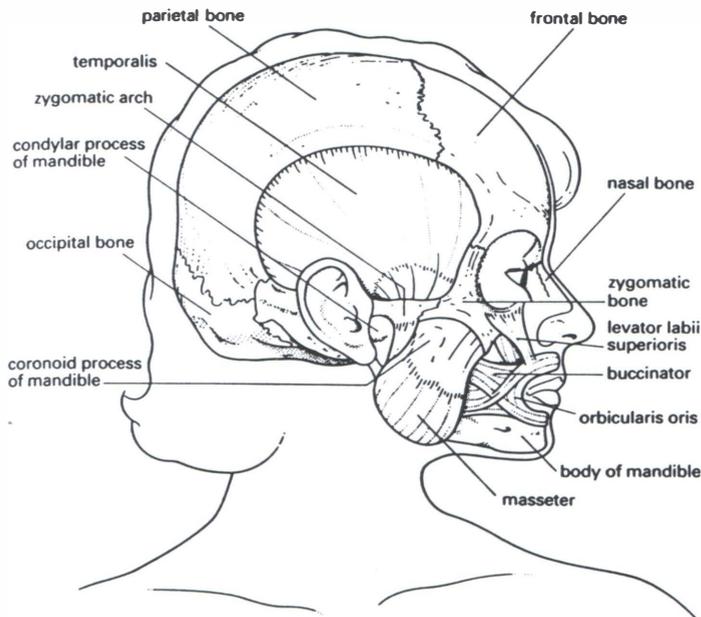
Singing for health

Paul Newnham, *The Singing Cure* (Rider, 1992, pbk, £11.99)

You might expect this to be a self-help manual recommending a course of lieder, arias and folksongs as a remedy for depression and anxiety, or (especially after reading the teeth-gritting dedication which contains the words 'heartful' and 'affirmation') a record of 'voice workshops' where someone is coining it by teaching (or 'facilitating') something everything can do. It's a larger market than singing lessons which requires clients or pupils to have a voice and an ear. The book is in fact a serious overview of the history, theory and practice of Voice Movement Therapy. The author is founder and director of the International Association for Voice Movement Therapy. It is not intended as a self help guide—you are advised to contact the Association to find a therapist.

Like all psychotherapy, it's not exactly scientific (once you get past the physiological mechanism). You can only respond intuitively, and his ideas coincide with experience. If you feel shy your voice comes out in a monotone—Mr Bean talks like a robot. You need to speak up, speak out and speak from the heart to get on.

The first part of the book is a history of the subject, and the second deals with the practice. Newnham gallops through the history of language, music and drama. He notes that song came before speech—really?—and primitive man communicated by imitative noises and emotive cries, and canters briskly through the pioneers of psychotherapy—did they or didn't they support his theory? We encounter well known names (Freud, Jung, Klein, Reich) and less known names (Moses, Lowen, Wolfsohn). We get Jung's shadow side, and Freud's theory of the punning subconscious. However, he reveals that Freud could make any dream object



into a sexual symbol by a process of linguistic ducking and diving. Lowen felt that 'the whole of Western civilisation is a barrier to self-expression,' and Reich said a person's character could be read from their physical attitude. The old loony had a point sometimes.

Mewnam recounts the fascinating story of Alfred Wolfsohn, a doctor haunted by the sounds of people *in extremis* he had heard in the trenches. After the war, he tried to exorcise these sounds by reproducing them. 'He put himself in the shoes of the suffering, and when he yelled out, he yelled for them.' He ended up as a singing teacher, incidentally producing freakish voices which extended to eight octaves (it's usually two). 'Wolfsohn recognised that if the voice was to be employed as an expression of the true nature of the psyche in its entirety, it would have to establish a connection with [Jung's] shadow.' However, Newnam thinks that this means yelling, screaming and sobbing. He makes the point that opera is a beautiful noise about sordid subject matter: political oppression, torture, rape, murder—and that's just Tosca. However, this conflicts with the view that art should embrace the 'bloody, violent, dark, torrid' (Antonin Artaud). He feels that opera has forced the human voice to serve beauty rather than emotion. Opera singers can't groan, sob and gasp, hence the voice is 'stopped of its fundamental therapeutic value'. His idea is that you should sing because it's good for you. There's an alternative view: that you should sing to serve music, and in the process your self will be revealed. Some feel that a beautiful and musical sound can contain the whole psyche—shadow included.

Part One ends with a discussion of Brook and Grotowski and their posturing luvvie attempts at creating a universal language. Brook even had the gall to try and foist it on some unfortunate African tribe. Part Two goes into the physiology (with diagrams), and explains harmonics and timbre. Does the face make the voice, or the voice make the face? The question is raised but not answered.

Voice therapy is for people whose vocal trouble is psychological, not pathological. 'The human voice has a political dimension ... The aim of voice movement therapy is to train a voice to be capable of giving expression to the gamut

of human emotions...' However, we don't get down to it until two-thirds of the way through the book. Newnam recommends treating the psyche through the voice rather than vice versa. A confident voice can make you more confident: you can turn a vicious circle into a virtuous one. And why not a makeover with new clothes and hairstyle at the same time? There are some embarrassing pictures of the author vocalising and revealing fillings, tonsils, nasal hair etc, but you can forgive him after reading the following: 'Phonophobia, or extreme shyness, is...an excruciating condition which affects thousands of people and yet it has never been taken seriously by therapists...'

It's all good sense with a bit of tosh folded in. The book might be useful to singers, or to people looking for some kind of therapy.

—Lucy Fisher

Life after death

Jenny Randles and Peter Hough, *The Afterlife* (Piatkus, 1993, 240 pp, hbk, £16.99)

Is Death the end, or do we in some sense carry on afterwards? This perennial question must be of universal relevance—since Death, like Taxes, comes to us all.

Our Neanderthal ancestors seem to have believed in an Afterlife; the Pagan Egyptians, Greeks and Romans shared this belief, as of course Jews, Christians, and Muslims still do. Hindus and Buddhists have for millennia believed in Reincarnation, while Australian aborigines still speak of the Dreamtime. More recently Spiritualists, and New Agers of various sorts, have accepted traditional concepts like these, which also figure largely in contemporary science fiction, fantasy, and films such as 'Ghost'. It seems that the power of these ideas to move us is as strong as ever.

However, the modern scientific, materialistic worldview teaches uncompromisingly that we are physical beings only, and that the death of the body is indeed the end for us. Therefore the question remains an important one, whether ideas of survival reflect a genuine feature of our human existence, or whether on the other hand they represent a sort of collective wish-fulfilment, perhaps a projection from the unconscious, no doubt of symbolic and psychological importance, but not necessarily true in concrete terms.

This attractively produced book, subtitled 'An Investigation into the Mysteries of Life after Death', examines the whole issue of survival, from the Ancient World to the contemporary scene. Evidence, both for and against, is marshalled from various sources. Skeptical arguments and investigations are mentioned, as well as more traditional paranormal material (including some intriguing photographs), and the reader is invited to make up his or her own mind on the matter.

The authors point out that many accounts of paranormal events, such as the 'Amityville Horror' haunting, may have a mundane explanation in human psychology and hoaxing, and that some mediums and trance channellers are either fraudulent or self-deluded, and use standard methods such as cold reading to produce their effects.

I was recently able to interview both authors at Jenny's

home in Stockport. They made it clear that they see themselves as moderate skeptics, concerned to examine the evidence for both sides impartially, without prejudging the issue. I was naturally glad to hear this, while puzzled by the paucity of their references to acknowledged skeptical works. They told me frankly that, in its present format, the book is more of a 'coffee table glossy' than a serious scientific investigation, and said that their original proposal had been much more detailed, but that the publishers had opted for the present layout on the grounds that it would sell better (this is probably a fair estimate). They were also proud of the skeptical references in the text and bibliography. However, in the latter, I could find only 3 moderately skeptical books, out of 42—no Jungian works, for instance, are listed, although Jung is mentioned in the text—while, under 'Addresses', I was alarmed to see *The Skeptic* lumped in with *Fate* magazine (this was better than no mention at all, of course). The authors said that this nevertheless represented more skeptical references than you get in your average paranormal book, which is no doubt true.

Although skeptics are mentioned (usually anonymously) in the text, I could find no mention in the index, bibliography, or the body of the book of any detailed reference to the skeptical movement, certainly not to CSICOP, Prometheus Books, or any of the standard skeptical works. I therefore offered the authors a short list of recommended books, which they were interested to look over; they agreed that some of these should certainly appear in the paperback edition, soon to come out, and that only shortage of space had led to the limited references in the present work.

The authors stress that many past-life regressions (including a couple of Jenny Randles' own), and other forms of imagery, such as ghosts, visions, apparitions, OOBs and NDEs, actually come from the subject's unconscious memories gathered in this life and worked up by the creative side of the mind. Other such phenomena include hypnagogic/hypnopompic imagery, lucid dreams, and the results of cryptomnesia, especially in the case of fantasy-prone individuals; however, *none* of the latter concepts are referenced in the index or bibliography, and there is no mention of standard works such as Baker [1,2], Reed [9], or Zusne and Jones [11]. All of this may lead the unwary reader to underestimate the role played by such well-known psychological phenomena in explaining paranormal experiences.

Blackmore's work [3] is mentioned, but physiological theories linking such phenomena with temporal-lobe disturbances, drug-induced visions, cerebral anoxia, etc. are re-



Jenny Randles

jected, with no reference to the recent work summarised by Baker [2]. The history of Spiritualism, including the Fox Sisters, Ectoplasm, the Schneider Brothers, and Daniel Home, is treated completely uncritically and as an entirely factual record of events. No mention is made of the extensive literature indicating that much (perhaps all) of the above is founded on fraud and/or self-delusion. In particular, Arthur Ford, known to be a complete fake, is described in the most glowing terms. Brandon [4], now alas out of print, has a great deal to say about the above matters, as does Hall [6].

In the text they cite the cases of Pearl Curran, who channelled (by ouija) the works of a discarnate lady named Patience Worth, and of Rosemary Brown, who channels symphonies from deceased composers. Of the former, they offer the standard comment that cryptomnesia is impossible here due to Mrs Curran's limited education and lack of interest in reading; the latter is said to produce (paranormally) works beyond her talents and training. A different view is put forward by Zusne and Jones [11], who point out that Mrs Curran was a precocious learner as a child, that she received extensive tutoring, that her education was good enough for her to teach at various schools, and that she played the piano at a spiritualist church headed by her uncle (a medium); they also point out that Rosemary Brown's compositions, while passably in the style of the great departed, seem to be simply reworkings of existing pieces—and that, furthermore, if genuinely 'channelled', her works show that the composers in question have not advanced their styles while in the world to come.

I can make no comment on electronic spirit phenomena recorded via magnetic tape, radio, TV, or (of course) video games and home computers, and must therefore refer you to the analysis given by Baker [2].

The most amazing account of strange phenomena in the book concerns Borley Rectory, sometimes described as the most haunted house in England. It has been shown conclusively by Wood [10] that the legend of Borley is just that: a legend concocted by Harry Price, based in part on tricks played by Marianne Foyster and her associates. There is no contemporary, well-documented evidence for the oft-repeated story of a ghostly nun who haunted the place, and when the rectory finally 'burned mysteriously to the ground in 1939', this was done by the owner himself, for the insurance money. The authors' only reference to skeptical works involves 'certain investigators with a less flamboyant style', and possible 'sour grapes' on the part of certain SPR members. This is perhaps meant to refer to the detailed text of Dingwall, Goldney and Hall [5].

I was not able to raise the question of two cases which in their day were regarded as the proof positive of life after death. These are (a) the mediumship of Florence Cook, who manifested the spirit form of 'Katie King' to the approval and endorsement of the famous scientist, (Sir) William Crookes; and (b) the interesting case of Judge Hornby, who in 1875 saw in his bedroom a reporter, requiring details of court decisions, who later turned out to have died earlier that evening—the judge's wife, Lady Hornby, verified that her husband had awakened her to tell her of the incident, not realising that the man was dead, and that what was seen must therefore have been his ghost.

Of course, the real reason for not mentioning these cases, must be the fact that they have been thoroughly exploded. Hall [7] has produced convincing evidence that the 'Katie King' manifestations were a complete fraud, while, as Hansel [8] points out, it was soon shown by independent researchers that the Hornby story just could not have taken place as described, even though Judge and Lady Hornby were undoubtedly sincere in their report—in fact they had not even been married at the time of the man's death.

I will no doubt be told that there is no reason to include debunked cases in a popular book of this nature. My point is simply that such cases show how witnesses of good character, standing and education can be led to incorrect descriptions of (supposedly) paranormal events, whether for personal reasons or as an honest mistake—and that to understand this process goes a long way to educate people in skeptical thinking. Perhaps some of the cases in this book will turn out to give genuine evidence of a life after death, but I think we skeptics are entitled to wait a little longer, until hard evidence is forthcoming, before making up our minds.

Of course, I am not suggesting that skeptical ideas should be treated as infallible. However, where a detailed and careful study of a paranormal subject has been carried out, it would seem natural, indeed desirable, to at least mention the work and its conclusions, perhaps quoting the odd paragraph—even if only in order to give a detailed, scientific rebuttal—so that readers can form their own judgement on the matter. Further, where skeptical investigations have definitely shown a particular topic to be fraudulent, it is incredible that no mention is made of this in the text.

Instead, at several points there are disclaimers, rather like the health warning on cigarette packets, to the effect that 'of course skeptics' (unspecified) 'suggest a rather different interpretation'. I wonder how an uninformed reader would interpret this remark—perhaps as a sop to the Skeptical community, but of no great significance?

As the authors themselves told me, this is not a book for skeptics. Sadly, I have to agree.

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—Mike Rutter

One dimension too many

J D Ralphs, *Exploring the Fourth Dimension* (Quantum, 272pp, pbk, 1993, £8.99)

J D Ralphs proposes that the mechanism of paranormal phenomena may be explained by the introduction of an extra dimension within which all the unseen activity occurs. He suggests that this would neatly avoid the limitations of travel at light speed thus allowing the instantaneous transfer of information.

This idea, as the author himself admits, is not new—it has been a science fiction staple for years. In addition the concept of a fourth physical dimension was '... extensively investigated by Johann Zeller ... during the second half of the 19th century'. The novelty this time is that J D Ralph attempts to explain heuristically how such a paranormal fourth dimension could work.

The author expresses deep dissatisfaction with the scientific method and states that 'Even the most shallow and perfunctory thought on world affairs would suggest that the apparent "progress" of science and technology is (with very few exceptions) a symptom of the total misdirection of man's efforts'. He is prepared to accept that some scientific theories may be correct, in particular that of (special) relativity, and yet he fails to allow for its effects when he is discussing time-slip events. For example, when he is explaining how Matthew Manning (an occupant of the 20th century) could have met and talked with Robert Webbe (an occupant of the 18th century) in Manning's bedroom he points out excitedly that 'The only thing the two men had in common was *that they occupied the same room* [his italics]'. The same room? In whose frame of reference?

Alas it appears that much of the author's knowledge of physics ceases at the classical Newtonian version. He rejects quantum theory and all that has followed as nonsensical. He states, with no supporting references, that 'Research into fundamental physics has produced a number of inconsistent and paradoxical results which are inexplicable in general terms and so are embarrassing to scientific orthodoxy.'

Ralph's uncritical attitude towards those references which he does give is also disturbing. He does explain in the first chapter that he tried to only use sources which 'convey a strong impression of honesty, convincing the reader that while the author may be mistaken, misled, confused, or subject to other human defects, he is at all times truthful to the limit of his ability'—thus allowing himself to quote any book that he wishes as though it were true.

The author's thesis has two major (fatal?) flaws: (1) It is unfalsifiable; and (2) It makes no predictions. Since Ralph has rejected the scientific method as inadequate these flaws do not present him with a problem. The book, despite some poor editing and appalling chapter titles (for example, 'The Spooky Part—With Naughty Little Devils'), is easy to read. It is an excellent example of the genre and if anyone does decide to read it I suggest that they read it concurrently with Martin Gardner's *Fads and Fallacies*.

—Toby O'Neil



Letters

A lucky meditator

Judging from Arthur Chappell's 'The Myths of Meditation' (*The Skeptic*, 7.2) I seem to have been lucky. Just after the war I came across some books on Yoga which recommended a very simple practice—no mantras, no gurus, no money changing hands. Just sit comfortably, close your eyes, and let your mind go blank, without effort.

They said it would be hard at first, and it was (thoughts and memories kept intruding). But after about three weeks of this, some 20 minutes a day, it worked. Nothing mystical, no hallucinations, no sleepiness. You are aware, alertly, only of yourself as a consciousness. And it's quite pleasant and calming, once you've got the knack.

Years later, I asked a medical relative how Librium worked. 'It reduces obsessive connectivity in the brain', he said. I told him about the Yoga 'meditation'. 'Sounds like the same thing', he said, 'but it's free. What was the name of that Yoga book again?'

Today, an 'in' thing is the anti-sensory tank in which you float, sensationless. Same principle, perhaps? But you've got to pay for it. (And I'm part-Scot.)

John Clarke
Uxbridge

Make up your mind

Arthur Chappell says that it is the aim of meditation 'to stifle the questioning, rational mind' (*The Skeptic*, 7.2). But the existence of a method (if it works) of temporarily quietening thinking does not necessarily imply a negative attitude towards the mind in its proper functioning.

The rational mind can create nothing new, but properly used may enable us to clarify what is confused, and like a sculptor's chisel, remove the unnecessary. At its best it may be

able to hold a number of ideas in the balance, refraining from deciding between them without further evidence. The mind malfunctioning (its usual state) may be likened to a flock of birds in a cage when the bars have been hit.

The question about meditation may be re-framed as whether it can enable us to connect with that state of consciousness anterior to thinking. It would be better to hear from those who have tried various methods (meditative and otherwise) before making up our minds, and probably only our own personal investigations can decide the issue. *Caveat emptor*.

Incidentally I think the editor should have his knuckles rapped for permitting a contributor to cite the *News of the World* in support of an argument.

Dr Martin Dace
London SE14

In response to Dr Dace's criticism concerning the citation from The News of the World, we can only quote one of our most reliable sources: 'Anything in print in a Birtish (sic) newspaper must be regarded as strictly factual' [The Sunday Sport, 7 March 1993].

The Editors

Meditation: a genuine side

Arthur Chappell (*The Skeptic*, 7.2) points out that many of the claims made for meditation, especially in the more bizarre sects, are exaggerated or groundless, and may cause harm to the believers. However, the Dalai Lama and Patanjali, for instance, are surely not necessarily in the same class as ... (name your favourite guru here!), and there is perhaps a genuine side to the subject.

Many psychotherapists, following Benson (*The Relaxation Response*, Collins, 1976), teach Yoga Meditation

for relaxation, and Visualisation is used by such contemporary, secular therapists as Lazarus (*In the Mind's Eye*, Guilford, 1984), as well as by the more mystically inclined Jungians.

Cars are involved in accidents, but we do not ban them on that account. What matters is how well they are handled, and no doubt the same is true of meditative practices. The important issue here is what benefits (and hazards) are offered by meditation. Metaphysical claims take second place—you do not need to join a particular cult in order to sit cross-legged, count your breaths, or visualise a candle flame. Meditative states surely need to be explored rationally, and without the bias evident in this otherwise thought-provoking article.

Mike Rutter
Manchester

Facts please

In the string of unsupported assertions which make up Tom Banner's letter (*The Skeptic*, 7.2) there is only one comment which suggests that he may have evidence to offer.

Now may we have the name of the girl whose neck-ornament was invisibly bent; the name of the metal-bender; the date and place of the occurrence; and the witnesses who would be willing to testify (a) that to their knowledge the ornament was unbent before the performance, and (b) that it was bent afterwards?

John Levitt
Leek

The Cyril Burt affair

As Ray Ward says (*The Skeptic*, 7.2), Hearnshaw's biography of Sir Cyril Burt cannot be relied upon. Hearnshaw says of Burt's 'A psychological study of typography', '... one of the few strictly experimental investigations that he carried out. ... The combination of erudition,

methodological sophistication and practicality which Burt's work in this area brought it well-merited acclaim'. When I wrote to Hearnshaw protesting, he lamely replied, 'Several people with expert knowledge told me that they thought highly of Burt's work, so I followed their judgement'.

When I heard that Ray Ward was studying the Burt affair, I sent him offprints of two papers, by James Hartley, a psychology lecturer researching reading skills, and myself a typographer, which analyse 'A psychological study'. The book began as a research report in the *British Journal of Statistical Psychology* (which Burt edited), and consists of recommendations for typographic practice which Burt claims are based on exhaustive reading tests. Doubts about whether the reading tests actually took place were published as early as 1959, and Hartley and I have confirmed these doubts. Of 123 recommendations, only two are supported by data and two by reference to named sources, one of which does not say what Burt says it says.

With regard to Burt's work on heritability of intelligence, Ray Ward points out that it was first questioned by people whose objective was to discredit the whole notion. They failed in this, because heritability of intelligence has been demonstrated by researchers whose veracity is not in doubt. Ray Ward shows that Burt was not guilty of upholding a false theory. Unfortunately, however, this is not the offence of which Burt is accused.

The charge against Burt is that he falsely enhanced his reputation for scholarship, by pretending to have done research which he had not done. This charge is proved beyond reasonable doubt in his study of typography. And because science relies on honest reporting, there must be a rule that if a scientist is caught cheating, his whole reputation is forfeit.

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Donald Rooum

Studies at fault?

It's very ironic that Wendy Grossman (*The Skeptic*, 7.2), after condemning 'white, middle-class, male scientists' for seeing 'in their own research ... what they want to see in it', should then do exactly the same thing herself further on. So 'Studies have long shown that if you tell a teacher that some kids in a given class are brighter than others, the teacher will treat them differently and they will get better grades', have they? Can she provide references?

In fact there was *one* study which came to that conclusion: it was severely criticised and thoroughly refuted, and all efforts to replicate it failed. It became famous, and people still refer to it (while the several failed efforts at replication are, of course forgotten), because it corresponds with what they *want* to believe. Oh, and Wendy somehow managed to misspell both Ann Widdecombe's first name *and* her surname...!

Ray Ward
Sheffield

Standard deviation

In her review of *The Mismeasure of Woman* (*The Skeptic*, 7.2), Wendy Grossman makes much of the fact 'that when you examine the research carefully you discover that the differences between the sexes, brainwise, are less than the variation within each sex'. This is indeed the case as regards most of the measurable differences, both brainwise and otherwise, not only between the sexes but also between racially defined sets. And that this is sufficient to refute all those silly universal generalisations of the form 'all women and no men this', or 'all whites and no blacks that'.

But research evidence of this kind is certainly not sufficient to show, what it is so often mistakenly assumed to show, that, absent hostile discrimination or discriminating incentives, we should expect the races and the sexes to be proportionally represented in every category of occupation and achievement. On the contrary: wherever the characteristics

being measured are normally distributed we should expect any substantial difference between the average to produce disproportionate differences at the extremes. If one of the two sets being compared is superior on average by as much or as little as one standard deviation then we should expect the members of that set to be proportionally very much over-represented at the top and similarly under-represented at the bottom of whatever scale is in question.

Antony Flew
Reading

Neural network NDEs

In the letters column of *The Skeptic*, 3.5, I pointed out (mainly for the benefit of Susan Blackmore) that computer-simulated neural networks already exhibited a behaviour which she had suggested would (in a human brain) explain the 'tunnel of light' effect of near-death experiences. Although I proposed that this (neural network simulation) was 'worth looking into', I have no doubt that Blackmore ignored my suggestion on principle.

I am writing now to point out that more recent work (see *Scientific American*, May 1993, p 15 and *Hits and Misses*, this issue) has shown that when a neural network simulation is 'killed', it begins spontaneously to output what it has learned. This is another familiar behaviour (life flashing before eyes) of the human brain under near-death conditions.

So, I again suggest to Susan Blackmore: stop worrying about the collection of endless anecdotes and learn to love cellular automata

Dr David J Fisher
Cardiff

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