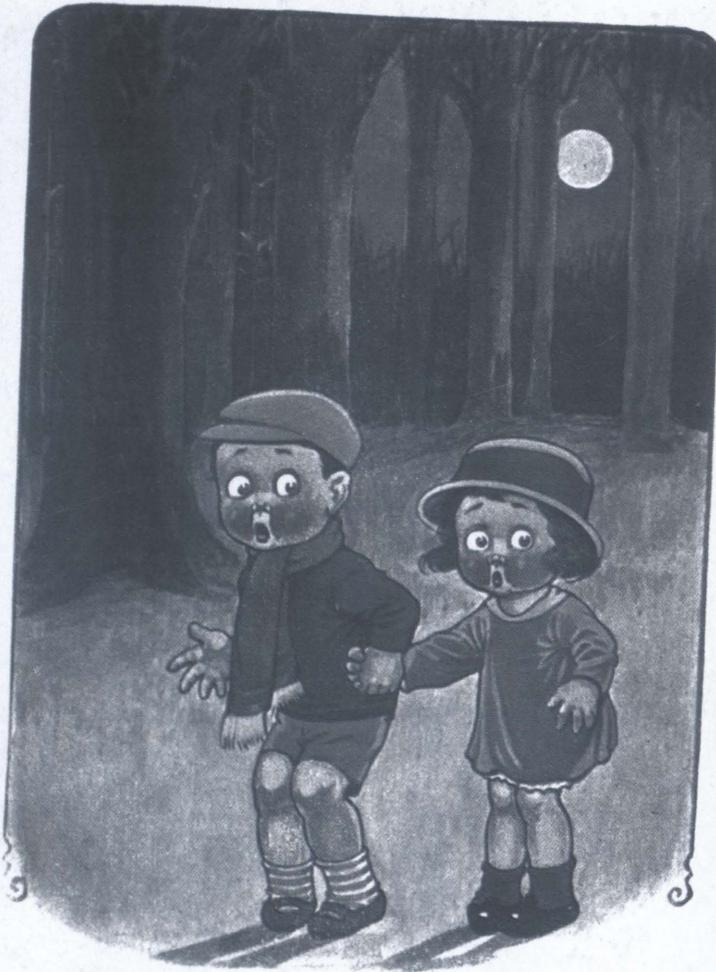


The **Skeptic**

"I DON'T BELIEVE IN GHOSTS, GLADYS, BUT
SOMEHOW I'M AWFUL SCARED OF 'EM!"



Haunts and Poltergeists: Part 2

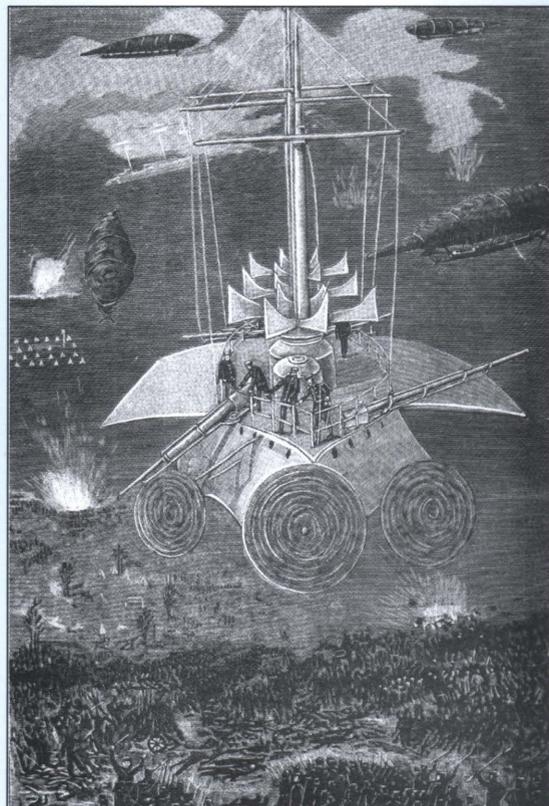
Also in this issue:

World War I Atrocities

Towards a Secular Church

Plus: **News. Book Reviews. Comment. Humour**

Hilary Evans Paranormal Picture Gallery



AIRBORNE ARTILLERY

If only Queen Victoria's War Office had listened to the prophets, and diverted the money it lavished on picturesque cavalry to the development of aerial weaponry! Six years before the Wright brothers took us into the aerial age, Ivan Bloch, the Russian author of a massive study of the future of warfare, predicted that devices like this would be the shape of wars to come. Not as picturesque as dragoons and lancers with their plumed helmets and prancing horses – but the Boer War would have been a very different affair with a handful of these soaring overhead.

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



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Editorial

Julia Nunn and Chris French



HELLO AND WELCOME to issue number 15.4. The magazine is in new editorial hands, as Julia Nunn has taken over from Kate Holden, who is thoroughly pre-occupied with her first child, Miles. Congratulations to Kate and her husband Nick!

In this issue we bring you the second and final instalment of Rense Lange and James Houran's article, in which they propose a more advanced model of the psychological processes underlying hauntings and poltergeists. They test the notion that people face a basic choice between belief and fear, and suggest that increasing believers' tolerance of ambiguity and lowering fear might provide a strategy to change paranormal beliefs. In a related vein, Prof Steve Donnelly in *Rhyme and Reason* describes recent research indicating that a tendency towards scepticism may be just a question of brain chemistry. So believing in the paranormal may be a cause for compassion and treatment in the future? Let us know what you think!

Also in this issue, Hilary Evans examines evidence that the conduct of the German army during its invasion of Belgium in 1914 was even worse than we thought. The events are of deep significance for anyone concerned with issues of belief and scepticism, and Hilary hasn't sanitised the findings. Essential reading, but don't try it just before you go to sleep ...

Last August, over one hundred public figures attacked Radio 4's *Thought for the Day* programme, arguing that the ban on contributions from non-believers was "discriminatory and unjustified". The BBC – despite admitting that the item was "boring" – refused to lift a ban on non-religious speakers in the official slot, but in an unofficial edition broadcast an hour later, Prof Richard Dawkins of Oxford University became the

first atheist to deliver an 'alternative' *Thought for the Day*. Now that the flood-gates are opened, we expect it will only be matter of time before atheists (and agnostics) are regularly represented on this programme. After all, the protest only reflects the decline in the numbers of church-goers. This theme is picked up by Matthew Coniam, who eloquently argues in his article *Reconsecration: Towards a Secular Church*, that churches should be dedicated to the wonder of science. What a wonderful idea!

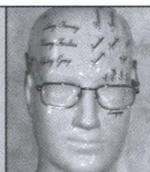
Also in this issue, we introduce a new regular column by Dr Michael Heap, Chair of the Association for Skeptical Enquiry (ASKE), to keep all our readers informed of ASKE events and activities. As many UK-based readers will already know, ASKE has been running for a few years now and during this period has produced its own publication, *The Skeptical Intelligencer*, and organised a number of conferences of interest to our readership. One concrete example of co-operation between *The Skeptic* and ASKE was the arranging and co-sponsorship of a lecture by James Randi on 31st July 2002 at University College London. Randi's talk was entitled *The Search for the Chimera: An Overview of how Science has Pursued Magic and Miracles in the 20th Century and into the 21st Century*. Particular thanks go to Tony Youens for arranging the event at very short notice and Dr David Oakley for organising the lecture theatre. We hope that *The Skeptic* and ASKE can continue to collaborate in a similar manner and that any future events are as successful as this one was.

Of course, we still have all our regular features and letters and book reviews. Enjoy!

With best wishes until the next issue, Julia and Chris



Hits and Misses



How to talk to your cat

The Times, pleasantly and unusually sceptically, recently featured 'cat psychic' Sonya Fitzpatrick, who claims to be able to receive emotions and pictures from cats, interpreting them for their human owners. (Fitzpatrick was promoting her new book, *Cat Talk*.) Now, we all know cats are from Mars and people are from some inferior planet not worth the cats' trouble to bother about, but it seems a bit absurd for humans to let themselves be manipulated by small, furry creatures into paying £34 a head to attend seminars on how to understand their cats' needs and personalities. *Times* writer Penny Wark did a good job of spotting how Fitzpatrick might have picked up clues she then translated into "Your cat says ...": she looked around the house, asked the human questions, and observed attentively. All the same stuff, in other words, that is familiar to sceptics from any type of cold-reading.

Of course, the advantage if you're a pet psychic is that it can be pretty difficult for the human owner to contradict what you say the animal feels. Wark, however, had a cat up her sleeve: her cat had been withdrawn and nervous since a car had hit him a few days before. Wark never mentioned this as a cause, focusing instead on the (obviously) reupholstered dining-room chairs.

But here's what we really don't understand. Most cat-lovers seem to be drawn to cats in part because of their furry inscrutability and stand-offishness. They like never being quite sure what their cats are thinking. Otherwise, they'd have dogs. So wherein, even among believers, could there possibly be a market for someone who promises to penetrate the mystery?

Method in the UFO madness

We've written before about Bonnybridge's mad town councillor, Billy Buchanan, who's been promoting the area as Clapham Junction for UFOs for some time now. Now, apparently, his relentless insistence that residents have told him of 60,000 unidentified phenomena may be about to pay off. Businessman Gerrit Wals, owner of the Hafton Castle Hotel in Dunoon, has plans for a multi-million pound alien theme park. Spacecraft-like shuttles could shunt visitors to casinos housed in flying saucer-like buildings, with indoor golf, Highland games, and bagpipes. (Aside to Wals: quite apart from whether aliens exist and are buzzing Scotland on a daily basis, have you ever *heard* bagpipes indoors? Trust us, you won't want to do it twice.) The Scottish *Sunday Herald* says the locals deny Buchanan's claim of routine alien visitation with some embarrassment; it seems improbable if only because, if you

assume five minutes per story, it would mean Buchanan has heard 5,000 hours of UFO stories!

"Tourists," Wals told the *Sunday Herald*, "are rarely in a situation where they can see the typical things they come to Scotland to see."

Like plastic aliens are on the typical tourist's list for Scotland.

Future confused

In his invaluable sf fanzine *Ansible*, David Langford published an item which seems worth repeating here

Henry Gee of *Nature* reports uproar at the Institute for Scientific Information, "which produces the bibliometric statistics on which the careers of many scientists hang. ISI was having problems deciding which parts of our many-faceted magazine counted as original reports of scientific research, and were therefore 'citable', unlike those parts which counted (in David Brin's words) as 'entertainment fluff'." Some of their 1999–2000 "Futures" sf vignettes were cited as "serious scientific information"... I wonder which items ISI chose. After Kim Stanley Robinson wrote a piece structured as a review of two books published in the year 3000, we did get an inquiry from a librarian asking for help, as they were unable to locate the books.

Moisture-proof

It's always nice to see someone tackling, rigorously, a set of misplaced beliefs that cost the holders serious money. The tackler was *Times* political columnist Matthew Parris, and the set of costly beliefs was the faith in expensive packaging that has the general public spending £421 million a year on moisturizers and 'beauty' creams. Interested in investigating whether



spending more made any difference, Parris, who suffers from dry, itchy skin around the ankles during the winter, tried successive four-week regimes of moisturizing cream, Vaseline, and engine oil on one leg, leaving the other one untreated. His conclusions: they all worked about the same; the skin itched less when gooped up but the effect disappeared after a few days of neglect; the longest-lasting product was the Vaseline; he liked the smell of the engine oil best. OK, a trivial matter, and not a double-blind trial. But we approve of the effort.

Parris also observed, however, that the skin that had been treated was, after treatment stopped, drier than before. He therefore proposes that women should try an experiment: use moisturizing cream on one half of their face, from crown to neck for ten years and leave the other to fend for itself. He figures the untreated side will have fewer wrinkles. We figure he won't find any takers.

We look forward to hearing more from Parris's Society for the Confounding of Error and the Prosecution of Twaddle (SCEPT).

Sporting wonders

We all know that sports stars are constantly seeking that extra little edge that will help them stay ahead of the competition. The latest wacky technology: a piezoelectric tennis racquet that the manufacturer, Head, claimed was used by Andre Agassi and Sebastian Grosjean when they made the quarter-finals at the 2002 French Open. The company hopes that the adoption of the racquet by two top professionals heralds a new era of intelligent electronics in sporting goods.

Uh-huh. So here's what the company says about the racquet. It contains piezoelectric fibres, along with a custom-designed chip. "Specially processed intellifibers are situated between electrodes on both sides of the throat area. They actively change the mechanical energy of ball impact into electrical energy and create an active counterforce under the control of a microchip." Meanwhile, a 'FlexCircuit' transmits voltage and current to and from the chip, which is integrated into the racquet handle and "simultaneously controls the boost in power and the elimination of vibration." Of course, the pro tours wouldn't accept a racquet with a battery in it, so the whole system had to be designed to be self-powering. The microchip "orients the direction of the force, stiffens the racquet for ultimate power, and eliminates vibrations for comfort."

We sent this story to a science editor of our acquaintance who has a past as a tennis correspondent and amateur player, and he laughed hysterically. We don't care if the 'intelligent' fibres in the racquet can pass the Turing test; if you hit the ball off the frame, no amount of intelligence is going to "orient" the ball to where you

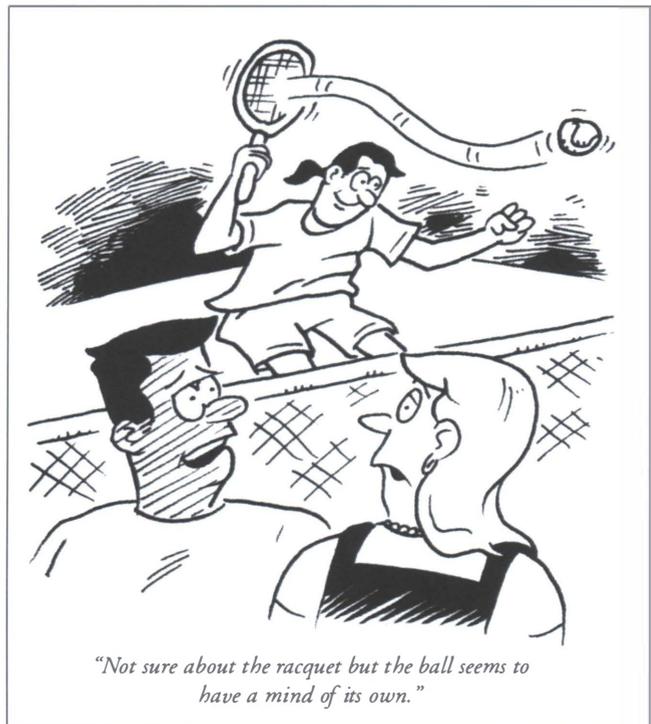
wanted it to go.

Head plans to incorporate the intellifibre/microchip system into skis next.

Of rats and runners

Talk to dedicated long-distance runners and they'll tell you they're not crazy, they're in it for the endorphins. (In our estimation, anyone who runs more than a mile a day is a long-distance runner.) Recent research, however, casts doubt on whether this is in fact what's going on. Many runners say they never get a high, no matter how much or intensively they exercise. Researchers find that endorphin levels do rise in the blood – but the trouble is they don't, from there, pass to the brain, and there is no evidence to show that brain endorphin levels also rise, in part because there are no non-invasive methods they can use to test them during exercise.

The New York Times reported in May that a team at the Memorial University of Newfoundland set out to study the phenomenon in rats, and quickly discovered that rats could become addicted to exercise to the point where they would literally starve to death. Further research showed that whatever the rats' post-running high was, it didn't last more than half an hour. A different team at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm hypothesizes that the pathway to many addictions is the same: morphine, cocaine, alcohol, amphetamines, painkillers, and marijuana all eventually kick off a flood of dopamine that triggers the production of the known trademark chemicals of addictive drugs to the reward centers in the brain. Endorphins may (or may not) have something to do with it.



Thanks to this issue's clippings contributors: **Rachel Carthy, Stuart Campbell, Tom Ruffles, Ernest Jackson, the Wizard's Star List, Skeptic News, David Langford, Kate Holden, Phil McKerracher.** *The Skeptic* would like to remind clippings contributors to use the magazine's current address, listed on p. 2, rather than the old PO Box address, which has been phased out. Thank you.

Skeptic at large . . .

Wendy M Grossman



Alternative, schmalternative

THE NICE WOMAN from BBC Manchester made a communication error. She said, “We’re looking for someone to present an alternative view on angels.” I said, “What do you mean, an alternative view?” And she said, “Someone who’s sceptical and doesn’t believe they exist.”

If that’s an *alternative* view, we really do have problems. ‘Alternative’ means ‘alternative to the mainstream way of thinking.’ She apologised for the wording, but the damage was done.

It really wasn’t her fault, of course. It’s just that believers in angels, more than most other believers in the paranormal, make me a little nuts. Back in December 2000 angels were entrenched enough to feature on a *Kilroy*, where I appeared as the token annoying sceptic. The stories told by my fellow audience members ran the usual astonishing gamut. One woman told how her parents’ angels appeared to her the night before her mother died, enveloping her in a blissful feeling of warmth, peace, and sublime love. Her mother wasn’t even sick, she said, but the next day was taken to the hospital with a suspected chest infection that quickly killed her. Another woman was saved from a car crash. A third was being pushed down a ravine when her rather hefty husband lost control of his electric wheelchair; a stranger with piercing blue eyes appeared out of nowhere, lifted the wheelchair and husband and carried them back up to the bank, saving both of them and then disappearing three seconds later.

But that was only the beginning. One woman, who was in the habit of feeding passing tramps in her house on Salisbury Plain gave a meal to a stranger with piercing blue eyes who read her a little sermon on angels. (As a blue-eyed person myself, I guess I have to be pleased that all these benevolent angels are, too.) A firm believer, she had moved on to giving readings using beautifully designed and printed angel cards (much like Tarot cards) and a little book of interpretations. Kilroy, for whom she did a reading, got the three cards Divine Guidance, Freedom, and Body Care, implying, I suppose, that if he opened his heart to believe in angels and took care of his body he would have freedom. Another woman does healing with angels guiding her – and yes, she does charge for it. Is that wrong?

So the angel industry is off and running. What was really striking about many of the stories was that I have heard the same kinds of stories told about ghosts or

aliens. Person in bed at night, sure they’re not asleep, sees a bright light. If the person is inclined to believe in alien spacecraft, it’s a UFO; if the person is inclined to believe in spirits, it’s an angel. The other really noticeable common factor was the number of stories that showed that the person in question began to believe in angels at a time of extreme stress in their lives. The near-fatal accident and the mother’s death described above are obvious examples; another angel appearance took place when a woman had just lost her daughter. Humans under stress want to believe there’s something or someone out there watching out for them. There’s nothing surprising in that. Life is scary, and gets more so as you go along.

But I wound up – and this is what I told the BBC Manchester researcher – more than ordinarily offended by the self-absorption on display in these tales. Where were all these angels on 11 September 2001, or in the many periods of drought, famine, and strife in the developing world? Why are these angels concerned with events that are, in the grander scheme of things, so trivial? Haven’t they got better things to do, like creating world peace, or ending hunger? “Ah,” said one of the believers sagely, “but those things can be solved by man, not the angels.” So what is the implication here? That large numbers of Africans should die of AIDS – current estimates are that half or more of 15-year old African males will die of it in the worst-affected countries, South Africa, Botswana, and Zimbabwe – is a human problem but an avoidable car crash is one for the angels? Does the developed world have to hog *all* the resources? Couldn’t we afford, with all our economic advantages, to send our angels to people who really need their services? (Brief digression while I imagine the scene at Passport Control where the angels try to explain why they should be allowed in.)

The question of whether these angels weren’t intervening in rather trivial human affairs compared to the great issues of the day was in fact put to the believers by one of the other audience members. “Man causes that,” said one believer angrily. “And man can fix it.” So an angel won’t fix world hunger because it’s caused by man but it reminded an English woman on the show to take her mobile phone when she went out to tramp across the countryside so she could call for help when she fell down a ditch. Yeah, yeah: God moves in mysterious ways.

Now, how do we test that?

Wendy M Grossman is founder and former editor (twice) of *The Skeptic*, and author of *From Anarchy to Power: the Net Comes of Age*. Her web site is at <http://www.pelicancrossing.net>.

The Psychological Reality of Haunts and Poltergeists

Part II: An Advanced Model

Rense Lange and James Houran propose a more advanced model of the psychological processes underlying hauntings and poltergeists.

Belief vs. Fear

ALTHOUGH THE PATH MODEL (presented in issue 15.3) highlights the major features of paranormal belief and experience, this type of linear modelling is ill-suited to test the notion that people face a basic choice between belief and fear. Therefore, we tackled this issue using nonlinear models derived from catastrophe theory (for an overview, see Guastello, 1995). Specifically, analogous to the sudden buckling of a beam under a gradually increasing load, we argued that fear of the paranormal and belief in the paranormal create a polarity such that percipients can suddenly switch from being fearful to believing in paranormal causes due to relatively minor changes in their environments (Lange, 1998a). This hypothesis was tested using the GEMCAT II catastrophe software (Lange, 1998b; Lange, Oliva, & McDade, 2000), which allows researchers to combine several ‘indicator’ variables linearly into the basic (‘latent’) components of a catastrophe model. GEMCAT II also provides estimates of the statistical significance of the indicator variables using modern resampling techniques (bootstrap and jackknife).



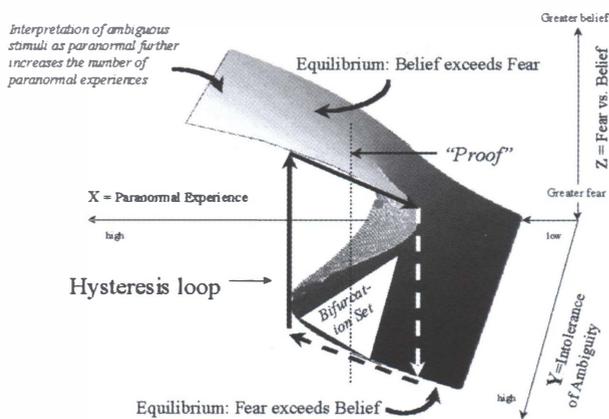
Annie Jones's brothel at Louisville, Kentucky, is disturbed by ghosts (say the girls) or by drunken rowdies (say the cops)

ity tolerant individuals (Low Y) as their beliefs are not fixed, and curiosity rather than fear dominates. However, those with low ambiguity tolerance (High Y) need to be sure: they either fear the paranormal (Low Z) or they embrace it (High Z) – but not both.

Thus, for ambiguity intolerant individuals belief and fear define two states: one in which belief dominates fear (top layer of graph), and one in which fear dominates belief (bottom layer).

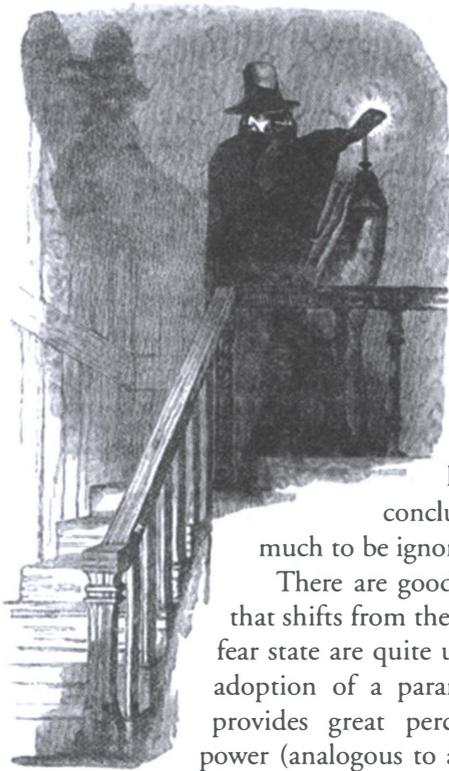
The transition from fear to belief is not a gradual process for those intolerant of ambiguity. Rather, the gap between the two layers indicates that paranormal belief results from a sudden reversal away from the fear induced by ambiguity intolerance.

The system has a “memory” in the form of hysteresis. That is, assume that someone perceives a series of increasing (and, for the sake of argument, equally spaced qua magnitude) ambiguous events $E_1 < E_2 < \dots < E_{t-4} < \dots < E_{t-1} < E_t$ that suggest a paranormal explanation given an appropriate context. Further, assume that the shift toward paranormal belief occurs in response to E_t – i.e., the ambiguous experience that acts as the proverbial straw to break the camel’s back. Now, if (somehow) the subjective evidence for a paranormal explanation decreases, the person will not relinquish his or her paranormal beliefs at the point E_t (or even E_{t-1}) where such beliefs first started. Rather, depending on the person’s ambiguity intolerance, a much lower level is needed to obtain the reverse switch (say, E_{t-4}).



As is shown in Figure 2, we discovered that delusions of the paranormal can be seen as a three-dimensional ‘cusp’ catastrophe model. The proposed cusp model entails that:

Intolerance of ambiguity is the major variable to force a choice between fear and paranormal belief (Y-axis). That is, fear and belief play little role for ambigu-



Point 4 is somewhat artificial, as it seems impossible that one's cognitive system ever exactly returns to a previous state.

Nevertheless, it explains nicely why the same evidence can simultaneously be seen by sceptics as "too little to warrant any conclusions" and as "too much to be ignored" by a believer.

There are good reasons to believe that shifts from the belief state back to fear state are quite unlikely. Firstly, the adoption of a paranormal perspective provides great perceived explanatory power (analogous to a revelation or religious experience). Secondly, any remaining doubts are alleviated by the discovery of additional supporting evidence for a paranormal point of view that previously went unnoticed. Thus, new believers undertake a reinterpretation of their environments, sometimes resulting in the type of perceptual contagion that was discussed in an earlier section. Thirdly, a shift away from belief is likely to reinstate the fears that induced such beliefs in the first place.

Lacking longitudinal data, it is not clear if, and how often, percipients vacillate between fear and belief. Also, whereas it seems likely that fear can be used to stimulate delusions of the paranormal, it is not clear how such delusions can be suppressed. Nevertheless, the notion that paranormal delusions are the result of an approach-avoidance type of phenomenon revolving around a conflict between fears and beliefs must seriously be entertained at this point. In particular, the model suggests that increasing believers' tolerance of ambiguity and lowering fear might provide a strategy to

change paranormal beliefs.

Epilogue

In addition to providing a coherent account of poltergeists, Figures 1 (issue 15.3) and 2 may also explain other delusions. We are particularly impressed by the similarity between descriptions of poltergeist-like episodes and contagious psychogenic illnesses. For instance, analogous to poltergeist outbreaks, contagious psychogenic illnesses are characterized by ambiguous stimulants that trigger a sudden onset and cessation of dramatic symptoms, predominantly in young females, and during times of psychosocial stress (Colligan et al., 1982; Wessely, 1987). Also, the interpretation of the contagious episode changes according to the context. For instance, Engs, McKaig & Jacobs (1996, p. 197) reported the following case:

The incident began around 6:00 p.m. during the first week of school, a time when students are beginning to form support networks. The weather during the week had been extremely hot and humid, making most of this all-female non-air-conditioned residence facility uncomfortable. While waiting in line in the snack bar, a student reported that she had seen some dusty substance in the air; another student began to feel very ill and went to the food manager to report this information. Almost immediately, other students reported symptoms similar to the first student and claimed that they smelled a bad odor. The reported symptoms included shortness of breath, eye and skin irritation, and a general feeling of sickness . . . In all, 69 students and workers, about 8% of the total population, reported symptoms . . . An exact cause of the ailments of the students who took ill was not determined.

It is also interesting to note that Windholz & Diamant (1974) observed nearly thirty years ago that believers in the paranormal score higher than non-believers on measures of neuroticism and hypochondriasis, i.e., complaints about bodily ailments and a subjective state of suffering. We have since conceptually replicated this result (Houran et al., submitted) and have found that somatic complaints and hypochondri-

Table 1. Comparison of the major aspects of the poltergeist and mass psychogenic illness examples cited in the text.

CHARACTERISTIC

1. Precipitated by stress
2. focusing on particular person
3. ambiguous triggering stimulant
4. psychological & physical effects
5. clustering (contagion)

POLTERGEIST

unclear in this case
 young girl
 'apparition'
 apparitions, coldness,
 movement of objects
 general feeling of sickness
 family has

PSYCHOGENIC ILLNESS

social & environmental pressures
 female student
 'dusty substance in air'
 shortness of breath, eye &
 skin irritation, bad odor,
 other students become ill as well
 experiences

acal tendencies, among other personality variables, help to distinguish experiences of haunts from non-experiences (Houran, Wiseman, & Thalbourne, in press). Thus, there does seem to be a strong rationale for likening haunt and poltergeist outbreaks to episodes of psychogenic illness. However, to further illustrate the similarities between poltergeist-like episodes and contagious psychogenic illnesses, Table 1 compares the major features of the McHarg (1973, pp. 17–18) and Engs et al. (1996, p. 197) cases.

It may seem peculiar to some readers that people would express conscious or unconscious psychological distress in terms of paranormal experiences. Sigmund Freud, and theorists that followed such as C. G. Jung, viewed human behavior as the manifestation of an underlying drama within our unconscious mind. The unconscious is the seat of suppressed impulses, ideations, and emotion, and without our awareness, it can express itself through everyday behavior, dreams and mental illness (Benjamin, Hopkins, & Nation, 1987). Some theorists suggest that unconscious motivations and processes underlie paranormal experiences as well, and this may explain why self-reported apparitions, haunts, and poltergeist experiences consistently correlate with “transliminality” (the hypothesized tendency for psychological material to cross thresholds into or out of consciousness) (Houran & Thalbourne, 2001a, 2001b). To be sure, the idea that images, visions, and apparitions are manifestations of unconscious or preconscious material can already be found in nineteenth century texts (e.g., De Boismont, 1853). Likewise, parapsychological theories of apparitions (see e.g., Tyrrell, 1942/1963) emphasize the influence of psychological factors on the perception of apparitions. Thus, regardless of the ultimate source of apparitions, the psychological background of the experient cannot be dismissed.

For example, Zeanah (1988) discussed the effects of unresolved mourning as a source of imagery during hypnogogic states. In more extreme instances, it is not difficult to imagine how such psychological dramas might be responsible for some bereavement apparitions and deathbed visions (see Houran & Lange, 1997a). Furthermore, “paranormal” expressions of distress may also occur during normal waking states. A case study by Sabatini, Gaud, & Guillemarrie-Alzieu (1987) detailed a woman who was hospitalized after a suicide attempt prompted by an argument with her lover. In telling the attending psychiatrists her life history, the woman described her place of employment as haunted by a presence connected with an old family secret. Hess (1988, 1990) similarly characterized haunts and poltergeists as idioms of distress. Apparently, themes related to “ghosts” and “demons”



THE MONK OF THE MARSHES a huge and sinister figure seen by countryfolk who pass ponds in Berry, central France, at night

are effective mediums with which to tell many types of stories (Edwards, 2001). Therefore, it is not surprising that ghosts may be universal personifications of troubled psyches (cf. von Franz, 1995). Siegel & Marion (1973) even noted that some psychiatric patients perceive images of ghosts on the projective Rorschach psychological test.

None of the preceding contradicts the models summarized in Figures 1 (issue 15.3) and 2, albeit that these only reflect the outcomes of unconsciousness processes, not the processes themselves. Moreover, the models agree with research findings on mass delusions (Wessely, 1987), as they identify fear as the primary factor in the genesis of delusions of the paranormal. Further, the finding that percipients' reaction to ostensibly paranormal events can be described in terms of a clear dichotomy (i.e., fear vs. belief) strongly suggests that delusions create “attractors” in percipients' cognitions which serve to neutralize otherwise threatening experiences. It is our current hypothesis that the nature of this attractor is difficult to define as it is largely determined by the unconscious processes outlined above. There is some evidence that such processes result in attentional biases. For instance, we (Lange & Houran, 2001a, 2001b) found that the perception of poltergeist-like experiences within individual cases follows a power law type frequency distribution with recognizable musical properties. Also, the time between discrete observations of paranormal happenings proved highly predictable. It does not seem impossible therefore that the unconscious motivations alter the way information is attended to and interpreted – i.e., percipients might literally “operate on a different wave-length”.

In our years of research on this topic we have come to one major conclusion and that is that ghosts, haunts, and poltergeists are clearly mostly social facts, perhaps guided by our physiological makeup. Yet, they are real

in the same sense that music, art, emotion, and language are real constructs. If our ideas on what generate and sustain these experiences are correct, then the study of ghosts may well provide the basis for a more comprehensive model of cognition — in the living of course!

References for both Part I (Issue 15.3) and Part II

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Skeptical Stats

1. Annual loss by the Royal Mail, announced 13 June 2002: **£1 billion**
2. Amount spent on changing its name/brand to Consignia: **about £2 million**
3. Cost of changing it back to Royal Mail: **£1 million** (estimated)
4. Number of letters lost in the post, per week, out of 500 million: **500,000**. (*News 24*)
5. Date on which scientists sent a special transmission to the retired Pioneer 10 spacecraft to mark its 30th birthday: **2 March 2002**
6. Pioneer 10's distance from Earth: **7.5 billion miles**
7. Number of phials of her own blood actress Angelia Jolie wants her soon-to-be-ex-husband, Billy Bob Thornton, to return to her for fear he'll use them to put a curse on her: **5**
8. Percentage of worldwide online activity accounted for by the US: **42.65**
9. Percentage accounted for by the number two country, China: **6.63**
10. Number of wives who tried selling advertising space on their husbands' penises on eBay: **1**
11. Amount top management of the biggest 25 US corporate bankruptcies made from share sales, payoffs, and other rewards: **\$3.3 billion**
12. Number who collected more than \$10 million each: **61**
13. Number of books Stephen King says he has left to write before he retires: **5**
14. Percentage of the global population that is obese: **18**
15. Percentage of the world's population that is chronically hungry: **13**
16. Traditional ratio of buy:sell recommendations by Wall Street analysts: **70:30**
17. Ratio of buy:sell recommendations by Wall Street analysts during the 1999 dot-com boom: **98:2**
18. Number of kinds of people in the world when you add together those who know binary and those who don't: **10**
19. Number of imported items of endangered wildlife species seized in Britain from 1996-2001: **more than a million**
20. Estimated annual value of worldwide wildlife crime: **more than £5 billion**
21. Distance by which asteroid 2002MN, about the size of a football field, missed hitting the Earth: **75,000 miles**
22. Days after it passed by the Earth that it was detected: **3**
23. Percentage of Santa's reindeers who, judging from their antlers, must be female: **100**
24. Average amount of time Britons spend reading novels: **11 minutes per day**
25. Average amount of time Britons spend on all types of reading: **48 minutes per day**

Sources: 1,2,3 Radio 4; 4 *News 24*; 4,5,6 NASA; 7 *The Sun*, alt.showbiz.gossip, 8,9 WebSideStory; 10 *The Register*; 11,12 *Financial Times*; 13 *Ansible*; 14,15 World Health Organisation, *The Independent*; 16,17 CNBC; 18,19 World Wide Fund for Nature; 20 Interpol; 21,22 *The Independent*; 23 *The Science Reporter*; 24,25 Book Marketing, *The Independent*

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Skeptical Stats is compiled by **Wendy M Grossman**.

Reconsecration: Towards a Secular Church

Matthew Coniam acknowledges the value of churches, but suggests that we dedicate them to science.

CHURCHES ARE the soft spot in every atheist's armour. Ask us about the Church in the abstract and we will rail against its hypocrisy, its destructive social influence, its anti-scientific absurdity. But ask us about the actual churches, those calm quiet buildings in village greens and country lanes, and we will lose that vehemence in an instant.

Nobody can deny that these constructions are cherishable in themselves, or even that their basic function – to encourage contemplation, solemnity, awe and humility – is an eminently worthy one. Further, as utilitarian buildings they are brilliant at their job: they really do, in their coolness, size and simplicity, encourage profound reflection. Imagine your world, the theists cry, with no churches, no bells on a Sunday morning, none of that warmth and cohesion that typifies the small parish. Who would want that? Certainly not us, we reply in true atheistic confidence. But the question lingers: in our ideal, secular society, just what would we do with all those churches?

Put the question to your friends and colleagues and the first reply you get will probably be light-heartedly selfish: to reconsecrate them to whatever happens to be their own biggest passion. (My own choice in that vein would be to turn them into cinemas that show only Marx Brothers movies – ah, the bliss ...) Then, thinking more deeply, they will almost certainly suggest that they should be turned into *libraries*.

This is a good idea as far as it goes, but it's not truly a practicable one. Churches make an awe-inspiring setting for a house of knowledge, as any who have visited such a conversion can confirm. But even if libraries were used as much as the most zealous among us would wish, there simply is no need for as many as there are churches. And again, I can't help thinking that so radical a refit is a step too distant from that aspect of a church's function that I as an atheist would be most keen to retain. That is the sense that the church is an end in itself, not a mere building. Regardless of what it contains, the church should by definition and in itself inspire powerful thoughts and emotions.

So how about this: why not let them keep the job they were designed to perform, to provide a space in which humans can temporarily abandon the superficiality of their everyday life and instead think more deeply about their lives and the universe in which they live? Do all that, but do it *properly*: with truth and reason and science instead of obscurantism, hocus pocus and superstition. Other than that we have grown up accepting the notion that we go to church to worship



St Paul's

God and to school to learn science, what is really so silly about a church dedicated to science? In this church citizens would be encouraged once a week – on a Sunday, say – to attend a church and think about the wonder of the Universe, the mysteries of life, the profound vastness of the cosmos, the majesty of

Instead of sermons there could be well-chosen, awe-provoking scientific readings

Darwinian natural selection and the implications of all that for our conception of our own existence.

Now, it seems to me that this would do everything that a church is designed to do. It would expect its congregation to be serious rather than frivolous, contemplative rather than superficial, humble rather than pompous, and mindful of the fact that we as individuals are no more than a tiny part of a vast tapestry. Instead of sermons there could be well-chosen, awe-provoking scientific readings, which, like religious sermons, could either be especially written by those with a talent for such things or else just carefully selected

from existing books. I take as my text for this morning Hawking on the formation of black holes, Dawkins on the earliest self-replicating molecules, Einstein on the speed of light ... who would leave such a service without feeling enriched, better able to deal with their lives and, in the truest religious sense, humbled? These great concepts, these profound ideas, so counterintuitive and dizzying to grasp – the immense age of the earth, the size of the universe, the intricacy of evolution – if we were to design a building worthy of their importance, nothing less than a cathedral would suffice.

For those who see no poetry in the scientific enterprise, preferring to dismiss it as a myopic, nuts-and-bolts affair characterized by joyless mathematics and the dissection of frogs, such speculations as I have advanced above would seem simply absurd. But it is that very view of science which needs to be challenged, and surely would be by such an idea. I'm reminded of the excellent moment in Richard Dawkins's 1994 television inter-

view with Sheena McDonald in which McDonald mentioned the brilliance of religious art, architecture and music and asked if that was to be dismissed, or else replaced by a choral symphony inspired by "the anatomy of a lizard". Dawkins's response, as ever, was so well-considered, thought-provoking and inarguable that it deserves to be quoted in full as postscript to this article. He replied:

By calling it the anatomy of a lizard you, as it were, play for laughs. But if you put it another way – let's say, does geological time or does the evolution of life on earth, could that be the inspiration for a great symphony? Well, of course it could. It would be hard to imagine a more colossal inspiration for a great piece of music or poetry than 2000 million years of slow, gradual evolutionary change.

Amen to that.

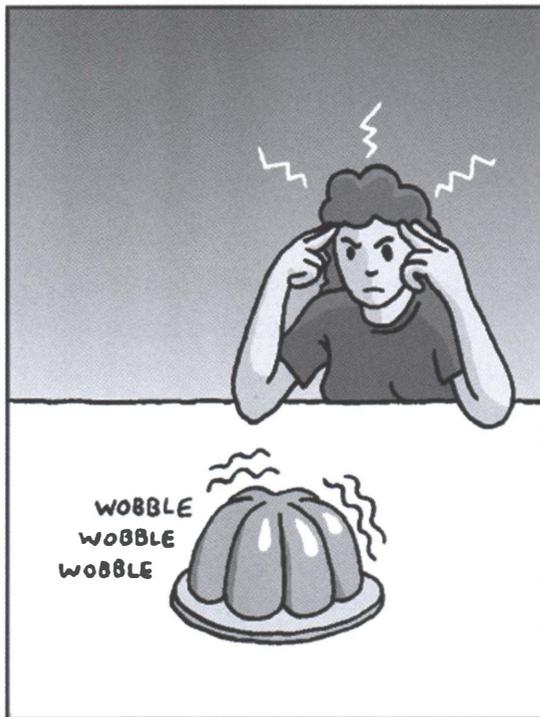


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THE PARKING LOT IS FULL

by Jack McLaren and Pat Spacek

<http://www.plif.com>



When she was fourteen, Cindy discovered that she was gifted with the rare mental power of jellokinesis.



Little-Known Fact#312: The discovery of gravitational force was actually made by Sir Ogilvie Newton, Isaac's older brother. Unfortunately, Ogilvie sought *his* inspiration in the anvil orchard.

Myths to Die for

Hilary Evans describes new evidence that the atrocities committed by the German army during its invasion of Belgium in 1914 were even worse than we imagined...

IT IS EASY to be skeptical about myths. What are they but legends of dead heroes, countryfolks' night fears, old wives' tales told at the chimney corner ...

Well, but what if the 'old wives' are the Officer Corps of a powerful nation aggressively seeking expansion? What if the myth is believed in by a people conditioned to think of themselves as a master-race, compared with whom other people, even their neighbours, are barbarians or savages?

The events chronicled in John Horne and Alan Kramer's *German Atrocities: A History of Denial* comprise a myth within a myth. Apart from the book's interest as history, it is of profound significance for anyone concerned with the issues of belief and scepticism, denial and revisionism, in the political sphere.

The question of the atrocities committed by the German Army during its invasion of neutral Belgium in August–September 1914 has been, like the atrocities committed by the Germans in World War II, the subject of controversy, of passionate advocacy and obdurate refusal to believe, of partisan revisionism and a scepticism amounting at times to wilful blindness.

We have all heard stories of the German World War I atrocities. Many of us, even if we are not fortunate enough to work in a historical picture archive, are familiar with cartoons, posters and propaganda images on the subject, depicting the Boche or the Hun as an evil monster doing unspeakable things to the innocent people of Belgium. I dare say that many, like myself, were inclined to discount a great part of this as distortion and propaganda: we accepted that war crimes had been committed, but were perhaps inclined to think that Bernard Shaw was right when he wrote, "There really isn't a solitary scrap of evidence that the Germans, apart from their obsolete usage of hostage shooting, are behaving worse than we should behave in their circumstances."

But Shaw was wrong, and I was wrong. There exists a vast body of evidence, not only in the form of government white papers, but also military orders and reports to superiors preserved in military archives, much of it only recently made available, also in private journals and correspondence, painstakingly brought to light. All of this is documented, impartially but devastatingly, by Horne and Kramer, whose 600-page book contains 114 pages of notes and references and a bibliography comprising 31 pages of small print. The views of other historians, from many countries including Germany, are given a full and fair hearing. The tone throughout is neutral and impartial, which makes the ultimate find-

ings all the more forceful.

And those findings are that the atrocities were, if anything, worse than even the most alarmist whistle-blower claimed. At the time, in the absence of solid documentation and with only eye-witness testimony to back the claims, the authorities were reluctant to accept that it was as horrendous as appeared: partly, too, they did not wish to panic the civilian population. But the vast archival resources now available make it clear that the Germans, even if they did not actually throw Belgian babies up in the air for the fun of catching them on their bayonets, did pretty well everything short of that.

**Some were simply lined up
against walls and shot;
others were held as hostages
then shot; others were hanged;
women were raped then shot**

The myth of 'the people's war'

At the declaration of war in 1914, Germany immediately put into action her long-prepared plan for the invasion of France. This involved not a direct attack on France, which they knew would meet with strong opposition, but an indirect invasion via neutral Belgium. Since they were just passing through, they expected to meet little resistance, but they found the Belgians less than delighted to have their country used as a shortcut by a huge and hungry army. Opposition was fiercer than expected, both from the Belgians themselves, and from the French and British troops which were hurried into Belgium.

When the Germans found that the resistance was fiercer, and their progress slower, than they expected, they looked for an explanation which didn't involve finding that "someone had blundered" – that someone being their own military planners who had made a colossal miscalculation. So who else could they blame? The answer: Belgium's civilian population, who, in the form of self-proclaimed *franc-tireurs* (literally, free-shooters), were taking part in the war. The people of Belgium, though not technically at war – they were merely being invaded – were waging a *volkskrieg* – a 'people's war'.

Now, this was contrary to the Germans' idea of how wars should be fought. Earlier in the century they had

refused to go along with other nations in formulating 'rules of war' which would allow for anything other than regular armies fighting each other. To them, any civilian who opposed their 'rightful' invasion – rightful because, by the insane logic of warfare, it was part of the recognised formality of war as perceived by the German High Command – was not on a par with legitimate forces, but was guilty of terrorism, and consequently liable to summary execution: whenever possible, this should be by court martial, but if it was inconvenient to hold a court in the heat of battle, then summary execution was permissible. As it happened, it proved never to be convenient: no formal hearings were held, every execution was a rush to judgment.

The consequence was that some 6,500 civilians, virtually all of them totally innocent, were executed or otherwise killed by the Germans. Six thousand five hundred may not seem many compared with the WWII holocaust, but we must remember that Belgium is a small country, and that these were mostly individual acts of violence. Some were simply lined up against walls and shot; others were held as hostages then shot; others were hanged; women were raped then shot. Bodies were dumped in mass graves or dropped into wells, sometimes while they were still alive; often, of course, they were burnt, along with the houses they were in. Women

and children were made to watch their menfolk being shot, then frequently shot in their turn. Often the Germans would round up civilians and force them to go ahead of their forces to provide a 'human screen'. Figures show that this was done in 25% of assaults on towns. Evidently it was 'legitimate' for the invaders to do this, whereas refusal by the invaded to co-operate with their invaders was punishable by on-the-spot execution.

These acts against innocent civilians were matched by widespread vandalism and looting – thousands of homes, whole villages often, were fired then razed. In the town of Visé, just one of many, the women and children were driven into Holland, while 631 citizens were deported to Germany to work as forced labour. The

town was completely pillaged, 600 houses were burned, and 23 inhabitants were killed. And this was one among scores. In the ancient city of Louvain, 2,000 buildings were destroyed: they included the University Library, containing 500,000 volumes including priceless medieval treasures, which was totally and deliberately destroyed, perhaps the single most appalling act of vandalism in modern history.

If the rest of the world at first found it hard to believe that these things were truly happening, it was because it was so hard to believe that the nation which produced Goethe and Beethoven, and so many of the world's greatest scientists and philosophers, could behave in so inhuman a manner. For not one single case of a Belgian civilian turning *franc-tireur* was ever confirmed. The *franc-tireurs* were a delusion.

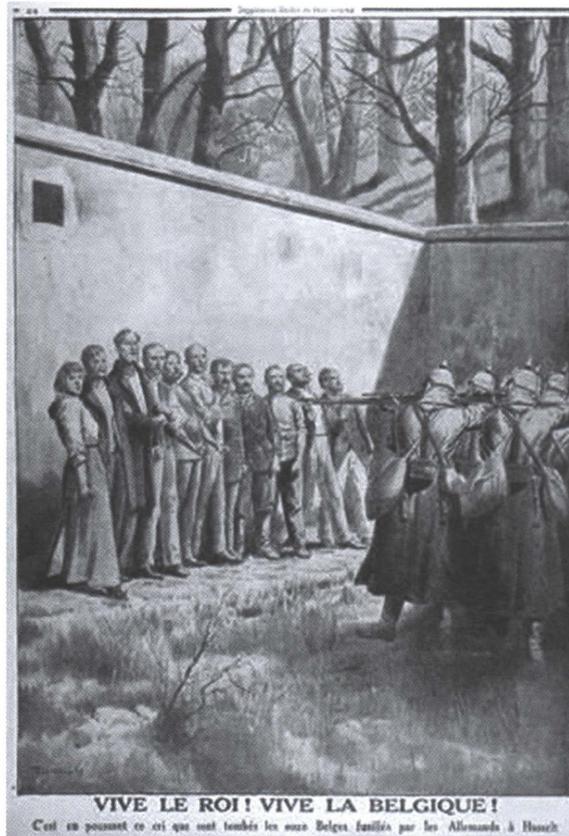
The origin of the delusion

So we have to ask: what did the German army think they were doing? It seems that many of them truly believed they were being shot at by *franc-tireurs*. But then we have to ask: why did they believe this when it wasn't so?

The answers are several and complex: but they boil down to myth. The myth was handed down to them from their officers, who – as is so often the case with military leaders – proposed to fight the 1914 war as though it were a repeat of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870.

The myth was that such behaviour was only what they must expect when invading a land of barbarians such as the Belgians. Such ideas were prevalent in the German Army, filtering down from the career officers to the rapidly assembled army of soldiers – soldiers who only a few weeks before had been clerks and farmworkers, fathers and husbands. Now with rifles thrust into their hands, they were forced to invade a neutral country whose population could be expected to be resentful, if not actively hostile.

Then, when they found resistance heavier than they had been led to expect, panic erupted – there is ample documentation of this. And since it was unthinkable that German soldiers could panic, or mistakenly shoot at one another, they clutched at the only explanation



At Hasselt, Belgium, Germans arrest 120 on charges of spying: eleven are executed on the spot, several of them fathers of families and one a 16-year old girl

which relieved them of responsibility – that they were being treacherously assailed by *franc-tireurs*, by civilians who behaved innocently enough throughout the day but at night turned into assassins who would stab the enemy in the back, gouge out his eyes, mutilate his body ...

The delusion must be seen, too, in a wider context. In November, 4,000 German university professors published their claim that “the salvation of European civilisation lies in the victory of German militarism in solidarity with German culture”. Clearly, from a German perspective, any means were justified which led to German victory. The Kaiser himself noted that “the population of Belgium behaved in a diabolical, not to say, bestial manner”.

Subsequent research has established that there is not even the shadow of a case for the existence of *franc-tireurs*. No priests sounded the alarm from their bell-towers, no villagers took potshots at the Germans as they thundered down the village street, no young girls crept up on sleeping soldiers billeted in their homes and gouged out their eyes.

On the other hand, research has shown that panic, leading to disarray and frequently to ‘friendly fire’, accounted for the great majority of the reported incidents. The Bishop of Namur, insisting that no *franc-tireur* incidents had taken place, described the Germans as victims of a mass delusion, identifiable in psychological terms as hysteria and mass psychosis. “The population in several villages”, he said, “had been ‘exterminated’ simply because it was rumoured that a major had been killed or a young girl had tried to assassinate an officer”. Subsequent research has simply confirmed his contemporary diagnosis.

In short, the myth of the *franc-tireur* was the trigger, and the atrocities were the consequence. For 6,500 innocent Belgian civilians, it was a very fatal consequence.

The myth of the myth

From the start, protests were made: at first by individual Belgian communities or even individual persons,

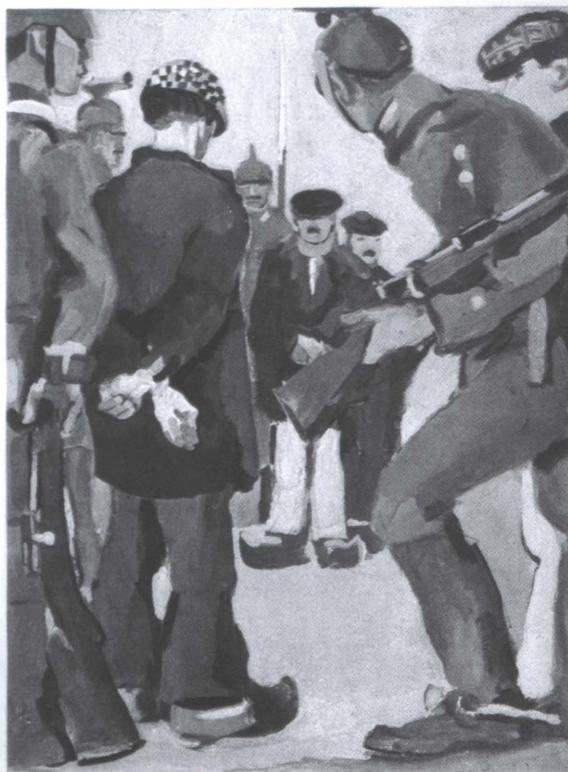
then by the Belgian government, which behaved with commendable restraint considering the circumstances. When the Germans reached France and for a while continued the same tactics, more complaints came, and observers with the British Expeditionary Force added their testimony. A journalist from neutral Netherlands reported of Dinant that “a village on the side of a volcano could not have been more completely, more terribly annihilated”. The Germans riposted with claims that each and every one of the executions was the consequence of vicious attacks by *franc-tireurs*.

When the perpetrators of the alleged acts were not to be found, hostages were taken from the nearest village, and executed. That this included many women and children was regrettable, of course, but this was an inevitable hazard of war. Women and children were forced to watch their husbands and fathers being executed, evidently to discourage them, too, from nurturing negative responses to having their country invaded.

Another German response was to the effect that the Belgians were themselves guilty of atrocities. The Germans had no difficulty in believing this, for the view was widely held that the Belgians were an inferior race (ignoring the inconvenient fact that few nations are less a ‘race’ than the Belgians). A German officer, writing home back to his wife,

wrote “I do not like this people ... they are also worth less than the Germans in physical terms”. A general commented “The Belgians rank with the Herrero [an African people with whom the Germans were not on the best of terms] well below the level of the Hottentots”. This explained, no doubt, how to Germans it was common knowledge that it was the practice among Belgian girls to gouge out the eyes of wounded Germans, atrocities “which will serve to strike this people from the ranks of civilised nations”. However, it is doubtful whether such desperate counter-demonisation carried much weight, even back home in Germany.

By 1915, not even the Germans could deny that appalling things had been done, so it became a question



Cover illustration from *German Atrocities: A History of Denial*, by John Horne and Alan Kramer

of justifying their actions as legitimate punishment. Thus a German general reported after the razing of Aarschot "The inhabitants turned out to be very hostile and have been very severely punished. Many poor innocents have also had to suffer! This kind of warfare, forced upon us by criminal fools, is horrifying. If only they saw reason ..." But no one tried to use such arguments to justify the destruction of Louvain.

The atrocities of 1914, and their subsequent history, confirms Santayana's saying, that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it

Only propaganda?

The Allies, as was natural, used the atrocities as propaganda, directed towards neutral countries such as Italy, hovering on the brink of war, and particularly towards America. Unfortunately, so far as regards the establishment of the truth, this exploitation of the facts was counter-productive. The fact that the atrocities were used as propaganda gave critics and sceptics the chance to suggest that it was 'nothing but' propaganda – that it was distorted, falsified or even invented outright. Many tales were, no doubt, exaggerated: the rumour about the babies and bayonets had no foundation in fact, so far as we know.

One of the earliest official reports, the *Bryce Report* of May 1915, was published less than six months after the events themselves – quite an astonishing feat given the difficulties of obtaining evidence in wartime conditions. At the time it was criticised, by the Allies themselves, as being over-sensational, and some went so far as to sug-

gest that Bryce and his committee had knowingly created a piece of deliberate propaganda. Yet we now know their findings to have been substantially accurate, and indeed there were many incidents of which the Committee was unaware at the time.

Nonetheless, thus was born the second myth, which swallowed the first. The myth of the *franc-tireurs*, which provided the justification for the atrocities, faded into the myth of the atrocities themselves.

Today, in the lingering aftermath of WWII, we are learning that revisionism is possible even regarding events as well-documented as the Holocaust. The need to establish the truth as securely as possible is becoming all the more important in the light of outrageous speculation and denial. The atrocities of 1914, and their subsequent history, confirms Santayana's saying, that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. Had we known in the 1930s as much as we do now about how the Germans behaved in 1914, governments might not have found it so hard to believe the stories they were hearing about Nazi death camps tucked away in remote regions of the Reich seldom visited by tourists.

The authors of this book remind us, too, that "the German atrocities of 1914 were also part of a wider phenomenon – namely, the tendency for atrocities to be committed against those who have been predefined as atrocious". The Belgians were demonised in 1914, before being stood against the town wall and shot: a quarter-century later the Jews were demonised before being sent to the death camps.

The 1914 atrocities carry two lessons for the sceptic. First, that a myth can be as dangerous as the truth, and second, that disbelief can be as misleading as belief.

So – don't disbelieve everything you hear!

Reference

Horne, J., & Kramer, A. (2001). *German Atrocities 1914: A History of Denial*. Yale: Yale University Press.

Hilary Evans likes to explore the frontiers of reality where neither belief nor scepticism prevail. His recent book, *Seeing Ghosts*, is one example. This article is another.

SKEPTICS IN THE PUB

Speakers: TBA

Skeptics in the Pub is an evening held once a month (in a pub, strangely enough) for anybody who has an interest in, or is sceptical about, the paranormal. Each month an invited speaker gives a talk on their chosen specialisation. The talk is followed by an informal discussion in a relaxed and friendly pub atmosphere. Entry fee is £2. The venue for future meetings is uncertain at the time of going to press. If you require further information, such as details of forthcoming meetings and travel directions, please contact Nick Pullar 07740 450 950, nickp@coleridge.co.uk or log in to <http://www.skeptic.org.uk/pub>.



Rhyme and Reason

Steve Donnelly

Keep taking the tablets . . .

I HAVE ALWAYS had great difficulty in understanding why so many otherwise rational and reasonable people have beliefs in aspects of the paranormal. Even more difficult for me is understanding the fact that some of my fellow scientists are also capable of embracing many paranormal beliefs ranging from faith healing through astrology and clairvoyance to close encounters of the third kind. They maintain these beliefs despite their years of training in the scientific method and their professional activity in which (one hopes) they draw logical conclusions from the results of well-designed experiments. I feel equally perplexed when I discover that scientists whom I admire have strong (and in my view irrational) *religious* beliefs. I can perhaps make an exception for believers in ‘God the Utterly Indifferent’ (as touched upon in this column in issue 14.4) but otherwise, the incorporation of firm beliefs extracted from ancient scriptures into the same brain that handles quantum mechanics or molecular biology surpasses my ability to understand human behaviour. Or perhaps I should say “did surpass my ability to understand human behaviour” as some recent research has shed some light on the differences between believers and sceptics and indicates that a tendency towards scepticism may just be a question of brain chemistry – sceptics (and believers) may be born rather than made.

Neurologist Peter Brugger and his colleagues at the University Hospital in Zurich carried out experiments on 20 self-confessed sceptics and 20 believers in which they asked the participants to distinguish between real faces and scrambled-up ones as the images fleetingly appeared on a screen. A second experiment involved distinguishing between real words and nonsense words which also briefly appeared in front of them. The participants then took the drug L-dopa which is normally used in the treatment of Parkinson’s disease and works by increasing levels of dopamine in the brain. Under the influence of the drug, both sceptics and believers became less accurate in their identification of real words and faces but, intriguingly, the sceptics became more likely to interpret scrambled words or faces as the real thing. Brugger concludes from this that “dopamine seems to help people see patterns”, and suggests that paranormal beliefs are associated with high levels of dopamine in the brain. By increasing dopamine levels

in sceptics they become more likely to believe in irrational things. For the believers, though, the drug did not significantly increase their pattern-making tendencies, perhaps indicating that there is a plateau effect such that, above a certain concentration, additional dopamine has no further effect.

Dopamine is an important neurotransmitter which, when present in normal quantities, facilitates important brain functions; however, imbalanced dopamine activity may result in brain dysfunction. For more than 30 years the effect of dopamine has been an important area of medical research and, in particular, scientists have studied the connections between dopamine levels and two major illnesses of the central nervous system: schizophrenia and Parkinson’s disease. Somewhat more recently, research has also indicated that dopamine neurotransmission plays a role in drug and alcohol abuse. Knowledge gleaned from this research may lead to new treatments in which dopaminergic drugs are used to affect a variety of behaviours.

I find all of this is slightly disturbing for a number of reasons. For instance, does the research imply that sceptics have abnormally low levels of dopamine and that scepticism is, therefore, some kind of brain dysfunction? Or is it that believers have abnormally high levels of dopamine and it is they whose brains are dysfunctional (to me a much more acceptable hypothesis!). On perhaps a more serious note, if scepticism is associated with lower than ‘normal’ levels of dopamine neurotransmission (and I’m not sure that one can draw this conclusion from the research findings), does this mean that sceptics may have a greater tendency towards diseases of the central nervous system than believers? Or for that matter, are sceptics more likely to suffer from problems with drug and alcohol dependency? I seem to remember, from some time ago, a study that indicated that church-goers (in the US I think) had, in general, better health and better life-expectancies than non church-goers but I don’t think the study contained information on the type of ailments likely to be suffered by both groups. Could this also be linked to dopamine levels, I wonder?

So the next time that you are cornered in a pub by someone who has regular conversations with aliens or who wants to discuss his latest design for a perpetual motion, antigravity machine I suggest that rather than take it with a pinch of salt, you try a pinch of L-dopa.



Steve Donnelly is a physics professor at University of Salford



Philosopher's Corner

Julian Baggini

EVERY DISCIPLINE has its special terminology and philosophy is no exception. For this issue, I thought I'd help readers unlock the mysteries of philosophical discourse by providing a handy primer to some of its key terms and concepts.

A posteriori

From the Latin for 'off your arse', used to denote a form of reasoning which requires the thinker to get off his or her rear and find out what the world is actually like. Not surprisingly, *a posteriori* reasoning is unpopular with philosophers, who will claim it is less rigorous than *a priori* logic. Many are puzzled, however, by how remaining seated is more rigorous than getting up.

A priori

From the Latin for 'from the armchair', used to denote a form of reasoning which entitles the thinker to remain sitting on his or her rear instead of going out and finding what the world is like. Perhaps the greatest example of this is Spinoza, who in his *Ethics* attempted to deduce the entire nature of God, the universe and everything from a small number of self-evident truths such as "All things that are, are either in themselves or in something else," "The knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of the cause," and "You can never get a plumber on a Sunday."

Certainty

Certainty is to philosophers what greatness is to George Bush. It's what they can aspire to but never have.

Evidence

A word to dignify the premises of a logically invalid argument which we like the conclusion of. For instance, it does not follow logically from the fact that every medium that has had her powers tested scientifically has been shown to be powerless, that all mediums are powerless. But this doesn't matter, we say, because the premises provide evidence for the conclusion. Ask a philosopher to specify just what makes good evidence, however, and you'll get a long answer that doesn't in fact include the specification you asked for.

Forms

Plato believed that all objects in the material world were mere shadows of their more perfect existence in the realm of the forms. This belief has provided the guiding philosophy of the British civil service.

Logic

Formal logic is a daunting part of philosophy but fortunately, like most students, you can elect to master only its elements: logic is hard, it's optional, therefore I won't do it.

Regress

What happens in philosophy seminars when someone starts losing the argument and begins to behave, first like a quarrelsome adolescent and then like a spoiled child.

Rights

Rights are defined by Jeremy Bentham as 'nonsense on stilts'. Although the phrase is oft-repeated it is not clear what the difference is between nonsense on stilts and ordinary nonsense. Perhaps nonsense on stilts is a more dextrous form of nonsense, or a less risk-averse variety? Maybe, when on stilts, nonsense is showing a greater creativity? Whatever the answer, it seems that this is an example of a metaphor that seems to make perfect sense until you begin to ask just what it means.

Valid

In common parlance, an opinion or a point made in argument can be valid. In philosophy, however, only an argument can be valid and even then it can be utter nonsense. For example, if I reason that all pigs eat chocolate and all animals that eat chocolate are called Dave, therefore all pigs are called Dave, I have constructed a valid argument. It is valid because the conclusion follows from the premises. Saying the argument is valid does not in any way endorse the truth of the conclusion or the reasonableness of the premises. So a philosopher can object to the common use of valid, while at the same time agreeing that an argument is valid which in common speech would just be called rubbish. You see why it's so important to get your philosophical terminology correct?

Comments welcome to julian@julianbaggini.com

ASKE News

From the chairman of the Association for Skeptical Enquiry, Michael Heap



AS MOST readers of *The Skeptic* will be aware, the Association for Skeptical Enquiry (ASKE) is a British-based organisation for sceptics that offers membership to anyone willing to declare a commitment to certain basic tenets of scepticism and to pay a small annual subscription. In return, members receive a number of benefits (see the ASKE website, www.aske.org.uk), including the ASKE magazine, entitled the *Skeptical Intelligencer*, which now appears annually.

Soon after its inception, ASKE was granted affiliation with other sceptical societies in Europe that are coordinated by the European Council for Skeptical Organisations (ECOSO). The headquarters of ECOSO are now in Rossdorf, Germany (see the website www.ecoso.org/).

Every two years, one of the affiliated societies hosts the European Sceptics Congress. The last one, in 2001, took place in Prague and was organised by the Czech Sceptics Club (SISYFOS) under the auspices of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic. ASKE is hosting the 2003 Congress. This is the eleventh such event and will be held in London from September 5-7. At the time of writing (August 2002) I am hoping to be able to confirm the venue as Kings College London (the Waterloo site on the South Bank). One advantage of this location is that it is within walking distance of the Eurostar terminus at Waterloo Station.

I have inspected the conference facilities and these are directly opposite student accommodation which will be available to conference attenders at a price comparing very favourably with those of local hotels.

At the time of writing, a provisional skeleton programme has been drawn up and is displayed on the ASKE website. It is intended that the conference will consist of a sequence of symposia devoted to different areas of interest to sceptics, although one symposium may be a miscellany of topics. The others are Science, Health and Medicine; Parapsychology; Anomalistic Psychology; and 'Scientists on the Defensive', the last-mentioned being in the form a debate.

We have approached a number of well-known experts on matters relating to scepticism to give invited addresses, and positive replies have been received from Professor Edzard Ernst (alternative medicine), Professor Leslie Walker (psychological approaches to cancer treat-

ment), and Professor Robert Morris (parapsychology). Professor Chris French, one of the congress organisers, will also be providing a keynote address on anomalistic psychology. An early call for papers has yielded some interesting offers from various parts of the globe.

We are keen to avoid two drawbacks that several people have noted at previous conferences. The first is the difficulties presented to the audience, particularly those whose first language is not English, in following papers spoken in a range of accents. One way of ameliorating this is to display on an overhead slide an ongoing summary of the talk as it is in progress.

The second problem is that, for much of the time, speakers at sceptic meetings are 'preaching to the converted' and there is not enough critical discussion. This of course can be mitigated by having an audience of individuals with differing and sometimes opposing ideas and views on the subjects being presented. This can be achieved by pre-congress publicity that reaches interested parties that are not fully paid-up members of the sceptical movement. However, we also wish to encourage speakers who are prepared to go out on a limb and perhaps be a little provocative, provided of course that they present well-informed and well-reasoned arguments.

An excellent debate can arise when sceptics are not afraid to take on 'taken-for-granted' issues that nevertheless amount to extraordinary claims that require extraordinary evidence. For example, dare we ask "Do we need so much education?"; "Do we need so much medicine?"; "Does democracy achieve what it is supposed to?"; and even (since sceptics should never, if they can help it, take anything for granted) "Should we be sceptical about scientists?"?

Whatever the case, we are keen to promote as much audience participation as possible, and for this reason are encouraging presentations in the form of 'make your point' sessions in which several presenters in turn give a talk of no more than a few minutes, after which the audience is invited to comment and to question the speakers, and challenge them to defend the point or points that they have made.

The ASKE committee looks forward to seeing you at the congress. Remember that there is a discount on the registration fee for all ASKE members.

Michael Heap is the Chairman of ASKE and a clinical and forensic psychologist in Sheffield. ASKE email address = general@aske.org.uk
ASKE website <http://www.aske.org>

Reviews



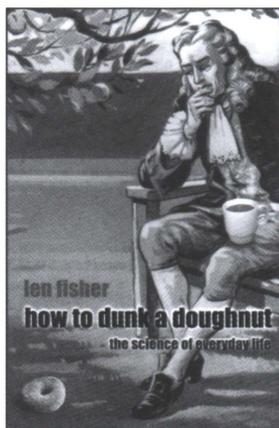
FOOD SCIENCE

How to Dunk a Doughnut: The Science of Everyday Life

by Len Fisher

Weidenfeld & Nicolson, £12.99, ISBN 0-297-60756-1

You have to be very dedicated to science to dunk and eat 140 biscuits with a stainless steel tube thrust up your nose, chewing for a specified count, while a colleague presses buttons to record and analyse the results. This is how people win Ig Nobel prizes (“for scientific achievements that cannot, or should not, be reproduced”), and indeed Len Fisher is an InGloreate. In fact, he drops a hint in this book that he was considered for a second prize.



Fisher, like the Igs, has a serious point, however. He believes that people are hungry to understand good science, and that everyday things are the way to help them connect to it. The study for which Fisher won his Ig had further ramifications than simply finding a way to dunk a biscuit so it wouldn't collapse under its own weight. Unlocking the secrets of capillary action and stress cracks opens the way to studying not just biscuits but how trees grow and how solid materials fracture.

What is fascinating about Fisher's book is how many everyday mysteries fill the world. Working out the best strategy for supermarket shopping, boiling an egg, or throwing a boomerang may not sound like the stuff of Real Science, but each problem leads to a more complex one. Except, it has to be said, for supermarket mathematics, though this chapter does give you the quick tip that the higher the proportion of prices ending in 99p on your register tape, the more relatively expensive your supermarket is likely to be. Even something as deceptively simple as catching a ball is immensely complex – if you try to do it via mathematical calculations, anyway.

Spending many hours on such ordinary problems may seem odd. But the results are certainly entertaining. Did you know you can restore the mint flavour of gum by taking a sip from a sweet drink? Try it.

Wendy Grossman

(This review originally appeared in *New Scientist*)

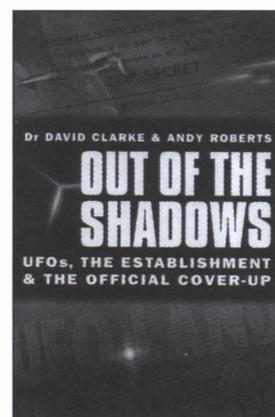
COVERING THE COVER-UP

Out of the Shadows: UFOs, the Establishment and the Official Cover-up

by David Clarke and Andy Roberts

Piatkus, £17.99, ISBN 0-7499-2290-7

There are lot more believers with a serious interest in UFOs than sceptics. This can present something of a dilemma for publishers who naturally want to sell as many books as possible. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that the cover notes for this book are clearly aimed at convincing believers that the Truth lies within these pages – and, by and large, it does.



Unfortunately for supporters of the ET hypothesis, the Truth is probably not what they really wanted. Clarke and Roberts meticulously document the truth about official interest in the UFO phenomenon in Britain and prove to this reviewer's complete satisfaction that there has indeed been a long and misguided history of official cover-up. The problem is that what has been covered up is not government and military knowledge of alien technology or even recovered alien corpses, but simply the very fact that there was any official interest in UFOs in the first place.

The main problem presented by the UFO phenomenon for the Ministry of Defence was not that of a threat to national security from extraterrestrial invasion but simply one of public relations. Although the vast majority of reported sightings can be easily explained in mundane terms, there are inevitably some cases which cannot. This in no way implies that such sightings must be of alien craft. It simply means that we do not have sufficient data to draw definitive conclusions. But the MoD worried that the mass media and the Great British public would not see it that way. In the authors' words: “If any cover up does exist, it is a cover up of ignorance.”

This book is to be recommended as a serious assessment of the history of official involvement in UFOs – no massive cover-up, just an ongoing small-scale monitoring of the situation.

Christopher C French

FOOLED AGAIN, HOLMES

Conned Again, Watson: Cautionary Tales of Logic, Maths and Probability

by Colin Bruce

Vintage, £7.99, ISBN 0099428571

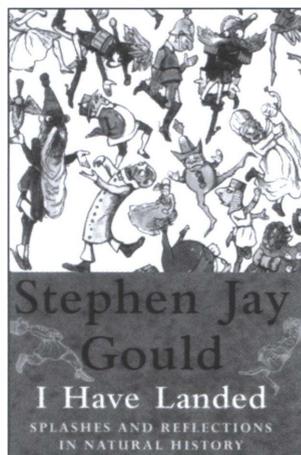
This book fizzes with ideas, paradoxes and problems, drawn mainly from logic, probability and statistics, and presented in a Sherlock Holmes setting. As you might expect, poor Dr Watson blunders from error to error, from which he is rescued, contemptuously, by Holmes. Topics include the birthday paradox, the drunkard's walk, various gambling fallacies, Pascal's triangle, the Wason test, the Monty Hall problem, the mark-release-recapture procedure for estimating population sizes, and there are also introductions to Bayesian logic and game theory. So, a great deal is crammed into the book's 288 pages.

As always with a book like this, the question arises: Who is it intended for? Certainly, anyone who is studying, or has studied, probability and statistics will probably find that it illuminates familiar ideas, and also introduces some new ones. On the other hand, it is doubtful whether a complete beginner will learn very much, unless they either approach the book with dogged determination, or else have a strong natural aptitude for the subject. Indeed, the only major criticism of the book is that it attempts too much, and so skims over important points. For example, this applies to one of the key problems relating to probability (pages 103–106), and readers should certainly visit the author's web site for an additional explanation.

Also, lovers of Conan Doyle's stories are warned that they will find, in every other paragraph, something to make them wince – not merely the many anachronisms to which the author freely admits (such as Lewis Carroll writing *Alice in Wonderland* two years after his death), but, more especially, the language. For example, Conan Doyle's Holmes would never have counselled Watson to “recharge his batteries”, and Watson would never have been so ungentlemanly as to address a clergyman as “Reverend”, or use the word “pub”.

But, in sum, it's an entertaining and lively book. Recommended.

Will Stevens



GOULD'S FOND FAREWELL

I Have Landed: Splashes and Reflections in Natural History

by Stephen Jay Gould

Jonathan Cape, £17.99 ISBN 0-224-06299-9

Twenty-five years after his first popular science essay collection, Stephen Jay Gould bids a conscious goodbye to his readers with this last compilation, published shortly before his death. This engaging meander through the ‘palaeontology of ideas’ includes elements of Gould's own personal and family history as well as the history of science and the evolutionary history of life. (Non-American readers familiar with Gould's books may be reassured that there's not too much baseball in this one.)

The essays largely deal with the kind of historical details that at first seem trifling and irrelevant. Occasionally that's because they are, and it doesn't work – as when Gould investigates why the zoologist E. Ray Lankester attended Karl Marx's funeral, and concludes that they were friends.

However, many other pieces are truly fascinating. What linked Vladimir Nabokov's two careers in lepidoptery and literature? Why did physicians ever apply ointment to weapons as well as to wounds? Why did Freud believe in Lamarckian inheritance? And how did pre-Darwinian geologists explain fossils?

Parts of the book have an autobiographical and occasionally schmaltzy dimension. For instance, one essay concerns why the author began the new millennium by singing Haydn's *Creation*. However, even this personal musing leads into an interesting digression on how the first two chapters of Genesis, taken literally, are inconsistent with each other as well as with scientific observation.

This is a thought-provoking and often heart-warming read. One could perhaps call it rambling, but only in the best possible sense – a pleasant wander through thought, with a most erudite guide to point out the beautifully obscure facts along the way.

Louise Johnson



Reviews are edited by Toby Howard. To join our book reviews team, please email: reviews@skeptic.org.uk – stating your interests and any relevant experience.



LETTERS

Believing in spirit photos

Sad to say, Chris Willis is mistaken in her statement that “modern writers are rightly sceptical about spirit photographs” (*The Skeptic*, 15.2). The author she cites by way of example, Fred Gettings, is by no means a total sceptic. On page 144 of the book she names, *Ghosts in photographs*, Gettings writes: “Except in those cases where I specify fraud, or where I express personal reservations, I have chosen to reproduce and discuss only those pictures that are, to the best of my knowledge and estimation, genuine spirit-pictures”.

I have to confess that I was astonished – and dismayed – to read this unambiguous statement. We have a good many works on spirit photography in our Library, as well as a number of original spirit photos, and it never ceases to amaze me that anyone, no matter how strong their wish to believe, could for a moment have suspended their disbelief sufficiently to accept them as genuine.

Hilary Evans, London

Your magazine's general lack of scepticism on mental illness topics

I do not buy your magazine because it is not sceptical about mental illness, the actions and justifications of quacks (psychiatrists), and related topics. You attack subjects which are easy to pooh-pooh – alien abduction, UFOs, etc. – but go into the politically correct area of mental illness. Watch-out! – scepticism abandoned! A case in point is the article on Multiple Personality Disorder (*The Skeptic*, 13.1), not that it wasn't a disease but whether Sybil was an authentic sufferer. That simultaneously crit-

icizes and fortifies psychiatry's position, while Sybil may not be an authentic MPD there are others who are. RUBBISH! When you can demonstrate by totally objective analysis that the subject has a disease, it isn't one. Multiple personality is a true con game (one you have obviously been sucked into), the 'patient' conning the psychiatrist by his or her claims, the psychiatrist conning the 'patient' by seeing how many 'personalities' the two of them can come up with. And both of them are conning the public eager for such spectacles. In my opinion there is only one 'personality' which is not something you can hold in your hand like a bodily organ but a concept, like mind. A brain which is a bodily organ can be diseased – subdural haematoma, cancer, effects from the neuroleptic drugs that the quacks (psychiatrists) love to give forcibly to so-called schizophrenics, etc. A mind can be ill only in a metaphorical way. Hence mental illness is a myth. (Thomas Szasz is my hero and he should be yours too!)

Getting back to the performance that is Multiple Personality Disorder, to me it is like the repertoire of a fine actor such as Sir Lawrence Olivier and the many roles that he accomplished so well. The MPD 'patient' is like a good actor exhibiting many roles – this should be obvious to an honest psychiatrist. But they are much more interested in aggrandizing themselves as caring physicians than knocking over their sacred cows. If your article were as sceptical as I am about such things, you would have a very different editorial staff.

**Martin D Kessler,
Lynn, Massachusetts**

Your magazine's general lack of scepticism on mental illness topics: a reply

Martin Kessler makes a number of claims and criticisms of the Dissociative Identity Disorder article (*The Skeptic*, 13.1) to which I would like to respond as the author. The statement that “while Sybil may not be an authentic MPD there are others who are” is a misrepresentation of the article which does not actually mention Sybil at all. The thrust of the article was to leave open the question of whether DID is an authentic psychiatric disorder, pending further research, and this is surely a good sceptic's position. Indeed, the conclusion reads “For the moment it appears that the case for DID as a social construct *has not been established beyond reasonable doubt* and so it should remain as a psychiatric disorder to facilitate treatment for individuals who are clearly suffering, *as long as it is recognised that the root of their problems may not be genuine DID*” (my emphasis).

Martin Kessler asserts that “a mind can be ill only in a metaphorical way” and I do not argue this point. I do believe that when a person is suffering, simple humanity demands that their needs should be addressed. Psychiatrists, for all their perceived and real faults, do relieve the suffering of individuals in need, and my own view is that there would have to be good evidence that intervention does more harm than good before psychiatric treatment should be withdrawn from cases of possible DID.

Martin Kessler is of the opinion that “Multiple personality is a true con game ... the 'patient' conning the psychiatrist by their

claims ...". This assertion denies the real distress of people who believe themselves to be suffering from multiple personalities. Furthermore, the assertion is unsupported by evidence, and an extreme claim without evidence is not a good sceptical position.

Finally, it may be the case that the truth of any individual case of possible DID is simply unknowable. Only the sufferers themselves can tell to what extent their experiences are genuinely uncontrollable and unwelcome, and this information may be buried at a level inaccessible to awareness. I commend the "*Guidelines for psychologists working with clients in contexts in which issues related to recovered memories may arise*" published in *The Psychologist* (13.5), which read "...helping the client to make reasonable sense of their lives is not the same as discovering objective facts".

Anna Stone, London

Psychic Balls or Crystal Clairvoyants

Early in 2002 a whole page offer appeared in the national press featuring *The Predictions of Nostradamus* on the return of a small coupon. Out of interest, I completed this, but using an alias, a pen name. As there was no response after some five weeks, I sent a postcard to the address in Rochester in Kent, asking about the work.

A mere ten days later, a printed letter of four pages arrived from Rochelle of Sevenoaks, Kent, addressed to my pseudonym. As "America's foremost psychic astrologer, author and lecturer on *Queen Elizabeth 2* Cruise ship, Hot Line Radio Talk Show and former President of the Astra Guild for Education", she told me that she was organising "my 'to do list' . . . when I realised that you

(my alias) are due to begin a cycle of wealth any day now – and there it was – 4th June 2002, circled with your name written on the calendar." Details were given on the last page of a really fantastic offer. For only £21.95 I could obtain a free gift AND my own secret guide to good fortune, and if I didn't experience 88 days of intense good fortune, all I had to do was to drop her a note to claim my money back!

In all fairness, I replied pointing out that as a "foremost Psychic Astrologer" she should have known that I am an OAP, with no desire for a secret guide and suggested that she check on her vibes before writing to non-existent individuals, especially as her clients all seemed to be in America.

Some ten days later, my alter ego received another offer from Rochelle, saying that my name had "been picked out by a friend in the village as someone who would benefit from the special offer," the details of which were similar to the original, but ignoring my earlier comments and giving another date for "the great event".

A week later, from Skye Alexander of Sittingbourne, Kent, a very similar offer of six pages arrived, in "recognition of your sensitivity, intuition and imagination", for a "prosperity talisman and golden rules of magick" (*sic*) for only four instalments of £5.99 each, but "send it back for a full refund, even in a year's time, if it doesn't work!" The guide, written by this "magickal practitioner and counsellor for over 20 years" was written for *Better Homes and Gardens* and Dell Horoscope and was recently filmed by the Discovery TV Channel performing (?) at Stonehenge. Then why did she not know she was writing to a *nom-de-plume*?

A week later, a four-page letter

arrived from Eva du Maurier of Solen Thonex, Switzerland, offering "more happiness, more money, more love" etc. Then Frank Andrews of Rochester, "Crowned Best Psychic in New York by *Marie Claire* and *New York Magazine*" and "The man who sees the future", claimed that what he saw "in the cards", for my pseudonym, was a period from July 13 which would be "extremely benevolent" until next year, provided I applied for a "free" Magician Card, Amulet and a *Fortune & Destiny Guide* for £21.95. Princess Grace and John Lennon had both benefited from Frank's "vision", it seems.

Breaking away from the general pattern, though, was the receipt of a "100 Million US Dollars Draw Entry – Final Stage" from Australia, entry for which would cost a mere £12, though still addressed to the fictional character that I had created. This was followed by an offer from Anthony Carr, "The 21st Century Nostradamus", of Cranleigh in Surrey, and FINALLY, Jean Mars of Oxford, "a Psychic Astrologer and Genuine Descendant of Nostradamus", wrote asking why I should trust him. Why indeed? Because he is a "long time member of the American Federation of Astrologers AND the American Mentalist Association" and has "rave reviews from personalities like Sir Laurence Olivier and Sir Alec Guinness".

Obviously compiling and obtaining a mailing list is fairly easy, and it seems selling it to others as gullible as oneself is even easier, but what does it do for the image of "psychic awareness" or being a "genuine clairvoyant"? How "psychic" is psychic? Are there any out there who can accept that money is NOT the sole reason for living?

Leo Robbins (pseudonym),
Sussex



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