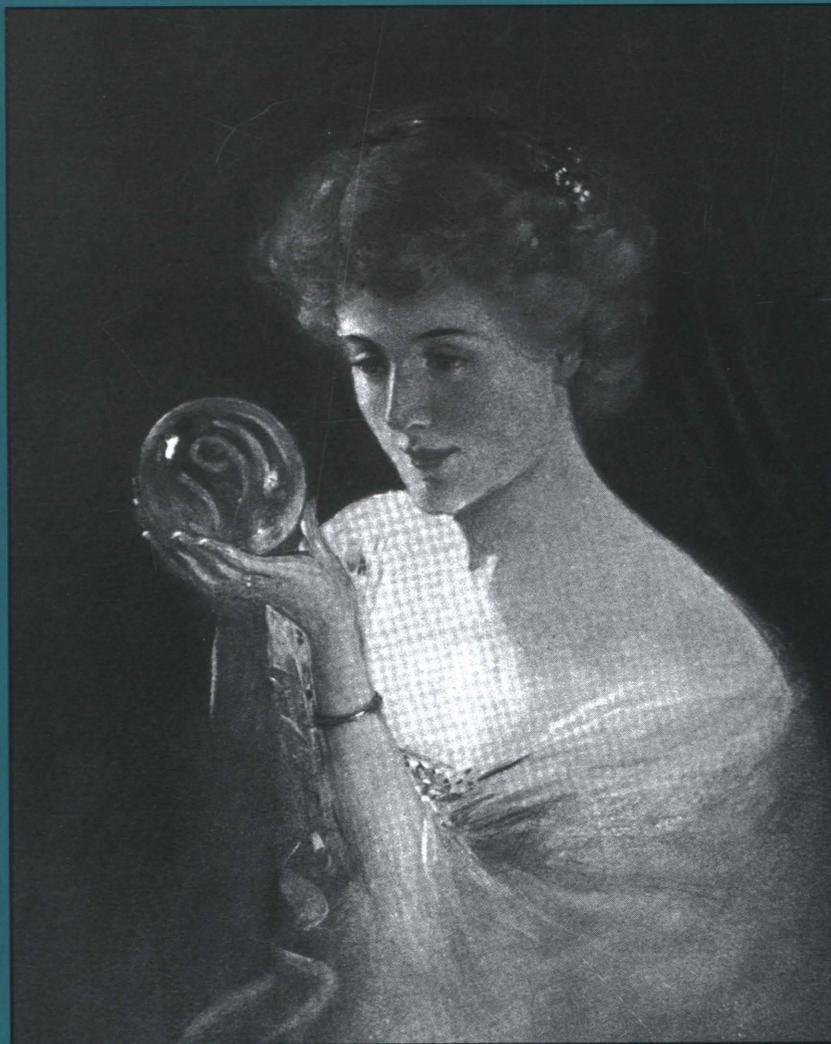


Volume 16 Number 1  
Spring 2003

# The **Skeptic**



## **What are we to make of Exceptional Experience? Part 1**

*Also in this issue:*

**Psychoanalysis: Science or Pseudoscience?**

**Motivational Speakers**

**Michael Bentine: Behind the Door**

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

## *Hilary Evans' Paranormal Picture Gallery*



After studying in India, 54-year old fakir To Kha returns to his native Germany, and has himself buried for 120 hours at Stuttgart in a glass coffin where he can be seen throughout his ordeal. He is monitored by doctors who testify to the genuineness of his feat, and he emerges in perfect health.

**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 16.1 of *The Skeptic*. We have two articles written by psychologists in this issue, and although they address very different topics, there is a common thread in terms of their insistence on the importance of distinguishing science from pseudoscience. The first article is by David Marks, who begins his three-part assessment of parapsychology with a critical view of remote viewing. As one might expect, he is not convinced that the remote viewing effect is real, once properly controlled experiments are conducted. Further, he suggests that one partial explanation for the apparent effect (apart from poorly conducted studies, of course) is wishful thinking.

We think this is also part of the reason that Freud continues to be held in awe. We *want* to believe in him. He provides a seductive narrative for our lives, and a get-out clause for whatever conventionally unacceptable desires we experience. Add in tremendous charisma, and a fantastic story-telling ability, and it's not hard to see why, with a push from wishful thinking, so many people remain loyal to him to this day – despite the lack of scientific rigour so clearly evident in his work! Both of us, as psychology lecturers (okay Chris, I *know* you're a Prof), have experienced at first hand the disillusionment of psychology students when presented with the evidence that Freud's work is, in scientific terms, trashy. It's as if the central pillar of their belief system has crumbled; their 'sacred cow' has been attacked. Of course, the smart ones eventually come round to our point of view ... Anna Järvinen carefully considers the status of

Freudian theory in her article *Psychoanalysis: Science or Pseudoscience?* and we'll leave it to you to guess the conclusion.

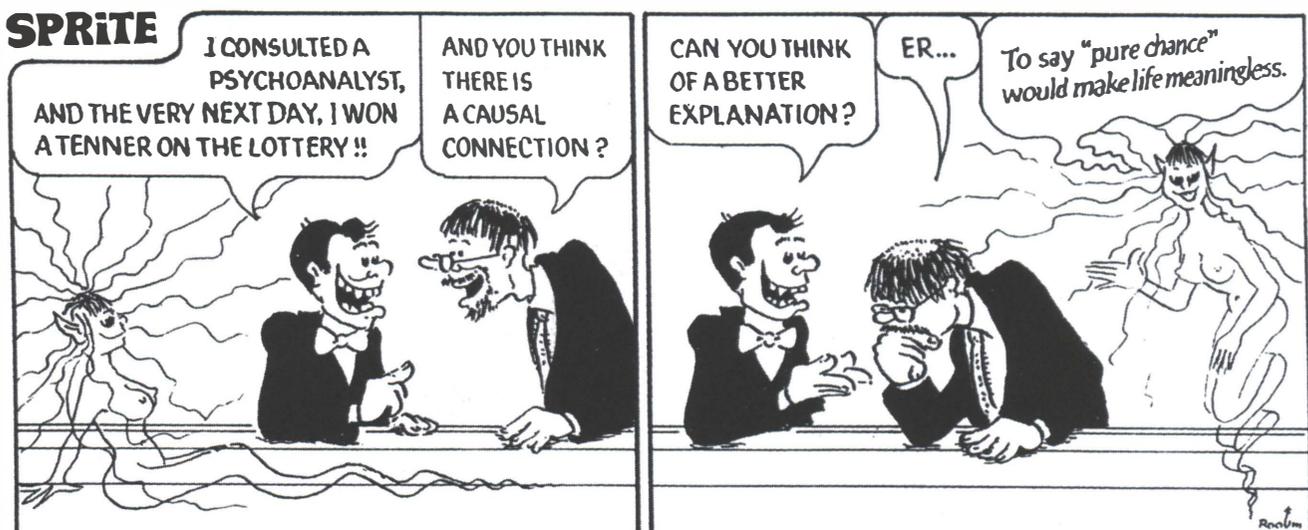
In case you were wondering, we haven't indulged ourselves by only presenting contributions from psychologists in this issue. Matthew Coniam describes his ambivalence about Michael Bentine, a man he clearly admired, who nevertheless was guilty of paranormal double-think. Although we are both *far* too young to have witnessed the revolution in British humour that The Goons undoubtedly provoked in the 1950s, the rich seam of archive material from that era enables even us young 'uns to realise the brilliance, and long-lasting influence, of this group. But it set us thinking: was Bentine's capacity for surreal humour connected to his proneness to fantasising? It is noteworthy that Peter Sellers was also a believer in the paranormal, as the 2002 Channel 4 programme *The Paranormal Peter Sellers* showed. Was the wacky wit of The Goons related to their wacky beliefs?

On another note, Martin Parkinson takes a humorous look at motivational speakers, but finds them sadly wanting. Have any of our readers had their lives changed by one of these guys? We doubt it, but we would love to hear about it if you have.

In addition, we have our contributions from our regular columnists, plus the letters, cartoons, and review sections. We hope you find this issue as interesting as we did.

With best wishes until the next issue, Julia and Chris

## SPRITE



## Hits and Misses



### Remote viewers need chocolate, too

It was only a matter of time before someone claimed to have predicted the 11 September 2001 attacks in the US. It may have happened before, but in November *The Times* reported that remote viewing is being reinvented as 'psychic spying' and one Prudence Calabrese and her colleagues at TransDimensional Systems drew the attack back in 1997. They say they even posted the drawings on the Internet, but just got laughed at.

Well, the thing about the Internet is that you can go look for yourself. We couldn't find the 1997 drawings on the TDS Web site ([www.largeruniverse.com](http://www.largeruniverse.com)), but we could find samples of current drawings labelled things like 'Diana Ross Singing in Central Park, New York' and we're here to tell you that frankly these scribbles could be anything. Each target gets a set of pages that begin with an extravagant, meaningless doodle, and move on through smaller, more specific drawings and scattered words. The Diana Ross set has a couple of drawings of circles with a central figure and words/phrases such as black, music, loud, and cigarette smell. It's not made clear on the site whether the remote viewer knew what the target was or not. *The Times* says the attack previews have words like crashing, screaming and smoke – and a big drawing of an airliner crashing into one of a pair of skyscrapers with a representation of the Statue of Liberty. More Web research reveals that the drawing is supposed to have been helped along by a three-foot-six-inch grey extraterrestrial.

Without seeing the drawings, we can't comment on them directly. We can note that if they were posted on the Internet in 1997 they did not attract enough notice among Netheads (in which category we would have been included at the time) to be laughed at. In any event, the claim now is that remote viewers are being pressed into service by the US security services in the interests of protecting the nation. Apparently, the remote viewers see more attacks.

The good news, as it were, is that you, too, can become a remote viewer. And you may want to. According to Calabrese, remote viewing is exhausting work, and you need to eat a lot to keep yourself going, and even then you'll lose weight. Especially, you need to eat chocolate. Tough sacrifice, but someone has to do it.

### Jaws: the re-enactment

As long as we are worrying about things, we might as well give a thought to the bottlenose dolphins off the



*Sorry, but the flipper looked like a fish!*

coast of Scotland. It seems they're hungry, what with the 50 percent drop in cod stocks. The dolphins, which can grow up to 13 feet long, require some 10 kilos of fish a day, not just cod, but haddock, salmon, herring, squid, and whiting, many of those species also under threat.

The upshot is that the dolphins have been trying to munch on the humans studying them, as well as other aquatic life around them such as porpoises. If you don't know the difference, porpoises are smaller and plumper than dolphins and have flat, triangular teeth instead of sharp, cone-shaped ones. If they were remaking the TV show *Flipper* now, they maybe oughtta use a porpoise instead of a dolphin.

Scottish researchers report that about a quarter of the dolphins they've been studying have moved out of the area to look for more food-filled territory. As long as they haven't actually left the planet and those bites weren't their way of saying, "Goodbye and thanks for all the fish" we guess we're still OK. For the moment.

### Attack on the clones

Discussions of cloning always seem to revolve around the idea that people are going to want to recreate themselves. This seems kind of loopy, since a clone of yourself is

going to be like any other child you raise: pigheaded, difficult, obstreperous, and determined to go its own way. Tell a child it's like its parent, and you get a child determined to prove the opposite. What seems more likely is the kind of scenario explored in the 1996 movie *Multiplicity*, in which Michael Keaton played a character who, overwhelmed by responsibilities at work and at home, makes a copy of himself just to fit in everything he needed to do in a day. It works so well that by the end of the movie he's sharing his house, wife, and bed with three copies of himself, each a little less perfect than the last. The final copy was degraded enough that the resulting animal-like Keaton was barely verbal. Analog copies, we guess, rather than digital.

At the time, the premise seemed kind of absurd. But it may prove truer than it sounded. In September, results were released from a study of cloned mice that scanned 10,000 different genes. The results, published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, showed that about one gene out of 25 in the placentas of cloned mice is abnormally expressed. The abnormalities may explain why ageing cloned mice develop pneumonia, obesity, or liver failure, or die prematurely. The scientists who did the research therefore conclude that cloning human beings is unsafe and unethical because these abnormalities would likely apply to cloning any type of whole animal. The results are not relevant to therapeutic uses of cloning. But if you're longing for someone to share your workload, for the moment you're going to have to hire someone. Else.

## The Really Big Greeting

A few years back, we were fortunate to read one of the funniest book reviews ever published. Appearing in the Web magazine *Salon*, the review, written by Susan McCarthy, was of the book *Biological Exuberance*. The book itself is a sober enough compendium of decades of overlooked snippets of scientific research. The gist: despite what fundamentalists claim while trying to attack homosexuality, gay animals do exist, and gay sex has been spotted throughout the animal kingdom. Scientists, however, fearing the loss of grant money and approbation, have generally interpreted what they saw as differently as they could. One popular theory was that some animals were just greeting one another in a particularly exuberant way.

And the evidence keeps rolling in; a new study at the Oregon Health and Sciences University in Portland examined the brains of a small sample of sheep - 27 sheep total, 11 of them ewes, nine of them rams that preferred to mate with other rams. The interesting bit: the researchers say that previous studies have shown that between 6 and 10 percent of rams are gay. But to prove a positive (or dis-

prove a negative) you only need to find one counter-example to the claim. So next time someone tells you homosexuality is unnatural because it doesn't exist in the animal kingdom, you know what to tell them.



## Men on the moon

OK, so first NASA was paying CSICOP Founding Fellow James Oberg to write a book about why we know the moon landings really did take place, and then, after eight days of criticism, they weren't. Essentially, NASA fell prey to the same doubts that beleaguer all sceptics: by arguing against irrational claims are we really just fuelling them with the oxygen of publicity?

NASA was apparently persuaded by critics who said that it was merely giving the faked moon landings conspiracy theorists credibility by debunking their beliefs. Sometimes that's actually true, primarily when sceptics appear in the media as part of a debate with someone selling a bonkers book making some wild claim. It's impossible to make that sort of appearance without helping promote the book and earn money for its author. Most of us wind up concluding, however, that keeping silent and letting the claims go out unchallenged is actually worse. Because you can just hear the people at home, saying, "Well, but it must be true, innit? 'Cos if it weren't, someone would have said."

Good luck to Oberg.

Thanks to this issue's clippings contributors: **Rachel Carthy, Sid Rodrigues, Stuart Campbell, Tom Ruffles, Ernest Jackson, the Wizard's Star List, Skeptic News, David Langford, Phil McKerracher.** *The Skeptic* would like to remind clippings contributors to use the magazine's current address, listed on p. 3, rather than the old PO Box address, which has been phased out. Thank you.

## Skeptic at large . . .

Wendy M Grossman



### Distinguishable from intelligence

PROBABLY EVERYONE HAS heard Arthur C Clarke's most famous saying: "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." Michael Shermer, editor of the LA-based magazine *The Skeptic* (whose birth postdates our *Skeptic*), in a recent column for *Scientific American*, extends this to argue that "Any sufficiently advanced extraterrestrial intelligence is indistinguishable from God."

Shermer goes on to say that if an ETI ever dropped in on us, "It will be as though a million-year old *Homo erectus* were dropped into the 21st century, given a computer and cellphone and instructed to communicate with us. The ETI would be to us as we would be to this early hominid – godlike." He also figures that Moore's Law means that by 2050 computational power will be, from our perspective, nearly infinite and therefore indistinguishable from omniscience.

Well, now, let's think about this. The first thing is that the person who wrote this can't be very familiar with technology. Computational power in and of itself means nothing. The £1,000 computer I have on my desk right now is many times more powerful than the first mainframe (and a tiny fraction of the size), but that doesn't make it more intelligent. It just makes the computer more capable of doing really stupid things much, much faster. Why, on this here computer, I can 1) play a word game, 2) work on an article, 3) research on the Web in a dozen browser windows, 4) chat with friends, 5) play music, 6) check email, 7) keep track of my schedule, and 8) manage my finances, all at the same time. None of that makes it more intelligent, just a more versatile tool. I don't see it, for example, offering to help write my article for me. It is no closer to thinking creatively than my toaster.

The second thing is that I'm not convinced we'd seem remotely intelligent to an early hominid. Remember Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*? Or H G Wells' "The Country of the Blind"? No? In both those stories the protagonist figured he had the advantage, the Connecticut Yankee by virtue of the increased intelligence he imagined a 13th century denizen had over one of the 6th century, the sighted man because of his ability to see in a country full of blind people. It more or less worked for Twain's character, who had the good fortune to remember the date of an imminent eclipse, but poorly for Wells's character, who was threatened with the prospect of having his eyes put out to bring him into conformity with the

rest of the populace, who thought his claims to be able to 'see' were the product of lunacy.

In our own case, it's arguable that an early hominid would find us helpless and stupid about the simplest necessities for survival. Could you find food in the jungle? Build a waterproof shelter out of nothing more than mud and twigs? Entertain yourself and others with no light or electrical power? Meantime, many of the things we do know how to do would simply be incomprehensible to him. We're making marks on a lighted screen? (And that's assuming you can find some electricity to run your computer off.) What's that about? Mobile phones, computers, TVs, and those other paraphernalia of modern life would surely seem quite mad. Even the clothes: you're walking around your house in a T-shirt and shorts? Don't you know it's winter? And so on.

I'm not convinced, in other words, that the progress of technology says that we are innately more intelligent than our forebears. The people who first thought up knitting and weaving, figured out how to make a wheel, invented tools, painstakingly devised writing systems . . . those people must have had giant creative reasoning abilities. Before the 1960s, one of my friends likes to say, everyone thought the Greeks had everything pretty much figured out. It's only since then that we've adopted the arrogant presumption that we are the smartest humans that ever lived. Chronocentrist, another friend calls it.

Thirdly, imagine that a being from a million years hence dropped in. Would he even be able to figure out how to use our mobile phones and computers? These gadgets are not intuitive, and being able to use them has nothing to do with intelligence. Some of the brightest people can't figure out that F1 on a PC means Help – because that's not something you can reason your way to, it's merely a convention that has grown up over the last decade. And that's presuming you know the language. Do you think today's English speakers can learn French faster than King Arthur's courtiers could? I say that the guy from a million years hence gets here and seems stupid to us. He won't know the language, he won't understand the technology, he'll miss the comforts of his no doubt advanced home, and he'll be arrogant with it because he'll think we're the ones who need to get with the program. He'll be as obnoxious as the American tourist who gets here and complains he can't find an ice-cold Budweiser.

God-like? Yeah. If God is, like, really *annoying*.

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

# What are we to make of Exceptional Experience? Part 1: Remote Viewing

David Marks begins his three-part assessment of parapsychology with a critical view of remote viewing

## Introduction

IN THIS PAPER, I discuss some major categories of 'exceptional' or anomalous experiences and how to interpret them. I am particularly interested in the kinds of experiences studied by parapsychologists (i.e. extrasensory perception (ESP); psychokinesis (PK), and precognition). An important assumption in this discussion is that the description of an exceptional experience (EE) needs to be kept separate from any of its possible interpretations. The brain/mind is structured in such a way that exceptional experiences and their interpretations easily become conflated. This is represented in a formula as follows:

$$\text{Context} + \text{stimuli} + \text{beliefs} = \text{experience} + \text{interpretation} = \text{perception}$$

The end-product is a synthesis of several elements involving inference and a mixture of conscious and unconscious assumptions about the nature of the world. Interpretations of exceptional experience (IEs) principally take one of two forms: normal or 'N' theory accounts (NIEs) or paranormal or 'P' theory accounts (PIEs). Analysis of lay accounts of EE suggests an acceptance of and belief in paranormal claims ahead of the evidence that is necessary to warrant these claims.

In this three-part paper, I will briefly discuss four PIEs from the period 1974-95:

1. Remote viewing ability
2. Ganzfeld ESP ability
3. Ability to detect unseen staring
4. Pets' ESP ability

The first part of this paper deals exclusively with remote viewing (RV). The remaining PIEs will be dealt with in Parts 2 and 3, in subsequent issues of *The Skeptic*.

Evidence supporting these four PIEs appears to be conflicting, inconsistent and, in other respects, seriously wanting. The evidence is discussed in detail in *The Psychology of the Psychic* (second edition; "TPOTP2"; Marks, 2000). The original edition of this book ("TPOTP1") was published in 1980 with my late colleague, Richard Kammann (Marks & Kammann, 1980). Many of the ideas in this paper were originally the product of discussions that he and I held in the 1970s when consciousness and the para-

normal were becoming hot topics on the borders of traditional science. Today these topics have moved into the mainstream of the field of consciousness studies and are no longer seen as quite so marginal to the study of psychology.

I argue that PIEs often result from special circumstances that pass unnoticed by the original investigators or PIE claimants, including methodological flaws, sensory cues, imperfect randomisation, selection of best cases, subjective validation, and inappropriate statistics.

## Analysis of lay accounts of exceptional experiences suggests an acceptance of and belief in paranormal claims ahead of the evidence that is necessary to warrant these claims

In discussing exceptional experience it is essential to keep the experience itself (EE) separate from the interpretation of the experience (IE). Unfortunately it frequently happens that the experience and its interpretation are conflated in the flow of consciousness and the interpretation of its contents. Normal, or N, theory accounts (NIE) are often prematurely forsaken for paranormal, or P, theory accounts (PIE) without proper justification. The problem will be illustrated with the four specific examples listed above.

### SRI series

This series of experiments on a form of ESP called remote viewing ran from 1972 to 1985 and was run by Harold Puthoff and Russell Targ at the Stanford Research Institute (SRI). With this experimental technique, a participant, known as the 'receiver,' sits in the laboratory with an experimenter. Another experimenter, accompanied by one or two other people, known as 'senders,' visits randomly selected sites such as bridges, parks, airports, etc. This team tries to transmit information telepathically about the site to the receiver at predetermined times. The receiver describes any impressions that he or she picks up. These impressions are transcribed and given to independent judges who visit each site and rate the degree to which the site matches the transcribed impressions. The receiver may also subsequently visit the site to assess the degree of match.

These experiments were published originally in *Nature* (Targ & Puthoff, 1974) and created huge international interest in the paranormal. Unfortunately, in spite of the floods of publicity created by this research, the studies were very badly flawed.

Science separates itself from pseudoscience in a number of ways. One of these is accessibility of the data. Scientific data are consensually validated by open inspection of the recorded observations and/or through replication of the relevant phenomena.

Following publication of interesting and significant observations it is an accepted scientific practice for researchers to allow colleagues who are doing serious research in the same field to have access to their original data. When researchers consistently refuse to allow colleagues such access, something important is being signalled. Of course data may get lost or destroyed or be difficult or costly to retrieve in the form required. Or they may be classified information or have commercial value that a scientist may wish to exploit prior to their general release. However, when none of these considerations is applicable, refusal to supply a copy of a data-set leads to the unpleasant inference that something is wrong, either that the data do not support what is claimed for them, or that the data are an embarrassment following an extravagant claim that cannot be substantiated.

Following publication of *TPOTPI*, I conducted a 'remote judging' exercise with the transcripts from a later series of experiments that had employed Hella Hammid as receiver. The scenario was a little more complex than had been the case for Price (Marks & Kammann, 1978) but the results were as good as those obtained by the SRI judge. *The three remote judges had access only to the cues provided in the Hammid transcripts together with the target lists and the map provided to the SRI judge. No site visits were possible and none of the descriptive material from the SRI transcripts was available.* A total of 24 cues were found in six Hammid transcripts. In this light the following claim by Tart, Puthoff, & Targ (1980) is impossible to believe: "In the extensive SRI replication studies, which also yielded significant results, the Marks-Kammann criticisms do not apply in principle. Target lists and transcripts were separately randomised, and transcripts were carefully checked before judging to ensure absence of any phrasing for which even a weak *post hoc* potential-cue argument could be made". How careful was a checking process that missed 24 cues in six transcripts?

The claim that the Hammid target list given to independent judge Arthur Hastings was randomised is also doubtful. It actually depends on which list one is talking about, because, although the SRI researchers were unwilling to admit this, no less than *three* listings of targets in the Hammid series were given to the judge. "I received three target lists" (letter



*Do the results of modern remote viewing studies really support the claims of clairvoyants throughout history?*

from Hastings, 26 May 1977). One of these lists was randomised; this is the one cited by Puthoff as *the* (implying only) target list given to the judge. The other two lists provided by SRI (described in detail by Hastings in his letter to me of 26 May 1977) were not randomised.

One of the two non-random listings was "a series of pages, each with the name of a target and location. The order of those pages, as I now have them, is this: courtyard, auditorium, Methodist church, playground, overpass, parking garage, railroad bridge, pumpkin patch, bicycle shed" (Hastings's letter, 26 May 1977). The correlation of this target listing and the order of target usage was 0.833 ( $p < .01$ ). This listing could easily have provided an artefactual basis for correct matching (Marks, 1981).

The second non-random listing of Hammid targets given to the judge was a map of the Menlo Park/Palo Alto area indicating the location of the nine target sites. There is a strong correlation between map codes and pairs of targets visited outside SRI by Targ or Puthoff on different days and half-days over the series.

This review of the SRI RV research goes as far as my limited access to the raw data permits. Contrary to Targ and Puthoff's claims, the quality of the participants' descriptions is extremely poor and, without the cues, cannot be matched against the targets. Had cue-less matching been possible, Targ and Puthoff would not have needed to leave these obvious clues in the transcripts in the first place.



Ingo Swann (pictured above) is said to have visited Jupiter using remote viewing.

Tart *et al.* (1980) claimed to have conducted a re-judging of the Price series *with all of the cues removed from the transcripts*. After asking Puthoff for a set of the edited transcripts on multiple occasions over three years, they were eventually sent to a colleague, Dr Chris Scott. On inspecting these supposedly

**Data suppression, flawed methodology, and lack of replication lead to the conclusion that the remote viewing effect is a cognitive illusion, an artefact of human error and wishful thinking**

edited transcripts, it was readily apparent that *many obvious cues were still present* (Marks & Scott, 1986). This was the final straw. The little remaining credibility that Targ and Puthoff had was now absolutely and irrevocably destroyed. Surely Charles Tart examined every word in these transcripts while looking for the presence of cues? Yet many cues remained. By the time Chris Scott and I had exposed the truth in the columns of *Nature*, Targ and Puthoff had both left SRI International, and the RV project had been placed under the direction of a Dr Edwin May (see next section).

Attempts to replicate remote viewing fall into two groups. First, there is a group of carefully controlled studies that avoided the flaws present in the

Puthoff-Targ experiments and that found no evidence of RV. When all normal and artefactual methods for matching the viewers' descriptions against the target are eliminated, no RV effect is obtained. A second group of experimenters claim to have confirmed RV. However, all are flawed in a variety of ways, some of the flaws being reminiscent of the original SRI research and some being new (see Marks, 2000, for details). The size of the RV effect claimed in these studies in fact correlates quite well with the magnitude of the flaws.

**Summary:**

1. Well-controlled experiments do not find the RV communication effect, while poorly controlled experiments nearly always do;

2. Data suppression, flawed methodology, and lack of replication lead to the conclusion that Targ and Puthoff's remote viewing effect was a cognitive illusion, an artefact of human error and wishful thinking.

**SAIC or Star Gate series**

This series of RV studies ran from 1985 until 1995 and was directed by Dr Edwin May (e.g. Lantz, Luke, & May, 1994). The Star Gate RV series consisted of three projects:

- (1) 'Operations' using remote viewers stationed at Fort Meade, Maryland, to collect intelligence;
- (2) 'Research and Development', the laboratory research conducted at SRI and later at Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC);
- (3) 'Foreign Assessment' focused on gathering intelligence on what potential enemies were doing in the area of parapsychology. The information on Research and Development and parts of Operations was declassified in 1995.

Much of the information about Operations and Foreign Assessment remains classified although many ex-military remote viewers have established private businesses that offer remote viewing services. They are responsible for a lot of hype in the media, in their books and on their web pages (e.g. Morehouse, 1996).

The CIA carried out a review of the SAIC program in 1995 which was aimed at determining whether Star Gate had any long-term practical value for the intelligence community, and if it did, what changes should be made to enhance the value of remote viewing research. The CIA report was published on 29 September 1995 (Mumford, Rose, & Goslin, 1995). The review reached the following conclusions:

1. "A statistically significant effect has been observed in the recent laboratory experiments of

remote viewing. However, the existence of a statistically significant effect did not lead both reviewers to the conclusion that this research program has provided an unequivocal demonstration that remote viewing exists. A statistically significant effect might result either from the existence of the phenomenon, or, alternatively, to methodological artefacts or other alternative explanations for the observed effects.”

2. “The experimental research conducted as part of the current program does not unambiguously support the interpretation of the results in terms of a paranormal phenomenon.”

The principal reason for this conclusion is that only one judge, who happened to be the Principal Investigator, was used in assessing matches throughout these experimental studies. The CIA report concluded:

*“As a consequence, there is no evidence for agreement across independent judges as to the accuracy of the remote viewings. Failure to provide evidence that independent judges arrive at similar conclusions makes it difficult to unambiguously determine whether the observed effects can be attributed to the remote viewers’ (paranormal) ability, to the ability of the judge to interpret ambiguous information, or to the combination or interaction of the viewers and the judge. Furthermore, given the Principal Investigator’s familiarity with the viewers, the target set, and the experimental procedures, it is possible that subtle, unintentional factors may have influenced the results obtained in these studies. Thus, until it can be shown that independent judges agree, and similar effects are obtained in studies using independent judges, it cannot be said that adequate evidence has been provided for existence of the remote viewing phenomenon.”*

The CIA report concluded that the lack of any independent judges in the SAIC program meant that a paranormal interpretation of any RV effect could not be accepted. The CIA report referred to the “particularly troublesome” fact that the remote viewers and project managers reported that RV reports were changed to make them consistent with known background cues. As stated by the reviewers, this “makes it impossible to interpret the role of the paranormal phenomenon independently. Also, it raises some doubts about some well-publicised cases of dramatic hits, which, if taken at face value, could not easily be attributed to background cues. In at least some of these cases, there is reason to suspect, based on both subsequent investigations and the viewers’ statement, that reports had been ‘changed’ by previous program

managers, and that substantially more background information was available than one might at first assume. Give these observations, it is difficult to argue that available evidence justifies application of remote viewing in intelligence operations.”

Evidence for the operational value of remote viewing does not exist, even after more than two decades of research. Second, it is unlikely that remote viewing will prove to be of any use in intelligence gathering due to the conditions and constraints applying in intelligence operations and the suspected characteristics of the phenomenon. One of the weakest points of the SAIC RV experiments is the fact that Ed May had a conflict of interest – he was both the Principal Investigator and the judge for the experimental series.

### Summary:

The SAIC remote viewing studies contained the following methodological problems: same viewers across many experiments; same target set across all experiments; same judge across all experiments; all experiments (except one) in same laboratory; principal investigator is the judge; and lack of replication.

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*In Part 2 of his assessment of the current state of parapsychology, to appear in the next issue, David Marks turns his attention to the ganzfeld studies.*

# Skeptical Stats

1. Percentage of Europeans who are too large for UK airline seats: **25**
2. Percentage of Americans who believe that Revelation will come true: **56**
3. Number of new computer viruses found every month: **800**
4. Number of merit badges earned by 19-year old Darrell Lambert, who may be thrown out of the (US) Boy Scouts for atheism: **37**
5. Size of the average UK pension pot: **£23,000**
6. Percentage of annuity purchases that are less than £20,000: **67**
7. Amount a Berlin man was asked to pay for 53 connections made in September 2002 by security services wiretapping his phone: **€15.35**
8. Amount NASA announced it would pay James Oberg to write a book debunking the claim that the moon landings never happened: **\$15,000**
9. Percentage of Americans thought to believe that the landings never happened: **20**
10. Number of days after the announcement that NASA bowed to criticism and cancelled the deal: **8**
11. Number of hits Google gets, per second, at 2 am on December 25: **1,000**
12. Proportion of children a University of Stirling study suggested may be being raised by men who are unaware they are not the biological father: **1 in 10**
13. Number of marijuana cigarettes carrying the same cancer risk as smoking 20 tobacco cigarettes: **3-4**
14. Educated estimate of the number of slaves, worldwide, in 2002: **27,000,000**
15. Odds offered by Totalbet on Elvis's appearing on a broomstick over London at Halloween: **1,000,000,000:1**
16. Odds of the ghost of the Queen Mother's appearing at the races to watch Shergar: **1,000,000:1**
17. Price of a Hello Kitty deck of Tarot cards: **\$24.95**
18. Winning number in the Maryland Lottery the day Reagan was elected president for the first time: **666**
19. Length of time the temporary paralysis of cosmetic injections of botulinum toxins (botox) lasts: **4 to 7 months**
20. Number of US deaths in 2000 caused by hospital infections: **90,000**
21. Average number of scientific questions out of 12 answered correctly by tabloid readers: **4.13**
22. Average number of scientific questions out of 12 answered correctly by broadsheet readers: **5.78**
23. Number of pieces of EU legislation relating to ducks and duck eggs: **300**
24. Number of tennis courts roughly equivalent to the total surface area of a pair of human lungs: **1**
25. Number of guitars owned by the late Douglas Adams: **23**
26. Price of a gold pendant containing a half-inch chunk of coal retrieved from the wreck of the *Titanic*: **\$120**

**Sources:** 1 *The Independent*; 2 *Time Magazine*; 3 Sophos; 4 <http://www.cnn.com/2002/US/West/10/31/atheist.scout.ap/index.html>; 5, 6 Financial Services Authority; 7 *RISKS Digest*; 8 Twin Cities.com; 9 <http://www.jamesoberg.com>; 10 NASA; 11 <http://www.livejournal.com/users/evan5> November 2002; 12 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/2369357.stm>; 13 British Lung Foundation; 14 *Scientific American*; 15, 16 TotalBet press release; 17 [www.weirdco.com](http://www.weirdco.com); 18 *Harper's Magazine*; 19 British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons; 20 *Business Week*; 21, 22 Economic Social Research Council; 23 *The Sunday Telegraph*; 24 *Business Week*; 25 *The Daily Telegraph*; 26 [www.sciencemall-usa.com](http://www.sciencemall-usa.com)

Both Hits & Misses and Skeptical Stats depend heavily on reader contributions of clippings, story leads, and odd statistics. Please send contributions to [news@skeptical.org](mailto:news@skeptical.org) or via post to the address on the masthead (p.3).

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

# Michael Bentine: Behind the Door

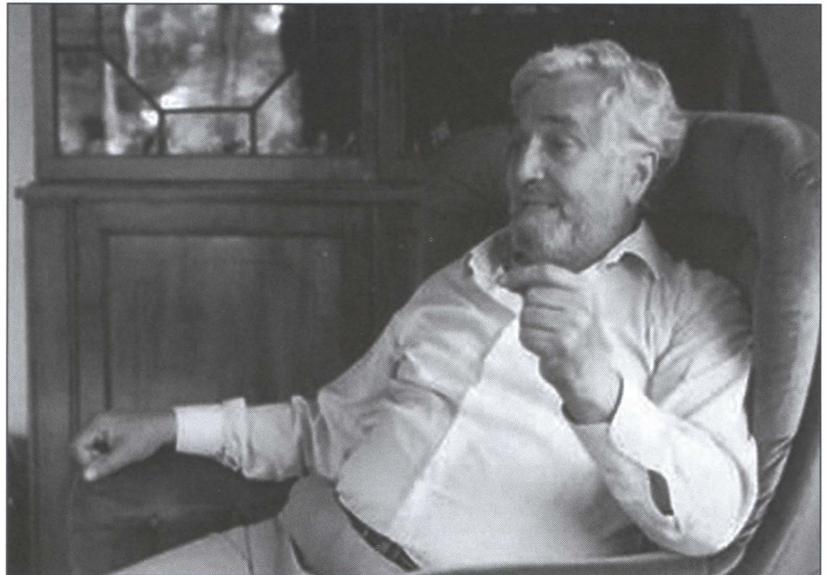
Matthew Coniam finds that Bentine was guilty of paranormal double-think

FOR MOST PEOPLE the late Michael Bentine is familiar only as a writer-performer, a figure on the fringes of post-war British comedy and, later, a popular presence on children's television. But he was also a serious paranormal researcher and a devout believer in occult powers and other worlds.

I read his book *The Door Marked Summer* as a child (and later its more academic follow-up *Doors Of The Mind*), and was thoroughly convinced by the sincerity and matter-of-factness with which he describes his personal experience of spiritual phenomena. In bewildering detail he describes how his scientist father decided to research the paranormal in the family home seriously and rationally, and in the course of years of investigation into the subject produced reams of incontestable proof before the young Bentine's eyes. This in turn awakened in Bentine his own skill as a receiver of psychic energy, leading to a lifetime of weird experiences.

Some sections of the book, such as that in which he describes receiving a premonition of his son's death in a plane crash only to have his warning ignored and the premonition come true, are genuinely moving, and written with an emotional frankness that makes one feel guilty for doubting his honesty. It is also important to remember that, outside of writing about these experiences in a couple of books (that are in no way sensationally packaged or aimed at the lunatic-fringe audience), he never sought to capitalise on what he must have known was a sensationally lucrative subject. No self-help books, no fraudulent displays of 'mediumism' before paying crowds, no pro-supernatural punditry on the debate circuit. Just quiet certainty.

As I grew older, and became a confirmed sceptic, Bentine remained a thorn in my side. How could so genuine, gentle and forthright a man be glibly written off as a charlatan? And yet, that is what he would have to be, since his book details not a small number of ambiguous experiences but decades of experiment and contact with occult forces. There is no room for compromise or half-measures: either he is telling the truth or he is



*Michael Bentine: scientist or fantasist?*

lying. Like many paranormal writers he makes a point of letting us know that he is no soft touch, including the obligatory stories of exposing fake mediums at phoney seances. But, he notes with uncompromising conviction, most of his paranormal experiences were genuine.

In one passage he writes that, when aircrews

**How could so genuine, gentle and forthright a man be glibly written off as a charlatan?**

took off on bombing raids during the war, he was able to tell which pilots would not be returning because their faces would transform into grinning skulls before his eyes. In another he makes the extraordinary claim that we are all of us able to *part clouds* by the power of concentration and actually invites us to try it. (I did, with a child's complete trust: it didn't work. But Bentine claims it is an obvious, throwaway reality, such a routine fact of existence that it is hardly useful to make the point. Incidentally, staring at clouds makes us focus on them with an acuity quite alien to everyday perception, and we thus notice their constantly fluctuating physical composition with heightened accuracy. They part and reform constantly – but *we* are not responsible!)

It is this unequivocal *certainty* that makes a neu-

tral view of Bentine impossible. In a long section on the Second World War he revives the old chestnut (familiar to all Dennis Wheatley readers) that devil worship inspired German Nazism. Even in its mildest forms this view has now been convincingly disproved: the naïve occult beliefs of Himmler were shared nowhere else in the upper echelons of the Nazi party, and Hitler – who wanted to criminalise astrology and freemasonry – viewed his obsession with the mythical origins of Aryanism as a genuine embarrassment. Yet Bentine states it all not as opinion but as certain fact. He even describes how he asked a Nuremberg prosecutor why he did not use the *definite proof* of Nazi satanism as evidence in the trials. (If they did, he was supposedly told, the Nazis would have escaped justice by virtue of insanity.)

**He makes the extraordinary claim that we are all of us able to part clouds by the power of concentration**

I was fortunate enough to see Bentine lecture before his death, in a one-man show ending in a question and answer session. Both on the night that I attended and in the recordings made elsewhere on the tour and later issued on cassette, the paranormal figured prominently in these sessions. One man (in the recordings) volunteers his experiences of dowsing, prompting Bentine to relate an anecdote about how he proved that dowsing was genuine on live television. Another, presumably a Goon fan new to this aspect of the Bentine story, asks simply (and a little incredulously), “Have you ever seen a ghost?”, to which Bentine shoots back with, “Oh yes; yes I have – many times”, and another anecdote. In fact, Bentine claims to have had first-hand proof of the validity of just about every imaginable fringe belief: mind-reading, levitation, table-turning, mediumism, poltergeists, astrology, even feng-shui.

How does this square with his insistence that he is a serious scientist? The answer is through the shrewd manipulation of typical paranormal double-think: “Mathematics is only a game, remember. It’s not a great science, it’s a great game, and if you don’t like the rules you change them. Einstein isn’t the be-all-and-end-all and he was the first person to admit it: he said, ‘this is a temporary stop-gap theory’. He said something else as well. He said, ‘Imagination is more important than equations.’”

Whether he did indeed say those things I am not Einstein-scholar enough to confirm or deny, but I am sure he would have drawn a distinction between the constructive imagination of the maverick scientist able to intuit previously unconsidered connections and make visionary logical leaps (before studiously going back and ensuring that every intermediate link in the logical chain is securely in place and holds firm) and the unfettered and undisciplined imagination of those who insist on the wildest and most complicated explanation for every phenomenon. The paranormal world view is pivoted on the fallacy that because a thing cannot be disproved it should therefore be taken seriously, a view that makes room for every imaginable lunacy on the grounds that ‘science cannot explain everything’. Further, to ignore the field of paranormal research (even on the solid grounds that there is still far too much left to understand in the everyday world to justify devoting precious time to phenomena the evidence for which is ambiguous at best) is to have a closed mind and therefore to be ‘unscientific’.

Of course there are grey areas in paranormalism, and the difference between phenomena which are unlikely but still possible (such as the Loch Ness Monster) and outright impossible nonsense (such as reincarnation or spoon-bending) should never be forgotten. But still, it is hard to imagine anyone seriously interested in science and scientific method, as Bentine always claimed to be, taking astrology and feng shui seriously. It would be obvious that such pursuits differ fundamentally from true science, and that to claim that scientific orthodoxy is being small-minded in ignoring them is to fall prey to the most specious kind of false reasoning. It is not enough to say that they have not been proved or disproved, it is in the very nature of them that they *cannot be*, even in theory, and are therefore neither scientific nor serious.

So what are we to make of Bentine? Certainly we should be aware that his friends and colleagues all speak of a man much given to fantasising. In his book *The Goon Show Companion*, Jimmy Grafton, instigator of *The Goon Show*, singles out for special mention his “powerful, creative imagination which was forever fantasising interesting experiences into fascinating exploits” adding: “one of his greatest talents was for the spontaneous invention of intriguing stories about himself, rather in the manner of a modern Baron Munchausen.”

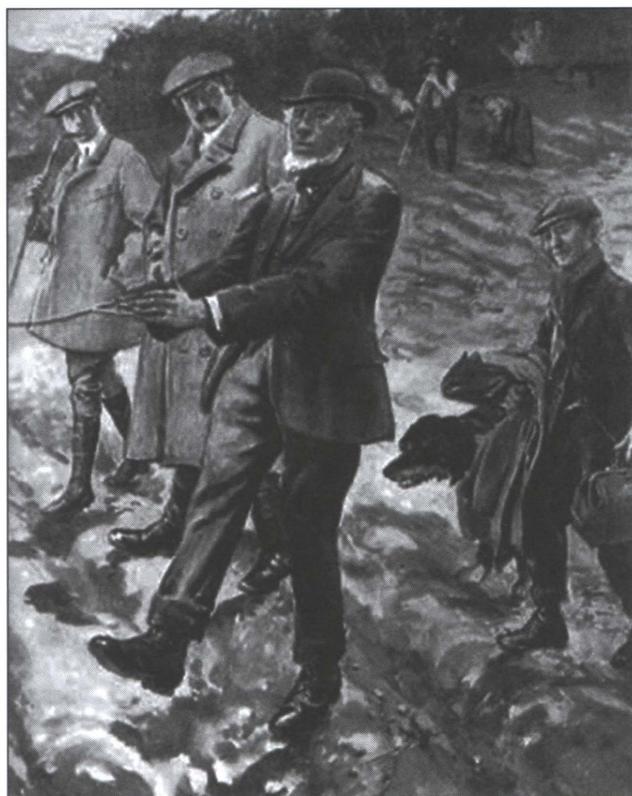
It is important to note that Grafton is not here referring to Bentine’s alleged paranormal experiences, to which he in fact does not refer at all, but is simply recalling with amusement Bentine’s skill

**The paranormal world view is pivoted on the fallacy that because a thing cannot be disproved it should therefore be taken seriously, a view that makes room for every imaginable lunacy**

at, and passion for, what he calls “self-indulgent little fantasies”. It is extremely telling evidence, the more so for being so good-natured, as is an occasion recalled by Bentine’s Goon colleague Spike Milligan in his book *The Family Album*: “One night when we were appearing in a show in Birmingham, I asked him, as he claimed to be a mathematician, could he give me the formula for the atomic bomb? He took out a lipstick and covered the mirror in the dressing room with Pythagoras, finishing off at the bottom on the right hand side with, ‘There! That is the formula for the atomic bomb!’ Unfortunately, there was a Professor Penny in the audience that night. I happened to know him and he came into the dressing room and looked at the mirror. I asked him what it was and he said, ‘that’s a load of bollocks!’ I told Michael and he said, ‘of course it is! You don’t think I would give away the secret of the atom bomb to you in a dressing room in Birmingham, do you?’” Anyone who has studied the slippery techniques of mediums and psychics will recognise that classic.

When one returns to *The Door Marked Summer* in the light of such recollections the cracks become apparent, and even the most affecting passages no longer quite ring true. Take for example the story I mentioned earlier, concerning the death of his son. He tells us that he explained his fears to his son, but was not taken seriously. Yet surely if he was that certain of his paranormal foresight he would have brooked no refusal? Wouldn’t he have done anything, even to the extent of physically overpowering him, rather than let him go to his certain death? And why would his son have disregarded his warning in the first place if the paranormal was as routine a part of Bentine’s daily life as he claims? Suddenly, the passage reads less like a statement of facts and more like the extremely complex and psychologically refracted public working-out of intense, unreasoning grief.

It seems inarguable that the same gift for flights of imaginative fancy which made Bentine one of



*Bentine claimed to have proved that dowsing works on live television.*

the key originators of the absurdist school of post-war British comedy also made him helplessly prone to fantasy and story-telling in his private life. Despite the ease with which I later decided that all supernatural and religious beliefs may safely be attributed to politics and wishful thinking, my childhood faith in Bentine, and in the sincerity of his books, has been ironically near-impossible to discard. Yet I am drawn reluctantly but inescapably to the conclusion that, for whatever complicated reasons, Michael Bentine wrote *The Door Marked Summer* not even in the mistaken belief that its evidence is authentic, but fully aware that it is not, and in the full knowledge that the events and experiences it documents so convincingly – and even beautifully – did not, in fact, take place.

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# Psychoanalysis: Science or Pseudoscience?

Anna Järvinen considers the status of Freudian theory

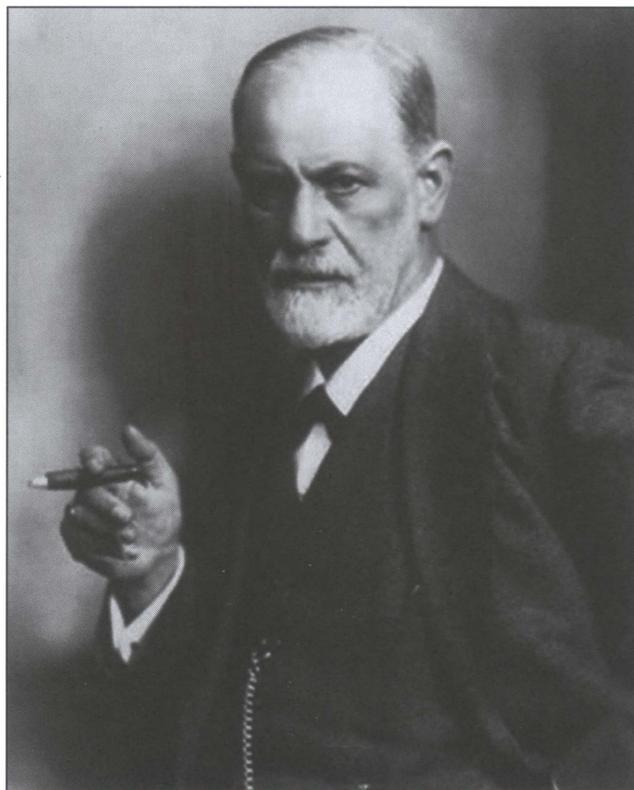
SIGMUND FREUD (1856-1939) insisted that his postulations that are collectively known as psychoanalysis formed the basis for the science of psychology. Yet, ever since its beginnings in the early years of the twentieth century, there has been considerable argument as to whether psychoanalysis is even a science at all. Some claim that Freud's work itself was entirely pseudoscientific in nature, and that later proponents of his theory have done little to revise this state of affairs. Yet, in its approximately one hundred years of existence, psychoanalysis has had a tremendous influence on Western culture, and in spite of all the stones slung in its direction, it still has many supporters around the globe.

Nobel Laureate Sir Peter Medawar (1984) argues that certain, seemingly 'naïve' questions are beyond the power of pure science to answer, such as those concerning the purpose of human life. He believes that such 'ultimate questions', as well as psychoanalysis with its subject matter of 'human nature', belong to the 'domain of myth'. Indeed it is important to note here that several physical scientists dismiss the social sciences in general as pseudoscientific.

Before assessing psychoanalysis against the criteria of pseudoscience, and for that matter, those of science, it is important to briefly consider what psychoanalysis is, and how it is assumed to work. The diffusion of Freudian theory is fascinating, it having been adopted for application in such fields as history, political science, literature, music and the arts. Further, for many laypersons Freudian theory is synonymous with psychology. Its goals are immensely ambitious, and theory and practice work hand-in-hand. Nevertheless, psychoanalysis is primarily grounded on pseudoscientific postulations that are inherently non-falsifiable.

Central to Freud's theory is the division of the mind into three levels of consciousness, the first being the conscious. Below this rests the preconscious, which contains most of a person's memories, and which in modern psychological language is equivalent to long-term memory. Below this lies the unconscious, which is one of the key concepts of psychoanalysis. According to Freud, this contains feelings, desires and memories that are repressed from the conscious because they are too traumatic or painful to deal with directly. One example of this putative repression is the Oedipus complex, which is concerned with incestuous desires. A further assumption of the unconscious is that the material in it is not available to the conscious mind, but nevertheless can powerfully affect behaviour – it therefore follows that repressed memories can result in psychological problems.

A major part of Freud's theory deals with personality



*Freud with a phallic symbol.*

development, particularly from the perspective of sexual behaviour and sexual identity. Freudian theory is divided into four developmental psycho-sexual stages. In chronological order these are the oral, anal, phallic and genital stages. In some of these stages one has to resolve certain 'complexes' in order to develop normally. In Freud's view, mature personality consists of the id, the ego and the superego, which all assume very different roles. The id is considered as the very core of personality, from which the other structures develop. The id is the most primitive structure, solely seeking to achieve pleasure and avoid pain. The superego can be thought of as the conscience of the person. These structures of personality bind together in a complex manner, and in individuals regarded as 'normal', they function in an interactive fashion.

Psychologist Terence Hines (1988) proposes several criteria by which a field may be judged as being either pseudoscientific or otherwise. One characteristic of pseudoscientific theories is that they exhibit non-falsifiable hypotheses. Some testable predictions can be derived from psychoanalysis, but they have typically been shown to be untrue. Several researchers, such as Hans Eysenck (1985), have embarked on the experimental study of Freudian concepts (see also Eysenck & Wilson, 1973). For instance, Paul Kline (1968) and

Calvin Hall (1954) have empirically investigated the Freudian developmental assumption that toilet-training exerts a great influence on personality. This is based on a postulation that the mother's training practices, together with her attitudes towards defecation, cleanliness, control and responsibility, strongly influence the personality development of the child. If this training is strict, then the child may take revenge upon authority figures by being messy, wasteful, extravagant, etc, or alternatively the child may become excessively neat and meticulous and develop a fear of dirt and exhibit over-controlled behaviours. Hence, the theory can explain *post hoc* any extent of tidiness or messiness as resulting from strict toilet-training. According to Hall, this theory becomes *twice* non-falsifiable when the effects of gentle toilet-training are examined – these are indistinguishable from the result of strict toilet training, and once more, both personality styles can be explained *post hoc*, but neither can be predicted. In addition to the

**Freud is sometimes likened to a religious, 'messianic' figure, who formed a 'church' and obtained a large crowd of followers, not because of the scientific basis of his teachings, but solely because of his authority**

lack of clear logic in Freud's postulation of the relationship between toilet-training and personality, studies investigating the relationship between these variables have found no relationship between the actual toilet-training practices employed by parents and the child's resultant personality style.

Related to these questionable assumptions of psychoanalysis are two equally questionable methods of investigating the alleged memories hidden in the unconscious: free association and the interpretation of dreams. Neither method is capable of scientific formulation or empirical testing. These methods bear no validity in reality. When these results are taken together with others, it seems plausible to suggest that falsifiability poses a problem for most aspects of psychoanalysis!

Daisie and Michael Radner (1982), ardent advocates of scientific methodology, observe that pseudoscientific proponents are inclined to "look for mysteries". It could certainly be argued that Freud largely got away with a lack of scientific rigour in his work due to the volatile, obscure and often inaccessible content of the subject matter of psychoanalysis, especially as it relates to human sexuality. Whilst Richard Webster (1995), a radical psychologist, notes that much of Freud's theory appears elegant and does display internal coherence, he argues that 'laws' of human nature are largely covered in mystery, and it is problematic to change this because, in order to investigate 'human nature', the power of sci-



*Freud with his family, 1898.*

ence is not sufficient. Moreover, many of Freud's achievements are seen to result from his own charismatic personality and "the heroic myth which he spun around himself during his own lifetime" (p. 9). Freud is sometimes likened to a religious, 'messianic' figure, who formed a 'church' and obtained a large crowd of followers, not because of the scientific basis of his teachings, but solely because of his authority.

Another of Hines' (1988) observations was that pseudoscientists accuse sceptics of demanding more proof for their postulations in comparison to that required for more established theorists. But, as Hines puts it, "extraordinary claims demand extraordinary proof" (p. 5). Psychoanalysts often argue that clinical experiences are the proof for psychoanalytic theory and thus do not require evidence of the scientific kind, and these are the facts on which their 'science' is founded. However, since these data consist of symbolic interpretations of dreams, free associations, and such, in the light of this discussion such claims may be seen to be entirely circular in nature. Hines further notes that pseudoscientific proponents commonly fail to modify their theories in the light of new evidence. A notable example of this is the idea of motivated forgetting, also known as repression. Repression is said to be an active mechanism by which particular memories are prevented from reaching consciousness due to their emotionally painful content. Infantile amnesia, referring to the fact that adults usually have virtually no memories of their infancy, has widely been regarded as evidence for repression. In Freud's explanation, this is because the period of early childhood is a time when the child is immersed in strong sexual desires, which are largely incestuous in nature. Because these desires cannot be satisfied, frustration follows. For a boy, his sexual feelings towards his mother may cause castration anxiety. Memories of these feelings are repressed when the Oedipus complex is resolved. Such memories cannot be allowed to enter the conscious mind, as there would be a risk that they would cause perversion and psychological damage. The scientific evidence for this notion of unconscious repres-

**It could be argued that Freud largely got away with a lack of scientific rigour in his work due to the volatile, obscure and often inaccessible content of the subject matter of psychoanalysis, especially as it relates to human sexuality**

sion is lacking, as is any evidence that conscious thought or behaviour is influenced by repressed memories.

Infantile amnesia is regarded as a real phenomenon, but studies investigating memory and brain have shown that its causes are far from the psychoanalytical explanation. The currently accepted explanation is that infantile amnesia is due to the nature of the brain of the immature organism. A second important variable in childhood amnesia is the development of language, i.e., the limited language skills of young children make it more difficult to memorise information. However, a large body of evidence showing that infantile amnesia is not due to repression, but to the immaturity of the infant's brain, has not made psychoanalysts revise the theory. Another example of a failure to update psychoanalytic theories is Freud's field of psychohistory, created for understanding historic individuals. Several flaws in his theorising have been indicated, but again such theories have not been subsequently modified.

What is science, then? How scientific is psychoanalysis? According to Donald Spence (1987), an American psychiatrist, something deserves to be considered as a science when there is a prevalent regard for the data, which is available for all interested parties, and when theory is data-driven and changes in response to new observations. Further, the progress of the theory is cumulative and the original model may serve as a basis for newer models. Finally, the claims are based on evidence rather than on authority. In this view science is immensely democratic. In terms of the above criteria, psychoanalysis fails on every count. Frank Sulloway (1979), a psychologist and historian of science, has actually described psychoanalysis as "a scientific fairytale". However, the subject matter of psychoanalysis, human sexuality and human nature, are laden with powerful taboos. Webster (1995) argues that to postulate theories concerning such issues requires not only intellect, but also emotional lucidity, something that is not commonly regarded as a characteristic of the scientific mind. Furthermore, to engage in such an activity requires a pinch of rebelliousness, which again is a quality rarely seen amongst those trained in natural sciences. In Webster's view, scientific ideas should not be judged by their intellectual source but by their explanatory power.

It cannot be denied, however, that Freud's theory is

superlatively ingenious, creative and perceptive. It further provides an initially plausible explanation of many aspects of human sexual behaviour. To dismiss psychoanalysis as being without any intellectual merit or importance would be wrong, and to do so would dismiss all of the many respectable authors who ever wrote in the psychoanalytic tradition.

The majority of psychologists hold that psychoanalysis is a pseudoscience, but perhaps the very business of examining Freud's work from the scientific perspective is unnecessarily harsh. Hans Eysenck, a hard-core behaviourist and iconoclast of the twentieth century, maintains that for many, Freud's contribution has not been to the scientific study of human behaviour, but to the interpretation and meaning of mental events. Specifically, Freud pioneered the desire to understand those individuals whose behaviour and thinking cross the bounds of convention dictated by civilization and cultures. It is difficult to dismiss the importance of psychoanalysis as it is so tightly entangled with our cultural history. However, perhaps the most transparent evidence that Freud was wrong is that he is very difficult for us to understand, and much of him remains an enigma – in Webster's (1995, p. 29) words, "a psychologist who is beyond the reach of psychology, the creator of a movement which has encircled the globe but which has formulated no theory which can even begin to account for its own success". It seems clear to me that psychoanalysis belongs to the 'domain of myth', and while of course myths may be enigmatic, they are not in the least scientific.

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# Rhyme and Reason

Steve Donnelly



## They should have seen it coming . . .

THE RECENT revelation that America's most famous psychic, Miss Cleo, is being taken to court by the US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) for various types of fraud and malpractice could lead to the hope that the public in the US and elsewhere might become significantly more sceptical about psychic mediums in general, and those operating by \$4.99 per minute telephone lines in particular.

Of course, allegations of fraud have always afflicted the world of the paranormal, particularly that of psychic mediums. Ever since the Fox sisters produced their mysterious rapping sounds in the mid 1800s and sparked off a national and then a worldwide interest in communicating with the dead, sceptical observers have raised suspicions that perhaps not all the 'paranormal' manifestations were coming from 'the other side'. On the other side of the credulity fence, there have also been the eminent scientists who have been passionately convinced of the reality of the psychic manifestations; rappings, ectoplasm and all. As an undergraduate student in the 1970s I studied at Liverpool University in a building named after the renowned 19th century physicist Sir Oliver Lodge, who carried out research into (among other things). lightning, the voltaic cell and the nature of the ether, a supposed medium that permeated all space. However, I discovered that in his later years he also became passionately interested in a rather different kind of medium and accepted the reality of the phenomena he observed with spiritualists such as the Italian Eusapia Paladino. Similarly, William Crookes, the eminent British chemist who made major discoveries in both physics and chemistry (including the element thallium) and whose studies of cathode rays were extremely important in the development of atomic physics, became convinced in his later years of the reality of the phenomena (including materialisations) exhibited to him by the medium Florence Cook.

Winding forward a hundred years or so, accusations by sceptics of various kinds of trickery did not seem to make any difference whatever to the popularity of British platform mediums such as the two Dorises (Stokes and Collins). By this time, of course, the hand-holding, ectoplasm and table rappings had largely disappeared (a shame really), but the essence of the act was largely unchanged and can be replicated by anyone with a knowledge of cold reading and other similar techniques,

without any necessity for the presence of discarnate entities. However, as reported in this column in issue 14.3, even in the 21st century, the work of mediums is still supported by some respectable scientists, and unfortunately just one reputable person of science stating his or her belief in the veracity of a spiritualist's claims can offset the work of a significant number of sceptics crying "fraud!!" So, on balance, accusations of the surreptitious use of agile big toes, muslin cloth, sleight of hand, rigged audiences, or cold-reading techniques by a few sceptics down the years has probably made little difference to the credibility of psychic mediums in the eyes of the general public.

So is the Miss Cleo case likely to make much difference to the credibility or profitability of psychic mediumship? As well as the FTC case, a number of states across the US are also bringing lawsuits against Miss Cleo's Psychic Readers' Network and the company that backs it, Access Resource Services. The cases have generated a great deal of publicity and there has been some very plain talking by state officials. For instance, in Missouri, State Attorney Jay Nixon was recently quoted in the *Washington Post* (3 October) as saying "The meter has run out for the Miss Cleo crew in scamming Missourians. The people behind Miss Cleo turned out to be more con artist than clairvoyant, more fraud than fortune teller and more swindler than psychic." Unfortunately though, most of the accusations in the lawsuits are of straight financial fraud, such as not informing customers that their free phone time had run out and they were therefore clocking up enormous telephone bills. Others are concerned with the fact that Miss Cleo, the 'Jamaican shaman', is actually Youree Harris, a jobbing actress from California. There is actually little or no mention of the biggest fraud of all, the claim that Miss Cleo and the army of script-reading 'psychics' who man the telephone lines are relaying information from dead people or by other paranormal means.

We can only hope that the immense amount of negative coverage all over the television and newspapers in the United States will serve to reduce the appetite of the American general public for these types of psychic services. But, sceptic that I am, I will bet any reader a bucket of ectoplasm to a cutlery drawer full of bent spoons that no amount of adverse publicity will make any difference either to human gullibility or to the profitability of this billion dollar industry.

Steve Donnelly is a physics professor at the University of Salford.



## Philosopher's Corner

Julian Baggini

**WHAT HAPPENS** when you read a book? I've got two answers to that question. One is what I imagine happens when most people read books, and one is what actually happens when I read one.

What I assume happens when other people read a book of, say, philosophy, is that they gain possession of some new pieces of information. That is to say they could rehearse for you the main arguments of the book and recall the gist of key passages. The book may do other things, such as alter their way of thinking or confirm a prejudice, but this gaining of new knowledge is the central result.

What happens when I read a book is quite different. I have a terrible memory and can often regurgitate hardly anything from a book I've only just returned to the shelf. Books don't so much add to the furniture of my mind as subtly rearrange what's in it. If it really affects me, I might find the very architecture of my thinking altered. Just don't expect me to be able to tell you what it looked like before, or whether that florescent lamp in the corner of my epistemological assumptions was there yesterday.

One book that has messed with my mind recently is Simon Critchley's *On Humour* (Routledge). What this book has really done for me is to make me appreciate some of the ways in which humour really is philosophically significant. What humour can do is jolt us out of ordinary ways of seeing the world and make us look at it from a different angle. This can make us question our assumptions and think about things afresh, which is a pretty good description of philosophising.

Not all humour is unsettling in this way. Indeed, a great deal of it is confirmatory and is based on getting us to laugh together at what is foreign, other or different. Interestingly, though, the idea that humour at its best does unsettle perhaps explains why it is we often feel this kind of insider/outsider humour is inferior. That laughing *at* is the crudest form of humour is something we learn at a very young age. This general account of humour also helps explain the appeal of biting satire. Poor satire is little better than crude laughing at. The new BBC comedy about the National Health Service, *TLC*, has got off to a poor start because it does little more than rehearse old prejudices about how decrepit the NHS is. Good satire

does plug into the self-satisfaction of laughing at, but it reveals new absurdities in the thing we are laughing at, or casts well-known ones in a new light. After watching the classic news spoof, *The Day Today*, for instance, it is impossible to watch the ordinary news the same way again.

But what the most brilliant satire does, like all the best humour, is unsettle the viewer, so that they are not just laughing at others but questioning themselves. There is a beautiful example of this in the first series of Peter Kay's *Phoenix Nights*, which is set in the anachronistic world of a Bolton working men's club. In one episode the club hosts an alternative comedy night which utterly baffles the mostly elderly audience who are more used to gags and sing-songs. In the audience is a group of students, one of whom starts heckling the compère – Jerry 'The Saint' St Clair – claiming his dated banter is "shit". Jerry, who is awaiting the results of tests for bowel cancer, looks for a while to be down and defeated. The students are obnoxious enough for us not to want to side with them, but we nevertheless think that the comic sensibilities of the series are closer to those of the students than to the old-style comedians. So really, we should be agreeing with the students.

But then, St Clair fights back. He hits out with a barrage of old-fashioned gags that get the crowd in the club and the viewer at home laughing along with him. The humiliated student squares up for a fight but finds the whole club standing against him. The students are defeated and the viewer finds himself cheering the victory of clubland over 'trendy alternative nonsense'.

It's one of the most brilliant scenes I've seen in a TV comedy for years: genuinely funny, genuinely moving and disruptive of preconceptions. Indeed, the beauty of the whole series is that the clubland it portrays, as well as being the butt of much of the humour, is also affectionately celebrated. What we thought we knew is bathed in a new light.

Is this part of the thesis advanced in Critchley's book? I think it might be but I can't be sure. Read his book for yourself and find out. But be prepared to have your mind covertly reconfigured.

*Comments welcome to [julian@julianbaggini.com](mailto:julian@julianbaggini.com)*

## ASKE News

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



IN ITS SHORT history ASKE has organised a number of meetings at universities and schools. At present we are planning to participate in National Science Week in Sheffield from 7th to 16th March 2003, when university staff give lectures to the public and at local schools. ASKE was involved in the 1998, 1999 and 2000 programmes, but we missed 2001 and 2002, when I was temporarily disaffiliated from the University of Sheffield.

I have done a number of such lectures at local schools, including one with Tony Youens (who regularly does such presentations). These have been on the theme 'Normal or Paranormal?' We have also organised two public lectures on this theme (the third was on the subject of fringe archaeology).

The idea of the 'Normal or Paranormal?' presentations has not been simply to debunk paranormal claims: there are more fundamental messages that we wish to convey. One is the oft-quoted maxim "Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence". One way to introduce this theme to children is to ask them to consider their reactions to the claim "On my way here I passed a field in which I saw a horse", and the claim "On my way here I passed a field in which I saw a lion". Having agreed that the latter is an 'extraordinary claim', the children are invited to provide different explanations that are consistent with their everyday experience. This also provides an introduction to Occam's Razor, which can be more simply rendered as "Science tries to explain things from what we already know". One can then challenge the audience as to whether they accept the statement "I can read people's minds", and proceed with several mind-reading demonstrations, starting with one or two that are easy to explain. In my experience, while the majority of children are likely to subscribe to some beliefs in the paranormal, this kind of challenge encourages a good sceptical response.

Another useful theme to develop is the irresistible tendency of the mind to impose structure and meaning on even the most random collection of stimuli and events. This theme can be introduced by slides of inkblot patterns, ambiguous pictures, and hidden figures such as 'the man in the clouds', the Bacup plank,

and UFOs. These examples provide – pardon? Oh, the Bacup plank. Yes, the face of Jesus was found on a plank in Bacup a few years ago. As I was saying, these examples provide an introduction to techniques used by mediums (e.g. "I have an old man here...He's talking about his fish or fishing ... I'm getting the name George or Jim ... Jack? ... Can anybody help?"), where once again the observer is required to impose his or her own meaning on fragments of information.

Variety is the spice of any lecture. There should be plenty of audience participation – as individuals or in groups, or using the whole audience. One useful topic is the ideomotor effect and this can be introduced by inviting the audience to experience suggested arm heaviness and 'hands coming together' (the suggestion that powerful magnets are drawing together the outstretched hands). This can be followed by an individual demonstration of suggested postural sway, group demonstrations of suggested pendulum motion and, with a responsive individual, 'unconscious communication' by a pendulum. Dowsing and facilitated communication can come next, with demonstrations using individual volunteers.

The inclusion of a puzzle for the audience (e.g. one illustrating the difference between intuition and logic) and one or two videos both add further variety. (Among others, ASKE has video footage of Uri Geller in which he uses 'mind power' to advance a watch, the winder of which clearly pops out, then in again.) It is also a good idea have a *grande finale*. For example, Tony Youens does a demonstration of 'psychic healing'. (Incidentally, avoid trying this demonstration on skinny children: they are far too ticklish and are liable to fall off the table.)

Whether with general audiences or schoolchildren, these presentations are well received and very enjoyable. Anyone interested in participating in or organising such a meeting and would like ideas or help is welcome to get in touch with ASKE.

Do any of our messages get across? After a presentation at one school, in which Tony demonstrated his fork-bending ability, with the strong hint that this does not demand paranormal powers, a young girl approached him and said, 'There's a man on the telly who really does bend forks with his mind'!

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

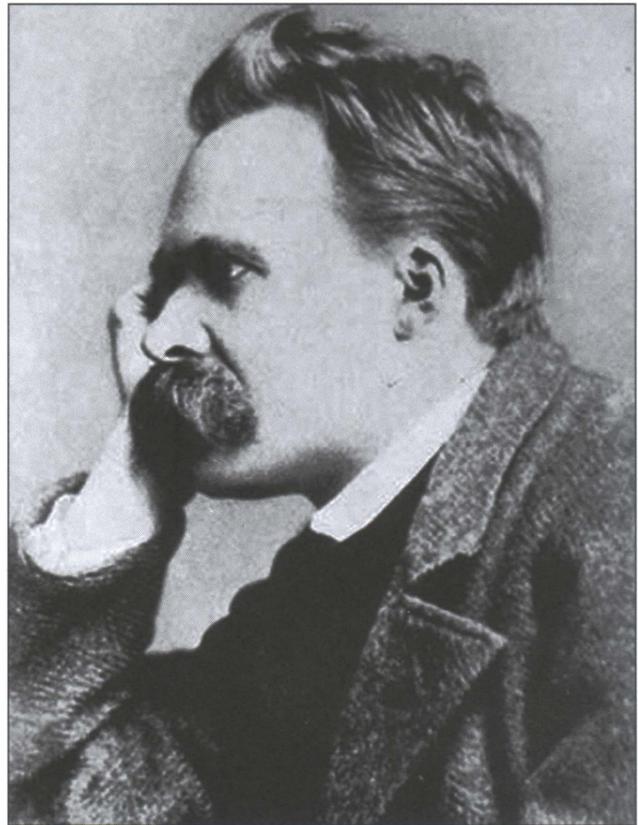
# Coming Soon to an Office Near You ...

Sadly, **Martin Parkinson** is unable to respond to inspirational leadership

I BECAME INTERESTED in the sceptical project in mid-2001 while working for a political organization. A colleague (*the* colleague – it is a very small outfit, albeit with a relatively high public profile) had recently started work and had distinguished himself in my eyes by his thumpingly patronising air towards me and breathtaking smarminess toward everyone else. Actually, that is terribly unfair, because my thoughts about him were pretty patronising too: I was sanguine about his Reiki training, but I wrinkled my nose when he said he was about to take a weekend course with “one of my favourite motivational speakers, who’s over in London at the moment”. Didn’t he realise how *unaesthetic* that sort of thing is? Wasn’t he aware that intellectual snobs such as myself might snigger?

On the day after the course he did something strange. I had idly commented that there were no serious prospects for small political parties such as ourselves in the absence of proportional representation, and he replied that “people keep saying that but it isn’t true ...”. He then stood up, made fixed eye contact with me, slightly dropped the pitch of his voice, slowed down his delivery and started reciting what sounded like a prepared speech. The content of his speech might best be described as cod-Nietzschean drivel: twaddle about Greatness, History, We Are Great Individuals, We Can Make History, We *Are* Making History. Oh no, I inwardly groaned, he’s bonkers; we’ve attracted another David Icke. As he was leaving no pauses for me to say anything (and what polite thing was there to say?) I just mumbled “I have to go” and walked out of his office.

The thing is, I was actually quite disturbed by this: I felt oddly assaulted and slightly shaky. What was all that about? Some urgent web research was in order. The American motivational speaker of whom my colleague was a fan is Anthony Robbins. He is ubiquitous in the US: he flogs his books, videos and courses *via* endless late night ‘infomercials’, he is casually mentioned on TV programs such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, he makes a short appearance in the recent Hollywood film *Shallow Hal* (he kicks off the plot by giving a hypnotic suggestion to the main character, causing him to fall in love with Gwyneth Paltrow in a fat suit). Robbins seems to have started out as a Neuro Linguistic Programming disciple, then branched out into fire-walking, and is now a ‘Personal Development’ guru. A current Robbins buzzword is ‘leadership’. This explains my colleague’s behaviour: he was ‘modelling’ Robbins



*Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche*

and being an inspirational Leader, presumably because I was a Sad Little Follower. (But is use of the word ‘Leadership’ any more than a way of making middle managers feel heroic?) Apart from that, his general line is familiar: you have not fulfilled your potential, if you believe in yourself you can do anything, don’t let yourself be held back by people with no imagination. Unleash your awesome personal power. Oh, and eat more fruit (really).

This is genuinely beguiling stuff and it does contain some truth: many people *do* have unfulfilled potential, attitude *can* make a huge difference to performance, and there *is* scope for manipulating one’s own attitudes. So why did I remain unbeguiled? And am I losing out by being such a spoilsport? When I look at Robbins I do not see a person who has unleashed his awesome personal power and is driven to share his discoveries with humanity. I see an immensely astute multi-millionaire salesman with an airbrush tan and too many teeth. His product probably does have some value: I’m sure his seminars are inspiring. Anyone who has undergone even a small amount of drama training will have experienced the emotional energy that can be generated

by a well-directed group: if that energy is created in a particular context and then focused in a particular direction you can convince participants that ... well you can convince them of almost anything, at least for a while.

Robbins is relatively harmless. My ex-colleague is also harmless: he attempted to impose a hypnotic suggestion on a co-worker and failed to realise that not only was this unlikely to work outside the fevered atmosphere of a self-improvement seminar, but that most people would be hugely insulted by what the attempt implied. His behaviour was clueless, not dangerous, and I'd just love to see it used as a canvassing technique in the next council elections were it not for the fact that I still support the political organisation concerned. (It will be obvious to some readers which party I'm talking about – I must stress that typical members are intelligent and independent-minded and the few people who have obtained office are seriously talented. Trees *are* hugged, occasionally, but only when the trees consent.)

Robbins may be harmless, but my research into him pulled up incidental references to all manner of wacky beliefs, cults and pseudoscience. Because the enthusiasm of his fans and the techniques used in his seminars are somewhat 'cultoid', the territory he occupies abuts onto the land of the distinctly dodgy. This was new to me: I had not known how unaware people can be about how their own minds and emotions work; about how literal-minded people can be. (I entertain my own share of dippy new age ideas, but 'entertain' is an apt word for my relationship to them; they belong to the play area of my mind; I value fiction greatly, but I do appreciate the distinction between fiction and reality.) Scary.

P.S. When I wrote this article I had been absent from the mainstream world of work for a couple of years.

Now that I've started to get out more, I realise that the use of the future tense in the title is wrong: it *has* come to a workplace near you. Books on hypnosis have become readily available in the same mainstream book-

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We Are Making History**

shops which now contain whole sections labelled "leadership". Centres for 'leadership' in this and that are proliferating, and I've overheard suits in the street having earnest conversations about "I really need to work on my Leadership". And "Vision". Well yes, it's a Good Thing I suppose, but it now seems to have become compulsory for everyone to have a Vision and tell others about it, as if they were Joan of Arc.

I was, and am, basically sympathetic to the view that language affects thought and thought affects action, which changes things in the real world (a writer has a vested interest in stressing the power of words). Yet observing these cultural trends has made me much more sceptical about how much can be achieved merely by minding one's language. I doubt if the constant repetition of "Leadership", "Vision", and "Excellence" actually generates these rare qualities: it is more likely that automatic repetition may drain the words of meaning while giving the false impression that things are actually being achieved. In short, I have become aware of the ubiquity of magical thinking.



**Martin Parkinson** lives in North West London and recently hit forty. He has too many interests for his own good, but has always been interested in why and how people believe things. He is currently planning a career change to become a Jedi.

## 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](mailto:nickp@coleridge.co.uk) or log in to <http://www.skeptic.org.uk/pub>.*

# Reviews



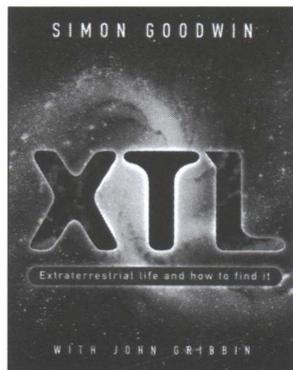
## IS ANYONE THERE?

### **XTL : Extraterrestrial Life and How to Find it**

by Simon Goodwin and John Gribbin

Weidenfeld and Nicholson, £12.99, ISBN 1-84188-193-7

The authors of this book are both astronomers and are therefore more interested in how and where life-supporting planets might be found in our galaxy, than in what form that life might take. This enables them to avoid the difficult question of how we would decide whether apparently organic structures which were completely new to us were, in fact, "living".



That aside, this is a clearly written and well-illustrated introduction to the search for extraterrestrial intelligence (SETI). There is a minimum of mathematics, but we are given the Drake equation, which enables anyone to make their own estimate of the probability that there are habitable and inhabited planets out there. Readers without some basic knowledge of physics might find the going hard here and there.

Goodwin and Gribbin start with some well-established assumptions (from as far back as the ancient Greeks): that there is nothing special about our solar system, that planetary systems like ours are common throughout the Galaxy and that life in some form exists on a large number of planets orbiting other stars. They also, however, mention Fermi's Paradox – if there are other advanced civilizations, why have they not already visited us, or made their presence known? – and they try to resolve it.

For this reader, the best part of the book is the final section, "Searching for Civilizations," which deals with existing and future SETI projects, using radio telescopes and long distance probes such as the endlessly self-replicating "Santa Claus machines". Sadly, this chapter is a too brief and hurried summing up, and the book feels incomplete as a consequence.

In mitigation, the last page does list a number of relevant Web addresses which provide the latest planetary news, including one on which you can get a screensaver which will set your PC to work when you are not using it, analyzing data looking for SETI radio signals. When the first message comes through, it could be to you.

Mike Hutton

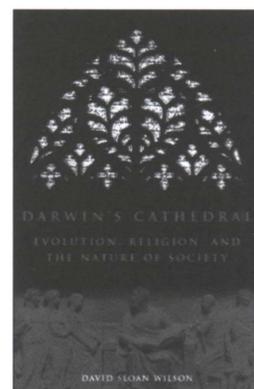
## ON BEING TOO ADAPTABLE

### **Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society**

by David Sloan Wilson

Chicago University Press, \$25.00, ISBN 0-226-90134-3

Wilson argues that the social phenomenon of religion can best be explained using evolutionary theory. A well-known, if controversial, attempt applies the concept of the meme as a cultural replicator. However, Wilson's approach is unlikely to find favour with those of us who look to Dawkins for the clearest and most persuasive evolutionary arguments, and not just because it is not memetic.



In the disputes within evolutionary theory about the unit of selection, Wilson is a long-standing exponent of group selection, a heterodox view, at least in the UK, for about thirty years. Dawkins, whose selfish gene theory nominates the gene as the fundamental unit, argues that group selection explanations muddle clear thinking, even though group selection may occur. Since Wilson's argument about religion rests on group selection theory, the reader must figure out what that theory's status is.

It looks muddled to me. For Wilson, individuals and groups (p. 9) and genes (p.18) are all things which evolve, not just species. It is unclear, though, how groups replicate and are selected, whereas of course they may change, persist or perish in ways that may not require evolutionary explanations.

Wilson's conclusions on religion will probably not charm the sceptic. He favours the coexistence of religious and scientific thought, and goes so far as to demote the very faculty sceptics hold dear: "Rationality is not the gold standard against which all other forms of thought are to be judged. Adaptation is the gold standard against which rationality must be judged, along with all other forms of thought." (p. 228).

Thus, if a religious belief in, say, miracles helps a group to adapt and persist, then this becomes its justification, despite any criticism we might bring to bear. This is not far from saying that religion ought to be believed because it is useful.

Paul Taylor

## A GHOST FOR ALL SEASONS

### Seeing Ghosts: Experiences of the Paranormal

by Hilary Evans

John Murray, £19.99, ISBN 0-7195-5492 6

Hilary Evans is well known to readers of *The Skeptic* for the Fortean illustration he supplies each month. As the commentaries indicate, he has a scholarly but light style, and both those qualities are manifested in his latest book.

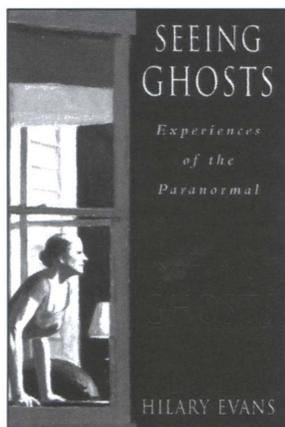
In it he conducts a thorough analysis of the evidence for ghosts, based on almost two hundred cases drawn primarily from the archives of The Society for Psychical Research and the American magazine *Fate*. This gives him a large database, though relying so heavily on the *Fate* material does raise concerns about quality control, as readers' reports to that journal are not investigated.

While the discussion is fascinating, there are problems. Many of the phenomena posited as aspects of seeing ghosts, such as "super-psi" – the limitless ability of the mind to obtain information paranormally – and the "extended self", able to exist independently of the physical body and survive death, are too readily accepted as possible mechanisms for ghost cognition. Concepts introduced tentatively gain strength as the argument proceeds, so that by the time the summary is reached they have assumed a high degree of probability.

It is acknowledged that witnesses lie or embellish, yet cases are still taken at face value. Most significantly there is little allowance for the ways in which memory is reconstructive, with honest witnesses smoothing over ambiguous experiences to produce a rounded narrative that, while it may seem authoritative, is far more coherent than the incident that initiated it. In sum, this is a thoughtful attempt to tackle a complex area, but is far from the final word.

The strangest thing in the book must be the illustration from *The Strand* used to illustrate the appearance of a librarian's ghost to his successor, as it is not clear why the latter should be holding a gun. Clearly librarianship, at least in Yorkshire, has changed a great deal since the 1890s.

Tom Ruffles



## SCEPTICISM – HISTORICAL INTEREST ONLY?

### Skeptical Philosophy for Everyone

by Richard H. Popkin and Avrum Stroll

Prometheus Books, ISBN 1-57392-936-0

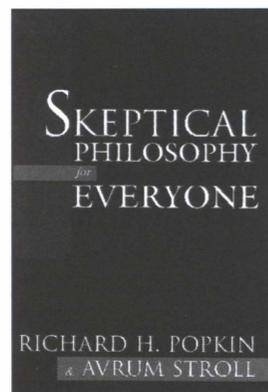
*Skeptical Philosophy for Everyone* presents a history of major philosophical controversies by focusing upon the role of scepticism within these debates. The authors consider topics in ontology, epistemology, religion, ethics and political theory and present brief biographies of the major philosophers involved.

The starting point for their discussion is radical scepticism concerning the existence of the external world and the possibility of knowledge. The history of such concerns is traced from the ancient world (Socrates, Plato and Aristotle), through to its modern formulation (Descartes, Locke, Berkeley and Hume) up until the 20th century (Russell, Moore, Austin, Wittgenstein and Derrida).

The authors then move away from such radical questions to consider the role of scepticism within specific philosophical controversies. These include the notion of religious certainty, claims of ethical knowledge and the balance between effective government and the need to be sceptical of the political claims. This last topic is presented via a discussion of the role of sceptical texts in the development of the American Constitution.

The book concludes with a debate between Stroll and Popkin on the modern relevance of scepticism. Stroll advocates a commonsense rejection of radical scepticism based upon the writings of Reid, Austin and Wittgenstein. Popkin contends that scepticism has a continuing and valuable role within philosophical debate. Interestingly, however, both seem to agree that the postmodern fashion of using scepticism to promote relativism and trivialize science should be opposed.

While I tend to agree with Stroll (the person who continually checks his trouser pockets in order to confirm it doesn't contain a rabbit cannot easily be described as a 'sceptic' or a 'philosopher'), both authors provide an excellent and accessible introduction to the historical importance of scepticism and to the practice of philosophical analysis.



Dr Dave Unsworth

**INDEPENDENT THINKING**

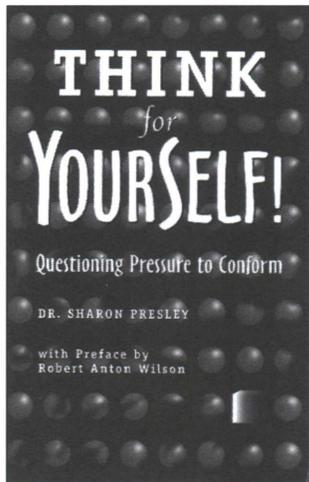
**Think for Yourself: Questioning Pressure to Conform**

by Dr Sharon Presley

Ronin Press, USA \$13.95, Europe \$25,

ISBN1579510501

This is a small book, only 127 pages, padded out with photographs and quotations. The intention is to persuade readers to examine their own habits of thought using the techniques the author suggests. This is a worthy goal and, indeed, *worthy* describes the book very well. It reads like a school text for one of those personal development classes we had in my youth in America.



Despite the fact that I agreed with nearly everything the author said, I found myself put off by the book's tone. It is preachy and lecturing. Perhaps it developed out of a series of public lectures or the scripts for self-help tapes. That's what it feels like.

The writing is very bland. Although this is hardly a sin, a book that seeks to convince readers of the need to make fundamental and profound changes to the way they think has got to inspire. Conformity, particularly for the young, offers security and appears desirable. Presley's writing, on its own, does not seem to me potent enough to counter this.

The publisher recommends the book for "youth groups, boys and girls clubs, church and community organizations". It is as a resource, for stimulating discussion of the issues around what it means to think independently, that I believe this book has real value. It covers, albeit briefly, a huge range of issues, for example the role of experts, political and commercial manipulation and social pressure. It then offers suggestions for coping with these. A skilled teacher could compensate for what it lacks in depth.

But before anyone goes out to buy this book, the publishers have a job to do. In this age of the automatic spell-checker, it is inexcusable for a book to be published with such dreadful typos as *teh* for *the*. A good editor would not have hurt either.

Marjorie Mackintosh

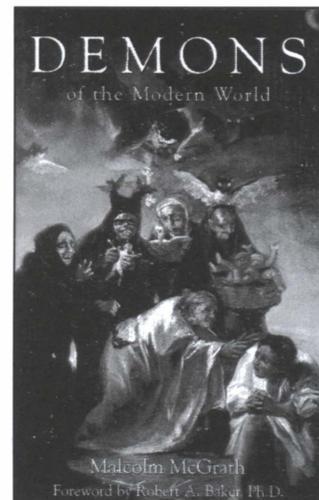
**DEMONIC MEMORIES**

**Demons of the Modern World**

by Malcolm McGrath

Prometheus Books, \$32, 1-57392-935-2

*Demons of the Modern World* is an investigation into the subject of supposed ritual satanic abuse, as well as a potted history of demonology in the West. It is well written, putting the subject matter across in a non-academic way – being sometimes as engaging as a whodunnit mystery novel. The author has done his homework too; this is a well-researched book drawing material from history, social sciences, literature, cinema, and even UFO abduction reports.



McGrath's main point is that demons are an illusion. He shows that ritual satanic abuse is also an illusion, one generated by some psychologists and therapists using techniques to uncover so-called repressed memories. However, in real life it seems that people who have suffered abuse, or other highly traumatic experiences, in childhood have difficulty in repressing the memories which can cause them so much anguish throughout their life.

I learnt a lot from this book. The author has done an excellent job in tying together strands from several areas to explain and make his case. The only criticism I have is that the focus is almost exclusively on happenings in America. Over a decade ago there were in Britain cases of alleged ritual satanic abuse of children. This resulted in parents being arrested and children taken away from their families. At the time I considered those allegations to be dubious and far-fetched, even though many children are, unfortunately, abused by their parents. It would have been interesting to see what differences there are in other countries.

After reading this book I was left with an unanswered question: why did the satanic abuse scare get taken seriously by so many people despite the lack of physical or other corroborating evidence? Maybe that would make a good subject for another book.

Dene Bebbington

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# LETTERS

## Roswell

If any balloon project contributed to the flying saucer myth (*Secrets of Area 51*; *The Skeptic*, 15.3), then some good evidence is required. David Hambling accepts the idea that Captain Mantell died chasing a (then secret) Skyhook balloon (his aircraft did *not* have an oxygen supply), which the USAF claimed they released that day from Clinton County airport in Ohio. However, according to Menzel and Boyd (*The World of Flying Saucers*, 1963), the records for that day are not available and the release crew could not recall whether or not a balloon had been released. Sachs (*The UFO Encyclopedia*, 1980) claims that no Skyhook balloons were released from Clinton that day, but notes Saunders and Harkins's suggestion (*UFOs? Yes!*, 1968) that it was one released early that day from Camp Ridley, Minnesota. So at least some of the sightings that day *might* have been of a Skyhook. But not all of them; the last, from Columbus, Ohio, appears to have been of an astronomical object, perhaps Jupiter. One should beware of simple solutions to complex problems.

Regarding Project Mogul, responsible for the Roswell incident, Hambling would have us believe that the US Army announced the discovery of a 'flying disc' 11 days *before* Kenneth Arnold coined the phrase 'flying saucer'. In fact the announcement was made on 8th July 1947, 14 days *after* Arnold's report, as you would expect. Hambling's idea that the reports of alien bodies derive from seeing the bodies of humans from a crashed manned balloon

cannot be taken seriously. What evidence does he have that there were any manned balloon flights or that freeze-drying shrinks bodies? It is better to reach no conclusion than jump to the first that comes to mind.

**Steuart Campbell,  
Edinburgh**

## Keen's response to French

It is generous of Chris French to allow me the last word in our extended dispute over the strength of evidence for psi (see *The Skeptic*, 15.3).

I do not argue that sceptics' negative results arise solely from the supposed experimenter effect – i.e. that negative vibes produce negative results. There is some evidence of this, certainly, but more important is that many of the tests are designed on false assumptions. For example, if I were trying to investigate psi, then I would not test a bunch of average students, but go for someone who claims psychic powers. Then I would make sure I thoroughly understand the conditions in which that person works, and design an experiment which fairly tests him. The implicit assumption that psi is a universally distributed, uniform faculty is absurd.

All too often this is not done, and with serious consequences. For instance, it is now apparent from overwhelming evidence from several sources that Chris Robinson in double-blind tests is able to dream where he will be and what he will see on a subsequent day, and he has been of considerable service to the

police and defence authorities. But if he is tested in a laboratory where he is given tests appropriate to some other faculty, like psychometry, he is likely to do badly. That's what happened in 1994.

Chris French greatly exaggerates the amount of scholarship required for an impartial assessment of the Dorr-Lethe case, but I won't press the point, because all he has to do is to explain away a much simpler case which I have been investigating with Guy Playfair: an Irishwoman is badgered by the voices of a recently murdered woman she's never heard of. She provides the police with 125 specific statements about the deceased, the murder scene, and the personality, appearance, route taken, method of entry and name of the murderer. Apart from a few unverifiable statements, all but one proved correct.

We have examined all the original documentary evidence. Apart from a very few statements, all must have had a paranormal origin. The only issue is where the information came from – the dead woman or the minds of the policeman who discovered the body, the murderer himself and the woman's family. The dead woman was Jacqui Poole, and the murderer, Pokie Ruark, was given a life sentence at the Old Bailey in August 2001.

Any non-paranormal offers of explanation?

**Montague Keen,  
London**

(See Tony Youen's letter in the *The Skeptic* 16.2 for a non-paranormal account of the Poole case - Ed)

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The Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit, Department of Psychology, Goldsmiths College, New Cross, London, SE14 6NW or e-mail [edit@skeptic.org.uk](mailto:edit@skeptic.org.uk). We reserve the right to edit letters for publication.

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