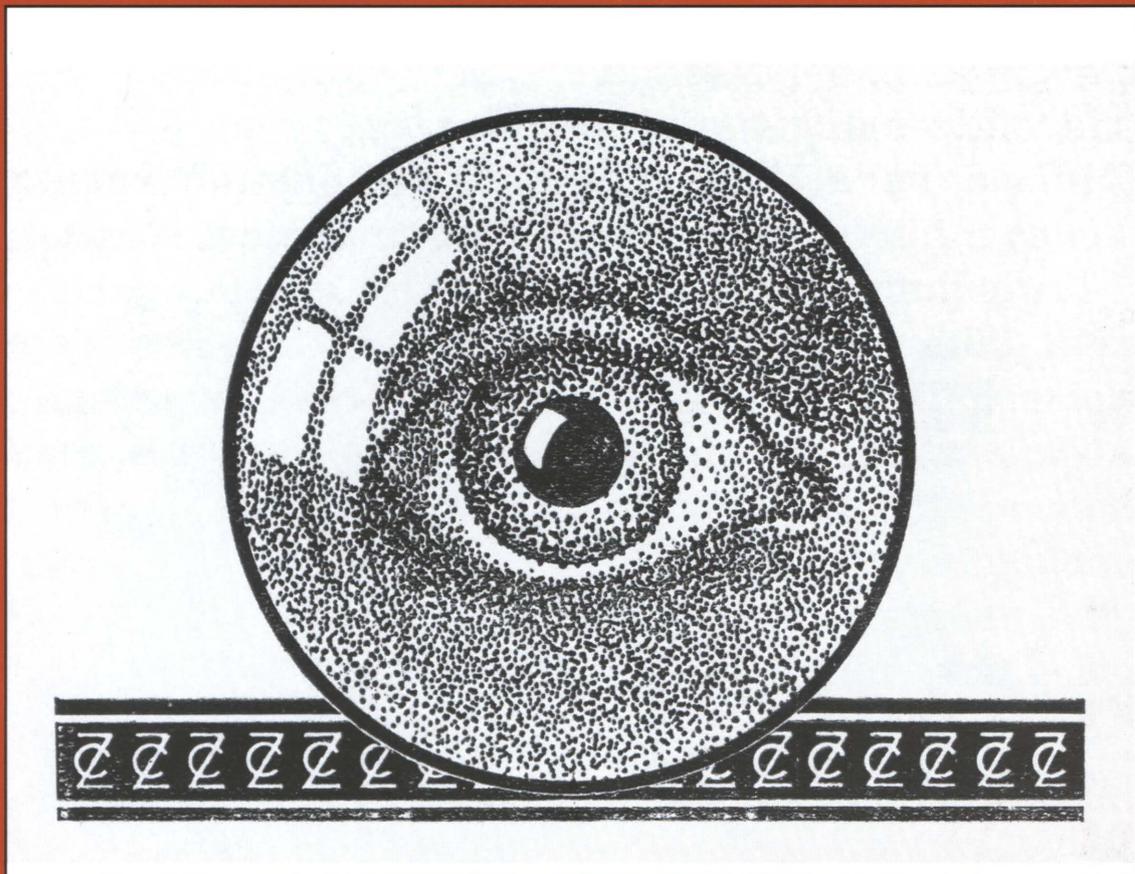


Volume 16 Number 3  
Autumn 2003

# The **Skeptic**



## **Unseen Staring Detection and ESP in Pets**

*Also in this issue:*

**Domesticating the Beast of Bodmin**

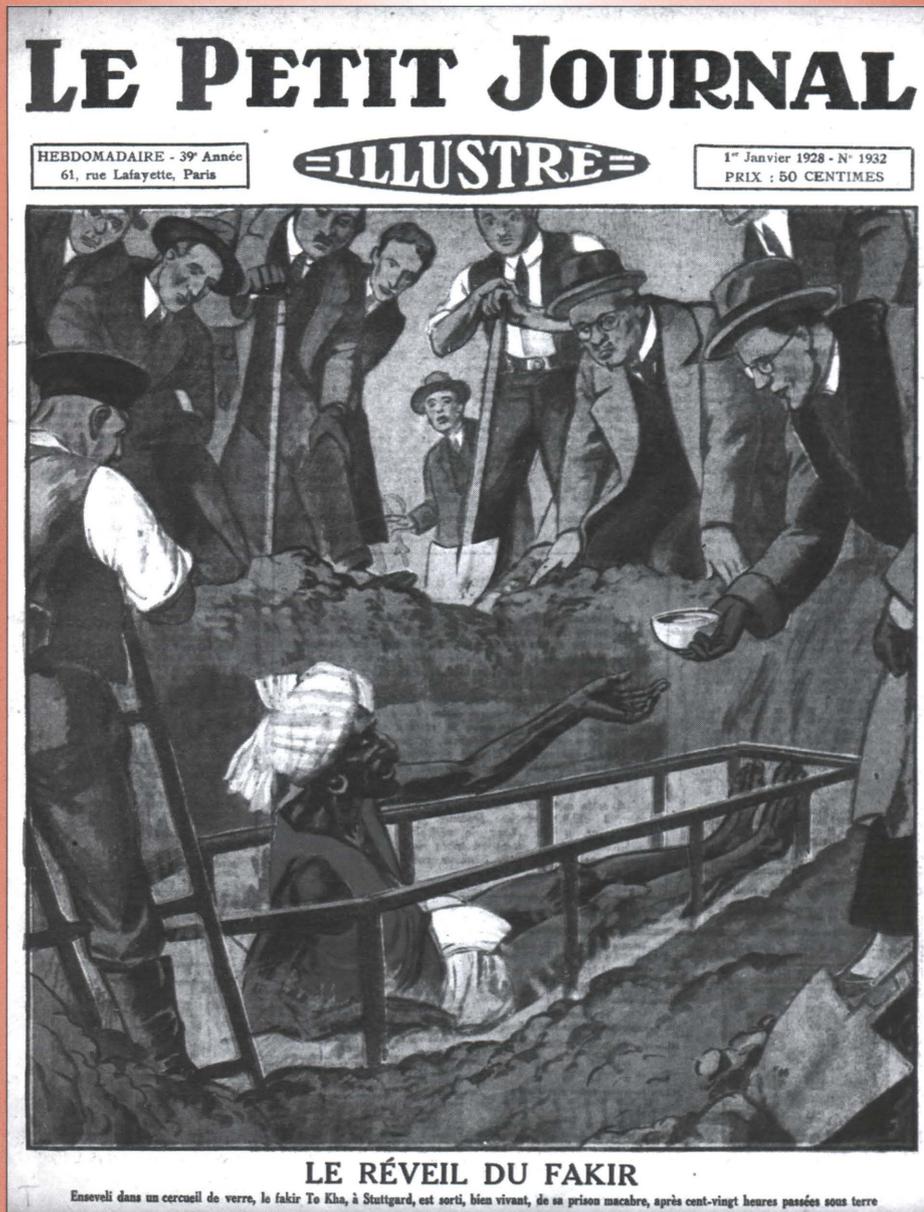
**A Brief Introduction to Neuro-Linguistic Programming**

**Stupid Sceptic Tricks**

*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.

We apologise for the mismatch between the picture and the text on this page in issue 16.1. Printed here is the correct picture and accompanying text.

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

The SKEPTIC: Volume 16 Number 3  
Autumn 2003

ISSN 0959-5228

Editorial enquiries to  
**The Anomalistic Psychology  
Research Unit**  
Department of Psychology  
Goldsmiths College  
New Cross, London SE14 6NW  
United Kingdom

Subscriptions/sample issues  
**Mike Hutchinson**  
10 Crescent View  
Loughton, Essex IG10 4PZ  
United Kingdom

Email: [edit@skeptic.org.uk](mailto:edit@skeptic.org.uk)  
Web: [www.skeptic.org.uk](http://www.skeptic.org.uk)  
AOL Keyword: **skeptic**  
Tel.: 07020 935 370  
Fax: 020 7919 7873 FAO Chris French

Editors  
**Julia Nunn**  
**Chris French**

Editorial Assistance  
**Wendy M Grossman**  
**Steve Donnelly**  
**Toby Howard**  
**DLF Sealy**  
**Steve Yesson**

Founding editor  
**Wendy M Grossman**

Webmaster  
**Phil McKerracher**

AOL Area  
**Liam Proven**

Finance Manager  
**Mike Hutchinson**

Skeptics in the Pub  
**Nick Pullar**

Cartoons  
**Donald Rooum**  
**Tim Pearce**  
**Nick D Kim**

Special Consultant  
**Cyril Howard**

Graphic Design  
**Lisa A Hutter and Christopher Fix**

Illustrations  
**Mary Evans Picture Library**

All contents copyright unless otherwise marked.

©The Skeptic

The opinions expressed in this magazine are those of the authors, and do not necessarily represent those of the Editors.

## Contents

<b>Editorial</b>	
Julia Nunn and Chris French	4
<b>Hits and Misses</b>	5
<b>Skeptic at large . . .</b>	
Wendy M Grossman	7
<b>What are we to make of Exceptional Experience? Part 3: Unseen Staring Detection and ESP in Pets</b>	
David Marks	8
<b>Skeptical Stats</b>	13
<b>Stupid Sceptic Tricks</b>	
David Owens	14
<b>Domesticating The Beast of Bodmin</b>	
Clive Jefferies	17
<b>A Brief Introduction to Neuro-Linguistic Programming</b>	
Martin Parkinson	18
<b>Rhyme and Reason</b>	
Steve Donnelly	21
<b>Philosopher's Corner</b>	
Julian Baggini	22
<b>ASKE News</b>	23
<b>Reviews</b>	24
<b>Letters</b>	27

Published by

**CSICOP** and **Skeptical Inquirer**

International Headquarters  
PO Box 703, Amherst, NY 14226 US (716) 636-1425



# Editorial

Julia Nunn and Chris French



HELLO AND WELCOME to issue number 16.3 of *The Skeptic*. In the third and final part of his three-part assessment of parapsychology, David Marks directs his attention to the subject of 'unseen staring' and the putative ESP ability of pets. Unseen staring refers to the idea that when we stare at somebody from behind they may be able to feel that we are staring on the back of their neck. It has been claimed that people are able to detect unseen staring at above chance levels, but Marks' review of the evidence provides no support for this claim.

But are animals psychic? Many pet owners say their pets know when a member of the household is about to come home. Does *your* pet seem to know when you're expected back home? Although Marks concludes that these expectancies are probably based on learning rather than psychic powers, much more research is needed in this area before a strong argument can be made either way.

Meanwhile, Martin Parkinson takes a look at 'Neuro-Linguistic Programming' (NLP), which (surprisingly?) has very little to do with neurology, linguistics, or computer programming. It does, however, claim to be a set of techniques which will radically improve your work and personal life. It is still used as a kind of psychotherapy, but its applications have spread far beyond correcting dysfunctional thoughts and processes, and it is now widely marketed to a broad audience. Personal gain can be yours, if you can work out a person's preferred mode of thought, using verbal

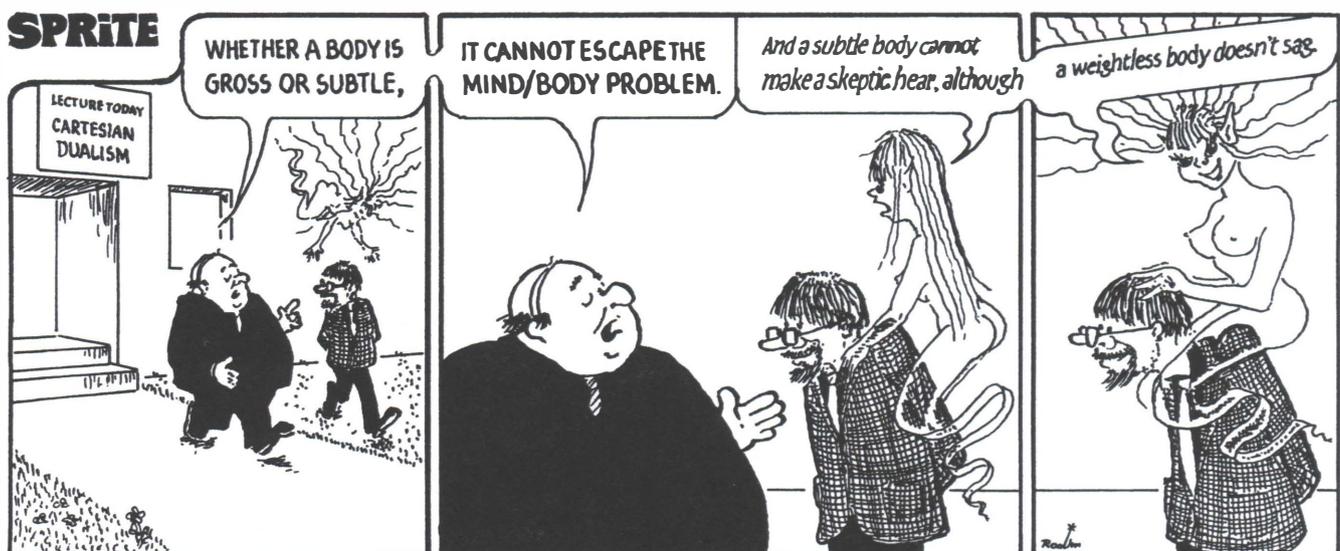
and eye-movement clues, and then adapt your own behaviour so that a sense of 'matching' is achieved. Eye movements can apparently be used to infer internal states, and the claim is sometimes made that one can tell when someone is lying from this information. But surely none of this is very far removed from what is often termed superior 'social skills'? Well, NLP claims to have found an infallible 'body-language dictionary'. Sounds too good to be true? You bet ...

It is all too easy to feel smug about being a sceptic – we want evidence; we want properly controlled experiments; we won't let anyone pull the wool over our eyes. However, this attitude assumes that sceptics themselves always play fair. But do we? David Owens outlines some tricks, ploys and gimmicks which sceptics have been known to use. Are we as guilty as anyone else of dirty fighting in order to win? Are you absolutely sure you've never used any of these tactics? Take a look, and let us know what you think.

Our fourth article in this issue has a very different tone – taking us back to more innocent, bygone era, while adopting a light-hearted approach to the demystification of 'The Beast of Bodmin'. A poignant reminder of a less cynical age, and the perfect counterpoint to David Owens' and Martin Parkinson's articles.

As always, we have our regular columnists, plus the letters, cartoons, and review sections.

With best wishes until the next issue, Julia and Chris



## Hits and Misses



### In search of prayer power

It is not often that *Wired* magazine covers the paranormal – although they’ve raised technology hype to a form of pseudoscience – but in the December 2002 issue writer Po Bronson (*Naked on the Late Shift, What Should I Do With My Life?*) tackled Elizabeth Targ’s 1998 research into the efficacy of prayer in terms of helping AIDS patients. Part of what interested Bronson is that Russell Targ’s daughter, Elizabeth, raised to be psychic as well as intelligent and polite, herself became a cancer patient, and during the months between diagnosis and death was surrounded by both medical care and a panoply of psychic healers. In and amidst Targ’s own personal story, Bronson did a good job of dissecting the problems with Targ’s AIDS study. The data were unblinded and then ‘reblinded’ in the process of looking for data that confirmed Targ’s thesis. Worse, when the original plan was disrupted by the advent of triple-drug anti-retroviral therapy, which became common practice shortly after the six-month trial began, Targ and her research partner re-ran the data. The original plan was to look at mortality. With that option gone, they looked for statistics supporting the efficacy of prayer using a variety of measures – quality of life, HIV symptoms, mood states, all of which were better in the control group – until they hit on hospital stays and doctor visits, which were better in the prayed-for group. With hospital stays, however, the biggest determining

factor was the availability of medical insurance. A recent paper had defined 23 AIDS-related illnesses, and in the end this was the measure they used, collecting new data from the patient charts to do so. This information renders the study seriously flawed: what you are supposed to do is define what you’re looking for, collect the data, and compare what you’ve found to your original hypothesis, not redraw the hypothesis until you find one that fits. It also perhaps explains why the Mayo Clinic, conducting a similar study, found no beneficial effect.

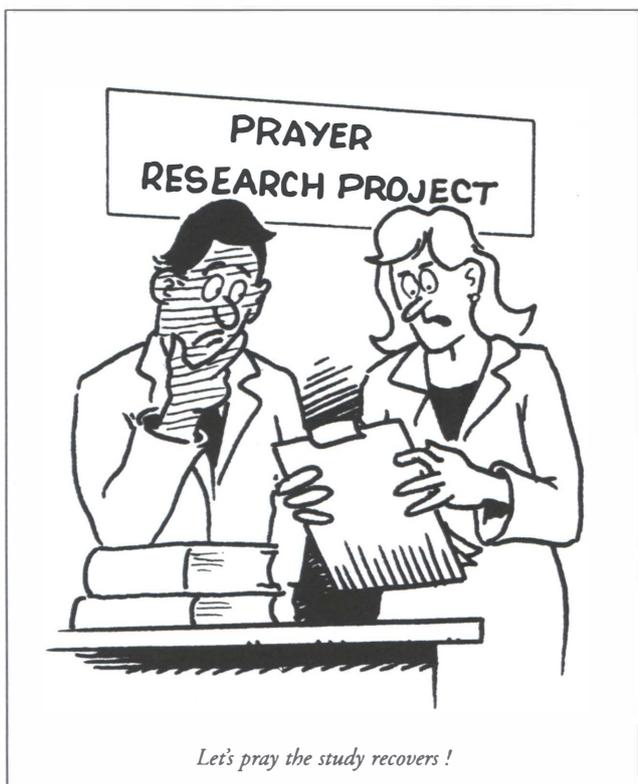
Kudos to Po Bronson, for doing a solid bit of journalism. However, we feel safe in predicting that Targ’s research will be quoted for a very long time as supporting the power of prayer.

### Beware the wort

In amid the largely negative coverage complaining that the EU’s efforts to regulate alternative remedies and food supplements are bureaucratic and will separate people from their multivitamins, *The Times* ran an interesting piece complaining that the directive on herbalism isn’t nearly tough enough.

People outside the sceptical world often get confused about sceptics and alternative medicine, asking us “Do you believe in alternative medicine?” rather than recognizing that there are many different types of alternative remedies and that the evidence for each one must be examined separately. (Of course, as the late John Diamond noted here in *The Skeptic*, there is no such thing as “alternative” medicine, just medicine that works and medicine that doesn’t.) Since the principles of herbalism are the same as the principles of pharmacology, there is no doubt that herbs can work. Where sceptics and believers might argue is over the value of consuming herbs in their original form rather than the extracted form sold by drug companies. In some cases, it may well be true that other substances in a particular herb enhance the effect of the principal active ingredient; but in others there may be dangers that modern pharmacology eliminates by jettisoning those extra substances. We note tangentially that studies have found that a very high percentage of food supplements sold in Europe are contaminated with substances on the banned list for world class athletes, for whom quality and consistency of manufacturing is obviously a huge issue.

Consultant anaesthesiologist Leyla Sanai explores many of these issues, concluding that scientific testing of herbal supplements and mandatory training for practitioners are long overdue. We’d have to agree. However, it also has to be said that the specific provisions of the directive are effectively xenophobic. They require that herbal remedies must be registered – and to obtain registration they must have been in use in the



West for at least 30 years, ten of them within the EU. This neatly knocks out Chinese herbal remedies while trusting European 'folk knowledge'; England's love affair with arnica, for example, can continue unabated. The directive – and this was Sanai's chief complaint – will not require safety testing. Sanai's chief example of why safety testing is needed is the herb kava, which was banned following 70 reports of liver damage. But there are other issues too. Often, as she says, doctors do not know their patients are taking herbal remedies on top of the pharmaceutical drugs they prescribe (16% of medical patients do), and so they can't warn against dangerous interactions even when they're known to exist, such as in the case of St John's Wort.

So, what is a sceptic to do? We can hardly be in favour of eliminating any remedy that actually works; we just want evidence that it does and that it's safe. It looks as though the proposed regime protects the entrenched interests of the companies that produce the alternative remedies while not doing enough to protect consumers.

### They're all out to get you

We were much taken with the news that Britain's leading conspiracy theory at present is that the food supply is being poisoned and the government is covering it up. Why would people believe such a thing? Why do they persist in believing that Diana, Princess of Wales, and JFK were the victims of conspiracies, or that the AIDS virus (and probably SARS now, too) was made in a laboratory and deliberately sent out into the world?

Research presented by Dr Patrick Leman of Royal Holloway, a college of the University of London, to the British Psychological Society, focused on just this question. His sample of 64 students was small, but his results interesting nonetheless. Each student in his group saw one version of four different, fake newspaper clippings recounting the story of the president of a fictitious country: shot and killed, shot and survived, shot missed and survived, shot missed but died shortly afterwards of something else. The worse the consequences to the 'president' the more the students were likely to believe the gunman was part of a conspiracy. The more the participants tended to believe generally in conspiracies, the more likely they were to doubt the facts in the articles.

The principle according to Dr Leman: the bigger the effect, the bigger the cause must have been. So the more dire the consequences for the president, the more likely the incident was to be caused by a conspiracy. We note, though, that there's also another version of this principle that we've seen at work for a long time in the cases of JFK, Elvis, Marilyn Monroe, and Diana. These figures were so much larger than life that many people cannot tolerate the possibility that something as small

and ordinary as a lone gunman, drugs, drug overdose, and drunk driving could take them out.

We wish, though, that someone would figure out what it takes to kill a good conspiracy theory. On the Net, we see it every day: no debunking, no matter how thorough, can keep a good conspiracy theory from resurfacing. And one or another of these things is proved right just often enough to make people believe in all the others.



### Split decision

The Economic and Social Research Council announced in mid-May that over half the British public wrongly believed medical science was split down the middle about the safety of the MMR (measles, mumps, and rubella) vaccine and its potential for causing autism. Naturally, it blamed the media. More precisely, it blamed the media's current style of reporting, which requires that opposing points of view be presented, more or less equally. The ESRC notes that in fact the bulk of the scientific evidence supported the use of the triple vaccine.

Even so: even if you knew that only a few dissenting voices in the scientific community were claiming a link between MMR and autism, what would you choose for your child? The study did not look at the impact of the government's rigid attitudes about giving parents the choice of single vaccines, which arguably fuelled at least some of the media coverage. Tell people what to do – especially when their children are involved – and they get suspicious.

Thanks to this issue's clippings contributors: **Rachel Carthy, Sid Rodrigues, Steuart Campbell, Tom Ruffles, Ernest Jackson, the Wizard's Star List, Skeptic News, 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.

## Skeptic at large . . .

Wendy M Grossman



### Invasion of the spirits

I GUESS THEY just all read the same newspapers because all of a sudden recently it's been non-stop death. I admit I have a statue of the Grim Reaper in my office, but that's got nothing to do with death. I just like the statue. Besides, it's a reminder: get on with it; life is short.

But that doesn't explain the sudden spate of calls from people looking for sceptics to talk about life after death. Of course, first you have to do the speech about how sceptics aren't about saying, "We don't believe in *x*," but about saying, "If you're going to claim *x*, which defies everything we know about biology, chemistry, and physics, you'll have to have really, really good evidence. Do you? And if so, what is it?"

Anyway, one of these events was the spring conference run by INFORM, a group that studies what it likes to call 'new religious movements', a category in which the sceptics are not supposed to qualify. For me, the most interesting speaker was Peter Fenwick, who was not there to talk about his research into near-death experiences. This was the study carried out in Southampton in 2000 that involved 63 resuscitated patients. Of those, 56 had no recollections of their period of unconsciousness. Seven had memories, of whom four passed the criteria known as the Grayson scale for assessing NDEs. Fenwick is also the one who was in the news a couple of years ago for attaching cards to monitors in the emergency room with the idea that patients who left their bodies would be able to read them and, by reporting back what they said, prove that they had done it.

I hadn't realized what an issue it was to prove exactly when NDEs happened, but duh, if the experience happens while the patient is showing brain activity there's no story. But I couldn't make head or tail of Fenwick's reasoning, which seemed to be based on the notion that it was impossible for the patient to form a persistent memory of the NDE while losing consciousness or while regaining it. Why not? We remember auditory and visual hallucinations when we're waking up from sleep and our brain is confused. The neuroscientist Terry Hines, author of my favorite general sceptical book, *Pseudoscience and the Paranormal*, newly released in a second edition with new material, fortuitously agreed with me. For one thing, "flatline is kind of a misnomer," he said. "The EEG isn't completely flat, and even if it were, that doesn't mean that the brain is not generating action potentials. We don't know exactly what the state of the hippocampus [the area of the brain responsible for memory, learning, and emotion] is during the flatline state, but you could do experiments on animals."

It seems, however, that what's really got everyone in life-after-death circles excited is new research in Glasgow conducted by Archie Roy that is claimed to show mediums can do more than just give us a banal message from Aunt Bea about how much she misses us. We're still waiting for the full write-up, but Roy has said in media reports that the tests were conducted using double-blind techniques, involved seating mediums and subjects in different rooms to avoid physical cuing, and have been statistically analysed. Of course, you can use good tools to arrive at faulty conclusions, so as good sceptics we'll have to wait to see the detailed description of how the research was conducted before commenting, and also wait for someone to replicate the results.

In the meantime, though, at least one of Roy's mediums, Gordon Smith, has been happily giving interviews to the Scottish press to explain how it all works. Like radio waves, apparently. Which makes you wonder: wireless Internet and mobile phone connections are one of the hot growth industries at the moment. If these mediums can channel frequencies, why don't they get into the secured data transmission business? In the dot-com boom, they'd have been able to sell that easily as a business plan and walk away with some tens of millions of dollars. I know mediums are all good folks who want to help people rather than make money for themselves – but that sort of money would sure let them help a lot more people.

But I really wonder how many people, in the search for comfort against the thought of facing the Great Void without their loved ones at the end of their lives, have really thought through this life-after-death business. Imagine the non-stop questions from your long-deceased great-grandfather Leo who died of Alzheimer's every time you started up your computer. "What's that?" "It's a computer, Grampa Leo." "What does it do?" "It types, and it adds up numbers, and it goes on the Internet." "What do you mean 'types'?" You'd never get any work done. And then there'd be all the moderating you'd have to do between your great-grandfather, who has a hot investment tip about a new buggy whip company, your grandfather, who says forget buggy whips, buggy whips are dead, you want to invest in this great zeppelin company, and your spouse, who wants to know why you're spending all your time in your study yelling to yourself, and could you please get your long-dead Aunt Myrtle to stop telling her to cut the ham in half because these days ovens are big enough to cook the whole thing.

See what scepticism can do for you? Peace, it's wonderful.



**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 3: Unseen Staring Detection and ESP in Pets

David Marks concludes his three-part critical review of parapsychology

## Ability to detect unseen staring

RUPERT SHELDRAKE (1994) proposed an 'Alice through the looking-glass' vision of things that might be so but probably are not. Sheldrake advocates the collective participation of non-scientists who have the "freedom to explore new areas of research." Sheldrake has a radically new theory of perception. We do not see images of things inside our brains; the images may be outside us: "Vision may involve a two-way process, an inward movement of light and an outward projection of mental images." Imagine, for example, that as you read this page rays of light are travelling from the paper and print in front of you, into your eyes, and from there into the visual processing centres in your brain. At the same time that this is happening, Sheldrake suggests, images and perceptions are being projected outwards through your eyes into the world, ending up exactly where the page and print are.

This process of outward projection of images has some interesting implications. If our minds reach out and 'touch' what we look at, then we may affect what we look at. For example, when we stare at somebody from behind they may be able to feel that we are staring on the back of their neck. This feeling of being stared at is of strain and pressure from skin, muscle, tendon and joint. The psychologist Titchener (1898) reported the phenomenon over a century ago and described the feeling as "a state of unpleasant tingling, which gathers in volume and intensity until a movement which shall relieve it becomes inevitable" (p. 895). More recently, Colwell, Schroeder & Sladen (2000) have reviewed the literature on psychic staring and carried out some empirical tests. The idea that 'unseen' staring can be detected has been apparently supported in some research with incidence rates as high as 68-86% (Coover, 1913), 74% (Williams, 1983) and 92% (Braud, Shafer, & Andrews, 1993). Titchener rejected the idea that the staring effect was based on telepathy and suggested the hypothesis that the eye is attracted to movement and the starrer's gaze is therefore attracted to the staree's head turning in his direction. Titchener attributed the cause of the feeling of being stared at to the staree, not the starrer, and so the attribution of causality to the starrer is false, a misinterpretation of fact (Colwell *et al.*, 2000).

Sheldrake (1994) has conducted new experiments on the staring phenomenon and encouraged school children and other members of the public to participate in his research programme. Experimental kits can be downloaded from the *New Scientist* web site including an interesting list of 24 supposedly 'random' sequences for use in experimental trials. Sheldrake suggests that each child in a group is tested with a different sequence,

**The fact that starees can guess when staring is occurring at above chance levels demonstrates nothing other than an ability to notice patterns. This is a low-level ability that even a mouse could manage.**

or uses sequences determined by tosses of a coin. The results are being compiled by Sheldrake into a pooled data set. Unfortunately, the sequences used turned out not to be truly random.

A colleague, John Colwell, decided to put the Sheldrake findings to rigorous test under controlled laboratory conditions (Colwell *et al.*, 2000). On the basis of Sheldrake's observations, it was decided to investigate the staring effect both with and without feedback. Colwell's team carried out two experiments. The results of the first experiment suggested that the participants in the staring research are able to score above chance as a consequence of being able to learn the non-random patterns in the sequences using the feedback. This idea receives support from the literature on 'implicit learning' which suggests that the learning can take place incidentally without conscious awareness (Reber, 1989). There is a huge literature on 'probability learning' that suggests people are very good at learning the global and local probabilities in the patterning of events (e.g., Servan-Schreiber & Anderson, 1990). The tendency of the participants to show negative recency by avoiding multiple repetitions was well matched by Sheldrake's sequences that showed exactly the same property. The fact that starees can guess when staring is occurring at above chance levels therefore demonstrates

nothing other than an ability to notice patterns. This is a low-level ability that even a mouse could manage.

John Colwell and his team repeated the experiment with one main difference. They used 10 properly randomised sequences taken from random number tables instead of Sheldrake's non-random sequences. The results of this experiment support the hypothesis that the improvement in accuracy during staring episodes observed in Experiment One was due to pattern learning. When no feedback was provided and pattern learning was blocked (Experiment One, blocks 1-3), no ability to detect staring was observed and also no learning. The data collected by Colwell *et al.* (2000) therefore suggest that there is no evidence of a general ability to detect unseen staring. The only positive results were obtained were in the context of feedback and the non-random sequences generated by Sheldrake.

*Summary:* Sheldrake has made the bold claim that people are able to detect unseen staring at above chance levels. Unfortunately the sequences he has used in his research are completely unsuitable. They follow the same patterning that people who guess and gamble like to follow. These guessing patterns have relatively few long runs and many alternations. The biased nature of Sheldrake's sequences has several unfortunate implications. Firstly, it leads to implicit or explicit pattern learning when feedback is provided but to a lesser extent or not at all otherwise. This fits the results obtained by Sheldrake and by the Colwell team. When the patterns being guessed mirror naturally occurring guessing patterns the results can go above or below chance levels even without feedback. Thus significant results might occur purely from non-random guessing. The evidence reviewed here provides no support to the claim that people can detect unseen staring.

### Pets' ESP ability

Are animals psychic? Since time immemorial human beings have attributed supernatural powers to animals. Cats, dogs, foxes, bats, frogs, toads, turtles, dolphins and birds have all been thought to have such powers at different times and places. The latest example of a long tradition of paranormal claims on behalf of our animal

friends is the 'psychic pet'. For example, a pet dog is claimed to be able to use psychic powers to detect when its owner is returning home. This has been the subject of Rupert Sheldrake's (1999) *Dogs That Know When Their Owners Are Coming Home*. Sheldrake believes that a dog called Jaytee (JT) uses its 'sixth sense' of telepathy to determine its owner's decision to return home.

According to Sheldrake, many pet owners claim the ability in their pets to know when a member of the

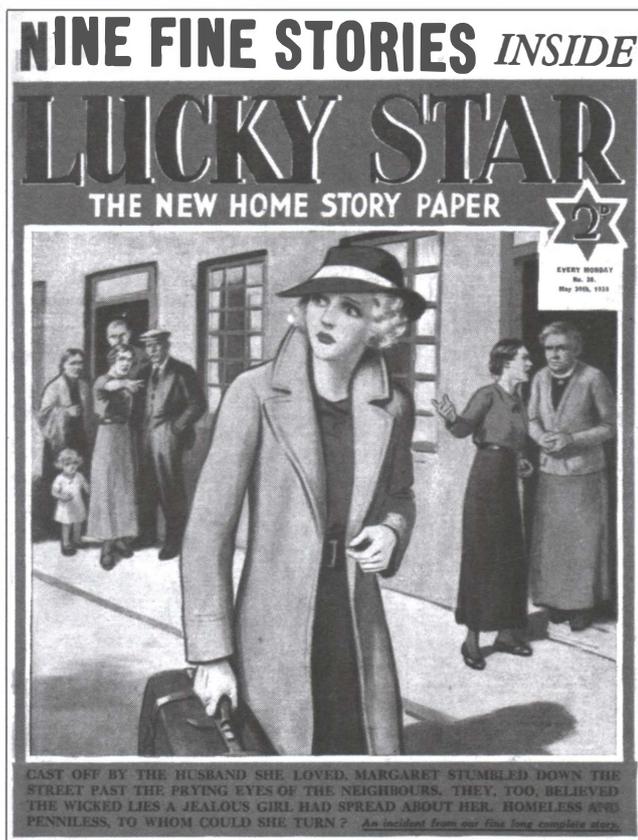


*Rupert Sheldrake: Visionary?*

household is about to come home. The dog goes and waits for the owner at a door or window, in a driveway, or even at a bus stop. Sheldrake has conducted three random household surveys in Britain and the United States that indicate that 45 to 52 percent of dog owners have noticed this behaviour (Sheldrake & Smart, 1997; Sheldrake, Turney, & Lawlor, 1998; Brown & Sheldrake, 1998). In over three-quarters of such cases the psychic anticipation is specific to the person to whom the dog is most closely attached (Sheldrake, 1999). Dog owners often refer to this ability as a 'sixth sense', or as telepathy.

Pamela Smart (PS), JT's owner, volunteered to participate in some research. Sheldrake claims that on 100 different occasions between May 1994 and February 1995 when she left JT with her parents and went out, 85 times JT reacted by going to the window before PS returned, usually at least 10 minutes in advance of PS's decision to set off for home. The anticipatory behaviour occurred regardless of distance or vehicle used. However, as Sheldrake acknowledges, the 'anticipatory signalling' behaviour of JT could have been cued by the

expectations of PS's parents, William and Muriel, as they consciously or unconsciously cued JT that PS would be home soon. It was necessary to conduct trials in which PS set off for home at randomly selected times that were unknown to William and Muriel.



*Ever felt like you were being stared at?*

The story took an interesting twist in 1995 when Rupert Sheldrake (RS) invited Richard Wiseman to investigate JT (Wiseman, Smith, & Milton, 1998). Richard Wiseman's team proposed eight normal explanations for the 'psychic pet' phenomenon that controlled studies would need to take into account: responding to routine; sensory cueing from the owner; sensory cueing from the people remaining with the pet; selective memory; multiple guesses; multiple return points; misremembering; and selective matching.

Wiseman *et al.* (1998) conducted four studies with the full co-operation of PS and RS based on the above safeguards and precautions. In none of these studies did JT detect accurately when PS set off to return home. If this pet dog had any psychic ability at all, it did not appear in this study.

Rupert Sheldrake (1999) reports a series of observations carried out in a pre-planned series of 12 'experiments' in which JT's behaviour was recorded throughout PS's absences on time-recorded videotape. In these trials PS came home at randomly selected times that were not known to PS in advance. A third

party (usually RS) selected the return time and bleeped PS on a pager.

The resulting observations were analysed in two ways. First, by plotting the percentage of time that JT spent by the window for three periods:

1. The first ten minutes following the bleep: 55%
2. The 10 minute period prior to PS's return: 23%
3. The main period when PS was absent prior to the pre-return period that varied between 110 and 150 minutes: 4%.

It would be a common sense interpretation of Sheldrake's data to assume that JT could learn the timing of PS's returns. This is exactly what happens. The results of Sheldrake's tests are therefore not convincing. Why Sheldrake chose to use a pre-arranged bleep period that started between 80 and 170 minutes after PS had left is unclear. This restricted range for the bleep means that the return is more predictable. A colleague, John Colwell, estimated the return periods following the bleep by examining Sheldrake's plots of the data. He found that PS always returned within a period of 110–200 minutes following her departure, 10 of the returns (83%) occurring during a 40 minute period between 120 and 160 minutes after departure. This means that JT may have learned when PS could be expected home and signalled accordingly. This hypothesis assumes no psychic powers, only the power of memory. The procedures used by Wiseman had allowed the return to occur at any time following PS's departure. This procedure stopped JT from learning a simple routine based on timing similar to the situation that pertained when PS had followed a daily routine of reliable departures and returns.

*Summary:* Observations by Wiseman *et al.* (1998) of JT over four periods when its owner, PS, was away from home found no evidence of psychic powers. These findings are in stark contrast to the claims of RS and PS that JT has a strong psychic ability to signal its owner's decision to return home. It has been concluded that JT's expectancies are probably based on learning rather than psychic powers. There are many other dogs and other species yet to be tested (cats, parrots, horses etc), in many more settings, with many more owners and many more procedures. A final verdict on 'psychic pets' will have to wait until all of these possibilities have been tested. Currently, apart from the anecdotes of thousands of pet owners, and Sheldrake's claim to have verified them, there is no solid evidence to support the psychic pet hypothesis. However, like the other claims, this is not a claim that will stop being made simply because science cannot confirm it. Paranormal beliefs have a life of their own, independent of objective facts.

### The genesis of P Theory

In the four examples of exceptional experience (EE) discussed in the two previous parts of this article and above, a normal or 'N'-theory interpretation (NIE) has proved to be a perfectly adequate explanation making any form of paranormal or 'P'-theory interpretation (PIE) redundant or superfluous. This rather pessimistic conclusion about the validity of PIEs is not purely a negative exercise, however. Psychological and statistical studies of EEs have yielded an interesting account of how the everyday operation of the processes of attention, perception and decision-making promote PIE-thinking even when the alternative and more rational

**The resources for scientific research are finite and it is a sensible strategy to target urgent and serious problems. This would be a wiser investment than further studies of relatively trivial phenomena such as ESP.**

NIE-thinking can do perfectly well with the same experiential data. These analyses have revealed processes that make the genesis and high prevalence of PIEs understandable from a psychological viewpoint.

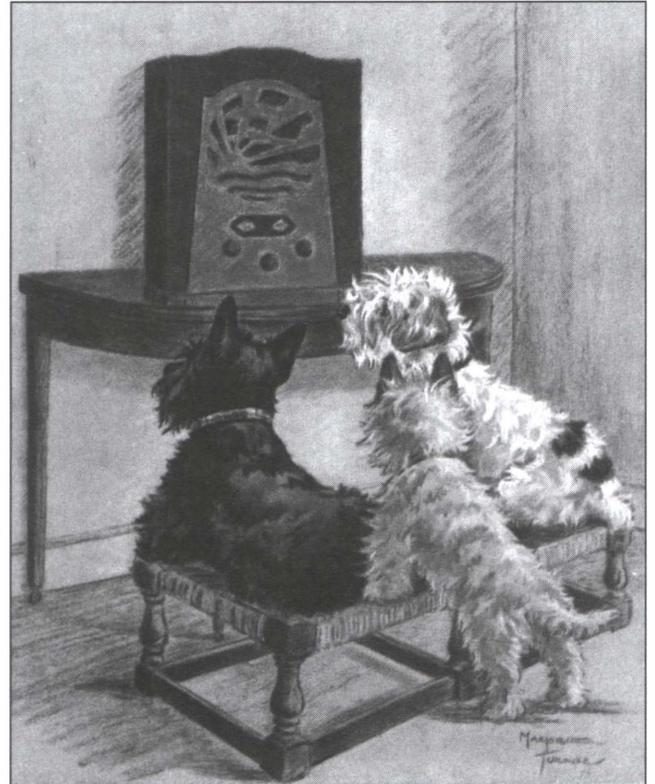
*Subjective validation:* This is a powerful effect of belief and selective attention. Subjective validation occurs when support for one's beliefs is found in a piece of evidence independent of any objective support. This process is also known as 'confirmation bias'.

*Coincidences as 'odd matches':* Another psychological mechanism is the compelling and widespread tendency to believe that coincidences cannot occur purely by chance. An 'odd match' is an association between two events that appears to lack a causal explanation. Kammann and I (Marks & Kammann, 1980) referred to the belief that such odd matches cannot arise by chance as Koestler's Fallacy, after the most famous of its proponents (Koestler, 1972). In fact, odd matches can and do occur by chance. 'One-in-a-million' odd matches occur with a probability of precisely one in a million. The problem is that you and I are unaware of the million-minus-one combinations that do not strike us as vivid odd matches.

The principle of the odd match can be illustrated by considering odd matches in everyday events. Assume that at the end of an ordinary day a person can recall 100 distinct events. This gives 4,950 pairs of events. In 10 years and 1,000 people we have 18 billion pairs of

events. This generates 18,000 'one-in-a-million' events, some of which will be very striking.

The numbers of 'one-in-a-million' experiences over the entire human population become impressively large. From the statistical viewpoint, it is inevitable that



*Experiments on animal ESP must ensure that all normal means of communication have been excluded ...*

these experiences happen. From a psychological viewpoint, it is equally inevitable that the individuals concerned will have difficulty dealing with the experience without a fatalistic or paranormal interpretation. If a few exceptional experiences inspire their authors to write about them in their full paranormal regalia (e.g. Koestler, 1972), we have discovered the genesis of parapsychology itself. The reason parapsychologists continue to work in their chosen field is not the often disappointing results they obtain from their formal studies, but their compelling personal experiences that have a PIE attached.

### USP, not ESP

By USP, I refer to 'Urgent and Serious Problems'. The resources for scientific research are finite and it is a sensible strategy to target urgent and serious problems. This would be a wiser investment than further studies of relatively trivial phenomena such as ESP. Five examples of USP are: the endangerment of global life support systems and the possible impact on human survival; population growth; non-sustainable consumption of energy; poverty; and the rapidly increasing

prevalence of Alzheimer's disease. There are plenty of others – please add your own topics to the list and think how your own work can target one or more of these problems. Parapsychologists, this is your wake-up call.

In conclusion, NIEs are consistent with the evidence – PIEs are not. If we wait another thousand years, ESP and other paranormal phenomena will remain as elusive, evanescent and evasive as ever before. More research is needed on USP.

empirical tests. *British Journal of Psychology*, 91, 71–85.

Coover, J. E. (1913). The feeling of being stared at. *American Journal of Psychology*, 24, 570–575.

Koestler, A. (1972). *The Roots of Coincidence*. London: Hutchinson.

Marks, D., & Kammann, R. (1980). *The Psychology of the Psychic*. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus.

Reber, A. S. (1989). Implicit learning and tacit knowledge. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 118, 219–235.

Servan-Schreiber, E., & Anderson, J. R. (1990). Learning artificial grammars with competitive chunking. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory and Cognition*, 16, 592–608.

Sheldrake, R. (1994). *Seven Experiments That Could Change the World*. Fourth Estate: London.

Sheldrake, R. (1999). *Dogs That Know When Their Owners Are Coming Home*. London: Hutchinson.

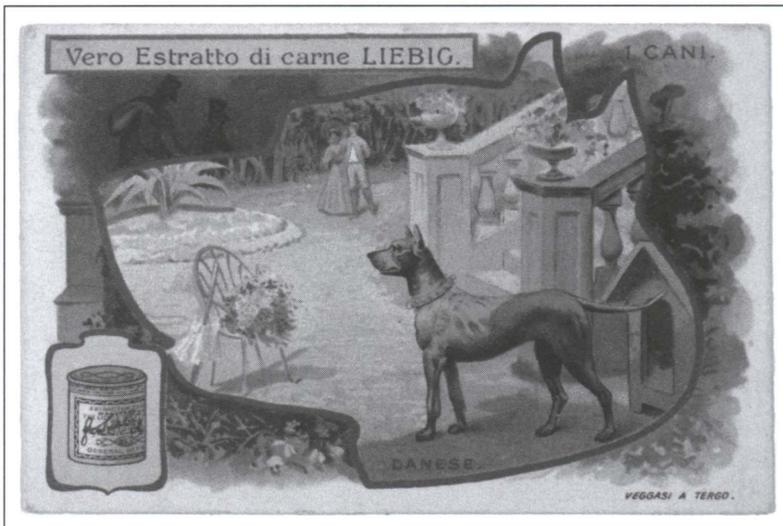
Sheldrake, R., Turney, J., & Lawlor, C. (1998). Perceptive pets: A survey in London. *Biology Forum*, 91, 57–74.

Sheldrake, R., & Smart, P. (1997). Psychic pets: A survey in North-West England. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 61, 353–364.

Titchener, E. B. (1898). The feeling of being stared at. *Science*, 8 (208), 895–897.

Williams, L. (1983). Minimal cue perception of the regard of others: The feeling of being stared at. *Journal of Parapsychology*, 47, 59–60.

Wiseman, R., Smith, M., & Milton, J. (1998). Can animals detect when their owners are returning home? An experimental test of the 'psychic pet' phenomenon. *British Journal of Psychology*, 89, 453–462.



Can pets really tell when their owners are coming home?

## References

Braud, W., Shafer, D., & Andrews, S. (1993). Reactions to unseen gaze (remote attention): A review with new data on autonomic staring detection. *Journal of Parapsychology*, 57, 372–390.

Brown, D. J., & Sheldrake, R. (1998). Perceptive pets: A survey in Northwest California. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 62, 396–406.

Colwell, J., Schroeder, S., & Sladen, D. (2000). The ability to detect unseen staring: A literature review and

**David Marks** is a Professor of Psychology at City University, London. He is author of the sceptical classic *The Psychology of the Psychic* and a CSICOP Fellow.

## 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. You can find out more about the meetings on *The Skeptic* website: <http://www.skeptic.org.uk/pub>. This includes directions and maps to the Old Kings Head pub in Borough, where we meet. Alternatively, please contact Nick Pullar: 07740 450 950, [nickp@coleridge.co.uk](mailto:nickp@coleridge.co.uk). The meeting begins at 7:30 pm and there is a suggested donation of £2.00.

## Skeptical Stats

1. Number of starlings in Putney accurately mimicking the default Ericsson mobile phone ring: **1**
2. Amount of weekly benefit lost by Sue Evan-Jones because government computers can't cope with a hyphenated name: **£190**
3. Number of years by which male Oscar winners are typically older than female winners: **5.3**
4. Number of years by which supporting male Oscar winners are typically older than supporting female winners: **10.1**
5. Legal fees in a custody battle over a divorcing couple's six-pound chihuahua: **£10,000**
6. Number of sheep killed in an attack by 50 to 60 hungry ravens in southern Germany: **19**
7. Amount paid by a Bethlehem, Pennsylvania woman for three magic wands to erase negative thoughts: **\$5,400**
8. Date when Sir Isaac Newton predicted the world would end: **2060**
9. Number of extra Planet Earths it would take to support every person in the world at present US levels of consumption with existing technology: **4**
10. Percentage of US doctorates in physics earned by women: **22**
11. Number of British men who were caught using a child pornography web site that was the subject of international police action: **7,000**
12. Number of pilgrims estimated to have visited Medjugorje since the original apparitions: **22 million**
13. Percentage of Scots who claim to have seen a ghost: **20**
14. Percentage of Scots who say they believe in ghosts, versus percentage in the UK generally: **43/57**
15. Rank of Canada in the list of nations from whom the US imports oil: **1**
16. Number of extra police added in London by Blair's government: **more than 1,000**
17. Percentage by which crime in London went up in 2001: **43**
18. Years before the Queen Mother's death that the *Times* first wrote her obituary: **64**
19. Number of eggs which the new double-speed Egg Master printer made by Imaje UK can brand in an hour: **150,000**
20. Percentage of athletes and teams appearing on the front cover of *Sports Illustrated* who subsequently had bad losses, bad luck, bad injuries, or a premature death: **37.2**
21. Length of time Uri Geller was chairman of Exeter City football club before it lost its Football league status, after 83 years: **1 year**
22. Number of schools the Vardy Foundation plans to build in the north of England to teach creationism rather than evolution: **6**
23. Winning number in the Maryland Lottery on the day Reagan was elected for the first time: **666**
24. Percentage of the world's population who live outside the country of their birth: **2.5**
25. Percentage of the 85,865 applicants for asylum in the UK in 2002 who were refused: **66**

**Sources:** 1 Personal information; 2 *Daily Telegraph*; 3, 4 Terence Hines and Michael Gilberg, *Psychological Reports*; 5 *Sunday Telegraph*; 6 Reuters; 7 ABC News (*WPVI.com*); 8 [http://www.ananova.com/news/story/sm\\_753470.html](http://www.ananova.com/news/story/sm_753470.html); 9 *Scientific American*; 10 *Discover*; 11 *Guardian*; 12 *Sunday Times*; 13, 14 *Edinburgh Evening News* (study carried out by Safeway); 15 *The New Yorker*; 16, 17 *Business Week*; 18 *Harper's*; 19 Imaje press release; 20 *Observer* (study by *Sports Illustrated*); 21 *Mail on Sunday*; 22 *Daily Mail*; 23 *Harper's*; 24 *Scientific American*; 25 *Independent*

Thanks for assistance to Rachel Carthy.

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

# Stupid Sceptic Tricks

Sceptics using unfair arguments? Surely not! **David W Owens** advises his fellow believers on how to avoid being bamboozled by their devious opponents ...

DO YOU EVER get into an argument with a sceptic only to end up exasperated and feeling you've been bamboozled? Sceptics are often highly skilled at tying up opponents in clever verbal knots. Most sceptics are, of course, ordinary, more-or-less honest people who, like the rest of us, are just trying to make the best sense they can of a complicated and often confusing world. Others, however, are merely glib sophists who use specious reasoning to



*Is it time for sceptics to accept that the Easter Bunny really does not exist?*

defend their prejudices or attack the ideas and beliefs of others, and even an honest sceptic can innocently fall into the mistake of employing bad reasoning.

In reading, listening to, and sometimes debating with sceptics over the years, I have found certain tricks, ploys and gimmicks which they tend to use over and over again. Here are some of them. Perhaps if you keep them in mind when arguing with a sceptic, you'll feel better when the debate is over. Shucks, you might even score a point or two.

## Raising the bar (or impossible perfection)

This trick consists of demanding a new, higher and more difficult standard of evidence whenever it looks as if a sceptic's opponent is going to satisfy an old one. Often the sceptic doesn't make it clear exactly what the standards are in the first place. This can be especially effective if the sceptic can keep his opponent from noticing that he is continually changing his standard of evidence. That way, his opponent will eventually give up in exasperation or disgust. Perhaps best of all, if his opponent complains, the sceptic can tag him as a whiner or a bad loser.

Sceptic (S): I am willing to consider the psi hypothesis if you will show me some sound evidence.

Opponent (O): There are many thousands of documented reports of incidents that seem to involve psi.

S: That is only anecdotal evidence. You must give me laboratory evidence.

O: Researchers A–Z have conducted experiments that produced results which favour the psi hypothesis.

S: Those experiments are not acceptable because of flaws X, Y, and Z.

O: Researchers B–H and T–W have conducted experiments producing positive results which did not have flaws X, Y, and Z.

S: The positive results are not far enough above chance levels to be truly interesting.

O: Researchers C–F and U–V produced results well above chance levels.

S: Their results were achieved through meta-analysis, which is a highly questionable technique.

O: Meta-analysis is a well-accepted method commonly used in psychology and sociology.

S: Psychology and sociology are social sciences, and their methods can't be considered as reliable as those of hard sciences such as physics and chemistry. Etc., etc. *ad nauseum*.

## Sock 'em with Occam

Sceptics frequently invoke Occam's Razor as if the Razor automatically validates their position. Occam's Razor, a principle of epistemology (knowledge theory), states that the simplest explanation which fits all the facts is to be preferred – or, to state it another way, entities are not to be multiplied needlessly. The Razor is a useful and even necessary principle, but it is largely useless if the facts themselves are not generally agreed upon in the first place.

### Extraordinary claims

Extraordinary claims, says the sceptic, require extraordinary evidence. Superficially this seems reasonable enough. However, extraordinariness, like beauty, is very much in the eye of the beholder. Some claims, of course, would seem extraordinary to almost anyone (e.g. the claim that aliens from Alpha Centauri had contacted you telepathically and informed you that the people of Earth must make you their absolute lord and ruler). The 'extraordinariness' of many other claims, however, is at best arguable, and it is not at all obvious that unusually strong evidence is necessary to support them. For example, so many people who would ordinarily be considered reliable witnesses have reported precognitive dreams that it becomes difficult to insist these are 'unusual' claims requiring 'unusual' evidence. Quite ordinary standards of evidence will do.

### Stupid, crazy liars

This trick consists of simple slander. Anyone who reports anything which displeases the sceptic will be accused of incompetence, mental illness or dishonesty, or some combination of the three, without a single shred of fact to support the accusations. When Charles Honorton's *ganzfeld* experiments produced impressive results in favour of the psi hypothesis, sceptics accused him of suppressing or not publishing the results of failed experiments. No definite facts supporting the charge ever emerged. Moreover, the experiments were extremely time-consuming, and the number of failed, unpublished experiments necessary to make the number of successful, published experiments significant would have been quite high, so it is extremely unlikely that Honorton's results could have been due to selective reporting. Yet sceptics still sometimes repeat this accusation.

### The Santa Claus gambit

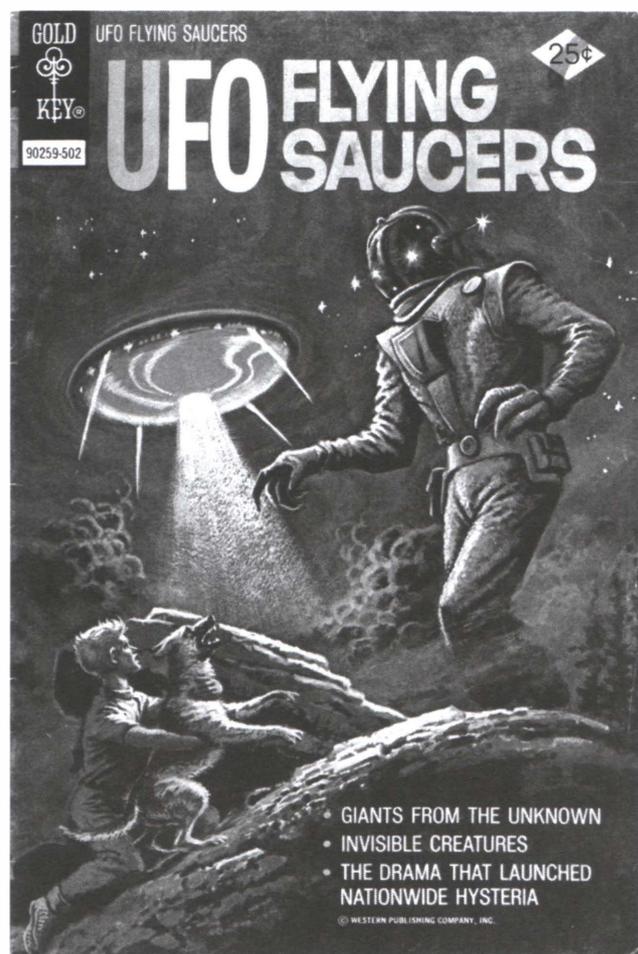
This trick consists of lumping moderate claims or propositions together with extreme ones. If you suggest, for example, that Sasquatch can't be completely ruled out from the available evidence, the sceptic will then facetiously suggest that Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny can't be 'completely' ruled out either.

### Shifting the burden of evidence

The sceptic insists that he doesn't have to provide evidence and arguments to support his side of the argument because he isn't asserting a claim, he is merely denying or doubting yours. His mistake consists of assuming that a negative claim (asserting that something doesn't exist) is fundamentally different from a positive claim. It isn't. Any definite claim, positive or negative, requires definite support. Merely refuting or arguing against an opponent's position is not enough to establish one's own position. In other words, you can't win by default.

As arch-sceptic Carl Sagan himself said, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. If someone wants to rule out visitations by extra-terrestrial (ET) aliens, it would not be enough to point out that all the evidence presented so far is either seriously flawed or not very strong. It would be necessary to state definite reasons which would make ET visitations either impossible or highly unlikely. (He might, for example, point out that our best understanding of physics pretty much rules out any kind of effective faster-than-light drive.)

The only person exempt from providing definite support is the person who takes a strict 'I don't know' position, or the agnostic position. If someone takes the position that the evidence in favour of ET visitations is



*Do sceptics fail to use evidence and arguments when denying extraterrestrial visitations?*

inadequate but goes no further, he is exempt from further argument (provided, of course, he gives adequate reasons for rejecting the evidence). However, if he wants to go further and insist that it is impossible or highly unlikely that ETs are visiting or have ever visited the Earth, it becomes necessary for him to provide definite reasons for his position. He is no longer entitled merely to argue against his opponent's position.

There is the question of honesty. Someone who claims to take the agnostic position but really takes the position

of definite disbelief is, of course, misrepresenting his views. For example, a sceptic who insists that he merely believes the psi hypothesis is inadequately supported when in fact he believes that the human mind can only acquire information through the physical senses is simply not being honest.

### You can't prove a negative

The sceptic may insist that he is relieved of the burden of evidence and argument because "you can't prove a negative". But you most certainly can prove a negative! When we know one thing to be true, then we also know that whatever flatly contradicts it is untrue. If I want to show that my cat is not in the bedroom, I can prove this by showing that my cat is in the kitchen or outside chasing squirrels. The negative has thus been proved. Or the proposition that the cat is not in the bedroom could be proved by giving the bedroom a good search without finding the cat. The sceptic who says, "Of course I can't prove psi doesn't exist. I don't have to. You can't prove a negative", is simply wrong. To rule something out, definite reasons must be given for ruling it out.

Of course, for practical reasons it often isn't possible to gather the necessary information to prove or disprove a proposition, e.g. it isn't possible to search the entire universe to prove that no intelligent extraterrestrial life exists. This by itself doesn't mean that a case can't be made against the existence of extraterrestrial intelligence, although it does probably mean that the case can't be as air-tight and conclusive as we would like.

### The Big Lie

The sceptic knows that most people will not have the time or inclination to check every claim he makes, so he knows it's a fairly small risk to tell a whopper. He might, for example, insist that none of the laboratory evidence for psi stands up to close scrutiny, or he might insist there have been no cases of UFOs being spotted by reliable observers such as trained military personnel when in fact there are well-documented cases. The average person isn't going to scamper right down to the library to verify this, so the sceptic knows a lot of people are going to accept his statement at face value. This ploy works best when the Big Lie is repeated often and loudly in a confident tone.

### Doubt casting

This trick consists of dwelling on minor or trivial flaws in the evidence, or presenting speculations as to how the evidence might be flawed, as though mere speculation is somehow as damning as actual facts. The assumption here is that any flaw, trivial or even merely speculative, is necessarily fatal and provides sufficient grounds for throwing out the evidence. The sceptic often justifies this with the 'extraordinary evidence' ploy.

In the real world, of course, the evidence for anything is seldom 100% flawless and foolproof. It is almost always possible to find some small shortcoming which can be used as an excuse for tossing out the evidence. If a definite problem can't be found, then the sceptic may simply speculate as to how the evidence *might* be flawed and use his speculations as an excuse to discard the information. For

## Anyone who reports anything which displeases the sceptic will be accused of incompetence, mental illness or dishonesty.

example, the sceptic might point out that the safeguards or controls during one part of a psi experiment weren't quite as tight as they might have been and then insist, without any supporting facts, that the subject(s) and/or the researcher(s) probably cheated because this is the 'simplest' explanation for the results (see "Sock 'em with Occam" and "Extraordinary claims"; "Raising the bar" is also relevant).

### The Sneer

This gimmick is an inversion of "Stupid, crazy liars". In "Stupid, crazy liars", the sceptic attacks the character of those advocating certain ideas or presenting information in the hope of discrediting the information. In "The Sneer", the sceptic attempts to attach a stigma to some idea or claim and implies that anyone advocating that position must have something terribly wrong with him. "Anyone who believes we've been visited by extraterrestrial aliens must be a lunatic, a fool, or a con man. If you believe this, you must be a maniac, a simpleton or a fraud." The object here is to scare others away from a certain position without having to discuss facts.

To be fair, some of these tricks or tactics (such as "The Big Lie", "Doubt casting", and "The Sneer") are often used by believers as well as sceptics. Scientific creationists and holocaust revisionists, for example, are particularly prone to use "Doubt casting". Others ploys, however, such as "Sock 'em with Occam" and "Extraordinary claims", are generally used by sceptics and seldom by others.

Unfortunately, effective debating tactics often involve bad logic, e.g. attacking an opponent's character, appeals to emotion, mockery and facetiousness, loaded definitions, etc. And certainly sceptics are not the only ones who are ever guilty of using manipulative and deceptive debating tactics. Even so, sceptics are just as likely as anyone else to twist their language, logic and facts to win an argument, and keeping these tricks in mind when dealing with sceptics may very well keep you from being bamboozled.

David W Owens is a native Georgian whose family came to Georgia well before the Civil War. He has a bachelor's degree in journalism and works for the state Department of Transportation.



# Domesticating The Beast Of Bodmin

Col C J Harbottle (retired) sends his occasional report from the village of Shawley Knott

FAR BE IT from me to pinprick a balloon of the unexplained, but a recent occurrence in Shawley Knott has driven me to put pen to paper. Even before my enforced retirement from military service, the Beast of Bodmin was receiving a mixed press. Was it a lynx? Or a wolf? Or was it, as our village postmaster supposed, two badgers with ambitions in pantomime? Admittedly, our postmaster often fails to conceal his previous extensive career in variety on Cromer pier, with the result that purchasing a stamp becomes an unnecessary drama, but his comment illustrates the diversity of opinion. To put the question to rest, I am pleased to announce that the Beast of Bodmin is, without doubt, a panther.

One must appreciate that I never intended to solve the mystery. Raylene, whom I've been courting for several years, and who on the South Somerset Bowls Circuit is generally acknowledged as my wife, suggested a picnic. Bodmin on a sunny afternoon seemed a grand idea, and despite a lack of suitable spreads in the cupboard, we drove swiftly through the countryside. To support my recollection, on this particular afternoon I remember that Raylene had selected a pleasant floral frock, while I chose tweed.

Only upon our return did we realise that all was not well. A minor growling had irritated us throughout the homeward journey, and I had blamed the carburettor. However, when I made the sharp right turn towards the village, I realised the true source of our problem.

I looked in the rear view mirror, expecting to see the reassuring perspective of a winding country lane, but instead was rather surprised to catch two bright eyes, disconcertingly offset by large white teeth and a sizeable black feline face. I immediately concluded that a beast was present, and that his mood was potentially aggressive. Had he flattened himself on the rear black mats, he would have been camouflaged, and perhaps docile. He had, however, made himself shockingly evident by selecting the back seat, for which I'd requested the optional 'clansman' tartan interior trim. This beast was clearly in no mood to hide.

With hindsight, he must have slipped into the car unnoticed while we were distracted by the light pastries at around four o'clock that afternoon. I believe true colours are often revealed under stress, and while I don't define Raylene's scream as panicking, let's say I would no longer be comfortable with her presence in, for example, the critical defence of a bridehead. To her credit, she regained her composure rapidly. At my

command she removed the last of the honey-baked ham from the hamper, and slowly passed it to the back of the car.

Frank, as we later christened the beast, was as keen as a teenager on a spring afternoon. Not only did he enjoy the ham, but he soon seemed perfectly at home in front of the open fire at the manor. For a panther, he was remarkably reserved, and, as it was to prove, quite intelligent.

Having finished our baroque conservatory in June, I had a little time to spare, and so commenced an incentive programme by which I endeavoured to teach Frank some basic concepts. Our local butcher, whose joints are still as tender as they were in 1952, provided us with ample meat and bone, and marrow proved marvellously encouraging towards teaching Frank simple mathematics.

In the spirit of democracy, Frank was discussed at length during the last meeting of the village council, but the risks voiced against providing simple freedoms for him were defeated by a majority decision. Only elderly Mrs Paddenham, whose husband had perished in 1936 whilst on safari in Africa, was particularly tearful and unsupportive. For an unimaginative woman, she gave a quite graphic account of what could happen if one turned one's back on a wild animal. Also, to placate Mrs MacPherson, we are obliged to ring the gatehouse bell when Frank leaves our premises, in order that she can usher her children into her house, should she so wish.

As I write, Frank attends to our local shopping needs, and only once has the challenge got the better of him. A particularly confusing two-for-one offer in the grocery store, compounded by the marketing of a clubcard, meant he lashed out. But in practical terms for the victim, it was nothing that a new pair of tights and a few stitches from the paramedic couldn't put right.

Frank has gained a sort of celebrity status in the village, and will have the privilege of opening the summer fête come next July. You're all invited. Raylene is still a tad uneasy, but off the record she's never been good with animals. Psychologically, I think the problem relates to facial hair, cruelly caused by a dietary deficiency in her childhood.

As for the mystery of the Beast of Bodmin, perhaps the conclusion is that an all-night firelit vigil with prying lenses and infra-red technology is no match for clean-cut sandwiches, a light pickle, some quality ham, and a calm disposition..



# A Brief Introduction to Neuro-Linguistic Programming

Widely claimed to be indispensable for anyone who wishes to communicate better, NLP tempted **Martin Parkinson** to enter the jargon-jungle and find out more.

*NLP is the next generation of psychology ... it may be as profound a step forward as the invention of language* (O'Connor & Seymour, 1995).

IT GOES WITHOUT saying (or else why would there be an article in *The Skeptic* about it?) that 'Neuro-Linguistic Programming' is a misnomer. It has nothing to do with neurology or neurolinguistics. The name is sometimes justified by vague gestures towards hemispheric specialisation, and the first book on NLP (*The Structure of Magic I*, Bandler & Grinder, 1975) makes an unconvincing tie-in with transformational grammar (co-founder John Grinder was a student of Chomsky's). 'Programming' is a piece of science-fiction fluff designed to give the impression that human behaviour can be changed as reliably as programming a computer. A more accurate name would be something like 'mind/language/hypnosis games'.

It claims to be a set of techniques ('toolkit' and 'technology' are favoured terms) which will radically improve your work and personal life. It has its origins in an attempt to copy the work of particular psychotherapists who were held (by some) to be so effective that their work seemed to amount to 'magic': hence the title mentioned above. Although it has spread far beyond its roots in 1970s psychotherapy, there is still a specific school of NLP therapy in the UK which is trying to get itself accepted by the NHS (Weaver, 1999).

My initial reaction to NLP was one of frustration because I could see no underlying coherence. It is basically a ragbag of dodges, tricks, and tips: some genuinely helpful, others banal space-fillers. This makes it difficult to cover properly in a short article – for example I do not have the space to examine the place of hypnosis in NLP. However, NLP does propose a fairly scientific psychological model which sheds a glow of plausibility over everything else. It is further claimed that this model can give us a reliable way to understand and influence people (and to manipulate one's own behaviour). NLP is therefore marketed to salesmen, psychotherapists, educators, managers (oops, sorry, I mean 'leaders'), and those seeking self-help advice. Some of the hype is extraordinary: the quote at the head of this article is not unusual (and I would put the authors at the more respectable end of the spectrum – they were at least embarrassed enough to hide that assertion away on p. 205).

There is no single definitive version of NLP, but accounts are broadly consistent. The box contains my summary of NLP theory derived from all materials read, especially Bandler & Grinder (1976 & 1979) and O'Connor & Seymour (1995).

1. Our internal representations (how we experience the present, remember the past and plan the future) show a broad preference for a particular sensory modality (the Preferred/Primary Representation System, or PRS). e.g. one can be a 'visual', 'auditory-', or 'kinaesthetic thinker'. Gustatory and olfactory PRSs are rare.

2. PRS is expressed in language. For example, a visual thinker will tend to say "I *see* what you mean, it *looks* OK ..."; whereas an auditory thinker says "I *hear* what you're saying and it *rings* a bell ...". Overall, a visual thinker will use a greater proportion of words related to seeing, etc.

3. Eye movements during cognition also indicate PRS. These "automatic, unconscious eye movements, or 'eye accessing cues', often accompany particular thought processes, and indicate the access and use of particular representational systems" (Dilts, 1998). For example if a (right-handed?) person is asked to remember the colour of, say, their grandparents' front door, you will see their eyes move up and to the right of the viewer.

(Some authors hold that PRS is also expressed in global body language: for example, an auditory thinker will tend to stand with their head tilted to one side, as if listening)

4. Putting the foregoing points together gives us a straightforward and reliable way to influence people. Deducing a person's PRS using verbal and eye-movement clues and tailoring one's language to it by matching their preferred modality will result in them feeling you're 'on the same wavelength' or 'seeing eye to eye' and hence more amenable to your machinations.

(The word 'rapport' is given a technical meaning within NLP to refer to this pseudo-intimacy. It is held that 'gaining rapport' can also be achieved by mirroring the body language, tone, speed of voice and breathing patterns of one's interlocutor. (See Singer & Lalich, 1996, pp. 173-174 for some examples of this in practice.)

I think NLP theory looks pretty plausible, at first blush. So how testable is it in principle? Presumably brain imaging could tell us something about Point 1, but I am not aware that any relevant work of this kind

has been done – doubtless the NLP people would have told us if it had. In the absence of that, the place to start is Point 2: does most individuals' language-use have clear modality 'winners'? If so, this possibly says something about their internal representations. One might approach Point 3 by first, having established an individual's preferred 'language-modality', looking for a 'preferred eye-movement', and then looking for correspondences across individuals (i.e. most people who prefer the same modality as expressed in language also prefer to move their eyes in the same way as each other). Point 1 would then be an interesting speculative inference drawn from Points 2 and 3. The more I think about this, the more tenuous it seems, and the chain of speculation rests ultimately on an implicit assumption about the transparency of language. However, even if points 2 and 3 could be clearly demonstrated, and Point 1 accepted as a potentially fruitful working hypothesis, Point 4 does not logically follow (maybe if I was a visual thinker I would be more persuadable by *non-visual* language because it would have a forceful freshness for me). Equally, even if Point 4 were independently demonstrated it would provide no support for Points 1, 2, or 3 – language matching might work for quite other reasons.

NLP books contain detailed diagrams linking eye movements to internal states and the claim is sometimes made that one can derive a sure-fire method for telling when someone is lying from this information (e.g. Dilts, 1998). Certainly, it needs no rigorous experiments to demonstrate that language and body language give us detailed information about people's beliefs, intentions, emotions etc. – we 'read minds' in this way all the time and normal social interaction depends on it. Some individuals are clearly better at it than others. It wouldn't be stretching a point to suppose that practice might improve one's 'mind-reading' ability, because practice improves most complex skills and there might indeed be methods of improving 'mind-reading' that work unusually well. However the NLP claim is much stronger than this: in effect it says it has found an infallible 'body-language dictionary'. Has it?

There is a body of experimental research, mostly published in the *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, inves-

tigating the PRS theory. There are two comprehensive reviews of this literature, both published in 1988. The first was in a report by "The Committee on Techniques for the Enhancement of Human Performance" which was commissioned by the US army to examine various techniques including NLP. In addition to reviewing the research literature they talked to co-founder Richard

Bandler. Here are some of their comments:

*"The underpinnings of NLP are not a set of findings and propositions arranged so that they imply the NLP statements of structure; instead, they are a series of concatenated anecdotes and facts that lead to no particular conclusion ..."*

*In brief, the NLP system of eye, posture, tone and language patterns as indexing representational patterns is not derived or derivable from known scientific work" (Druckman & Swets, 1988, pp. 141-142).*

In the UK Dr Michael Heap of Sheffield University and Sheffield Health Authority approached NLP from the angle of its potential therapeutic usefulness. His conclusion was:

*"The present author is satisfied that the assertions of NLP writers concerning representational systems have been objectively and fairly investigated and found to be lacking ... it may well be appropriate now to conclude that there is not, and never has been any substance to the conjecture that people represent their world internally in a preferred mode which may be inferred from their choice of predicates and from their eye movements" (Heap, 1988, p. 275).*

Well, that seems pretty definite. Nonetheless, PRS is presented as established knowledge in books ranging from the serious (McDermott & Jago, 2001) to the silly (Heskell, 2001).

Partway through the American Commission's investigation, they were informed by Richard Bandler:

*"...that PRS was no longer considered an important component. He said that NLP had been revised ... Bandler stated that NLP was a system based on modelling not theory" (Druckman & Swets, 1988, p. 140).*



*Is your Primary Representation System visual ...*



*or auditory?*

It would take too long to give a proper discussion of NLP modelling here. It is sometimes used in a sense in which PRS theory is used to model someone's expertise. But this sense slides into a sense closer to that of 'role model' and it is the looser sense that seems to be most commonly used. This latter sense, as far as I can see, doesn't amount to much more than the most basic of all human learning methods: copying someone else in such a way that one is in effect pretending to be them. This is done unselfconsciously by children and undoubtedly has its uses for adults; NLP is implicitly claiming that it has found some reliable and systematic method of improving this skill, but I am so far unconvinced. (I prefer acting classes myself, but then my adult dignity does not require the reassurance of obfuscatory jargon and a quasi-corporate setting.)

**'Programming' is a piece of science-fiction fluff designed to give the impression that human behaviour can be changed as reliably as programming a computer. A more accurate name would be something like 'mind/language/hypnosis games'.**

I was surprised by the degree of cultural penetration NLP has achieved. It pops up (not always attributed) in all sorts of materials related to communication and management – and just take a look at this gem from the non-commercial *Living NLP* website:

*"Teachers and children at Tyssen School will be able to learn NLP and have their teaching integrated with NLP skills and techniques, and the centre will also provide a resource base for other educators, parents and adult learners.*

*Headmaster Martin Webb, a Master Practitioner in NLP: Ever since he read *Frogs into Princes* he realised how important NLP would be for education. His staff are now looking forward to working with the founders of the NLP Education Network ..."* (The Central London NLP Group, 1999).

This brings me to my final point. So many things about NLP scream that it is just a clever scam: the strident appeal to one's inner toddler (one book is actually called *NLP: The new art & science of getting what you*

*want* (Alder, 1994); Richard Bandler's desperate legal attempts to hog NLP as his intellectual property; the absurd claims of transcendent efficacy; the sheer nastiness of the name itself. Yet there are genuinely intelligent, altruistic and sincere people involved in it who have vowed to use their NLP powers solely for good. It is quite possible, probable even, that people attending training courses do gain some benefits. Tyssen Primary School is in one of the most deprived boroughs in the country, so voluntary help from some keen extra teachers can do it nothing but good. But this does not in itself demonstrate anything about the validity of NLP's theoretical claims. And if the theoretical claims evaporate, what is there to make it stand out from the crowd?

## References

- Alder, H. (1994). *NLP: The new art & science of getting what you want*. London: Piatkus.
- Bandler, R., & Grinder, J. (1975). *The Structure of Magic I*. Palo Alto, California: Science & Behavior Books.
- Bandler, R., & Grinder, J. (1976). *The Structure of Magic II*. Palo Alto, California: Science & Behavior Books.
- Bandler, R., & Grinder, J. (1979). *Frogs into Princes*. London: Eden Grove Editions.
- The Central London NLP Group (1999). *Living NLP The newsletter of the Central London NLP Group. Issue 5 Autumn 1999*. Retrieved 27 October 2002, from <http://www.nlpgroup.freeserve.co.uk/lnlp0005.html>
- Dilts, R. (1998). *Eye Movements and NLP*. Retrieved 27 October 2002, from <http://www.nlp.com/Articles/artic14.htm>
- Druckman, D., & Swets, J.A. (eds.) (1988). *Enhancing Human Performance: Issues, Theories, and Techniques*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Heap, M. (1988). Neurolinguistic Programming – an interim verdict. In M. Heap (ed.), *Hypnosis: current clinical, experimental and forensic practice* (pp. 268–280). London: Croon Helm.
- Heskell, P. (2001). *Flirt Coach. Communication tips for friendship love and professional success*. London: Thorsons.
- McDermott, I., & Jago, W. (2001). *Brief NLP Therapy*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- O'Connor, J., & Seymour, J. (1995). *Introducing NLP. Psychological skills for Understanding and Influencing People*. London: Thorsons.
- Singer, M. T., & Lalich, J. (1996). *"Crazy" Therapies*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Weaver, M. (1999) *July 13th 1999*. Retrieved 27 October 2002 from <http://www.lifetide.co.uk/nlplug-19899/jun9903.htm>

**Martin Parkinson** is the originator of Psycho-Ludemics™, a powerful technique which will make you socially invincible in any situation! Fascinated and inspired by the work of acting guru Keith Johnstone and mould-breaking jazz composer Ornette Coleman, Martin synthesised this central axiom: "Make it up as you go along".

# Rhyme and Reason

Steve Donnelly



## Nothing acts faster...

**MOSTLY I REMAIN** pretty cool when confronted with aspects of pseudoscience and the paranormal but, on occasion, I get madder than hell and go into what I can only describe as ‘rant’ mode. Probably, the single topic that is most likely to get me ranting is that quack therapy beloved of British Royalty, homeopathy. The reason for this is that it is, at the same time, both the most widely accepted complementary therapy and the most preposterous of all such quackeries, iridology and reflexology notwithstanding. The first time I remember nearly ‘losing it’ over this topic was when I had taken part in a TV debate on homeopathy in a Glasgow studio. It must have been June as I had taken a stack of examination scripts with me for marking on the train up north but had had to stop working after a while due to increasing feelings of motion sickness (which doesn’t normally afflict me on trains). Following the presentation of my sceptical views on the healing power of distilled water and the ensuing heated discussion, I was on the station waiting for the train back to Manchester. It seemed a good idea to seek some chemical assistance to avoid any feelings of travel sickness on the return journey to enable me to get some marking done. I, therefore, popped into a small pharmacy in the station and asked them for an anti-motion sickness preparation that would not cause drowsiness. It was only by exerting a Zen-like degree of self-control that I managed to sublimate my anger when I was offered a ‘very effective’ preparation costing (if my memory serves me well) more than £7 – and yes, you have guessed correctly, it was a homeopathic remedy which certainly would have been unlikely to cause drowsiness.

Homeopathy (or homoeopathy) was invented at the end of the 18th century by a German physician, Samuel Hahnemann, on the basis that like will cure like: for instance, if you wish to prevent nausea (due to motion sickness or anything else) then take, in low dilution, a preparation which, when taken in higher dose, causes similar nausea. In this way, homeopathy does not deal with the underlying causes of an illness, only its symptoms. And for all I know, there may be some situations where this approach works – but not when homeopaths are preparing the medicine. Homeopathic remedies are prepared by a process of repeated dilution known as ‘potentisation’ or ‘dynamisation’ in which a quantity of the active ingredient is dissolved in a larger quantity of water which is then shaken (but not stirred). A drop of this is then mixed with a larger quantity of water and

the process repeated a number of times — and this may seem like a perfectly reasonable procedure for preparing a weak solution. However, it rapidly results in ridiculous levels of dilution: for instance, the commonest homeopathic dilution, the 30th centesimal dilution, or 30C, is a dilution of  $10^{-60}$ . This is an astonishing, infinitesimal concentration at which, on average, only a single molecule of the active ingredient will be contained in a volume of water equal to *20,000 times the volume of the sun*. In other words, at least in principle, there will be not a single molecule of the active ingredient in the droplet of water that goes into a homeopathic tablet. To get round this affront to common sense, proponents of homeopathy invoke ‘water memory’ – a purported phenomenon which caused a furore in 1988 when *Nature* published a paper by French scientist Jacques Benveniste claiming to demonstrate its reality. During a subsequent visit by a team consisting of *Nature* editor John Maddox, James ‘the Amazing’ Randi and Walter Stewart of the National Institutes of Health, the French researchers were unable to reproduce their results and a second article soon appeared in *Nature*, this time by the editor, entitled *High-dilution experiments a delusion*.

But it does not require the findings of a team of sceptical investigators to force us to the conclusion that water memory cannot, in any case, provide a mechanism by which homeopathy could operate. If water has a memory then it must suffer from severe amnesia as, in addition to the memory of the active substance, the homeopathic water droplet will also contain molecules (or memories thereof) of everything from Shakespeare’s urine to Napoleon’s last breath. To get round this logical argument, homeopaths argue that the shaking is all important. Clearly, William’s wee-wee will not have been potentised in the prescribed manner and thus will not have entered into the water’s long-term memory. However, when this argument is invoked, it seems to me that homeopathy becomes something belonging more in a Harry Potter movie than in the bathroom cabinets of the British Royal Family and in the prescriptions of one out of four French general practitioners.

Even writing about homeopathy gets me worked up, and as it is now after midnight and I must work tomorrow I would like to calm down before trying to sleep. Looking for a remedy for insomnia on the web, I have discovered one which contains (among other things) homeopathic quantities of coffee. I’m sure that were I to take this with a large pinch of salt it would be most effective . . .

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



## Philosopher's Corner

Julian Baggini

I LIKE TO think of myself as a tolerant kind of chap, not least because I find the idea of being something so quaint as a 'chap' amusing. I don't feel like a militant sceptic, driven by revolutionary zeal to destroy all traces of irrationality in the world. I try to remember that, hey, we're all just fools trying to make our own ways through this confusing and difficult life, and if some of us are helped along the way by the odd comforting myth, I'm not going to try and kick away the crutch.

From time to time, however, I find my tolerance has its limits. Recently I discovered another of them. Travelling on the tube I found a discarded copy of a magazine "for women who want the best possible future". "That's me!" I thought (apart from the woman bit, obviously). And I'm sure that's you too. The problem is that the magazine was *Spirit and Destiny*. Let's call it *Sad* for short.

Because of the laws of libel I have to be very careful what I say about *Sad*. Let me just say that I find it hard to imagine a more pernicious collection of nonsense. Lawyers note that it is my own imagination rather than *Sad* which may be at fault here.

The front cover says it all. The lead item is "Organic food makes you slim!" Given that the article itself only claims that the "chemicals added to conventional food slow down our metabolism" this is an overstatement to say the least. But that piece was downright sensible in comparison with the rest. The cover also promised "12 loved-up pages" of horoscopes, to "unlock your star sign sensuality" and "8 in-depth pages" on Chinese astrology.

I find it odd that people buy into both sun sign and Chinese astrology. After all, people exist in all possible combinations of the two signs – a Virgo monkey, for example. Yet if any one personality type is compatible with any other, their characterisations must be so thin as to be totally uninformative. The dog, for example, is loyal. So anyone of any sun sign born in the year of the dog is 'loyal'. Yet loyalty is also supposedly a distinctive trait of a specific sun sign (Taurus, apparently). Doesn't this at least incline people to pause?

But I digress, for the worst of *Sad* is yet to come. "My psychic gift found me love" the cover screams, along with the news of a Patsy Palmer exclusive: "The voices in my head saved my life." Plus, there's "luck boosters, white magic, psychic school" and "love charms".

I found myself audibly sucking in my breath, tutting and making other such disparaging noises as I flicked through this melange of mush. But why the strong reaction, if I am really am the 'tolerant chap' I imagine myself to be?

I think two things really bother me about *Sad*. The first is that its extreme pick and mix approach is intellectually offensive. Anything can appear in these pages, just as long as it's baloney – sorry – 'alternative'. So, you have a resident witch called Silja, psychics, colourpuncturists (no kidding), homoeopaths, kinesiologists, crop circles and so on. Even if you believe in one of these, why on earth does that give you a reason to believe the others? Why should the supposed efficacy of homeopathy give you any reason to suppose colourpuncture is a good idea? The indiscriminate consumption of all things alternative, with no regard to the fact that they all operate according to different, incompatible paradigms, requires an astonishing suspension of critical faculties which seems to be depressingly common.

The second cause for despair is that this is a glossy, mainstream title published by Bauer, who are responsible for other top selling titles such as *Bella*, *TV Quick*, *Take a Break* and *Real*. New age nonsense is no longer safely caged up in 'health food stores' (which oddly enough are usually lacking in fresh fruit and vegetables but have rows and rows of dried preparations and things in bottles). It's out there in the mainstream.

Which reminds me of another bugbear: the Barefoot Doctor. This "teacher of all things Tao" turns up in *Sad*, but also has a regular column in the *Observer* magazine. Even our favourite quality Sunday newspapers are playing the sucker by giving succour to these new-agers. Barefoot Doctor makes me wince every time I hastily flick past his column. I sometimes feel like starting a campaign: Barefoot Doctor must hit the journalistic highway, shoes or no shoes.

Now I come to think of it, for a tolerant chap I do seem to get easily irritated. Perhaps it's time I saw myself in terms of another quaint old word: the curmudgeon. It seems my tolerant chap days are behind me.

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

Julian Baggini is editor of *The Philosophers' Magazine* ([www.philosophers.co.uk](http://www.philosophers.co.uk)) and author of *Making Sense: Philosophy Behind the Headlines* (Oxford University Press). See [www.julianbaggini.com](http://www.julianbaggini.com).

## ASKE News

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



### 11th European Skeptics Congress

FURTHER TO MY progress report on the Congress in the last issue, I am happy to say that all is proceeding well. The Congress programme begins on the afternoon of Friday September 5th with the symposium on 'Science, Health and Medicine', with Edzard Ernst as the keynote speaker on alternative medicine. Saturday is devoted to Parapsychology and Anomalistic Psychology with keynote addresses by Robert Morris (discussant Ray Hyman) and Chris French, and a mini-symposium on 'Science on the Defensive' after the afternoon tea break (including a presentation by Paul Kurtz). The Sunday morning programme will consist of miscellaneous papers.

While formal talks and discussions form the main programme, it is a good idea to have some choice at the Congress by holding parallel 'fringe' events. I envisage these as being relatively informal with greater audience participation than in the main programme. For example, Tony Youens is considering presenting a short workshop on 'The Art of Cold Reading'. I would be pleased to hear from anyone who is planning to attend the Congress and is interested in organising some kind of 'fringe' event of this kind.

Two final points: readers who would like to come to just part of the Congress will be able to pay a registration fee on a *pro rata* basis. (It will be possible to register on the day.) Secondly, all those registering for the full Congress are able to subscribe to *The Skeptic* at a slightly reduced (by £3) fee. Registrants who are already subscribers will receive a £3 voucher at the Congress to supplement their next subscription.

### The 'Skeptical Intelligencer', 2003

The 2003 issue of the 'Skeptical Intelligencer' will come out at the end of this year. As with the two previous issues, the papers will be devoted to a particular theme. This time the theme will be 'sightings of unusual creatures'. 'Unusual creatures' is to be interpreted broadly, to include unknown or supposedly extinct animals (e.g. Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster); animals in the wrong environment (e.g. the Surrey Puma or the Barnsley Lion (no, I'm not kidding)); magical or mythological creatures (fairies, elves, *etc.*); religious apparitions, such as angels; and extra-terrestrial beings.

I would be pleased to hear from any readers who would like to contribute to this issue. Usually we keep to a minimum unamended papers that have already

appeared elsewhere, but we welcome updated papers and discussion commentaries on papers that have already been published. Book reviews (on the theme of the issue) and humorous articles are also welcome.

### The ASKE Psychic Challenge and the Randi Challenge

The award for the ASKE Psychic Challenge now stands at £12,000. As I mentioned in issue 16.2 of *The Skeptic*, ASKE is also willing to conduct a preliminary test of anyone wishing to take up the Randi challenge. Currently we have someone in London who wishes to demonstrate his ability to dowse for water. Incidentally, the water has to be flowing.

A large-scale investigation of dowsing ability in Munich, reported in 1997 by H.-D. Betz, appeared on the face of it to produce only chance results. However, the author claims that some of the dowsers on some occasions demonstrated better-than-chance detection rates. Jim Enright's analysis of the data (*Skeptical Inquirer*, January – February 1999) suggests that these significant findings arose simply through the selection of positive data and rejection of negative data.

Whatever the case, if only one person is able to demonstrate unequivocally, under properly controlled conditions, that he or she can detect the targeted substance at a level consistently better than chance, then it is very difficult to dismiss the claim that there is a phenomenon that is yet to be explained by science. We would be interested in hearing from anyone willing to participate in a test of this person's ability (or that of any other dowser). Also we would be grateful if readers who know or encounter anyone claiming to possess paranormal gifts would alert him or her to the ASKE challenges.

### ASKE and Complaints by the Public

ASKE would like to hear from anyone who has had a bad experience at the hands of people claiming paranormal powers, including psychics. On the ASKE website ([www.aske.org.uk](http://www.aske.org.uk) or [www.aske.clara.net](http://www.aske.clara.net)) one such complaint is reproduced. I myself have mixed feelings about this (for one thing, if few complaints are forthcoming, then people are entitled to say there is little evidence of harm). However, people who have come off badly should have some sort of forum for publicising their experience and alerting others to the potential for harm, and we welcome such reports.

**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>

# Reviews



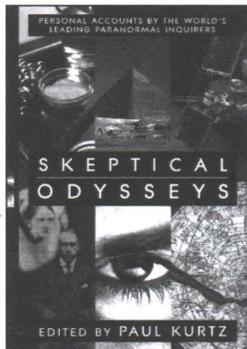
## FINE STYLE

### Skeptical Odysseys: Personal Accounts by the World's Leading Paranormal Inquirers

by Paul Kurtz

Prometheus Books, \$27, ISBN 1573928844

It's almost impossible to summarise this brick of a book briefly. Each newly-written contribution reviews a specific field and/or gives an autobiographical account of the author's journey into scepticism, and they are a galaxy indeed: James Alcock, Steve Allen, Susan Blackmore, Antony Flew, Ken Frazier, Martin Gardner, Philip Klass, Joe Nickell, Gary Posner, Kurtz himself, and 27 others, beginning with 25 years of CSICOP, passing on to sections on specifics – parapsychology, UFOs, astronomy and the space age, astrology, creationism, alternative medicine – going from there to scepticism around the world, personal reflections, and religion, and ending with Robert Baker on *From Scepticism to Humanism*. The book celebrates CSICOP's 25th birthday and does so in fine style.



Ray Ward

## CURING CANCER WITH A SUGAR PILL?

### Placebo: The Belief Effect

by Dylan Evans

HarperCollins Publishers, £16.99, ISBN 000712612 3

“Placebos are treatments that only work if you believe in them.” My belief in accepting the merits of this book before a full reading was akin to placebo. I was enthralled by the topic before learning of its historical precedent in the words of Chaucer, before being given a critical account of the early research by the anaesthetist Beecher in the 1950s, and before smiling at stories of its ignorant adoption by alternative therapy communities.

Whatever placebo was at work in my enthrallment initially subsided, only to be replaced by the wealth of fascinating information and detail provided by Dylan Evans. Vocal sceptics are frequently guilty of dismissing various therapies, citing ‘placebo’ as their reason. What makes this book truly fascinating is its consistent critical dismissal of not only such therapies, but even the most

compelling placebo research. Some of the early work by Beecher (famous for replacing morphine with saline for wounded WWII soldiers), and his Harvard colleagues, has entered into medical folk-lore as the benchmark and starting point for serious research into the area. Evans directs disapproval at several often-cited ‘placebo-drug’ studies for their low standards of methodology when compared with the testing of real drugs.

The reader is taken on a course of enlightening treatments to cure us of our misperceptions. From studies and anecdotal reports through to compelling success stories, ‘nocebos’ (the ‘bad’ side of placebos) and hypothetical examples, Evans steers our thinking to a final, quite simple conclusion. The power of the mind in curing all ills, as regularly touted by various alternative health practitioners, is not the only effect taking place. The ‘Belief Effect’ is the essential component in placebos working. Anything else and it's like trying to cure cancer with a sugar pill! Read this book – it'll make you better, I promise.

Ciarán James O'Keeffe

## QUACK TO THE FUTURE

### Bad Medicine: Misconceptions and Misuses Revealed, from Distance Healing to Vitamin O

by Christopher Wanjek

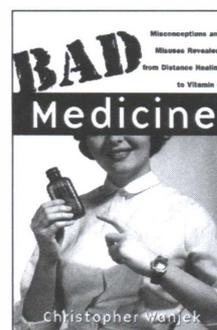
Wiley & Sons, \$15.95, ISBN 047143499X

In this enjoyable history of quackery, Christopher Wanjek discusses bad medicine across the centuries, from Ayurveda to Atkins.

He makes a strong and heartfelt case against the current rush to the witch doctor, discussing several telling examples including the widespread use of homoeopathy, the rejection of MMR vaccination and the American craze for shark cartilage supplements.

The first section of the book is a concise and entertaining history of folklore medicine, with colourful descriptions of past plagues as a reminder of how unsuccessful it generally was.

The tone is lively and journalistic, bordering on gratifyingly chatty (“Let's cut the ancients a break”) – but some background knowledge is assumed, which could be confusing for certain readers. For example, Wanjek rightly stresses the importance of randomised, double-blind, placebo-controlled medical trials, but never



defines these terms or explains why such safeguards are necessary against error and wishful thinking.

Each chapter is an interesting essay in its own right, sometimes at the expense of the whole book's coherence. The section on bad medicine in the movies, for example, doesn't contribute much to the main argument (although it's highly amusing and will allow you to bore your friends witless at any action flick).

Wanjek occasionally falls into the 'bad medicine' trap himself. An otherwise excellent chapter on lifestyle and obesity contains an inaccurate account of the supposed long-term effects of dieting on metabolism. More dangerously, he denounces chemotherapy as "the bloodletting of the 20<sup>th</sup> century", as if an unpleasant treatment were equivalent to a worthless one.

This approachable and well-written case against bad medicine has much to recommend it. If you're sick of health scares, its realistic assessments of the dangers of sedentary lard-eating, antibiotic overuse, and not fastening your seatbelt are a dose of sanity.

Louise Johnson

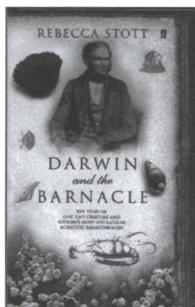
## DARWIN'S DISTRACTIONS

### *Darwin and the Barnacle*

by Rebecca Stott

Faber, £14.99, ISBN 0571209661

What happens when someone brought up as a strict Christian fundamentalist abandons her faith and writes a book about Darwin? Not as much as you might imagine. As the title indicates, *Darwin and the Barnacle* resolutely avoids controversy by concentrating on Darwin's obsession with this humble sea-creature.



Every student has heard the cliché that Darwin concentrated on barnacles to avoid finishing his work on human evolution. Stott emphasizes that Darwin's barnacle studies contributed to the development of his evolutionary theories, enabling him to refine his scientific methodology, and making him a respected member of the scientific community.

Stott sheds some interesting light on the idiosyncrasies of Darwin's colleagues and predecessors. Anyone who thinks their own life is boring should compare it with that of early nineteenth century biologist Robert Grant, who spent five years obsessively studying and dissecting sea-sponges before proudly announcing that he had watched a sea-sponge excrete continually for five hours.

Victorian medicine could be equally bizarre. Darwin underwent the 'water cure' invented by Dr Gully (who later became notorious as a result of the Bravo poisoning case). This involved clairvoyance, mesmerism and several weeks of such strange rituals as being wrapped in

cold wet bedsheets for hours on end. It must have done Darwin some good. While in Gully's Malvern nursing home, separated from his beloved barnacles, he fathered his seventh child.

Darwin's barnacles took over his life for many years. Stott does her best to account for this, and to interest the reader in Darwin's obsession. *Darwin and the Barnacle* is scholarly, well-researched and highly readable – which is more than can be said for many recent academic tomes. But you have to very interested in either Darwin or barnacles to read it.

Chris Willis

## HOW SCIENCE OVERCAME MYTH AND DOGMA

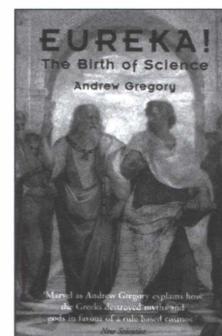
### *EUREKA! The Birth of Science*

by Andrew Gregory

Icon Books UK, £6.99, ISBN 1840463740

Books on philosophy are often encyclopaedic and hard to digest, interesting but boring; those on philosophy of science or on logic even more so. Fortunately, this book suffers none of these faults.

Gregory takes us on a tour from the early beginnings, when the world was explained by myths, to the first people who dared to question those myths and laid the foundations for what today is called science. Myths were rejected and replaced by hypotheses and theories that had to be verifiable. Choosing the best myth is a matter of taste, but then how to decide which is the best hypothesis when several are offered? Gregory describes how the tools to make that difference were developed: logic, and the notions of proof. How may we differentiate them from false proof, false logic and sophism? What made the ancient Greeks unique? Other civilizations, the Babylonians and the Egyptians, also had highly developed technologies but no science. The chapter on Euclid and geometry clearly illustrates the differences between science and technology. All this is exposed in an agreeable narrative style. Why did the Greeks develop science while other cultures stuck to technology? Probably the absence of a strong, organised religion allowed them to question the myths about the creation of the world, the why and the how of natural phenomena, the movement of celestial bodies, the shape of the Earth, the origins of diseases, and to consider different explanations. They could attack claims of magic and distinguish the natural from the supernatural; they even dared to state that magic and the supernatural do not exist, that the world is comprehensible and can be explained in a rational manner. It did not always go unpunished as Socrates experienced. They



were not always right. Sometimes they very understandably took the wrong path, by lack of knowledge. They also gave us holism (Aristotle) and it took some 2,000 years before reductionism gave a new impulse to the advancement of science.

The first chapters give an overview of the evolution in thinking. Then separate chapters go deeper into astronomy and astrology, into medicine and the life sciences, into biology and alchemy.

The great quality of this book is that it reads like a novel and is (yes!) holistic in its approach. Highly recommended.

Willem Betz

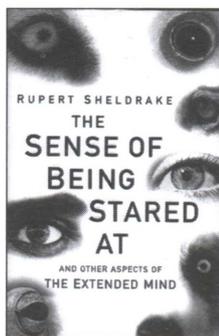
## FARTHER REACHES OF THE MIND

### The Sense of Being Stared at, and other aspects of the extended mind

by Rupert Sheldrake

Hutchinson, £17.99, ISBN 0091794633

This is a book about human and animal experience. It is about animals who know an earthquake is imminent, about dogs who know their owner is coming home, about creatures that know a predator is close, about people who obtain sudden knowledge about a partner's distant accident. And people who sense they are being stared at.



It is not about the paranormal. These experiences are extra-sensory only for those who think in terms of only five senses: for Sheldrake there are six or seven at least, and there is no need to cross over into the supernatural to find them.

The obstacle to research into human experience of any kind is, of course, its subjective character. There is no hard evidence for science to get its teeth into. Sheldrake offers us a sampling from his huge case-files, and his stories are certainly impressive. But are they anything more than coincidence or delusion? Can we really build a science on anthropologists' anecdotes about African witch-doctors, or hunters' experience with their quarry, or animals' restiveness before an earthquake? Even if they are backed by folklore and tradition spanning the globe and going back centuries?

Sheldrake says yes, we can. Some of these experiences – such as the sense of being stared at – are susceptible to experiment. Some 14,000 trials have been conducted, giving odds against chance of the order of  $10^{20}$ . And a theoretical infrastructure can be con-

structed, as Sheldrake demonstrates with his suggestion of the extended mind.

These effects promise breakthrough insights into the interactions between people, between animals, and between people and animals. This is a fascinating and thought-provoking book.

Hilary Evans

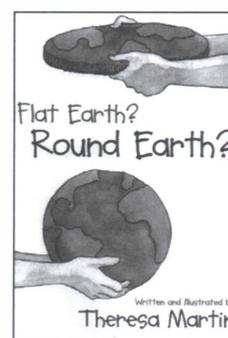
## WHY DEFEND AN IDEA BLINDLY?

### Flat Earth? Round Earth?

by Theresa Martin

Prometheus Books, \$12, ISBN 1573929883

Two schoolboys argue about the shape of the world. The teacher says it's a sphere, but Stan says it is round but flat as a pancake. "Look out the window, see for yourself" is his argument. Nathan sets out to prove to him the teacher is right and the earth truly is a sphere. He uses all the standard observations, round the globe travel, ship sinking below the horizon, time zonation, different shadow lengths, and the shape of the earth's shadow on the lunar eclipse. Stan rejects them all.



It is a book for children "ages 7 and up." Arguments and proofs are appropriately simple, so youngsters can follow. The author's intention is to teach a sceptical attitude, and introduce an understanding of evidence and proof. Stan's objections seem invented for the moment. Tales of global travel are made up, different shadow length are explained by a nearby sun, ships sinking are optical illusions, there may be local curvature of the Kansas plain, and a disk shaped earth will throw a circular shadow. The author's point is that any proof can be denied by *ad hoc* explanations, but scientific knowledge comes from many directions and several lines of evidence. It is the balance of facts which prove the earth a sphere.

The book drives home a single valuable lesson of scientific reasoning, and I think children may like it. They will, however, ask why Stan so stubbornly insists the world is flat? No reason is given. The earth curves only about 8 inches in a mile (about 8 cm in a km), which is not a bad approximation to flat. The only reason I can think of as to why Stan cannot be convinced, but remains stubbornly wedded to a flat earth, is because the Bible says so. The author does not tell us.

Wolf Roder



# LETTERS

## Good luck

The inquest on Donald Campbell has now revealed that he was wearing a necklace holding an image of St Christopher. Enough said?

**Fabain Acker, London**

## Sloppy reporting

In 1994, Christina Hoff Sommers exposed the urban legends feminism has perpetrated on the public in her book *Who Stole Feminism? How Women Have Betrayed Women*, wherein she warned that the media must cease being complicit in ringing false alarms and spreading inaccuracies.

Reporters should ignore, or severely question, any report:

- with highly emotive language;
- with specific policy recommendations or funding demands;
- with a ‘snapshot’ approach rather than data over time;
- with internal and unexplained anomalies or contradictions;
- without collaborating empirical evidence;
- without a statement of parameters, e.g. margin for error;
- without disclosure of researchers’ relevant affiliations;
- which has an unrepresentative or small sampling;
- which does not attempt to verify the accounts;
- which stresses anecdotal accounts,
- which does not independently verify accounts from subjects

Moreover, reporters should stop treating slander as though it was a counter-argument. Thanks to sloppy or politically motivated reporting, a generation has been raised to believe that shouting is

debate, defamation of character is argument, and valid research does not exist.

**Bill Holmes, California**

## Cloning rights

Michael Shermer (*The Los Angeles Times*, 2 January 2003) first tells us that clones should be treated like everyone else, given the “rights and privileges” and “dignity and respect” all humans deserve. Then he writes, “Let’s run the cloning experiment and see what happens”. So let’s get this straight: clones are humans, but they are also the subjects of an “experiment” in which we will “see what happens”? Don’t human beings have the right to choose whether or not they participate in an experiment? If clones are to be granted full human rights, we’d better be sure their creation is more than an “experiment”.

**John Tecumseh, California**

## Keen’s response to Youens

A brave but doomed attempt by Tony Youens (*The Skeptic*, 16.2). His confessedly superficial examination contrasts with the detailed inquiries which Guy Playfair and I made when interviewing both detectives and the medium and examining the original records.

Christine Holohan lived well over two miles away, not ten minutes walk. Her sole inaccuracy was a reference to Saturday instead of Friday as the night of the murder. Whether the experience has ever been repeated is irrelevant to the issue of paranormality, but in fact, according to Batters as well as Holohan herself, it has been.

Ruark had already given the

police a persuasive alibi. He was no longer a suspect when Holohan was interviewed. As for the supposed inability of the medium to provide a clue to what happened to the stolen jewels after the murder: in fact a written clue, considered meaningless at the time, was provided. Details will have to await publication of our full report.

The idea that Holohan had received her information from someone not wishing to inform the police directly is another good idea blown away by the fact that she would have had to receive information from five separate sources who were either unknown to one another, or mutually hostile, and included the murderer himself! The police would hardly have been ignorant of such an elaborate web, had it existed.

The case was reopened in 2000 because another person, not Ruark, had been accused of the murder. Advances in DNA technology enabled Ruark’s discarded pullover, rescued by Detective Batters 18 years earlier, to pin the crime. It was Holohan’s uniquely detailed evidence, plus a spontaneous psychometric ‘reading’ which produced three strikingly accurate pieces of personal information about one of the detectives, that so impressed Batters and prompted him to ransack Ruark’s dustbin and retrieve the fatal garment. Without it the case would have collapsed.

Holohan produced a large number of statements whose accuracy and relevance can not be attributed to any normal function. Premature judgement based on inadequate first-hand knowledge and selective evidence is unwise.

**Montague Keen, London**

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

**The Skeptic** is published quarterly. A year's subscription covers 4 issues. Please make cheques, postal orders (£ Sterling only), credit cards (MasterCard/Visa) payable to The Skeptic.

Postal zone	Sub. (1 year)	Back issue*
– United Kingdom:	£15	£4
– Europe (airmail) or Rest of the world (surface):	£18 (US\$30)	£5 (US\$8)
Rest of the world (airmail):	£30 (US\$48)	£5 (US\$10)

(\*see below for our discount rates for multiple back issues)

From: **The Skeptic**  
**10 Crescent View**  
**Loughton, Essex IG10 4PZ, United Kingdom**



## VOLUME 16 (2003)

- 1 What are we to make of Exceptional Experience? Part 1: Remote Viewing;** Michael Bentine: Behind the Door; Psychoanalysis: Science or Pseudoscience; Coming Soon to an Office near You ...
- 2 What are we to make of Exceptional Experience? Part 2: Ganzfeld Studies;** Life From Non-Life: Must We Accept a Supernatural Explanation?; The Misfit World of Derek Acorah

## VOLUME 15 (2002)

- 1 An Interview with James Randi.** The Missing Airmen; Mrs Gaskell's Elephant; Wild About Harry.
- 2 An Instructive Tale of Ear Candling.** Science/Non science; A Case of Spirits; Do Astrologers have to Believe in Astrology?
- 3 The Psychological Reality of Haunts and Poltergeists: Part 1;** In Search of Monsters? Secrets of Area 51
- 4 The Psychological Reality of Haunts and Poltergeists: Part 2;** Reconsecration: Towards a Secular Church; Myths to Die For

## VOLUME 14 (2001)

- 1 Weird Science at Goldsmiths;** Psychic or Fantasy-Prone?; The Psychology of Psychic Readings; The Enigma of Florence Cook.
- 2 Would We Be Better Off Stupid?** Simon Hoggart's life as a skeptic; The safety of mobile phones; UFO sightings.
- 3 Why Are People Still Threatened by Darwinism?** The paranormal in women's magazines; Reinventing the past.
- 4 Watch Out Alien Big Cats About!** The Sexual Orientation Controversy; Post-Modernism and Parapsychology; Nostradamus Said What?

## VOLUME 13 (2000)

- 1 Satanic Cat Abuse?** The last witchcraft trial; Asking awkward questions; Multiple personality disorder; Careers in pseudoscience.
- 2 Medjugorje Spectacular;** Breatharians; World Peace; Electromagnetism.
- 3/4 (double issue) God on the Brain;** Behind the Red Planet; In search of Nessie; Radio Ga-Ga; The skeptic's dictionary; Fantastic skepticism; What really happened?

## VOLUME 12 (1999)

- 1 Hilary Evans on alien "abductions" (part 1);** Are women more gullible than men?; The Brahan Seer; Feng Shui revisited.
- 2 Rupert Sheldrake on Morphic Fields;** Revisionist historians; Hilary Evans on alien "abductions" (part 2); Biorhythms.
- 3/4 (double issue) Mars: The Mystery Planet;** Radio psychics and cold reading; Searching for the Loch Ness monster; Near-death experiences; the strange astronomy of the Hare Krishnas; Scientists who go off the rails.

## VOLUME 11 (1997/98)

- 1 Psychoanalysis: fact or fiction?** Carl Sagan; The Mars Effect; Sleep paralysis or alien abductions?; Runes and the New Age.
- 2 Organ snatchers: myth or reality?** Genseng; Humanism – the atheist's religion? Regression hypnotism.
- 3 Zeppelin hysteria;** Analysing an 'alien' implant; The Piri Re'is map; Feng Shui foey; In defence of Humanism.
- 4 Does astrology work?** Blue-green algae and truth; An experiment to test a psychic; Spontaneous Human Combustion.

## VOLUME 10 (1996)

- 1 The mystery of self;** Investigating a haunted pub; Why your 'IQ' may be misleading; The Cottingley Fairies; Fraud in Science.
- 2 UFOs today and yesterday;** Testing a guru; How not to get rich quick; Lucid dreaming; Do we only use 10% of our brains?
- 3 Why do people believe in the paranormal?** Investigating Yogananda, the 'incorruptible guru'; Little grey aliens; the media and the pylon scare; Meet a psychic faker.

- 4 Multiple personality disorder: fact or fiction?** The supernatural in detective fiction; The psychology of alien abductions; A critical look at children's books about the paranormal.
- 5/6 (double issue) Music from beyond the grave?** Millennium madness; Smart bombs or stupid people? The Delphic oracle; Meet the Extropians; Penny dreadfuls and video nasties; Psychic con-men; Skeptics choose their favourite books.

## VOLUME 9 (1995)

- 1 Ritual satanic abuse;** How not to win the national lottery; Tesla: eccentric or neglected genius? Psychic surgery in Britain.
- 2 How to become a charlatan • SOLD OUT.**
- 3 Fighting Creation 'Science' • SOLD OUT.**
- 4 The social psychology of healing and therapy;** Quackery; Lies and statistics; Arthur Conan Doyle: unlikely Spiritualist.
- 5 Health-care for your Hi-Fi;** The triumph of alternative therapy; The Age of Aquarius; Spiritualism ancient and modern.
- 6 Is there anyone out there?** Desperately seeking immortality; The myth of the flying saucer; The placebo effect; Patent medicines.

## VOLUME 8 (1994)

- 1 Crop circles: the full story, part 1 • SOLD OUT.**
- 2 The Creation: What really happened? • SOLD OUT.**
- 3 Animal Rights: Science or Pseudoscience?** Vivisection: The case against; Healing Waters: The Flying Saucer Myth.
- 4 Mysterious energies and martial arts • SOLD OUT.**
- 5 Can the hands heal?** Fantastic archaeology; Don't point that comet at me; The Mary Celeste revisited.
- 6 Alternative Medicine Special • SOLD OUT.**

## VOLUME 7 (1993)

- 1 The truth about tarot;** Obituary: Charles Honorton; A healthy dose of sarsaparilla; A test for reincarnations.
- 2 The myths of meditation;** Vicious circles; the Cyril Burt affair; Castaneda; Skepticism, 1895 style; Equine pseudoscience.
- 3 Cold fusion heats up;** Rajnesh; the failed guru; Interview with Susan Blackmore; Meditation; Spirit guides and after images.
- 4 The face on earth;** Neural networks and NDEs; Francis Galton; Cyril Burt reconsidered; The computer conspiracy.
- 5 The mysteries of creativity;** A supernatural IQ?; The Big Bang controversy; Write your own pseudoscience.
- 6 Science and nonsense;** The Mary Celeste 'mystery'; Who's that on the line?; Close encounters of the cult kind.

## VOLUME 6 (1992)

- 1 Paranormal trends in the USSR;** Faking an alien; Where do we file flying saucers?; Psychic questing; Sea-bands.
- 2 Brainwashing a skeptic;** Dianetics; Who invented the Loch Ness monster?; The medium, not the message.
- 3 Premanand: scourge of god men;** Women and the New Age; Do-it-yourself UFOs; Chapman Cohen: freethinker.
- 4 Physics and the New Age – Part 1;** Crop circle hoaxing; Homeopathy; Miracles; Pyramid power.
- 5 Vampires in Cumberland;** Is light getting slower?; Eurocereology; Physics and the New Age – Part 2.
- 6 Great balls of fire;** Quackupuncture; Cold comfort for cold fusion; The fasting woman of Tutbury; Skeptics and scoffers.

## VOLUME 5 (1991)

- 1 Paul Daniels interview;** Canals of Mars; Nostradamus and the Middle East crisis; Potty training; The case for super-skepticism.
- 2 The New Age and the crisis of belief;** The Mary Celeste mystery; N-rays; Wet and dry skepticism.
- 3 Why not test a psychic – 1;** Speaking in tongues; Another look at scientology; Sharp blades or sharp practice?
- 4 James Randi interview;** Why not to test a psychic – 2; The Freethinker: 1881–1991; Medjogorje; Dualism, ESP and belief.

## BACK ISSUE DISCOUNTS

Order more than one back issue and deduct the following discounts from your order total: Ordering 2-6 issues, deduct 10%; Ordering 7-12 issues, deduct 20%; Ordering 13 or more issues, deduct 30%.



This document has been digitized in order to share it with the public through AFU's project, running since 2010, to share files donated/deposited with the AFU foundation. Please consider making single or regular monetary donations to our work, or donations of your files for future preservation at our archival centre.

Archives for the Unexplained (AFU) · P O Box 11027 · 600 11 Norrköping, Sweden · [www.afu.se](http://www.afu.se)

Paypal: [afu@ufo.se](mailto:afu@ufo.se)

IBAN: SE59 9500 0099 6042 0490 7143

BIC: NDEASESS – Nordea/Plusgirot, Stockholm

Swish (Sweden only): 123 585 43 69