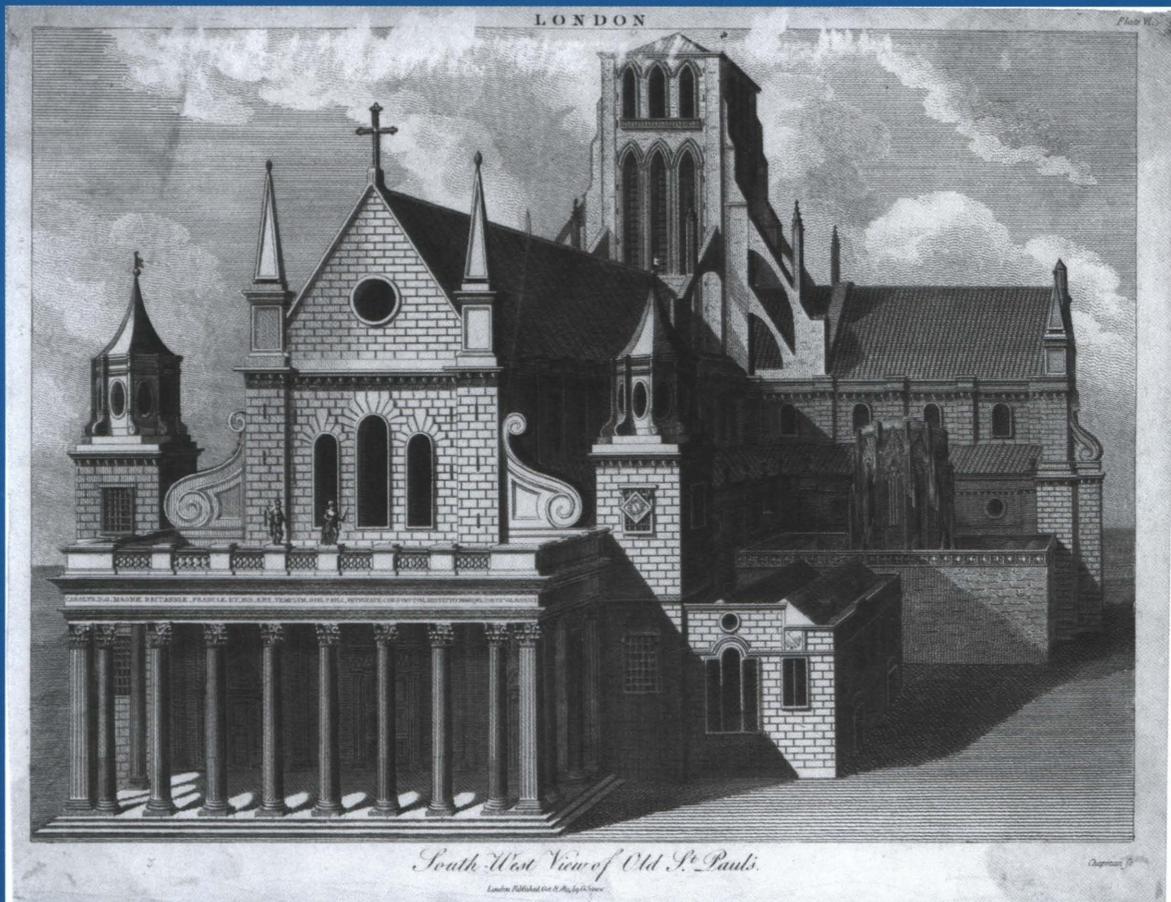


Volume 16 Number 4  
Winter 2003

# The **Skeptic**



## **Organised Religious Faith ... Why?**

*Also in this issue:*

**The Need For Open-Minded Skepticism  
Neuro-Linguistic Programming and Hypnosis**

*Plus:*

**News. Book Reviews. Comment. Humour**

## Hilary Evans' Paranormal Picture Gallery

Un numero arretrato Cent. 80  
PER GLI ABBONAMENTI indirizzare vaglia alla  
Amministrazione in Torino, corso Valdocco, N. 3.  
Italia e Colonie: Anno L. 19; Semestre L. 10  
Estero: Anno Lire 40 — Semestre Lire 20,00

ILLUSTRAZIONE DEL POPOLO

Venti pagine - Centesimi 40  
PER GLI ANNUNCI A PAGAMENTO rivolgersi  
all'Agencia G. Birechi - Milano, via Sallustiana 10, e  
una succ. a Parigi, 28, Faubourg Saint Honoré,  
oppure all'Amministrazione del Giornale - Torino,  
corso Valdocco, 3.



La passeggiata notturna di un sonnambulo suonatore di trombone sul tetto della sua casa a Hettstadt in Germania.  
(Leggere la notizia a pagina 5) (Disegno di Aldo Molinari)

### THE SLEEPWALKING BANDSMAN

The penchant of sleepwalkers for high and often dangerous places was noisily demonstrated in 1932 when Joseph Furst, a member of the municipal band at Hettstadt, Germany, promenaded at night on the roof of his home, rehearsing brassily till the neighbours protested. Though totally unaware of his situation, he came to no harm. Similar behaviour was noted in the 17th century in the demon-possessed victims of convent hysteria, and in 1857 during the community outbreak at Morzine. The nuns and the afflicted children would climb tall trees and take to the rooftops, performing amazing feats while in some kind of trance state. There must be a psychological explanation, but it remains a mystery.

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# Editorial

Julia Nunn and Chris French



**HELLO AND WELCOME** to issue number 16.4 of *The Skeptic*. Following David Marks' article on the subject of unseen staring and the ESP ability of pets (see *The Skeptic* 16.3), we now hear Rupert Sheldrake's radical views on these topics. Needless to say, Marks and Sheldrake vehemently disagree. For example, Sheldrake thinks that not only is the claim that people – and animals – can tell when they are being stared at by unseen others true, but that it may have an evolutionary basis, because prey animals that could detect when a predator is looking at them would have a better chance of survival than animals that did not. Do Sheldrake's and Marks' fundamental differences of opinion derive from the different disciplines they trained in? Is it possibly the case that Sheldrake is even more sceptical than the sceptics? Whatever the answers to these questions are, Sheldrake is certainly a stern iconoclast.

Our last issue saw Martin Parkinson investigate Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP) – a venture that left him disappointed. Now he wonders if he had dismissed its virtues prematurely, and was missing out. The promise of eternal happiness can't be passed over too lightly, one supposes. In this issue, Parkinson returns to the topic and considers whether NLP is basically a version of hypnosis. *En route* he encounters some pretty unpleasant attitudes, and ultimately feels that perhaps he has not suffered *too* much from not being 're-programmed'.

Meanwhile, Douglas George makes his forthright views on religion known publicly in his piece, entitled

*Organised Religious Faith ... Why?* George doesn't pull his punches: either when telling us why, and how, organised religion came to be, or when telling us what he thinks of the myths that religion propagates. Let us know what you think!

In September, The 11th European Skeptics Congress was held, and delegates from all over Europe, the US, and elsewhere, gathered in London for a fascinating event. We very much hope that those of you who attended found it interesting and worthwhile. Even our very own Chris French gave a presentation, which was, of course, absolutely fabulous (according to him). In our next issue we'll have full coverage of the Congress, and no doubt the truth will come out ...

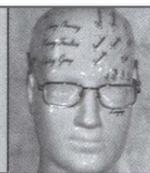
Talking of our own staff, we would like to extend a warm welcome to Paul Taylor, who is taking over from Toby Howard as our new Book Reviews editor. This seems like a good opportunity to remind you all that if you would like to join our list of regular reviewers, please contact Paul Taylor directly by email at: [reviews@skeptic.org.uk](mailto:reviews@skeptic.org.uk), stating your interests and any relevant experience. And of course we must thank Toby for his sterling service over many, many years in this role.

As usual, we have our contributions from our regular columnists, plus the letters, cartoons, and review sections. We hope you enjoy reading this issue as much as we did editing it!

With best wishes until the next issue, Julia and Chris



## Hits and Misses



### Mars is frowning upon us

Mars is close to us! Run for your lives!

Or so went part of the message sent by astrologers on August 27, when Mars got intimate with Earth for a few seconds. Intimate, that is, in the sense of being 'only' 34,616,418 miles away instead of, say, 166 million miles away. But it wasn't just the closeness, as a deeply serious astrologer on BBC *Radio Scotland* hastened to point out, it was the placement and activity. Jupiter? Retrograde? Time to change your life! Apparently the people most affected are Pisceans, who may have found themselves becoming more assertive and aggressive during this time. (We were, however, very pleased to see a new short story by Brian Aldiss in the *Guardian* to celebrate the event.)

We consulted the oracle, who in this case was astronomy writer Ian Ridpath, who pointed out that while Mars was indeed closer than it had been at any time in the last 60,000 years, the difference between this and its last most intimate moment with Earth was merely a fraction of a percent. "A difference only an anorak could love," he said, suggesting that if you had any decisions to make about Mars the one he recommended was going to a star party to see it. Meanwhile, astronomers have taken advantage of the situation to send out probes (including Britain's *Beagle II*), which are expected to reach the Red Planet in time for Christmas and will tell us a great deal more about the possibility of



Have a look now. It's 10 miles closer!

life on Mars. "There is no intelligent life on Mars," Ridpath said, "but if astrologers are getting excited about today there may not be much intelligent life on Earth, either."

Our friend DJ Walker-Morgan, meanwhile, had a different take on it all. "Mars close, Jupiter retrograde, heralds ... cheesy radio shows."

### Astrology needs to be true

But the truth is, August wasn't a very good time for astrologers generally (hey, guys, maybe you should cast your own charts), which may explain why they felt so intimidated by having Mars glowering down on them. The wonderful Robert Matthews reported in the *Sunday Telegraph* on a study published in the *Journal of Consciousness Studies* that tracked more than 2,000 people from their London births through to the present. It began as a medical study of babies born in early March, 1958 who, according to astrological doctrine, ought to show great similarities to each other since they were born in more or less the same place at more or less the same time. (We're talking sceptical values of close here, so the distances are reasonably expressible in yards and the times in minutes.) The results, as analysed by Geoffrey Dean and Ivan Kelly, looked at more than 100 different characteristics including occupation, anxiety levels, marital status, IQ, and a variety of abilities, and showed ... no similarities. So much for birth charts. You would think.

### Not the minority report

Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania has developed crime prediction software. They are not claiming anything as impressive as the Philip K. Dick story (or the more recent film version starring Tom Cruise). Instead, preliminary results indicate that their software, developed with funding from the National Institute of Justice, can predict with 80% accuracy how many crimes in various categories are likely to occur in a 100-block area of a particular city. The computer model behind all this was built using 10 years of crime data from Pittsburgh and Rochester, NY. The next step will be to test the software, and then the research team hopes to make it available nationwide.

The real question: how will using the software's predictions change the behaviour of police and public? At last we will get to test the hypotheses proposed by sf writers. But isn't it refreshing to have someone claiming an 80% hit rate and being prepared to back it up with actual tests and research? Though you know, guys, you'll never make it in the psychic prediction biz if you're going to be like that.

## Real women see psychics

Immense excitement on July 1, when *Real Magazine* published the results of a survey showing that 52% of women in Britain had seen psychics and/or New Age gurus, and a quarter of those reported that doing so had changed their lives. Surveys, too, herald cheesy radio shows, and a good time was had by all.

The much more interesting part of the survey, from our point of view, lay in the superstitious beliefs that the magazine's poll also asked the 3,000 female respondents about. The top 10 superstitions, for example, were: touching wood (68%); breaking a mirror or crossing fingers (64%); walking under a ladder (61%); seeing one magpie (53%); putting shoes on the table (46%); throwing salt over your left shoulder (41%); the number 13 (31%); killing spiders is unlucky (15%); crossing knife and fork on a plate (11%); the color green (8%). So here's the thing: very few people of our acquaintance have ever heard of all these different beliefs. We didn't know about cutlery, magpies, green, spiders, or shoes.

If the conditions of a superstitious belief are met in a forest but no one is there who knows, does the bad luck still happen?

## How to be too skeptical without really trying

A TV researcher rang one day, asking about witchcraft. Usual spiel: mostly harmless; people perform rituals that have meaning for them and may be as a result psychologically inclined for certain desired consequences to happen; beliefs not evidence of supernatural powers; etc. Researcher asks: "What about child sacrifices?" Well, it sounded like an urban legend. "Are you saying there are child sacrifices in this country?" "Yes. The RSPCA has figures." "RSPCA is animals; you said children." "Well, in developing countries, they..." We did not react well to this statement. We thought "people in developing countries" would be likely to value their children as much as the citizens of this or any other country. (Although: consider the phenomenon of child abuse.) We also thought "developing countries" was a rather broad category. We suggested we'd want to see the evidence before accepting such a statement or making it on the air.

We might have responded differently to a newspaper reporter or a trusted friend; the problem with TV researchers is that so many of them are so gullible on so many topics that they all get broadly tarred with the same brush (just like "developing countries"). Of course, the researcher *could* have said, "I'm talking about Muti and the related sacrifices, not just of children but of adults. There was a case in London just a few months ago." But she didn't. It was a friend who, enraged by our irritable comments wondering where they found researchers who said things like this, posted a number of Web links to, for example, the unim-

peachable BBC news and provided this information. The countries in which human sacrifice takes place, according to the *Guardian*, lie in a swathe across Africa that extends from Nigeria in the west to the Zulu and Swazi regions of South Africa. Muti, the Zulu word for medicine, refers to a form of healing that involves potions of herbs or roots and may require, in some cases, the sacrifice of an animal or, yes, even a child or adult. There are, according to CNN, few statistics on



how common the practice is; estimates from the South African Police Service's relevant unit vary from one a month to 300 a year. Most Muti medicines, however, are simply made of plant extracts.

So: we should have been more careful with this researcher and asked her for more detail. We apologise. And to the question she asked but we didn't get around to answering at the time: yes, if people are killing children we're against it, whatever the excuse.

## Where do the clippings go?

Our long-standing clippings contributors may wonder where the cuttings they painstakingly clip and send go when they've been used or not used for the news and stats pages. Until recently, we've been sending them to Mike Hutchinson, who keeps them for consultation as a useful reference library (thanks, Mike!). Now that Mike's run out of space, we will be sending them to help stock the library of the new Center for Inquiry that has been set up in Germany by the sceptics there. Nothing is thrown out, so please keep sending them. We couldn't do these pages without you. But please remember to use the new address!

Thanks to this issue's clippings contributors: **Rachel Carthy, Sid Rodrigues, Stuart 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



**“THE REALLY INTERESTING QUESTION,”** said a friend at the New England Institute conference on Religion, Cognitive Science, and Evolutionary Psychology, “isn’t whether something is true.” His view was that the far more interesting question is what function believing something serves. Both he and one of the featured speakers, Allen D MacNeill from Cornell University, told the same kind of story to back up their viewpoint: a conversation with someone who had already died that they believed gave them a new perspective they could have gained in no other way. In fact, I wasn’t asking whether Mackay’s ghost was real; I was asking whether MacNeill could tell the difference. I just wanted to know, practically speaking, whether he was a lunatic. (“Oh,” my friend said, “that’s different.”)

Is it childish of sceptics to want to know whether things are true? There is no doubt that in the context my friend was talking about – discussions of whether religious feelings have an evolutionary advantage – he has a point. If humans are hard-wired to believe in unprovable things and you want to study the mechanisms of that belief, it really *doesn’t* matter if the unprovable thing is true or not. Certainly, no one was willing to suspend disbelief long enough to get through the talk of one academic expert, who had a whole line – ripped to ribbons by two of the star (English) speakers – about how animals used drumming and vocalization in ways similar to Shamans. I thought it was probably nonsense, and fortunately better informed, more credible people loudly did too. If your facts aren’t right, how can any conclusions based upon them have validity?

Even before the conference I was reminded of this question when I saw the *Sunday Telegraph’s* write-up of Geoffrey Dean’s study of the 2,000-odd babies born in London in the 1950s that showed there was no validity to the notion that the position of the stars at the moment of birth influence how your personality develops. Years ago, Dean wrote a two-part essay for *Skeptical Inquirer* called, *Does Astrology Need to Be True?* Obviously, it doesn’t for people to believe in it. And it’s easy as a long-serving sceptic to predict that Dean’s latest study will have no impact whatsoever on the level of belief in astrology.

In the example above, it doesn’t really bother me if either my friend or MacNeill wants to get personal advice from conversations with imaginary ghosts. It’s perfectly reasonable that the process of thinking how a particular person would have responded to you in a particular situation might clarify your own thoughts on the subject. I was curious about MacNeill, in part because he said that

he and his interlocutory ghost – I think it was a dream vision of an aunt or grandmother – had reached a mutual arrangement. He didn’t remind her she was dead, and she didn’t vanish. Apparently, in their first few conversations he’d made the mistake of mentioning her respiratory status and she had disappeared instantly. So, you know, when someone says something like that, even lounging around after dinner and maybe a few drinks, you want to know whether *he* knows she’s dead and may have difficulty keeping appointments.

Along these lines, psychology professor and CSI-COP Fellow Elizabeth Loftus is doing some very interesting research. Loftus is, of course, the woman who has come in for much heat from the recovered memory folks for holding the line that the evidence does not support the theory of repressed memory, under which grown-ups claim suddenly to have remembered abuse that went on for years decades ago. (I’m not kidding about the heat; once, a woman sitting next to her on a plane began hitting her with a rolled-up newspaper when she said her name.) Her current work, she told me recently for *New Scientist*, attempts to establish what consequences there may be for having had a false belief implanted. She and her team have been experimenting with implanting a false belief that eating a particular food as a child made the person sick. They’ve had some success with this, as they have had with implanting other false memories, such as being lost in a shopping mall as a child, or going to one of the Disney parks and shaking hands with Bugs Bunny (not possible; Bugs is Warner Brothers all the way). Now, she wants to delay the debriefing process in order to find out whether the person will actually avoid those foods. My guess is she will find out they will, partly because food aversions are so compelling.

For myself, of course, I’m just as whiny and childish as anyone could want. I like to know whether things are true. I like to avoid assuming what I’m trying to prove. I like to know whether the people I’m talking to know that what they’re saying sounds insane. I like to know that I’m making decisions based on hard evidence. Thoughts clarified by talking to a ghost are reasonable evidence, if only of what I think about something; belief that the ghost will save me if I make the wrong decision is not a good basis.

So I can only go this far: I’m willing to suspend disbelief in order to study the consequences of a particular belief as long as I’m not allowed to forget to reinstate that disbelief afterwards.



**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>.

# The Need For Open-Minded Scepticism

Rupert Sheldrake replies to David Marks.

**DAVID MARKS' COMMENTS** (see *The Skeptic*, 16.3) on my research on staring and on return-anticipating dogs are shortened versions of Chapters 8 and 9 of his book *The Psychology of the Psychic* (2000). They were outdated and misleading when they were first published, and three years later are even more so.

In his book Marks quantified his subjective estimate of the reality of various "paranormal" phenomena as "infinitesimally low" (p. 306). The chapters of his book resemble a series of show trials in which a guilty verdict is a foregone conclusion; the only question is on what grounds the apparent evidence is to be condemned. He tells us he wrote the book "in the hope that the fantasies, fictions and figments of the paranormal, cleverly disguised as facts, will in future be seen for the impostors that they are" (p. 19).

Marks is a very unreliable guide to research in these areas. He treats the questions he writes about as irritating distractions from what he calls 'Urgent and Serious Problems', and is impatient with the factual details. He does not seem to have read the relevant papers, published in peer-reviewed journals, and disregards evidence that does not fit in with his strong beliefs.

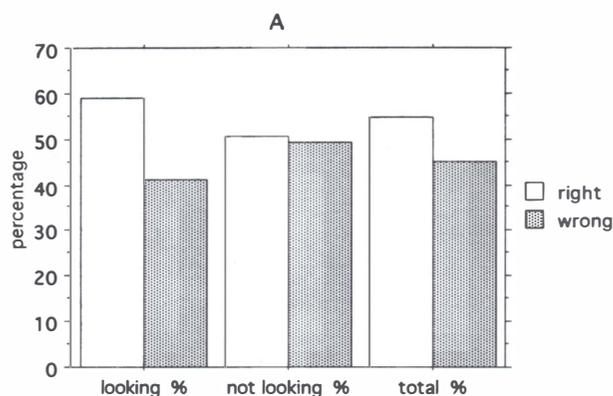


Figure 1A: Results from Sheldrake's staring trials.

## The sense of being stared at

As Marks pointed out, several surveys have shown that the majority of people claim to have detected when they were being stared at by unseen others. This is not an "exceptional experience", but appears to be quite common; it is not paranormal but normal, in the sense that it happens quite commonly to ordinary people, and also to many species of animals (Sheldrake, 2003). I think its evolutionary basis may lie in relations between pred-

ators and prey. Prey animals that detect when a predator is staring and escape would tend to survive better than animals that did not.

My experiments on the sense of being stared at have given consistent positive and highly significant results, and have now been widely replicated. Anyone inter-

**The chapters of his (Marks') book resemble a series of show trials in which a guilty verdict is a foregone conclusion; the only question is on what grounds the apparent evidence is to be condemned**

ested can try this simple experiment using the instructions on my web site ([www.sheldrake.org](http://www.sheldrake.org)).

There is also a growing body of evidence from a parallel stream of research using closed circuit television (CCTV), that people can unconsciously detect when they are being looked at on a TV monitor by an observer in a remote location, as measured by changes in skin resistance. This work has replicated in several different labs (for a recent review, see Delanoy, 2001). I return to a discussion of some recent CCTV research below.

In my own tests, people work in pairs. One serves as the starrer, the other as the subject. In a randomised series of trials, the starrer either looks at the back of the neck of a subject, or looks away and thinks of something else. The subject then guesses whether he or she is being looked at. The subject is either right or wrong. By chance, 50% of guesses would be correct.

In the looking trials, the scores are generally positive and highly significant, around 60% correct, while in the not-looking trials they are at chance levels (see Figure 1A). These results have been replicated in many trials in schools and universities (Sheldrake, 2002). Similar results were obtained whether or not the subjects were given feedback (Sheldrake, 1998; 1999a; 2000a; 2001a) and also in trials conducted through closed windows and at distances up to 100m, eliminating auditory or olfactory cues (Sheldrake, 2000a). The

same pattern of results was obtained using coin-tossing for randomisation (Sheldrake, 1998; 1999a), and with randomised instruction sheets prepared in advance (Sheldrake, 1999a; 2000a; 2001a).

These results are consistent with the reality of a sense of being stared at. Such a sense would be expected to work when people are in fact being stared at. But it would not be expected to work in not-looking trials. We do not have a sense of NOT being stared at; subjects would just be guessing under these conditions; results at chance levels would be expected. This pattern of results argues against explanations in terms of subtle cues or cheating, which would lead to an elevation of scores in *both* types of trial. This pattern of results thus provides internal evidence against the subtle cue and cheating hypotheses.

Following methods similar to my own, Marks' colleague John Colwell and his associates (Colwell, Schröder & Sladen, 2000) obtained the same pattern of results that I and others have found (see Figure 1B). Marks (2000) and Marks & Colwell (2000) were faced with the problem of explaining why these findings replicated my own. They speculated that subjects might have learned implicitly to recognize patterns in the randomised sequences used in their trials. These particular counterbalanced sequences were downloaded from the *New Scientist* web site, and were the same as some of those I used in some of my own trials. They proposed that because these sequences deviated from "structureless" randomisations, subjects who were given feedback could have learned implicitly to detect patterns in the sequences, thus enabling them to guess at above-chance levels. They announced their hypothesis as if it were a fact in the title of their article in the *Skeptical Inquirer*: *The psychic staring effect: An artifact of pseudo randomisation*.

This Marks-Colwell hypothesis is fatally flawed for four reasons:

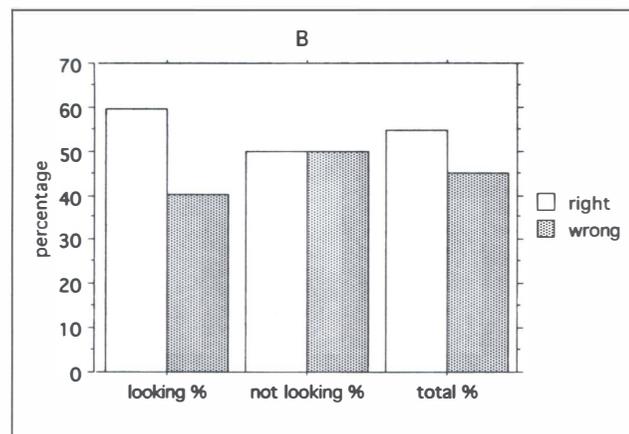
1. Marks (2000) and Marks & Colwell (2000) were apparently unaware that their implicit learning hypothesis had already been refuted by thousands of trials involving structureless randomisations (Sheldrake, 1998; 1999a), where implicit learning would have been impossible. In addition, a computerized staring experiment has been running at the New Metropolis Science Museum in Amsterdam since 1996, and more than 18,500 subjects have taken part. A program in the computer provides structureless randomisations for the sequence of looking and not-looking trials. The results are positive and astronomically significant statistically.

2. The implicit learning hypothesis has been refuted by thousands of trials with no feedback, with the usual pattern of positive and highly significant results (Sheldrake, 2000a). Implicit learning depends on feedback, and hence cannot explain these results.

3. If implicit learning led to positive scores in looking trials, then it should also have done so in not-look-

ing trials. But it did not (see Figures 1A and 1B). Why not? Marks did not mention this problem; perhaps he hoped his readers would not notice it.

4. In Colwell *et al.*'s experiment, the same subjects took part in nine successive 20-trial sessions with feed-



1B: Results from Colwell, Schröder & Sladen's (2000) trials

back. There was a statistically significant learning effect in successive sessions, but only in the looking trials, not in the not-looking trials. This is consistent with the subjects learning to detect stares more effectively. But such learning would not have been possible in the trials I conducted. Each subject was tested only once, in a single 20-trial session, and hence the learning hypothesis cannot account for the experimental data shown in Figure 1A.

In an attempt to support the implicit learning hypothesis, Colwell and his colleagues did a second experiment, with a different person doing the staring. This time they used structureless randomisations. As they expected, the result was non-significant. Marks and Colwell jumped to the conclusion that this was due to the different randomisation method. They did not mention the change of starrer. In the first experiment the starrer was a graduate student with a sympathetic interest in the sense of being stared at; in the second the starrer was one of Colwell's colleagues. Unfortunately, the design of this experiment was confounded. Two variables were changed at once: there was both a different randomisation method, and a different starrer.

This is no mere quibble. From experiments on the sense of being stared at carried out by other researchers, it is already known that starers differ in their effectiveness. In a series of tests on the sense of being stared at using CCTV (Wiseman & Schlitz, 1997), Schlitz obtained statistically significant positive results, in accordance with her previous findings. By contrast, when Wiseman, a sceptic, conducted the experiments and served as starrer, the results were not significant.

Such experimenter effects are not symmetrical. The failure of the subjects to detect Wiseman's stares implies only that Wiseman was an ineffective starrer, or that his

negative expectations influenced the subjects' responses, or both. By contrast, the detection of Schlitz's stares by the participants implies the existence of an unexplained sensitivity to stares.

Wiseman's negative expectations influenced the way he looked at the subjects. He himself said that he found it "an enormously boring experience" and that in most

**The majority of people claim to have detected when they were being stared at by unseen others ... it is not paranormal but normal, in the sense that it happens quite commonly to ordinary people, and also to many species of animals**

of the trials he was "pretty passive about it" (Watt, Wiseman & Schlitz, 2002). In addition, he may have influenced the expectations of the subjects at the University of Hertfordshire, where he works. At the time of this experiment, he was already well known nationally through many TV and radio appearances, and in addition was often featured in the local Hertfordshire media. Most, if not all, of the subjects must have known of his reputation as a leading media sceptic, and been aware of his negative expectations.

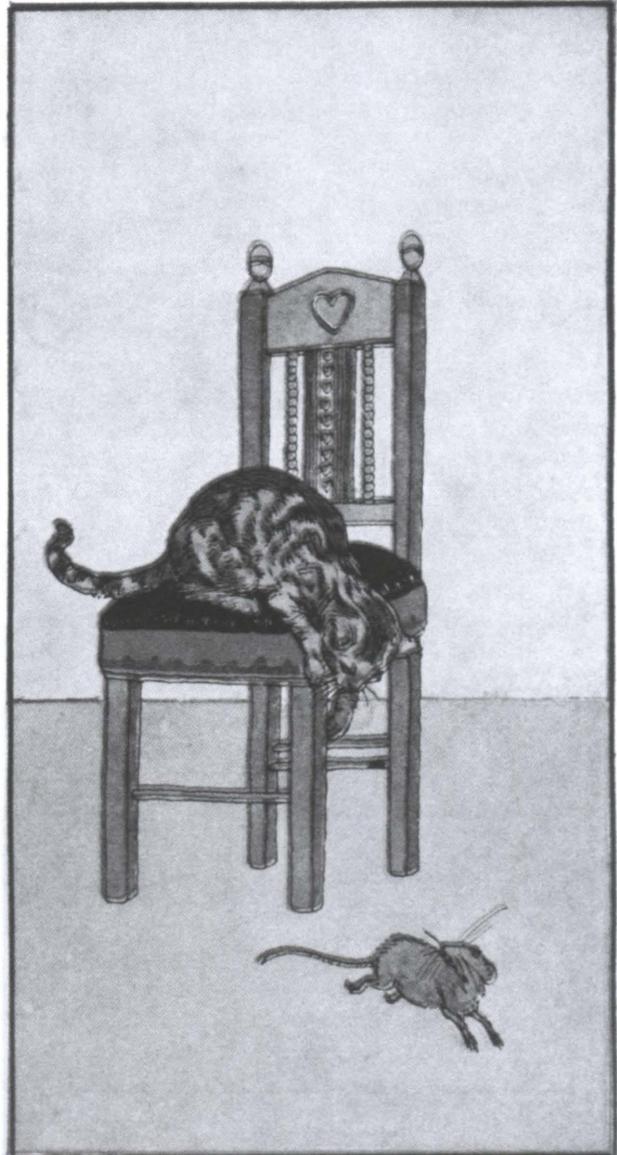
Finally, neither Marks nor Colwell has shown any interest in testing their implicit learning hypothesis, only in publicising it. They could have examined their own data to see if subjects really did score more positively after particular patterns occurred in the sequences of looking and not-looking trials. Apparently they have not done so. I asked Colwell for his data so that I could test their hypothesis myself. He refused to let me see them. I then asked Marks but he has not replied to my repeated requests.

I pointed out the fundamental problems with Marks' argument in the *Skeptical Inquirer* (Sheldrake, 2001b). He and Colwell responded by saying that the change of starrer was "a complete red herring", and resorted to rhetorical blustering instead of reasoned argument (Marks & Colwell, 2001). Now, two years later, Marks is recycling his original claims unchanged, in his usual polemical style. This is lazy propaganda, not science. A

paper as sloppy as this would be rejected by any self-respecting peer-reviewed journal. I assume Marks works to higher standards in his own professional field.

### **Return-anticipating dogs**

Marks' account of research on return-anticipating dogs is equally misleading, and shows the same disregard for data that do not fit in with his beliefs.



*Does the sense of being stared at have its evolutionary basis in the relationship between prey and predator?*

Many pet owners claim that their dogs or cats know when a member of the family is returning and go to a door or window as if to wait for the person coming home. Sometimes the animals start waiting half an hour or more before the person arrives. These responses are said to occur even when people come home at unusual times, when no one at home knows when to expect them, and even when people travel in unfamiliar vehicles such as taxis (Sheldrake, 1999c).

I have carried out many trials with return-anticipat-

ing dogs, especially with Jaytee, a dog belonging to Pam Smart, in Ramsbottom, Lancashire. To start with, we recorded Jaytee's anticipatory behaviour on 100 occasions when Pam was absent for a wide range of times, some as short as an hour, others as long as 12 hours. Jaytee anticipated her returns on 82% of these occasions, both with short and long absences (Sheldrake & Smart, 1998). He also anticipated her returns at least 10 minutes in advance when she was travelling in unfamiliar vehicles, such as taxis.

Subsequently, in a series of 100 videotaped trials, the place at which Jaytee waited by the window was filmed continuously on timecoded videotape throughout Pam's absences. These films were evaluated 'blind' by independent scorers, who recorded all the times at which Jaytee was by the window. The data showed that he was waiting by the window very significantly more when Pam was on her way home from destinations at least five miles away than in the main period of her absence (Sheldrake & Smart, 2000a).

Marks suggested that the anticipatory behaviour of the Pam Smart's dog Jaytee could be explained by the dog learning when Pam could be expected home, and signalling accordingly. But if he had read our published papers he would have known that this hypothesis had already been refuted. Jaytee responded to Pam's homecomings after absences of very different durations. We tested for the possibility of learning effects by comparing Jaytee's behaviour after short, medium, and long absences. His anticipatory behaviour was similar in all cases, ruling out the learning hypothesis (Sheldrake & Smart, 2000a).

Marks commented "Why Sheldrake chose to use a pre-arranged bleep period that started between 80 and 170 minutes after PS had left is unclear". The reason was explained in the Methods section of the paper that Marks criticised but apparently did not read. There was an upper limit to how long these videotaped trial could run, owing to the duration of the videotapes themselves, which lasted for a maximum of four hours, using the long play setting on the camera. Nevertheless, within this limit, there was a wide variation in the times of Pam's absences, from 80 to 220 minutes.

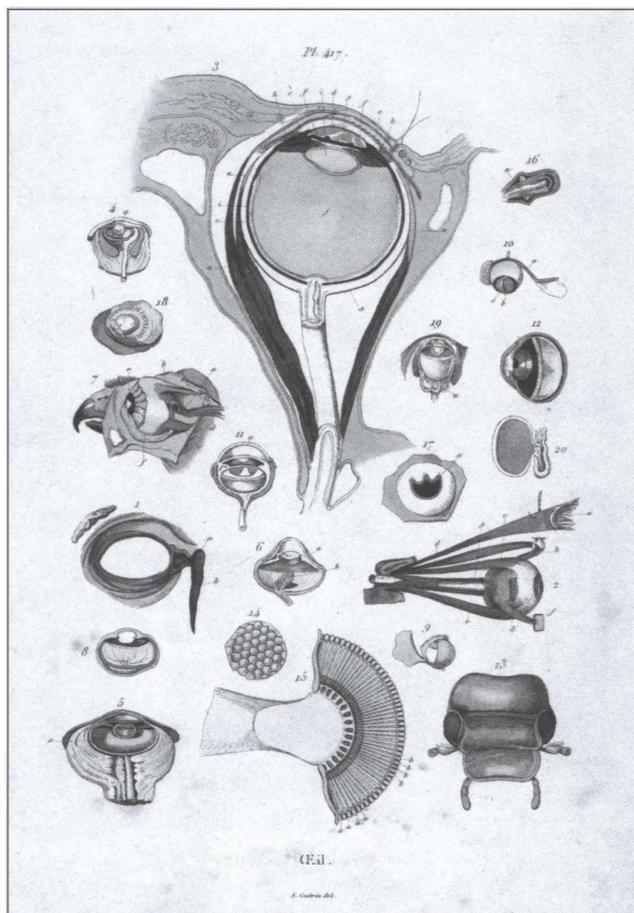
The data Marks referred to (examined for him by John Colwell) were taken from a subset of 12 videotaped trials. In these data, there was no evidence for a learning effect. Readers can judge for themselves by looking at the results for all 12 trials (Figure 2, Sheldrake & Smart, 2000a).

We also tested the learning hypothesis in another way, by running a series of control trials in which Pam did not come home at all. According to Marks' hypothesis, Jaytee should have gone to wait at the window after a routine time had elapsed. He did not (Figure 5, Sheldrake & Smart, 2000a). Marks simply ignored this evidence, or did not take the trouble to read it.

Marks also based his case on a claim made by Richard Wiseman and his colleagues. At my invitation, Wiseman, Smith & Milton (1998) carried out four tests with Jaytee

in 1995, using similar videotaped methods to my own.

In my own randomised tests, the dog was at the door an average of four per cent of the main period when his owner was absent, and 55% during the first 10 minutes of her return journey ( $n = 12$ ,  $p = 0.0001$ ). In Wiseman *et al.*'s tests in the same location, which Marks thinks were better designed than ours, the respective figures



Does the eye transmit as well as receive?

were four per cent and 78% ( $n = 3$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ) (Sheldrake, 1999b). Far from refuting the pattern of results that Smart and I observed, Wiseman *et al.* replicated it. But they wanted to debunk Jaytee's abilities. They ignored our data, and discarded most of their own to arrive at the conclusion they expected: Jaytee had failed their tests. They invented an arbitrary criterion by which to judge Jaytee. If he went briefly to the window before Pam set off for no apparent reason (as judged from the videotape), he had failed. These 'failures' were part of the four per cent of the time Jaytee was at the window when Pam was absent. After these 'failures', his waiting at the window when Pam was on the way home could be ignored, even though he was there for 78% of the time.

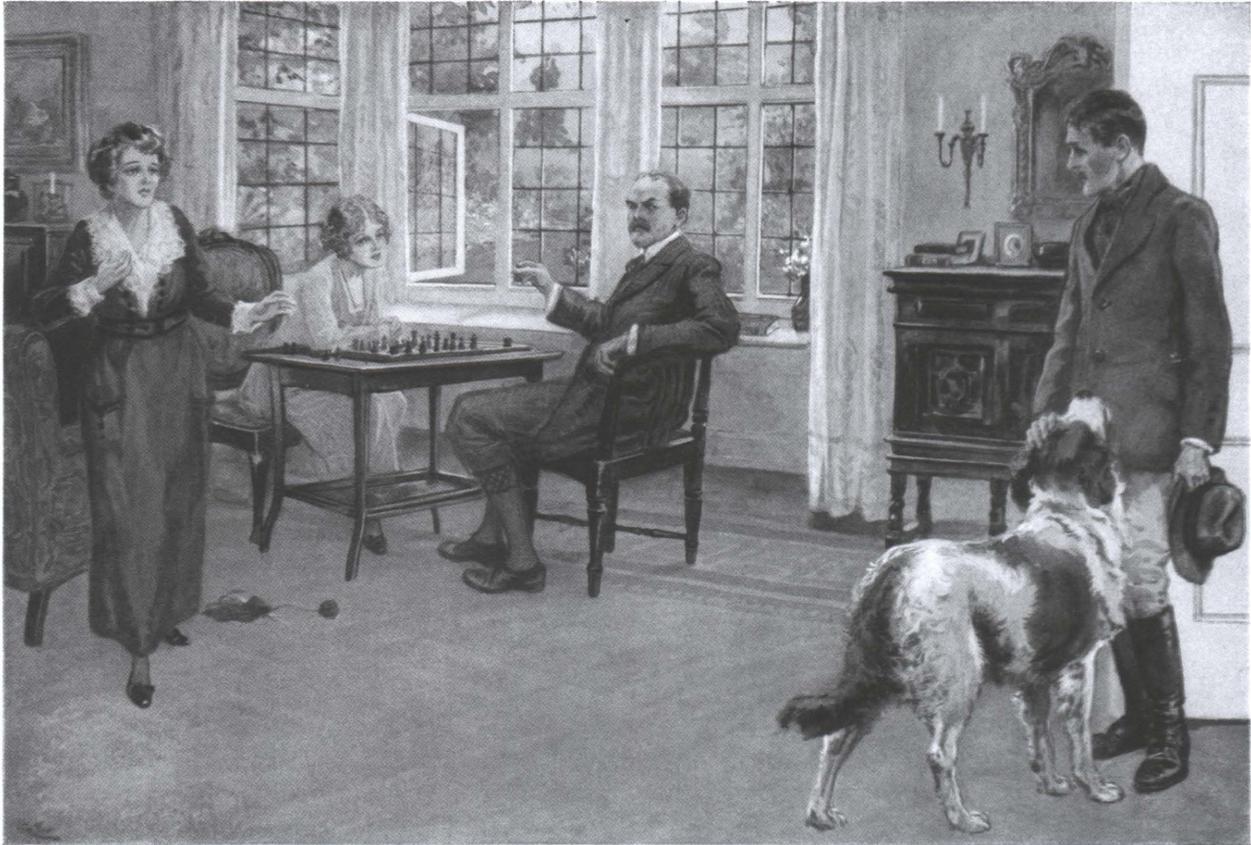
Wiseman publicized this sceptical claim very widely through a press release, and in newspaper and TV interviews (Sheldrake, 1999b; 2000b; see also Wiseman, Smith & Milton, 2000). Marks repeated his claim uncritically, ignoring the actual data.

Jaytee is by no means unique. We have found similar patterns of return anticipation in other dogs. In a series of videotaped trials with a Rhodesian ridgeback, called Kane, the dog was at the window an average of one percent of the time during his owner's absence, and 26% of the time during the first 10 minutes of her homeward journey (n = 10, p = 0.0004; Sheldrake & Smart, 2000b).

to have evolved in relation to biological needs, and to be widespread in the animal kingdom. To accept their existence would not involve the abandonment of science and reason, and the collapse of civilization as we know it; rather it would extend the scope of science and of evolutionary understanding.

By contrast, Marks claims that "a normal or 'N'-the-

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THE PRODIGAL'S RETURN

*Do pets know that their owners are coming home even before they arrive?*

### Open-minded research

I am a biologist, rather than a parapsychologist. I am convinced there is much we do not understand about living organisms. That is why I believe it is important to investigate phenomena such as the sense of being stared at and apparent telepathy in animals: we could learn more about animal nature and human nature by doing so. If forms of the sixth sense really exist, they are likely

ory interpretation (NIE) has proved to be a perfectly adequate explanation making any form of paranormal or 'P'-theory interpretation (PIE) redundant or superfluous". But it is not enough merely to suggest an 'NIE interpretation': such hypotheses need testing, and the ones Marks proposed have been refuted by the data. He himself provides a good example of the "powerful effect of belief and selective attention", to use his own phrase.

## SKEPTICS IN THE PUB

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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.

Like Marks, I am a sceptic, but of a different kind. His scepticism is directed towards anything he regards as 'paranormal', taking as normal that which lies within the limits of current scientific understanding. My scepticism is directed towards the assumption that we know enough to proclaim what is possible and what is not.

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**Rupert Sheldrake PhD** is a biologist and author of *Dogs That Know When Their Owners Are Coming Home, And Other Unexplained Powers of Animals*. He was a Fellow of Clare College, Cambridge and a Research Fellow of the Royal Society. His web site is [www.sheldrake.org](http://www.sheldrake.org).

## Skeptical Stats

1. Amount of cash St. Louis-based Genomed had on hand on April 24, 2003: **\$2,732**
2. Rise in Genomed's stock price after Genomed began testing drugs for efficacy against SARS: **300%**
3. Length of the winning throw in the world mobile phone-throwing championships: **66.62 m**
4. Amount this was short of the world record: **10 cm**
5. As of July 2003, the percentage of Internet email that is spam: **50**
6. Number of spam sources that account for 90 percent of the junk: **under 200**
7. Amount of pocket space provided in a Scott e-vest, designed for the gadget-mad: **2,312.75 square inches**
8. Amount paid by Virgin Atlantic in compensation to a passenger who was injured by being squashed by the obese person in the next seat on an 11-hour transatlantic flight: **£13,000**
9. Amount of government funding for nanotechnology research over the six years beginning July 2003: **£90 million**
10. Number of bids on "ghost in a pickle jar" auctioned on eBay: **14**
11. Rank among four "woman seeking man" ads of the one advertising the woman as "financially independent...successful [and] ambitious" (instead of "lovely...very attractive and slim"): **1**
12. Amount US industry spends every year promoting GM foods: **\$250 million**
13. Global number of expatriates: **150 million**
14. Number of years unsuccessful Montana Libertarian Senate candidate Stan Jones, who now has the silver-caused skin condition argyria, drank colloidal silver believing it would protect him from Y2K antibiotic shortages: **4.5**
15. Year by which BT futurologist Ian Pearson believes we'll all be eating synthesised turkeys made by genetically modified bacteria or nanotechnology: **2020**
16. Amount of money an Egyptian exorcist refused to return when he could not cure the impotence of a 27-year-old man, who went on to stab and burn him to death: **£240**
17. Percentage of American federal budget that goes to foreign aid: **less than 1**
18. Percentage of American federal budget Americans think goes to foreign aid: **15 to 24**
19. Cost of a Landmark forum weekend (formerly known as est): **£275**
20. Amount Landmark claims in annual revenues: **\$58 million**
21. Average weekly travel time of British commuters: **7.5 hours**
22. Date on which Erich von Däniken's "Mystery" theme park claimed its 100,000<sup>th</sup> visitor, after opening in June: **July 17, 2003**
23. Number of British farms that plant crops "biodynamically" – in other words, guided by the moon: **around 40**
24. Number of support groups in Hull for people who have experienced ghosts: **1**
25. Cost of Meowlingual, a Japanese handheld device to translate cats' cries and purrs into words: **£47**

### Sources

1,2 *The Scientist*; 3,4 *Financial Times*; 5 Brightmail; 6 Spamhaus Project; 7 <http://www.scottevest.com/>; 8 BBC News; 9 *Telegraph*; 10 [www.eBay.com](http://www.eBay.com); 11 Evolutionary Psychology mailing list; 12 *Independent*; 13 *Scientific American*; 14 Wired News; 15 <http://www.btexact.com/ideas/futurology?doc=42726>; 16 *Times*; 17,18 *Harper's*; 19,20 Landmark Forum; 21 RAC Foundation; 22 <http://www.mysterypark.ch>; 23 *Gardening Which?*; 24 *West Hull Advertiser* (ParanormHull); 25 BBC News

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# Power, Arcana, and Hypnobabble

Martin Parkinson reflects on the attractions of NLP.

WHILE RESEARCHING NEURO-LINGUISTIC PROGRAMMING (see *The Skeptic* 16.3), I experienced a disturbing sense of existential nausea. *Supposing it's true?* As I read the endless blandishments, the promises that you can master your mind and circumstances, that you can not only radically change your life but also become a different person, the hints (often pretty deafening hints) that you can fix it so that you need never feel intimidated, bamboozled, or *small* ever again and that, on the contrary, you can bend people to your will yet they will love you for it rather than resent you – as I read this stuff I felt a great sorrow. I felt like the lame boy in *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* who couldn't keep up with his friends and had to watch as they skipped off to bliss and happiness in the magic mountain while he was left behind, forced to spend the rest of his life with the boring grownups.

I implied in my previous article that the supposed effectiveness of NLP is caused in part by some genuine 'active ingredients' beyond the usual cocktail of pseudo-causality, selective memory and wishful thinking, but that these ingredients are readily available from other sources and that if you sincerely wish to sharpen your ability to understand yourself and others and hence to communicate more subtly, you would be as well to take some acting classes. One notable 'active ingredient' is Ericksonian hypnotherapy: many of NLP's instructions about the use of language derive from the way Milton Erickson was supposed to have addressed his patients. I now think that hypnosis is the one unifying element of what is otherwise a miscellany of borrowed ideas, and that NLP is basically, in the words of Singer and Lalich (1996, p.169) "an overrated version of hypnosis".

This article is not about what hypnosis may or may not be, nor about its possible usefulness. Naturally I have tried the various self-hypnosis tricks I have read and some of them 'sort of' work – if nothing else, conjuring up sensual imagery is a pleasant activity – but their potential seems exaggerated. However, for my present purposes I am taking *Hypnosis in Therapy* (Gibson & Heap, 1991) as an authority on the *realistic* uses of hypnosis (note that 'therapy' here is not confined to 'psychotherapy'). On this basis I am not arguing that NLP proponents have exaggerated the potential of hypnosis, I am *assuming* that they have in fact

done so and gently suggesting what desires might underlie a willingness to accept these exaggerated claims. I shall illustrate this with examples from *Frogs into Princes* (Bandler & Grinder, 1979), an early NLP



*What if NLP really does provide the key to bliss and happiness?*

text, which has been widely praised and recommended.

Much of NLP is about language – one could say that we can all read between the lines but NLP promises to teach us how to both listen and speak between them. Gibson & Heap say (p. 64) "[in the context of hypnosis] ...simple verbal instructions are a potent, though limited, means of effecting therapeutic change".

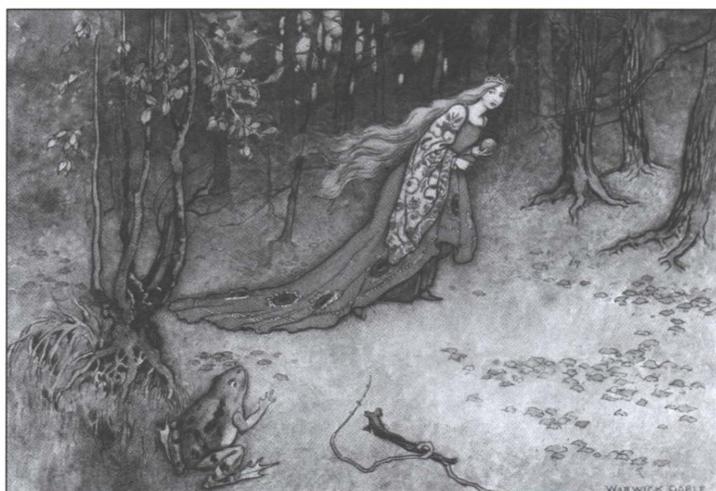
This in itself is rather remarkable. So remarkable, in fact, that one could easily forget the vital words "though limited". Omit that qualification and you have a version of 'wishing can make it so' with apparent empirical support. Combine this with the NLP assertion that "all communication is hypnosis" (Bandler & Grinder, p.100) and you have a fantasy of wizardry in all areas of life.

(It is worth noting here that there are websites which claim, more or less, that NLP can cure cancer – for exam-

ple, Hamblett & Bolstad (2000). Fortunately, believers usually have no problem with using orthodox medical technology in addition to their 'attitude installation'.

**Frogs into Princes (Bandler & Grinder, 1979)**

This book is a transcription of a seminar given in 1979 to a group of psychotherapists, so it is about other-help rather than self-help. It contains some reasonable material: for example, warnings against reification ('depression' is not a *thing* that can be acquired or lost, it is shorthand for a set of *behaviours*), and the point that perception is a form of interpretation. Nevertheless, I found the book nearly unreadable because of its unpleasant tone. For example:



*If you turn a frog into a prince, you have not made him your equal.*

"I could very easily install memories in you that related to real world experiences that never occurred ...that were just bizarre hallucinations out of my fantasy. Made-up memories can change you just as well as the arbitrary perceptions that you made up at the time ..."

"...You can also convince your parents ...I tried that and it worked. My mother now believes she did things to me when I was a child that never happened."

(p.97)

Surely it is a little odd to brag about successfully lying to one's mother? Perhaps this is just a joke that has been lost in the telling.

Here is some more on altering memory and an illustration of 'hypnobabble' (this concerns people who have lost weight and then have problems dealing with the social expectations that thinness brings):

"So instead of trying to get people to adjust, we would simply go back and create a whole new childhood and have them grow up being a skinny

person. We learned this from Milton Erickson. [...] We started creating entire personal histories for people, in which they would have experiences which would serve as resources for the kinds of behaviors that they wanted to have. And then we extended it from weight to all kinds of behaviors."

"[...] ...we don't ordinarily create new personal histories for people anymore. [...] We programmed another person to do it each night as they dreamed. We literally installed, in a somnambulistic trance, a dream generator, that would generate the requisite personal history ..."

(pp. 99-101)

A claim to extraordinary power is being made: 'not only can we get inside people minds and fiddle about with their pasts but we do it so casually that actually it's a bit of a yawn and we don't bother with it these days'. There is a subtly implied invitation to the audience of psychotherapists to ally themselves with the wielders of this power and thereby set out on the route to attaining that arcane power for themselves. You too can apply for membership of the elite.

The following is part of a description of the 'quotes pattern', one of Erickson's linguistic tricks:

"People have almost no consciousness of any meta-levels if you distract them with content.

Once at a conference I talked to a large group of psychologists who were pretty stuffy and asked a lot of dumb questions. I told them about quotes as a pattern. Then I said for example – I even told them what I was doing – Milton Erickson once told me a story about a time he stayed at a turkey farm, and the turkeys made a lot of noise and kept him awake at night. He didn't know what to do. So finally one night he walked outside – and I faced all those psychologists out there – and he realised he was surrounded by turkeys, hundreds of turkeys everywhere. And he looked at them and he said "You turkeys!"

"...I stood on stage in front of these people who were paying me a fortune and I went "You turkeys!" They didn't know what I was doing. They all sat there nodding seriously. If you are congruent they will never know."

(p. 62)

Why do people not notice how puerile this is? Presumably because they, like the original audience, feel *included* and join with Bandler (I suspect it is Bandler) rejoicing in his own cleverness. What sort of person would think themselves a part of the lumpen mass who "have almost no consciousness ... if you distract them"?

Certainly not me.

pA perk of being a member of an elite group with arcane knowledge is that you don't have to bother with the rules that constrain lesser folk:

"The trouble with many professional ethical codes ...is that they limit your behavior. And whenever you accept any "I won't do it," there are people you are not going to be able to work with ...I walked over and stomped on the catatonic's foot as hard as I could and got an immediate response. He came right out of 'catatonia', jumped up, and said "don't do that!""

(p. 75)

*Helping people* must be one of the most seductive forms of power because the fact of its being an exercise of power is so easily hidden from the person doing the helping. There is arrogance implicit in the very title of the book: if you turn a frog into a prince, you have not made him your equal, because you could as easily have chosen to leave him as a frog.

Let me make it quite plain that I am not being cynical or claiming that members of the helping professions are evil or hypocritical or do no good or that altruism never exists. I am simply restating a commonplace: people are complicated, and they act from complex motives of which they are often largely unaware. That

goes for me too, of course, and I hope my opening paragraph indicates that I do not feel myself (too) superior to people who fall for systems like NLP.

**Helping people must be one of the most seductive forms of power because the fact of its being an exercise of power is so easily hidden from the person doing the helping**

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# Organised Religious Faith ... Why?

Douglas George tackles some of the structures and assumptions of religion.

“RELIGIOUS ORGANISATIONS OWN outright 8% of the earth’s habitable land. Religions are the oldest multinational companies in the world.” These were the words I heard when I turned on the radio one day. It was the Sunday morning religious slot and an advocate was trying to get his point across in words that would seem up to date and ‘on message’. The effect on me was not, I presume, what he had intended, but he hit the nail right on the head. Think of the vast amounts of money it must take to sustain these organisations! No wonder they need all their real estate and continue to hold out their hands for donations. For just one example, check out the Anglican web site [www.trinitywall-street.org](http://www.trinitywall-street.org) and click on ‘real estate’.

Religious organisations, of whatever faith, are indeed multinational companies. They are past their best, but are still going strong with large customer bases. Religious brand X is competing with brand Y for customers. These companies have all the necessary organisational departments to promote and sustain their empires, including Sales and Marketing, Public Relations, Accounts and Personnel. All major religions have a hierarchy. With the Catholic faith, for example, this consists of Owner/God, Chairman/Pope, Board of Directors/Cardinals, Higher Management/Bishops, Managers/Priests and so on. The only difference is that if the Chairman did get a visit from the Owner then it would certainly be a big surprise! One of the reasons I use the Catholic religion as the example above is because I have some first hand knowledge of it.

So what’s the big deal, you might ask, if they help the poor and needy? Well, if that was their *raison d’être*, then I think they could do a better job without the hocus-pocus. Organised religion’s main purpose is to get followers. They really want masses of unquestioning believers who will follow the rules in order to gain a better life in the hereafter. A comfortable life and a questioning mind is not synonymous with being a true follower. It doesn’t take a genius to realise that the majority of believers are poor and uneducated. That’s the way the church seems to want them.

If religious belief was harmless and up to each individual then it wouldn’t worry me. Unfortunately, when any large organisation is given a free hand it will usually try to push us around. All organised religions really believe they have ‘The Truth’ and that if they had the power they would eventually force misguided non-believers to fall into line. When it comes to religions somewhat to the east, I get the impression that if you say or write something they don’t like, they might come looking for you! It has always puzzled me that whenever a religious group thinks their prophet or god has been offended they feel the need to get even with the perpetrator, even possibly to the point of killing him. What I want to know is, if their

god is so powerful and has been offended, why don’t they just sit back and wait for the bolt of lightning from heaven to strike the disbeliever down? By the way, if you want to test the fact that there is no man in the sky with a big stick, go into a field (making sure there are no zealots around) and shout what you like to the god or gods and you will find nothing happens. Absolutely zilch.

To be a true cynic one must have faith. Don’t get me wrong, I don’t mean religious faith, but faith in one’s own reasoning and judgment. We can all come to the wrong conclusion after studying the evidence, but as long as we have an open mind and are willing not to be dogmatic, we have a reasonable chance of getting it right. The problem with religion is that whenever you question the validity of someone’s belief, they will eventually fall back

**If you want to test the fact that there is no man in the sky with a big stick, go into a field (making sure there are no zealots around) and shout what you like to the god or gods and you will find nothing happens. Absolutely zilch**

on the age-old defence of saying that they know they are right and that it doesn’t matter what you say, they don’t need any proof – they just *believe*. We’ll that’s fine for them but it just doesn’t cut the mustard with me.

Now belief is a funny thing. It is not always necessary to have seen something to believe in it. Take for instance the Leaning Tower of Pisa. I have never seen it in the flesh, so to speak, but I believe it’s real because so many people have seen it and countless books and films have had the Leaning Tower as their subject. Better still, people not interested in towers or architecture admit that it exists. When it comes to Jesus, the Christian will say “Of course he exists, it says so in The Bible.” The non-believer, especially if he is an intellectual, will say “Hang on a minute, there is no actual evidence from the period he was said to have lived.”

You’ve probably noticed by now that I don’t like using too many quotes from other sources. The reasons for this are simple – I really can’t be bothered to wade through masses of information and quote other people’s ideas because they could be just as suspect as any other. I like to think about things for myself. I might not be right, but hey, if I get you to think about them as well, then we might question the many things that are presented as ‘facts’ and form our own opinion free from guilt.

So what *is* the truth? I must first state that I am what I call a ‘happy cynic’ and a ‘positive sceptic’. To be just

a cynic or sceptic is to be always negative about everything. Being a positive sceptic is to be prepared to accept ideas until they are obviously no longer tenable. I think organised religion has reached this point.

So where do I think religion comes from? Religious leaders would say it is a gift from God. My thinking is that it is a natural consequence of being a sociable animal. All natural things including plants, animals, and humans have a basic instinct to survive. All living things will cling onto life in an attempt to pass on their genes to the next generation. Somewhere along the evolutionary path we humans must have encountered the earth-shattering discovery that we were *aware* that we existed. Questions are then asked: "Why am I here?" or "What does it all mean?"

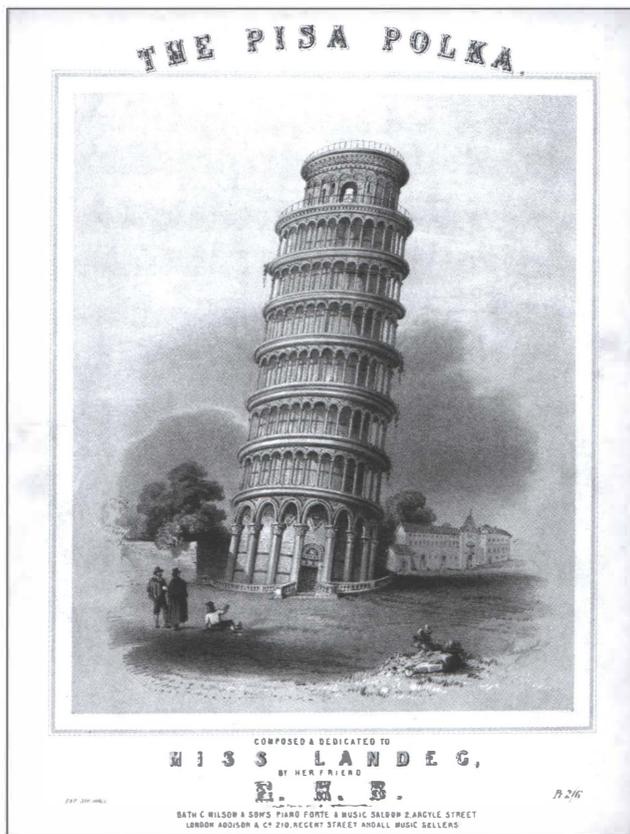
I would imagine that before this point we regularly associated in groups for protection and hunting. The cleverest and strongest would probably have been the leader and would have got all the benefits that this power and authority gave him. The fly in the ointment for the leader was, that when he started to lose his strengths through old age or injury then a new likely lad would chance his arm and take over. This continual change of leadership may not have been in the best long-term interest of the group. So the groups that did best were the ones that thought of the natural forces around them in a personal way. Somehow, with their new-found awareness, they must have convinced themselves of their own importance and that these natural forces were personal and being directed towards them by some superior being or beings because of something they had or had not done. It wouldn't take much thought to realise that if you could convince your group that you alone had the power to protect them, then your position would be unassailable within the group. A few lucky predictions that brought success to the group might lead to the self-delusion of the head-man thinking he was the *chosen one*. When the group became larger it would only be a short step to dividing the responsibility between leader and keeper of the divine secret knowledge and, hey presto, a religion is born. As time goes by, the story of a great leader is handed down from generation to generation. A legend is born and before you know it he becomes a god in his own right.

We all know that in any commercial organisation there is a tendency to build empires. The natural evolution of the religion would be no different. The keepers of 'the secrets' would form a hierarchy and embellish their authority with all sorts of ritual mumbo-jumbo. Organised religion is on its way.

Throughout human history the power of religion to give authority to the king has been used to good effect. Even the present Queen was crowned by the Archbishop of Canterbury. Henry VIII even had to invent a new version of the established religion in order to get his own way. No leader in the modern western world could be elected unless he paid homage to the main religion of his country. You can't imagine a prime minister of Great Britain saying "I never go to church. I just don't believe in it". Now I don't know if they do

or do not believe in religion, but the happy cynic in me can't help thinking that our leaders like to have the cosy authority of religion to back up whatever they want to do. It gives them the moral high ground.

Right! The time has come for everyone to release their sense of humour and think about the practical side of what we think religion is for, and what we think happens to us after we 'pass on'. Here are some of my thoughts.

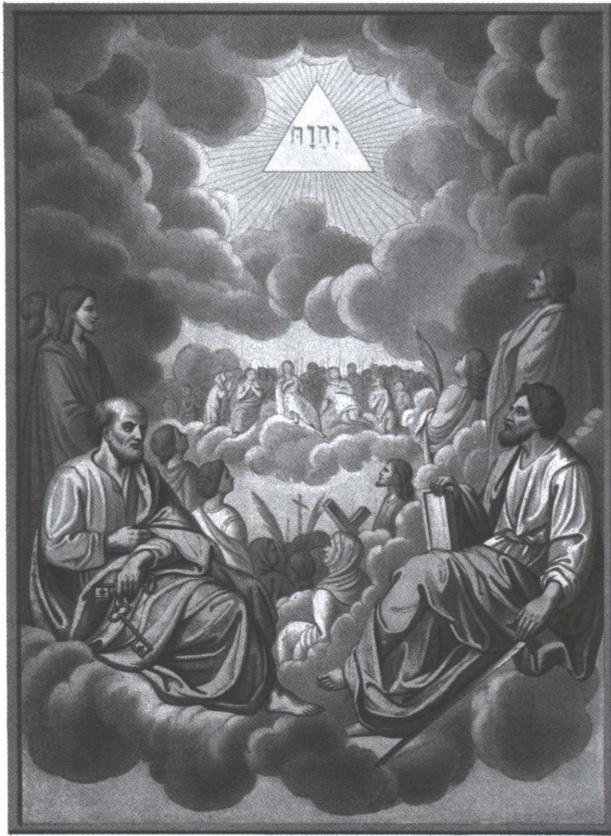


*Should you believe that the Leaning Tower of Pisa exists – even if you have never actually seen it?*

Religion as it seems to be presented to the masses: God sends down his messenger or son to teach us to be good and responsible people because up until then we had been getting it all wrong. The messenger or son has to go through all sorts of suffering and dies to save us all. Disciples are recruited and they in turn recruit followers who in the name of God go out and try to convert others, whether they like it or not, by force if necessary. All sorts of rituals and prayers are invented which seem to be used to 'please' or get their requests through to God. God is presumably a little deaf, or just gets bored with the same old ritual and doesn't pay too much attention. God never replies, except under certain circumstances. Certain people who say that God speaks to them are sometimes locked up in mental institutions or receive medical help. Others who can keep a straight face and look the part are believed and made saints. All pretty things are made by God. Sunsets, classical music, plump nice looking babies, baby seals etc. All things ugly are part of the Devil's work (where did he come from?). Natural disasters, disease, deformed babies, cockroaches and rock and

roll. Hang on, I like rock and roll!

Miracles are gifts from God: If you have the right attitude, pray enough, or visit some shrine like Lourdes, you may get lucky and be 'cured'. Now, I would be first in line to bow down and worship if somebody went to Lourdes without legs and suddenly they were jumping up and down with a new pair. Now that *would* be a miracle. But it never happens.



Heaven can sometimes get a little bit boring ...

Life after Death: It seems we will 'enjoy' eternal life in heaven. From this we may draw the conclusion that there won't be any need for food or drink. All of the people who have dedicated their lives to producing wonderful food and developing perfect wines will be at a loose end. Also redundant will be anyone who has a profession or skill of any kind, as there will be no need for work. There will also be no need for reproduction. I'm not sure whether religious leaders believe they will continue with their rituals and worship after they die. If they *do* think that worship and prayer will be needed, then it seems that this will be the only game in town. Human nature being what it is – always looking for something new – we will soon get very bored. I know this sounds flippant and a bit simplistic, but I don't hear any message coming from organised religions about how they expect things to be in heaven.

Everyone is equal in Heaven: This one I must admit is

a little confusing. I'm not quite sure if there is a pecking order in heaven. Do the holiest people get the most benefits? Does a pope or archbishop have a better after life than a priest or an ordinary believer? If everyone is equal in heaven then this creates a problem. What is meant by equal? Take a member of a royal or wealthy family. He has had a life where everything has been taken care of. If he finds that in heaven he is *equal* he will perceive his new situation as being pretty grim. We as ordinary people might find things better than we expected. Someone from a third world country would indeed find it heaven. So does the standard room in heaven have one bathroom with a nice balcony? The believer will probably say that heaven is always slightly better than our personal expectations but it is a mystery. This is a cop out! Come on you prophets and spiritualists – next time you speak to someone on the other side ask this one for me, "Are there any nice, cosy, country pubs in heaven?"

What about the future?: At the time when most religions were starting out, there seemed to be lots of direct communication and visitations by angels. Nobody ever asked about the future. You would think that someone would have had the sense to ask about the future of the human race and what technological wonders would be in store for them. The prophets never seem to have asked why God created billions of stars and planets just like ours. God never seems to have mentioned that our world is just one of countless others.

Now if you've got this far, some of you are no doubt thinking this is all a bit childish and simplistic. Then tough. I like my logic simple and I like my evidence straightforward. After 60 years I have found that if something cannot be explained in a way that anyone can understand, or if there is a large amount of small print, then you can be pretty sure somebody is trying to pull the wool over your eyes. Organised religion gives the impression that its members are on the end of a very bad telephone line. Only they are able to understand what is being said and they are the only ones that can interpret the message to the hard of hearing: you and me.

So what *do* I believe in? If I were a betting man I would have to go for oblivion. The one thing you can say about oblivion is that it is final. When you die there is nothing. That means there is no knowledge that you have died or that you are dead. You have no feelings or thoughts so you cannot be unhappy about it. A true sort of heaven. On the other hand, being a bit of an egotist and being a product of the natural will to survive, I would like to think that I carry on into an interesting next life, but not as organised religion explains it. At the moment the positive sceptic in me leans towards quantum and the 'many worlds' theory. This theory has many hilarious consequences, but that's another story ...

**Douglas George** is 61 years old and for all of his working life was involved in the travel industry. Early retirement has given him the time to research and question accepted beliefs, religious or otherwise. Douglas states that among his many qualifications he has now managed to complete his Masters Degree in Cynicism. His wife, Marion, says that among his hobbies is "shouting at the television".

## Rhyme and Reason

Steve Donnelly



### Casting the first stone . . .

THE TROUBLE WITH bringing up kids is that they end up having some of the attributes of their parents. In my case, having always tried to encourage my children to think logically and avoid irrational and superstitious beliefs, this has had the unfortunate consequence of ending up with children (now adults) who (horror of horrors) have the temerity to query the rationality of their father's behaviour.

Like most tea drinkers, I have my preferred way of preparing the beverage. An absolutely essential part of my ritual is (of course) warming the pot and then bringing the pot to the kettle (never the kettle to the pot) to ensure that the water (which should have just boiled) hits the leaves at a temperature as close to 100 °C as possible. I chose the word "ritual" in the previous sentence advisedly, because when one of my daughters used the word "fusspot" rather than "teapot" in connection with my tea making and asked why all this was necessary, I realised that I did not know either from a theoretical or an empirical point of view whether it actually makes any difference. OK, I have read that boiling the water for any length of time removes dissolved oxygen from the water – but does this really affect the brew? And would a 5°C difference in the temperature of the water (say) have any influence whatever on the taste? I have no idea, and maybe sometime in the near future, I will try to carry out some experiments to find out. However, the point that was brought home by the exchange with my daughter was that I, who pride myself on my lack of superstitious beliefs, clearly am guilty of engaging in behaviour which at the very least is not based on rational principles, every time I make myself a cuppa. And yet I have to say I am not very tolerant of superstitious behaviour in others – particularly fellow scientists.

An example of my intolerance occurred in the last year of existence of the Soviet Union when I spent a month on a scientific exchange visit in what is now Latvia – working on some experiments with a Russian colleague, Anatoly. At the end of my visit, given the

extreme shortage at that time of many items that were common consumer goods in the west, I went through my possessions to ensure that I left with my friend anything that might be useful to him and that I could easily replace on my return home. I therefore handed him a tube of toothpaste and one of anti-fungal (athlete's foot) cream, a can of shaving foam, and (and this is the crux of the story) a pack of Bic disposable razors. Anatoly gratefully accepted the first three items but balked completely at accepting the razors. When I asked why, he explained that he could not accept a gift of anything that included a sharp blade as this would

bring him bad luck. I could not believe that my friend – a physicist, an atheist and someone extremely intolerant of sloppy thinking in the context of his research – could possibly be serious. But he was. However, he had an easy way out of the dilemma – provided that I was prepared to accept payment for the razors (even a couple of kopecks would have been OK) then he would be able to accept them without bringing death and

destruction on him and his kin. Intolerant sceptic that I was (and probably still am) I steadfastly refused to this superstitious 'get-out' and the result was that my razors travelled back to the UK the following day. (In my own defense, I have to say that Anatoly has always sported a luxuriant beard so that this may not have been a major loss to him).

Perhaps I am just mellowing with age, but I would like to suggest that every sceptic, particularly anyone (like me) openly critical of irrational behaviour, should quietly reflect on his or her own behaviour before criticising anyone else. In particular, we should perhaps all query the beliefs that we hold dear, whether they be related to tea-making, politics, health or anything else. Is it really reasonable for us, for instance, to take people to task for their beliefs regarding complementary medicine, Feng Shui or horoscopes if we ourselves have quaint tea-making practices, won't allow open umbrellas in the house and always fill in the lottery form with the same lucky pen. If we are unable to eliminate our own (small?) irrationalities are we really justified in railing against those of the people around us?



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



## Philosopher's Corner

Julian Baggini

**THIS MAY NOT** sound like a very inviting way to start a column, but sometimes I bore myself. I don't mean that I get bored by my own company. I mean that sometimes I say or think something that just makes me want to yell, "For chrissakes just give it a rest!"

Here's an example. I recently interviewed the brilliant novelist Philip Pullman and as part of my preparation I read his hugely enjoyable *His Dark Materials* trilogy. Pullman shares my broadly humanist convictions, so I found myself enjoying the way in which this children's tale criticises organised religion. But then Pullman shows a very sympathetic character, a scientist called Mary, using the I Ching. True, Mary is a little embarrassed by this, but she does think there's some value to it.

Now this is a work of fiction set in a fantasy world of parallel universes, written within a framework that I generally find congenial. But still it bothered me that the I Ching – an ancient Chinese parlour game, thought by some to be a means of divining fortune – should appear in a favourable light. I hate to see succour given to mystical nonsense.

Such botheration bores me. I really don't want to be the kind of joyless, hard-nosed rationalist who can never just go along with things. The constant need I seem to feel to question and challenge even wears me out. What it must do to other people who have to endure my company I can only guess. I suspect that it makes me something between trying and insufferable.

Pullman gave a perfectly reasonable explanation of the appearance of the I Ching in his books. He sees it as functioning rather like Rorschach inkblot tests. "They give us a usefully random set of notions which can free the creative part of our minds, the bit that's not rational, to find things that we otherwise wouldn't find," he told me.

Shouldn't that have finally shut up the sceptical nag inside me? Maybe, but it didn't. Because although Pullman may be right and there can be a point to doing something like the I Ching even if one has no belief in its powers of divination, we all know that belief in the supernatural is sustained by clutching at straws. People don't make the kind of careful distinctions Pullman or his character Mary do. What people do is see the I Ching being treated favourably and think, "A-ha! There is something in it, you see!"

You don't believe me? I have known people who believe in ghosts who, having read a newspaper article about a scientific investigation into a 'haunting' that

provided a non-supernatural explanation of the strange goings on, drew the conclusion that scientists are close to finding clear evidence that ghosts exist. It's as though they only see the words "scientists", "evidence" "ghosts", ignore the rest, and thus conclude what they want.

Similarly, documentaries that reach sceptical conclusions, such as the recent *Horizon* programme debunking homeopathy, can paradoxically help to keep the myths alive. Because their narratives work by building up the 'mystery', this, rather than the brief but damning conclusion, is what gets remembered. Especially when the misleading voice-over utters words to the effect that the study leaves homeopathy back where it started: an unexplained mystery. No it doesn't! It leaves it utterly in shreds!

So the bore in me cannot be silenced. I will not 'let it go' because belief in the kind of nonsense sceptics abhor feeds on whatever scraps it can get hold of. Even a tiny morsel that, examined properly, does not provide evidence for the paranormal, can, in the hungry eyes of someone desperate to believe, provide enough nourishment to sustain or deepen their illusions.

Does that mean the bore in me is vindicated? Not quite. Being exercised by relatively minor infringements of good sense can be bad for several reasons. First, it is a sign of intolerance. Tolerance is not always a virtue. We should not tolerate domestic violence, anti-social behaviour or the teaching of creationism in schools as science. But the fact that toleration has its limits does not mean it is not generally a good thing.

This links with the second problem, which is that to get so worked up so easily is a sign that one is perhaps too confident about what constitutes good sense in the first place.

The third problem is that it is simply counter-productive. Conserve your energy for the battles that really count. If you must challenge people, challenge them about something that is at the heart of their beliefs, not the periphery. It may be annoying that a sensible person reads the horoscopes, supposedly 'for fun', but also, you suspect, because a bit of them thinks there might be something in it. But to make this a big issue won't affect their lives much, even if they end up agreeing with you. Worse, it might make you seem like an intolerant, over-confident bore. I might be able to live with that, because it's true. But fellow sceptics who end up being tarred by the same brush may not be so understanding.

*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



I AM WRITING this contribution while enjoying a break in the Forest of Dean: more precisely in a cottage near Littledean. By the time you read this, the 11th European Skeptics Congress in London will have taken place. This bi-annual Congress is hosted by ASKE under the auspices of the European Council of Skeptical Organisations (ECSO) and sponsored by CSICOP and *The Skeptic* (i.e. this periodical and not the American one). ASKE is very grateful for the support of CSICOP in promoting the event. *The Skeptic*, in the form of Mike Hutchinson, provided invaluable assistance in enabling payments of registration fees to be made by credit card. Subscribers to *The Skeptic* who registered for the Congress should have picked up a voucher from the Reception Desk allowing a £3 reduction on their next subscription. (If you registered and missed this, please let me know and I shall send you a voucher.) Registrants who were not already subscribers to *The Skeptic* were allowed a similar discount on their first subscription. We are also grateful to Michael Shermer and the US Skeptics Society for publicising the Congress.

This is a good place to express my thanks to certain individuals for their role in planning and organising the Congress. I have already referred to the assistance of Mike Hutchinson. Chris French and his colleagues at Goldsmiths College have been consistently helpful, notably in the business of publicising the event in the media. Julia Santomauro has been especially helpful in organising the Congress Dinner. Barry Karr of CSICOP has provided immense assistance in publicising the event. (At the time of writing, CSICOP is sponsoring the attendance of five individuals, namely Barry Karr, Paul Kurtz, Ray Hyman, Barry Beyerstein and Mike Hutchinson.) Tony Youens assisted in collecting registration forms (but at the last moment was unable to attend the Congress). All speakers deserve thanks, especially our invited speakers Edzard Ernst, Robert Morris and Leslie Walker, and a special guest speaker Dorothy Rowe. My wife Valerie Heap has provided much secretarial support. Amardeo Sarma and Martin Mahner of ECSO central office have been extremely helpful in their advice and in liaising with the sceptical societies on the continent.

At present we are considering whether to arrange for Congress papers to be available on either the ASKE or the ECSO website, or possibly both. Not all the papers will be available: I have made it clear to speakers that

they have a choice in this matter. It is likely, however, that all abstracts will be put on the ASKE website. By the time you read this, decisions concerning these arrangements will probably have been made so you may wish to check the two websites if you are keen to download this information ([www.aske.org.uk](http://www.aske.org.uk) and [www.ECSO](http://www.ECSO) websites).

So the show is now over. What next for ASKE? I hope that 2004 will see a substantial increase in membership. With the task of organising the Congress now out of the way, likewise the tedium of editing a book, I now intend to devote more of my own time to ASKE. But more of that next time.

### ASKE and the Media

One of the functions that ASKE attempts to fulfil is to provide journalists with the names of members whom they may consult on topics that have come up in the news or on the subject of articles or programmes on TV or radio (see ASKE website). Of course, some members are well known in any case for their expertise and are consulted directly. Sometimes the request is to appear on a live programme tomorrow or the day after – often a discussion involving a studio audience (e.g. the *Kilroy* show). Even if a person is able to attend, the format is not always satisfactory. Several programmes have featured Tony Youens, who, amongst other things, specialises in the art of cold reading. The last of these was on Channel 4 on Saturday August 23rd, most of the evening's programme being devoted to the question of whether it is possible to contact the dead. For the purposes of this programme, Tony gave a 2-hour training session to an actor who was subsequently able to amaze his sitter with his apparent psychic powers. Unfortunately, Tony was unable to present a planned 'mini-workshop' at the Congress on cold reading. A workshop on cold reading is something that ASKE could organise if there is sufficient interest. If any readers would be interested in this in principle, I would be grateful if they could let me know.

### The Skeptical Intelligencer

Do not forget that the next annual issue of the *Skeptical Intelligencer* will be dedicated to 'sightings of unusual creatures'. Contributions, however small and informal (including recent reports in the media) are welcome.

**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



## THE SEARCH FOR FREE ENERGY

### The Scientist, the Madman, the Thief and their Lightbulb

by Keith Tutt

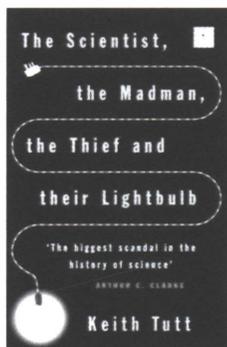
Simon & Schuster, £7.00, ISBN 0743449762

This fascinating book covers a good selection, though admittedly not all, of the recent scientists and would-be scientists who have hoped to succeed in the search for free energy. In fact, it was first published as *The Search for Free Energy* in 2001, but the spin doctors must have felt that the title didn't have enough jazz.

Tesla gets a chapter and is the only one who has actually contributed really useful products to life as we know it. Most exciting to me was the news that cold-fusion lives, that over 600 papers report independent tests which duplicate the initial Pons-Fleischmann effect, and that the hot-fusion crowd are attempting to suppress the truth. Did you know that?

There are ten interesting appendices, a good glossary and a proper index and list of references. Dr Hal Puthoff, whom most of us will remember as having been taken in big time by Uri Geller, is quoted as an authority several times. Other than that I have no major criticism.

We are not told anything about the author, which is a pity, as he writes well and presents good cases for the pros and cons of the field, but he should look up the meaning of the word 'prolific'. Remind me to subscribe to *New Energy News* and *Infinite Energy* magazines and buy some *Blacklight Power* stock!



**Frank Chambers**

## A SCEPTICS' CHAMPION

### A Devil's Chaplain (Selected essays)

by Richard Dawkins

Weidenfeld and Nicholson, £16.99, ISBN 0297829734

Dawkins has done so much to promote the scientific and sceptical outlook that a new book from him should automatically be of interest to readers of this journal. This is a collection of short essays, reviews and articles that ranges beyond discussions of evolutionary theory to consider education, belief, religion, and Africa.

The consistent effort to make important and subtle ideas crystal-clear shines from every page, and elevates

what might otherwise be mere didacticism to the level of literature. This is further enlivened by a wonderful bluntness and belligerence, as, for instance, when he discusses the vogue for claiming that religion and science are somehow partners in understanding the universe: "Convergence? Only when it suits. To an honest judge, the alleged convergence between religion and science is a shallow, empty, hollow, spin-doctored sham."

There are writings on the meme, Dawkins' putative cultural replicator, including an essay on religion entitled *Viruses of the Mind*, but we may not be ready for memes if we haven't yet fully taken on board the original Darwinian message about our own biology: "We admit that we are like apes, but we seldom realize that we are apes ... There is no natural category that includes chimpanzees, gorillas and oranges but excludes humans."

Dawkins waspishly applies the evolutionary theory of 'costly signaling', put forward to explain the metabolically expensive displays of courting creatures, to the somewhat less charming case of extravagant religious beliefs: "Is it possible that some religious doctrines are favoured not in spite of being ridiculous but precisely because they are ridiculous? Any wimp in religion could believe that bread symbolically represents the body of Christ, but it takes a real, red-blooded Catholic to believe something as daft as the transubstantiation."

Shape-shifting lizards, anyone?

**Paul Taylor**

## A VISION OF SUSTAINABILITY

### The Hidden Connections: A Science for Sustainable Living

by Fritjof Capra

Flamingo, £8.99, ISBN 000655158 0

Fritjof Capra is a physicist who has produced a series of popular books, starting with *The Tao of Physics* in 1975, and moving into biology and ecology. In this book, Capra is trying to outline a grand theory of life, the mind, society and the material world using complexity theory (or, as he often calls it, 'nonlinear dynamics').

The first third of the book is a summary of the science and social science needed for Capra's vision. Although Capra keeps the explanations non-technical, it is fairly indigestible, using many new terms such as 'autopoiesis' and 'neuropheonomenology'. Throughout, the key idea is that new understandings of the real world must involve complex networks with non-linear dynamic linkages.

In the latter part of the book, Capra tries to apply his ideas to the world at large. We learn that the bosses of giant corporations are deeply troubled, that global cap-

italism is creating much poverty and destroying the environment, that modern genetic engineering is extremely dangerous, and that environmentalists are trying hard to find alternatives. In his final chapter 'Changing the Game' he spells out what an environmentally sound world might look like.

Capra's vision is impressive, but the book has several problems. The arguments in the second part really do not follow from the science in the first: occasionally throwing in references to networks and nonlinear dynamics does not help much. Further, much of the science in the first part is speculative: it might turn out to be right, but it might lead nowhere. Finally, Capra is spelling out his own vision, and so alternative viewpoints and criticisms receive little attention.

**Martin Bridgstock**

## IGNORANCE IS BLISS?

### Everything You Know is Wrong: the Disinformation Guide to Secrets and Lies

by Russ Kick (Editor)

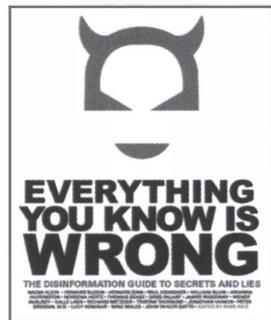
The Disinformation Company Ltd, £17.99, ISBN 0971394202

This is a compilation of various articles on various subjects by various authors, so the first thing I looked for was the Index. There isn't one. So I browsed around, looking for subjects I knew something about.

Kick, reviewing a book on botanical influences on illness, writes: "I keep hearing the refrain, mainly from people who like to call themselves 'skeptics', that there is not one bit of medical evidence supporting natural, alternative medical therapies. This is absolutely and unequivocally wrong. Anyone who says it is either 1) lying, or 2) doesn't know his or her ass from a hole in the ground."

Kick is also impressed by Peter R. Breggin, MD, and includes one of his articles, as well as writing a highly favourable review of one of his books. What you will not find here is Quackwatch's assessment of Breggin as "a harmful nuisance whose views can ... frighten people away from helpful treatment". Nor will you find the words of the Milwaukee judge who found Breggin's observations in court "totally without credibility. I can almost declare him ... a fraud or at least approaching that".

Micky Z, who gives us A Closer Look at the Meat-based Diet, tells us confidently that "contrary to popular opinion ... human beings were not designed to consume animals"; that eating one egg a day raises your cholesterol



level by 12%; that 40% of cancers are related to diet; that "if the beef for your burger came from the rainforest, roughly 660 pounds of living matter is destroyed"; and that Big Mac "contributes to global warming".

And there is the usual rant against nuclear power by a member of the Union of Concerned Scientists.

There are a few pieces in this uncritical mixture that might give you pause for useful thought (the Olympic industry; the war against drugs; untouchables; the menace of watchdog committees). But unfortunately, too many of the reference sources turn out to be pamphlets and newsletters by the same few propaganda groups.

All in all, it is a patchy collection. But if you decide to turn to it for information, you should be wary of what Russ Kick knows: quite a lot of it is wrong.

**Lewis Jones**

## BULLDOG BREED

### Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century

by Angelique Richardson

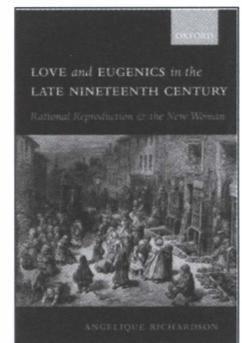
Oxford University Press, 2002, £45, ISBN 0198187009

Nowadays Nowadays eugenics is a dirty word, calling to mind Nazi experiments and compulsory sterilisation. But a hundred years ago it was a hotly debated topic. There was great concern over perceived racial degeneration in Britain, particularly the prevalence of hereditary diseases and the ill-health and poor physique of large slum families. Eugenecists argued that selective breeding was the answer to both problems. If only the healthiest people bred, the race would improve.

Some commentators argued that any woman wishing to marry should choose the husband most likely to give her healthy children, disregarding such complicating factors as love and sexual attraction. Having as many healthy babies as possible was seen as a woman's duty and destiny. *Fin de siècle* feminist writers such as Mona Caird, George Egerton and Sarah Grand took up this debate, exploring the eugenics question in short stories, novels and journalism.

Richardson's book examines these women's work, exploring ways in which the eugenics debate informed wider debates on the role of women and the nature of marriage. Some of the issues have uncomfortable resonances with today's arguments about genetic screening and 'designer babies'. Are we as different from the Victorians as we would like to think?

**Lewis Jones**





# LETTERS

## Defusing diffusion

I would like to comment briefly (and belatedly; I am newly returned to the UK!) on the exchange in *The Skeptic* between Wellman (issue 8.5), Eccott (issues 12.3-4) and Morrell (issue 13.2). Following mainstream sceptical archaeologists such as Feder, Wellman inveighed against diffusionist 'fantastic archaeology', making many strong points, but arguably coming across as rather indiscriminate. Eccott, who represents the more careful brand of American diffusionism in the UK, made this very point in a scholarly manner but with varying degrees of persuasiveness. Morrell carried the argument forward in respect of one of Eccott's weaker cases, that of the non-standard claims of Schoch, West *et al.* on the age of the Sphinx.

I know Eccott's work and I have some respect for him; I think he is right to say that one must distinguish the fringe from the merely controversial, and that some diffusionist ideas do warrant more serious attention than they have recently received. For example, almost everyone in New Zealand archaeology now seems to accept the once unsettling view that the kumara was brought from South America, probably by wide-ranging Polynesians. There are also provocative cases in the Americas; the best known is that of Kennewick Man. On the other hand, the evidence adduced in support of diffusionism in my own field, historical linguistics and epigraphy, is much weaker than enthusiasts generally imagine; they are a long way off the pace in theoretical terms. And, as Morrell shows, Eccott is one-sided himself on the Sphinx.

In an appendix to his latest book (a diffusionist account of pyramids around the world), Schoch

now attempts to rebut his critics on this issue – including those mentioned by Morrell. I leave it to Egyptologists and geologists to respond to this passage. But in the body of this work Schoch's discussion is again fearfully weak and tentative – as well as perfunctory – in the area which I myself know best. In fact, I have yet to see a persuasive linguistic case for a dramatically diffusionist hypothesis. Even Oppenheimer (*Eden In The East*) is weak here, as is his linguist ally Manansala.

**Mark Newbrook, Wirral**

## How should we judge scientists?

Anna Järvinen's says in her article *Psychoanalysis: Science or Pseudoscience?* (issue 16.1) that "the majority of psychologists hold that psychoanalysis is a pseudo science" and that "perhaps the most transparent evidence that Freud is wrong is that he is very difficult for us to understand". By chance it arrived at the same time as the April 2003 issue of *The Psychologist*, the journal of the British Psychological Society. An earlier issue had quoted a survey by the American Psychological Association, which asked its members who were the greatest psychologists of the 20th century. They voted: 1) Skinner, 2) Piaget, and 3) Freud. When asked the same question, British psychologists voted: 1) Piaget, 2) Skinner, and 3) Freud.

So have American and British psychologists fallen for a very difficult to understand pseudoscientist, or should scientists, particular the greatest ones, be judged by additional criteria, as well as those set out in her article?

What the top three have in common is that each of them pioneered

a new method of gathering data. Let us remember that when Tomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* said science developed through the introduction of new paradigms, he meant interpretations based on novel methods of collecting data – the telescope, the microscope, X-rays etc. By creating new paradigms Skinner initiated behavioural, Piaget cognitive, and Freud insight psychology.

Skinner collected data through systematically observing how changing defined variables increased or decreased the probability of animals and humans acting in a specific way. Piaget observed how children manipulated materials to answer his questions and how they explained their answers.

Freud began as a neurologist, but frustrated by his failure to explain and treat some patients' problems, he let them 'free associate' that is, say whatever came into their head without editing or dismissing it. From this data he identified how 'transference', that is the unconscious projection of our ideas and feelings on to others, creates and perpetuates our anxieties and frustrations.

Freud's interpretations may be quoted as if they were dogmatic conclusions, but to understand and benefit from his novel method, we need to read his works in chronological order. Then we can see how often he tests an interpretation, finds it wanting, and replaces it with fresh insights. In the 1890s, for example, he interpreted the problems of some of his female patients as the effect of childhood sexual abuse – effects of which they were completely unaware. His interpretations were stubbornly resisted, but even if grudgingly accepted produced no tangible improvements.

So he changed his interpretations.

Freud moved on, but others do not. For example, from the late 1980s onwards, some 'recovered memory' therapists claimed Freud in support of the theory he had rejected. They could produce no corroborative data, but due to their dogmatism, troubled adults were estranged from their families and parents in their fifties and sixties found themselves charged and sometimes jailed for 'crimes' supposedly committed thirty or even forty years ago.

To progress, science needs bold and imaginative individuals like Freud, Piaget and Skinner to identify and exploit new methods. Once the value of these methods has been demonstrated, others can use them to devise experiments to test, modify and refine interpretations.

**Joshua Fox, London**

### Another kind of scepticism?

I write to convince you of nothing other than your scepticism. The fact that we exist with rationale and intellect demands scepticism when considering belief in anything. Far too many people in the world today live, move, and exist by blind faith – the faith that doesn't know why it believes what it believes. It just believes, void of considerations for reason, and void of finding unity in the facts. Consequently, I find myself in celebration of scepticism – true and honest scepticism, that is – a stance you'll only find supported by the worldview that is defined by the teachings of Jesus, the prophet and teachings of which no credible historian denies. For in this worldview lies the confidence of where true scepticism is led. But why the confidence?

Leaving all scriptures and 'holy books' aside, there are many life questions that can only be logically and coherently explained in the

context of an infinite, personal, all-knowing, transcendent, eternal being – the person many of us know as God through the person of Jesus Christ. For example, life's meaning is one of those questions – a question that has been addressed by many a philosopher as being life's fundamental pursuit with all questions deemed secondary – and here is what the honest sceptic will find: where choices and will exist, meaning exists. Therefore, life unquestionably has meaning as a co-existent, and where meaning exists, purpose also exists, which posits a person. For where you have purpose you always have a person.

Consequently, since we didn't create ourselves and since many within the scientific community no longer hold to evolution due to its mathematical impossibilities, life's meaning can only logically and coherently be explained in the context of an infinite, personal, all-knowing, transcendent, eternal being.

Another example is the state of the universe – a universe that cries out for definition by design. For how else could one reasonably account for how such a complex system of constants and physical quantities constantly and consistently exist and remain in their only allowable states with such simplicity as has to be attached to them? Only where unity and diversity are defined in the first cause can such a system be explained, and it is here that the worldview as defined by Jesus stands alone. For that worldview has unity and diversity coexistent in its first cause – God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit – unity and diversity in the first cause – the Triune God.

My last example is that of the existence of evil. Any rational, normal-working mind posits the existence of evil, and where evil admittedly exists, good also has to exist.

How else would one define evil if not by contrast to good?

Consequently, where good and evil exist, an absolute moral law has to exist, whereby one differentiates between good and evil, what's right and what's wrong, and where a moral law exists one must posit a moral lawgiver. Only can a worldview that explains and defines the existence of such a law by an infinite, personal, all-knowing, transcendent, eternal being, remain in the balance of reason and coherence without self-contradiction, and also without arguing in a circle.

What the sceptic will find as he systematically searches through life's many philosophical issues is a one-way street leading to the one true God. Therefore, I celebrate your scepticism if you're the sceptic not driven by existentialism but by your honest search for answers. For my God has promised, "You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart," and this is what the honest sceptic by definition is: one who searches with all his heart. For truth *must be* his bottom line unless his scepticism is a mere mask he actually wears on the face of atheism, a position that stands in the puddle of the indefensible absolute negative. For only an infinite, all-knowing, transcendent, eternal being is capable of proclaiming the non-existence of an infinite, all-knowing, transcendent, eternal being.

In closing, I must share with you that once you find God you'll find that He has given us His written word that is amazingly inerrant if viewed through His eyes – full of fulfilled prophecy and truth that only inspiration can define. It is through this word you will find the directions to a personal relationship with Him (see John 1:12; 3:15-18; Romans 5:1; 10:9-10, 13). May God bless you in your search for answers.

**Jonathan Poe, Benton, Kentucky**

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.

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