

Volume 17 Number 4
Winter 2004

The **Skeptic**



Freud and Religion

Also in this issue:

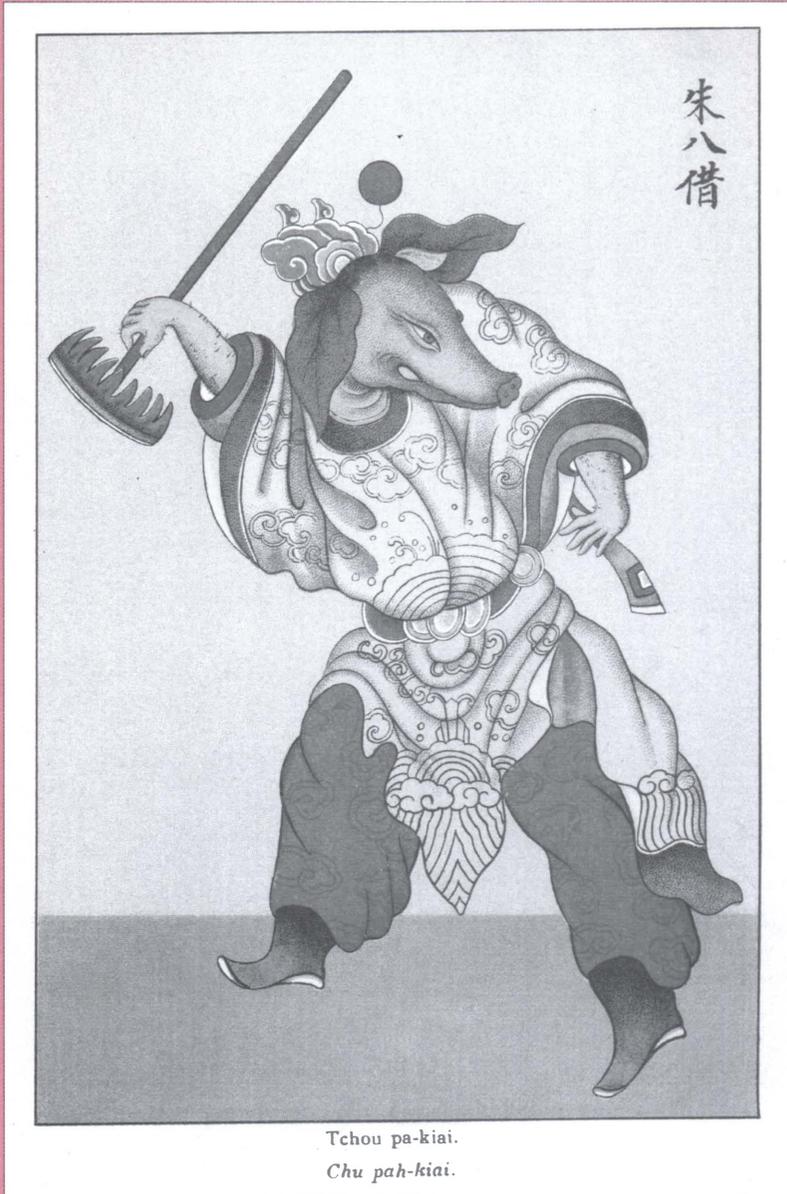
Motivated Distortion of Traumatic Memories

How (not) to Talk to Aliens

Scepticism and the Kennedy Assassination

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

Hilary Evans' Paranormal Picture Gallery



WHEN THE GODS SLIP UP

The Pope may be infallible, but the Gods themselves can make mistakes just like the rest of us. When the time came for the Chinese bonze Tchou Pa-Kiai to be reincarnated, some heavenly official had made a boob in the paperwork, and the poor fellow was compelled to live his next life half-man, half-pig. No wonder he was liable to periodic fits of irritation during which his friends feared for their skins.

[Unnamed Chinese artist in Henri Dore's *Superstitions en Chine*, 1914]

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



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Editorial

Victoria Hamilton and Chris French



HELLO AND WELCOME to issue number 17.4 of *The Skeptic*. We have a varied collection of articles for you in this issue.

Our first article assesses Freud's psychoanalytic perspective on the development of religion. As Ian Fairholm points out, Freud was fascinated by the topic of religious beliefs. He believed he saw parallels between religious behaviour and the neurotic behaviour that characterised many of his patients. While many readers of *The Skeptic* will be aware that Freud's own theories have often been the subject of strong criticism from commentators in terms of their lack of scientific validity, Fairholm highlights what he sees as both the strengths and weaknesses in Freud's approach to this issue.

Although Freud's name does not appear in our second article, by Mark Pendergrast, it still reflects one aspect of his legacy. Is it possible that events can occur which are so terrible that memories for such trauma are locked away from consciousness, perhaps to re-emerge years later either spontaneously or as a result of therapy? Or is it more likely that such apparent memories are unintentionally constructed false memories? Pendergrast is in no doubt that the latter is usually, perhaps always, the case.

Mark Newbrook then considers the evidence relating to Mary Rodwell's claims concerning alien languages. He convincingly argues that the evidence presented to date in support of such claims does not even come close to establishing their validity and also provides a valuable insight into the kind of evidence that would be required to do so.

Our final article in this issue presents Jeremy Bojczuk's musings on conspiracy theories surrounding the assassination of John F. Kennedy. We found this article sufficiently interesting (and provocative) to merit publication, but we suspect that some readers may want to take issue with some of the assertions made in this article. Let us know if we are right!

We would also like to take this opportunity to thank *The Skeptic's* previous co-editor, Julia Nunn, for the excellent job she did over several issues. Things are a lot more organised behind the scenes now than they were before Julia took over! It was with great regret that back in February 2004 Julia had to stand down as co-editor due to worsening ill-health. This is the first issue that our new co-editor, Victoria Hamilton, has been involved in producing. Scepticism often seems to be dominated, with a few notable exceptions, by males, so it is a particular pleasure to welcome yet another female co-editor on board!

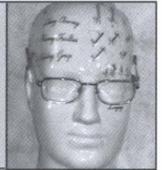
Our (female) founding editor, Wendy Grossman has asked us to draw your attention to www.livejournal.com/users/ukskeptic. And we are more than happy to oblige. If you want the very latest news and views on matters of interest to sceptics, then you really should check this site out.

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, Chris and Victoria



Hits and Misses



All change

In August, the European Environmental Agency released a comprehensive report on Europe's changing climate, and the picture isn't pretty. Alpine plants are being crowded out by lower-altitude species that are creeping upwards along with the tree line, agriculture is likely to move northwards as the south gets drier and hotter, and we can expect to see a lot more catastrophic weather events like flash floods, wild storms, heat waves, droughts, and so on. The good news: fewer people are likely to die in cold snaps. The bad news: more people are likely to die in heat waves, and tick-borne diseases are likely to become a much bigger problem. If we don't change our policies and habits to adapt, we might all be doomed.

Drawing on climate data and research from centres and projects all over Europe, the report doesn't spend much time speculating on how much of global warming is attributed to human activity, because in the end it doesn't really matter compared to whether warming is taking place. By 2050, no one is likely to be arguing about that.

Movie science

One amusement in looking up global climate change as it's likely to affect Europe, is the number of Europe-based sites on the subject that have felt it necessary to post scientific reviews of the recent movie *The Day After Tomorrow*, in which a rapid (say, about 24 hours) shutdown of the thermohaline circulation sends three hyper-hyper hurricanes rampaging through the US and Europe, first massively flooding both regions and then freezing them solid at a speed just slow enough for the movie's heroes to run away and escape. The good news

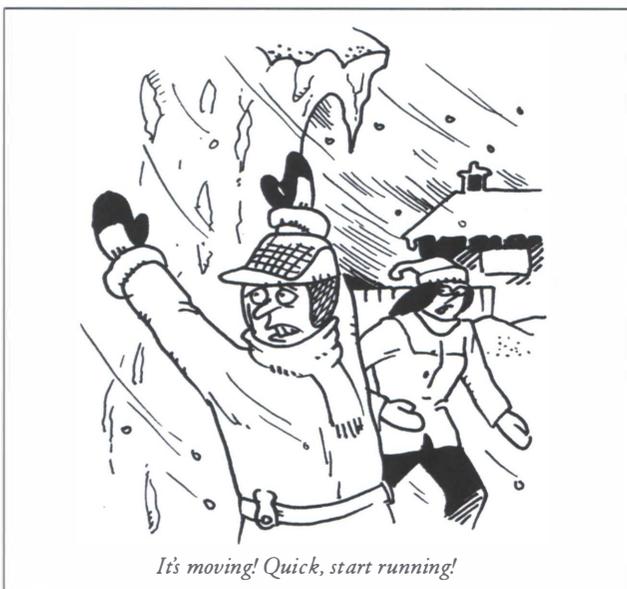
is that the cold front stops at the Mexican border, allowing the US to set up temporary government south of the border, from which location it can grovel to the rest of the world about its having wilfully ignored the warnings about global climate change. What's surprising is that most of these scientific analyses regard the movie as helpful in raising public awareness of the problems we face. By contrast, William Hyde, a paleoclimatologist at the University of North Carolina, who was forced to see the movie when a bunch of people from an online discussion group raised the \$100 he said it would take, posted a lengthy review that made it clear just how laughably silly not only the "science" but the "plot" and "characters" of this movie are. We think a movie that doesn't make scientists giggle is more likely to be helpful in alerting the public. On the other hand, we have to admit that a movie in which the world's climate went to hell over a period of 10,000 years or so might be a little dull to watch. But then, so was *The Day After Tomorrow*. The reviews were much more fun.

Why Johnny can't evolve

Much of the summer was occupied with debates about creationism in schools, which subject gets plenty of attention in this issue of *The Skeptic*, too. The story in brief: the Department of Education, recognizing that a number of schools – many, though not all – in northern inner cities, were failing to give their pupils even the most minimal education, decided to allow private companies, organizations, and individuals to step in. For approximately £2 million, you can buy yourself a state-funded school, and this is precisely what Sir Peter Vardy, a multimillionaire car salesman, did. Vardy, like the principal and at least some of the staff of the first school he funded, is a creationist. At least one journalist who has visited the school says all the staff agree that creationism is not taught there in science lessons. In addition, the school's league table results are impressive. We'd still argue that if the state is funding a school the state should be in charge of deciding what is taught there, and £2 million shouldn't buy you total control, and that the abdication of control is the real story here with creationism being just a detail – but that's a different ball of political wax.

The dating game

Skeptics scratching their heads over finding more lucrative careers may like to take a hint from Dr. James Houran, whose early work included studying hauntings at Edinburgh Castle with Richard Wiseman. Houran recently surfaced in – of all things – a press release promoting an Internet dating site True.com (formerly TrueBeginnings.com), which has taken to publicizing itself *via* bits of media-friendly research. In one such



exercise, Dr James Houran, director of psychological studies for True, found that many single people are depressed by St Valentine's Day – depending on whether or not they were given gifts. In another, he found that celebrity worship led to success in life as people strive to emulate the celebrities they admire. Most recently, Dr Houran has examined the psychometric tests other dating sites claim will make sure-fire matches for their users and found them unscientific. He believes dating sites should allow their methodology to be peer-reviewed – like, of course, True.com.

We found True.com kind of creepy: it boasts that it screens all members through the US's largest criminal database, checks marital status against public records, and will actually prosecute people who lie about their status. We feel that someone who isn't sufficiently well-versed in the online world to be able to tell whether or not the person they're corresponding with is telling the truth probably isn't for us. But our own chain of trust assures us that Dr Houran is a good scientist, and that, yes Virginia, there really are scientifically verifiable relationship compatibility factors.

What isn't clear is whether True.com checks to make sure its members aren't ghosts.

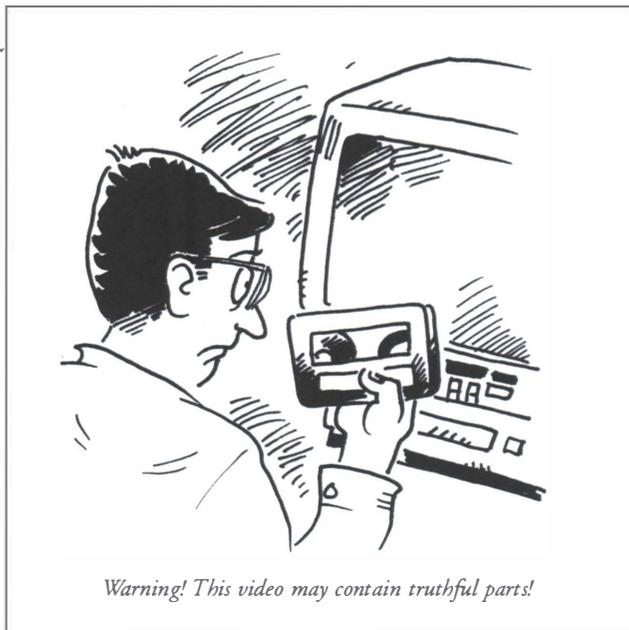
Reality may be out there

Sometimes advertisers seem to go just a little too far in playing with our sense of reality. We have recently noticed a new type of ad, in which real people who are famous fictionalize their own lives. Example: in an ad that runs frequently on Eurosport during major tennis tournaments, a young, blonde woman records a song in a studio, dreaming of her boyfriend, French tennis player Arnaud Clément, and then meets him with ecstatic hugs at the airport when he comes home. Clément is real, and so is the girl: she's Danish singer Natasha Thomas doing her hit "It's Over Now". But Clément's actual girlfriend is the French player Camille Pin. Another example: an ad currently running on US television shows a six-year-old boy hitting tennis balls with American player Taylor Dent. After Dent, mystified, is unreservedly defeated, the kid's parents show up to collect him: they are Steffi Graf and Andre Agassi. Graf and Agassi are, of course, actually married, but their real son, Jaden Gil, is still only about two years old.

A few years back, we heard about an ad campaign that involved getting real actors to ride the tube all day ostentatiously reading and discussing a book whose publicists hoped would become a bestseller. We now see that the American version of the Sci-Fi channel decided to publicize its documentary about film director M Night Shyamalan (*The Sixth Sense, Signs*), who likes to fill his movies with the paranormal, by claiming that the director had turned against the documentary project, which had turned into a "disturbing expose". A month later, Sci-Fi admitted none of that was true, and neither were parts of the documentary. The justifica-

tion: that Shyamalan's films leave moviegoers unsure what is real and what is not, and therefore it was appropriate to make a documentary about his life that did the same thing. We feel that anyone who has trouble telling that Shyamalan's movies are not real probably shouldn't be allowed to make things called documentaries.

Meantime, we can only suggest a rule of thumb. Things in ads: not real. Things in movies: also not real. Things in documentaries: research to make sure.



Psychic development

Interested in licensing is medium Emma King, who was written up in the Edinburgh News when she announced she intended to run in Edinburgh a 15-week course to teach people to become psychics, to add to similar courses she already ran in Glasgow and Dunfermline. According to The Scotsman, King, a 50-year-old mother of four from Glenrothes, also fishes competitively for Scotland. The Scotsman's writer attended a class, which she described as enjoyable, though she seemed surprised that the other attendees were an apparently normal cross-section of the public.

Interestingly, a Google search turns up only these two write-ups, republished in various locations. Surprisingly, for a medium who has claimed to be so successful at her trade that she has advised MPs and celebrities, helped in criminal investigations, and been in business for more than 30 years, King seems to be invisible on the Net. Even the 'Psychic and Medium Society' of which she is president, accredits her courses, and issues a diploma, gets only one hit: www.mariesimpson.com, which is the Web site of San Antonio, Texas-based medium Marie Simpson.

It must be that shyness effect we hear so much about.

Thanks to this issue's clippings contributors: **Rachel Carthy, Sid Rodrigues, Steuart Campbell, Tom Ruffles, Ernest Jackson, the Wizard's Star List, Skeptic News, and Phil McKerracher.** The Skeptic would like to remind clippings contributors to use the magazine's current address, listed on p3, rather than the old PO Box address, which has been phased out.

Skeptic at large . . .

Wendy M Grossman



Creating 'science'

IN GENERAL, sceptics have no position on the subject of God other than who should play Her in the movie. There are sound reasons for this. The philosophical reason is that belief in God is a matter of faith, and faith is not something that can be tested by empirical means. You can tell me that a small, pink, invisible cloud hovers just above your left shoulder and directs you in all your affairs, and I may think you're demented, but there's nothing for me to argue about. If, however, you tell me the cloud communicates with you by hovering in your bedroom at night and raining pink droplets on you, that I can test. We can examine your bedding for pink stains, we can install a camera to watch overnight and review the footage, we can take frequent moisture readings, and we can put down absorbent white paper and see what it shows. If nothing is to be seen and you then claim the rain is invisible, we're back to Square Faith: nothing I can do.

The practical reason is that belief in the paranormal and belief in God do not go hand in hand (even though a number of psychics earnestly tell the media they're 'good people' and as evidence offer their belief in God). If we are arguing against sloppy thinking, pseudoscience, claims that would upend all of science, or simple cheating using known magic tricks, belief in God or the lack thereof is irrelevant. It would be silly to alienate either churchgoers or atheists in debunking such claims.

This principle is most important when dealing with creationism. The push to regard it as a legitimate alternative theory to evolution comes pretty much exclusively from the fundamentalist Christian right. If you read what they themselves say about it, they regard accepting creationism as necessary if people are to accept Jesus and be saved. Adults may be lost causes; children may not be.

The fuss this summer over a few state-funded, privately controlled schools that may be teaching creationism is actually small potatoes. Parents are – rightly – concerned about what their children are being taught in these schools. They are also concerned about their own lack of control of these schools; under this government initiative, the sponsoring organization puts up roughly 10 percent of the initial funding and in return gets almost all the governors' seats. If a generation of children is being taught an utter falsification of science, that is obviously cause for major concern. To believe the tenets of creationism means

jettisoning a great deal of what we know about biology, physics, chemistry, and geology. But the UK government itself is not considering including creationism in the national curriculum, and the percentage of schools at risk of including it is tiny. It's still not a good thing, but one must keep perspective.

The bigger story, which is likely to have broken by the time you read this, is the fact that a number of academic scientists with real jobs in real British universities are also creationists. Their Web sites generally list eminently respectable publications in their own fields, but when you plug their names into Google and do searches, you find the same names and affiliations popping up as contributors to creationist journals, speakers at creationist conferences, and members of creationist groups. One teaches thermodynamics, another studies the AIDS virus, a third is a biologist.

From the creationists' point of view, you can see why they'd be in demand as speakers, too: we have scientists, they have scientists. Most people are not going to understand the difference if it comes down to "My scientists are bigger than your scientists" or "My thermodynamics professor is a more credible source than your thermodynamics professor".

What worries me about all this is the casual way the British folks I've spoken to seem to regard all this. To be sure, the parents of the children whose local state school was being taken over by the Vardy Foundation were upset enough to mount demonstrations, but I think this was as much to do with the clear loss of control over the school to an unaccountable, private foundation as it was to do with the specific fear that the kids would be taught creationism. (Still, it's way ahead of the US, where the parents are more likely to be demanding the removal of evolution from the classroom or the introduction of creation 'science' as a competing 'theory'.)

Most people here say something on the order of, Oh, well, it'll never really take root here. We're too sensible/educated. The US is full of people who are stupid/gullible, and it's a much more religious country. This is an American problem.

You know, that's what they said about alien abductions. Obesity. Email spam. Made-for-TV national leaders. Not every American fad will make inroads over here, but enough of them do that we should not be complacent. This country's being the homeland of Darwin guarantees nothing.

 **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>.

Psychoanalysing God: Freud on Religion

Ian Fairholm discusses Freud, neuroticism and religion

SIGMUND FREUD'S WORK on religion, a subject he seemed immensely fascinated with despite his distaste for it as a modern-day practice, has not fared well under close scrutiny. Here I offer a critical assessment of Freud's ideas about religion, before concluding to what extent they have anything useful to say about religion in the 21st century.

Despite Freud's early medical specialization in neuropathology, it was his later interest in neuroses – their causes and treatment – and his investigation of the unconscious through psychoanalysis that established his reputation.

The basic goal of psychoanalysis is to make the unconscious conscious. This is because Freud believed that the roots of all psychological problems were hidden within the unconscious. Once the unconscious has become conscious, or accessible to the patient, then the cause of his/her problem becomes apparent, enabling the patient to deal with it in a conscious and rational manner. Freud believed that by getting patients to talk freely and without inhibition about their problems, under the guidance of the analyst, they would have insight into their unconscious ideas and motives, enabling them to tackle the previously hidden causes of their problems.

In Freud's view personality is a dynamic system that develops during childhood. During this time assorted goals must be reached and conflicts must be resolved, e.g. the Oedipus complex. This relates to Freud's suggestion that a male child has an unconscious jealousy and fear of his father and a desire for his mother; this creates a conflict for the child, which must be resolved, not externally, but internally. These conflicts, and the consequences that Freud believed resulted from a failure to resolve them, are central to Freud's position on religion.

It may seem difficult to imagine how psychoanalytic theory could have any applications for religion, particularly as Freud, though Jewish by birth and upbringing, did not have any religious faith. Although Freud could not be said to be at all ashamed of his Jewish background, he was in no sense a religious man.

However, although he was neither interested in nor needful of religion for his own sake, he was intensely interested in why other people should need it and why it should have played such a predominant role in human history. He thought he was beginning to find the answers to these questions from evidence provided by his neurotic patients. These patients had failed to resolve successfully their childhood conflicts leading to them being driven below the level of consciousness, into the unconscious. Although temporarily buried there they had appeared in later life, in the form of irrational, 'neurotic' symptoms.

Neuroticism and Religion

Freud saw a resemblance between the behaviour of his neurotic patients and what he believed was the behaviour of religious people. He observed religion as an outsider and used Austrian Roman Catholicism as a model for all religious practice. From this extremely limited approach to the study of religion he came to understand it largely as a matter of the believer performing certain specific practices, observances, ceremonies and rites. Freud believed that this behaviour was similar to the private ceremonials that several of his patients obsessively indulged in, and that the similarities between the two types of behaviour were too great to be accounted for by mere coincidence. Following this line of reasoning, Freud found several similarities between the neu-

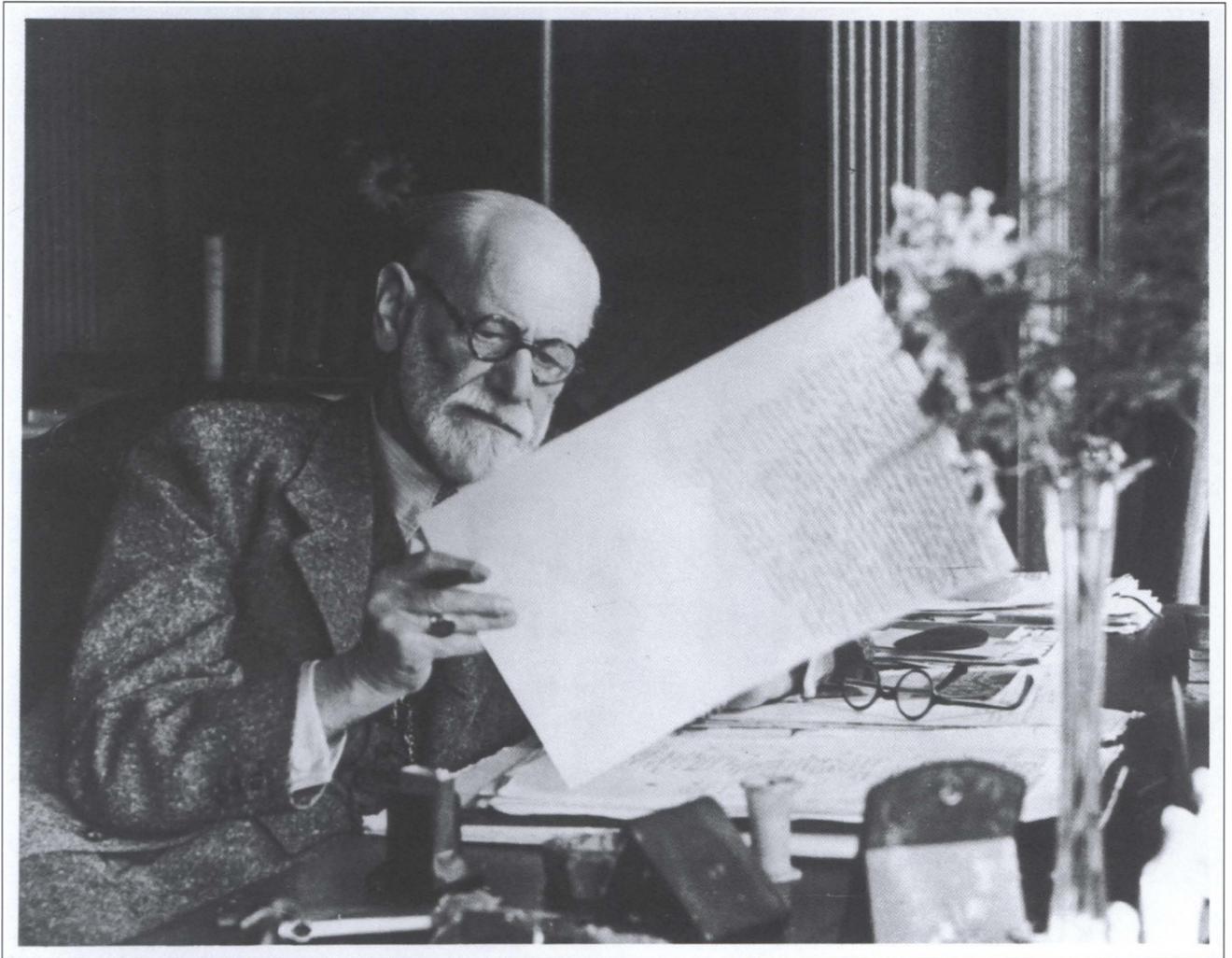
Freud saw a resemblance between the behaviour of his neurotic patients and what he believed was the behaviour of religious people

rotic and the religious person, e.g. a guilty conscience resulting from any omission of the neurotic or religious person's ceremonial; the treatment of the ceremonial as something isolated from everything else in life; necessary performance of acts of penance to maintain the subject's peace of mind; and what Freud called the 'mechanism of physical displacement', by which he meant a mental value being given to the ceremonial out of all proportion to its intrinsic importance. From his identification of these similarities Freud came to the conclusion that religion was best understood as a neurosis, and because of its place in the history of mankind, he called it a "universal obsessional neurosis" (Freud, 1962, p. 39).

Freud believed that religion could be treated and cured in the same way as any other neurosis: if the religious practitioner became aware of why s/he was indulging in neurotic behaviour s/he would be able to face reality without the need for that behaviour.

Totem, Taboo and Oedipus Rex

Freud was also interested in the reasons for the origin and persistence of religion as a universal obsessional neurosis. He looked for answers in primitive society and these 'answers' formed the basis for his book, *Totem and*



Although not religious himself, Freud was intensely interested in religious belief.

Taboo. In it Freud argues that all primitive societies went through a stage of totemism. A totem is a symbolic emblem of a particular social group within a tribe. An object of reverence or worship, it is protected by taboos which generally forbid killing it, eating it, or even touching it.

Freud interpreted the totem as representing the father, because he knew of three cases in which boys with Oedipal conflicts had phobias of animals in which the animal seemed to be a substitute for the father. Freud believed that the fundamental taboos of totemism correspond to the two repressed wishes of the Oedipus complex. These conclusions were based upon the 'primal horde' theory, originally proposed by Darwin and Robertson Smith, but taken up by Freud. The theory proposes a period of human prehistory in which the family unit consisted of father, mother, and offspring. The father, as the dominant male, retained the exclusive rights to the females and drove away or killed any of the sons who challenged his position. The sons couldn't defeat the father-leader individually so they banded together to kill him and, being cannibals, ate him. Hick (1973, p. 34) summarizes what Freud believed resulted from this unsavoury act:

"This was the primal crime, the patricide that has set

up tensions within the human psyche out of which have developed moral inhibitions, totemism, and the other phenomena of religion. For having slain their father, the brothers are struck with remorse. They also find that they cannot all succeed to his position and there is a continuing need for restraint. The dead father's prohibition accordingly takes on a new ('moral') authority as a taboo against incest. This association of religion with the Oedipus complex, which is renewed in each male individual, is held to account for the mysterious authority of God in the human mind and the powerful guilt feelings which make people submit to such a fantasy."

Freud is claiming that the origins of religion and morality can be traced back to an actual historical event. Or to put it in Freud's terms, religion is a 'return of the repressed'. For Freud, God is, in every case, modelled after either the father or the need for a 'father image' (rising from the Oedipus complex), and an individual's personal relationship with God is dependent upon their relationship with their physical father.

According to Freud, all religions are attempts to deal with the sense of guilt deriving from the primal crime. For example, Freud's interpretation of Christianity would be that Christ took his own life to make amends for his brothers' primal crime and at the same time took revenge



Anthropology provides no evidence in support of the primal horde theory.

on the father, on his brothers' behalf, by becoming a god in place of the father.

Having diagnosed religion as a 'universal obsessional neurosis' and having accounted for its origins, he summed up his position, that religion is an illusion with no future, in his book, *The Future of an Illusion*. Religion is, Freud explained, merely humankind's psychological defence against the forces of nature. Just as children find relief from the terrors of nature in the love of their parents, adults also feel terrified and helpless when facing the universe, and so seek protection from an all-powerful father figure, one who is capable of controlling nature, enforcing moral rules, and easing the fear of death. When men and women through the ages thought that their worship and theology was responding to a reality other than themselves they were in actual fact simply using psychological defence mechanisms. Freud believed that if people could use psychoanalysis to enable them to understand that they were using these defence mechanisms then they would soon be equipped to face the cruel reality of the world without the need for the fraudulent aid of religion.

Validity, Falsifiability and Global Religions

There are some worthwhile elements to Freud's interpretation of religion. It offers an explanation as to how it arose, what is going on when people believe in God, and it points the way forward to enable humans to stand on their own feet without the illusion which is, in Freud's eyes, religion. It also seems to have some scientific backing as it is allegedly based on the observation of infant behaviour, of adult patients' neurotic behaviour and recovery, and on the beliefs and practices of primitive tribes. Finally, some elements of his interpretation have a degree of plausibility to them. However, we can also criticise his position on religion on several grounds.

The validity of Freud's procedures has been questioned and his theories are considered to be unfalsifiable, based on flawed research, and to have limited scientific objectivity. For example, his speculations about a primal horde, and indeed much of what he wrote about totem and taboo, appears to have little scientific basis. From anthropological studies there is no evidence that a primal horde dominated by a single male ever existed,

and Darwin derived his notion from hearsay reports about the organization of gorilla troops that have since been shown to be false. In addition, in 1943, following the *Survey of Objective Studies of Psychoanalytic Concepts*, Sears (cited by Clark, 1958, p. 88) reported that empirical studies are far from verifying all of Freud's hypotheses, including those concerning parent-child relations (Freud emphasised the importance of the child's relations with his/her parents for future religious development). Sixty years on, many of Freud's hypotheses have yet to be verified.

Freud thought that he had discovered the psychological origin for belief and concluded from this that the belief must be illusory. This is an entirely illegitimate conclusion because the motive for a belief doesn't affect its truth or falsehood.

Another problem with Freud's view of religion is that in logical terms it commits what Shaw (1978) calls a "genetic fallacy". Freud thought that he had discovered the psychological origin for belief and concluded from this that the belief must be illusory. This is an entirely illegitimate conclusion because the motive for a belief doesn't affect its truth or falsehood.

Freud's view of religion is exclusively paternal in basis. The importance of female goddesses is passed over entirely and Freud neglects any discussion of the possible importance of the mother in totemic religion. These omissions are characteristic of psychoanalytic theory, which until more recently habitually emphasized the father's role at the expense of the mother's.

Another critical point is that if religious behaviour is best understood as neurotic behaviour, we would expect its most serious and intense practitioners to exhibit the most severe neurotic symptoms. Although it is extremely difficult to judge the mental health of historical figures it is worth noting that most (though certainly not all) models of religious life throughout history have not been recorded as individuals crippled by disturbed behaviour. Instead they are seen to embody the qualities of selflessness and spiritual growth.

Finally, there appears to be some dissimilarity between the God that Freud describes and the God worshipped by Christians. For Freud, God's main func-

tion seems to be as a father figure who offers protection both from punishment and from the harsh forces of nature, in return for loyalty and obedience. From Freud's external view of Christianity, this may be how Christians appeared to talk about and worship God (in Wittgenstein's terminology we might describe Freud as being outside the Christian language game). However, most Christians would find it difficult if not impossible to recognise their God from Freud's description. The description of 'God as father' shares some similarity with the definition of a human father, but it is not intended to reflect primarily his power and willingness to guarantee worshippers protection from natural disasters, the effects of guilt or from extinction, as Freud suggests; rather it is an attempt to describe a reciprocal relationship with him, defined more in terms of love than of protective power. This relationship, real or not, does not suggest a retreat into an illusory place of refuge.

In Freud's favour, we can see his ideas not as a generalisation for all religion and religious people but as an explanation for the views of certain individuals. These people can be seen as having a false religious belief, one that they hold purely for the sense of security it provides. Psychoanalysis may actually help these people to realise that their belief is an illusory one, based more on internal conflict than faith. It is not the job of psychoanalysis to tell a person whether to believe in God or not, but instead to provide an insight into their concept of God – to identify whether it is a healthy one for them.

Similarly, Freud argued that all religious people use defence mechanisms, such as denial and rationalization. While this may be an exaggeration, it isn't unreasonable to suggest that most believers use these defence mechanisms to some extent as part of their religious belief, but perhaps no more than anyone else.

Freud's view of religion involved exaggeration and overestimation of its negative causes and consequences. This was no doubt driven by his own atheism and his lack of direct contact with modern religion. However, this does not diminish any insights that psychoanalysis might bring to individuals, whether they are religious or not, and whether the relationships they are trying to improve are with people or their gods.

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Skeptical Stats

1. Cost of completing Emma King's psychic development course: **£544**
2. Number of four-colour photographs of the President used to illustrate the 2004 US budget: **27**
3. Number of such photographs that appeared in previous budgets: **0**
4. Date on which Japan's Pana Wave Laboratory cult believed the world would end: **May 15, 2003**
5. Percentage of catastrophic events in Europe since 1980 that are attributable to weather and climate extremes: **64**
6. Percentage of economic loss due to catastrophic events that is attributable to the above: **79**
7. Number of live posts per minute to the popular blog (i.e. shared online journal) site LiveJournal in August 2004: **149**
8. Number of psychics employed by Star Temple, a UK-based psychic phone line: **50**
9. Number of readings they conduct per month: **6,000**
10. Year of founding of the oldest known business in the world, the family-owned Japanese construction company Kongo Gumi: **578 AD**
11. Cost of a three to five day "street retreat" in the UK in which business executives pretend to be beggars to relieve their stress: **£150**
12. Number of new US state laws passed in the last eight years restricting a woman's right to choose abortion: **335**
13. Amount in funding withheld in the last two years by the Bush administration from the United Nations Population Fund: **\$34 million**
14. Percentage of voting machines provided by the US's biggest voting technology vendor: **30**
15. Number of states that vendor's CEO promised to "deliver to Bush": **1**
16. Estimated percentage of British food poisoning incidents caused by consuming bottled water: **12**
17. Number of germs found on the average computer keyboard, per square inch: **3,295**
18. Number of germs found on the average toilet seat, per square inch: **49**
19. Likelihood that God exists, according to calculations carried out by Dr. Stephen Unwin, author of *The Probability of God*: **67 percent**
20. Percentage of men's brains that according to a Cambridge University study followed female patterns: **17 percent**
21. Percentage of women's brains that according to a Cambridge University study followed male patterns: **14 percent**
22. Number of residents of the Italian village Canneto di Corona evacuated due to a rash of spontaneously combusting appliances: **39**
23. Percentage of 988 adults living below 110th Street in Manhattan surveyed in October and November 2001 who had been diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as a result of the 9/11 attacks: **7.5**
24. Percentage in a March 2002 survey who suffered from prolonged Post Traumatic Stress Disorder: **1.7**
25. Number of pages in the US Senate's ethics manual: **562**

Sources

1 *Edinburgh News*; 2,3 *Harper's*; 4 *Scotland on Sunday*; 5,6 European Environmental Agency; 7 LiveJournal.com; 8,9 *Sunday Herald*; 10 <http://www.familybusinessmagazine.com/oldworld.html>; 11 *The Independent*; 12,13 syndicated columnist Molly Ivins; 14,15 e-voting expert Rebecca Mercuri; 16. *Harper's*; 17,18 BBC; 19 *Education Guardian*; 20,21 *Evening Standard*; 22 *Scotsman*; 23,24 *The New Yorker*; 25 *The New Yorker*

Both Hits & Misses and Skeptical Stats depend heavily on reader contributions of clippings, story leads, and odd statistics. Please send contributions to news@skeptic.org.uk or via post to the address on the masthead (p3). Thanks for assistance to Rachel Carthy.

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

Motivated Distortion of Personal Memory for Trauma

At the *Remembering Trauma* Conference held in London in September 2003, Mark Pendergrast described how people can develop false memories for terrible events

Introduction

What I want to do is explain how people can come to believe in extremely traumatic events that never happened. It is quite clear that this does happen in the case of alien abductees, or in the cases of medical virgins who remembered being raped during their childhood. It is also quite clear to me from my research that this has happened in thousands, if not millions, of cases in North America and the UK, but I cannot prove that assertion. Still, some cases of illusory memories are provable.

I am going to cover seven major points:

- motivation
- secondary gain
- belief systems
- authority figures
- use of hypnosis, dream analysis, body symptoms and other kinds of theories
- rehearsal (of imagined 'memories')
- cognitive dissonance.

Motivation

Firstly, to get someone to remember something horrible that never happened to them in their childhood, they have to be very *motivated*. There is a common misconception that therapists can 'implant' memories. I do not like the word *implant* at all. In order to believe in repressed memories, you have to be very motivated, and your motivation usually involves a quest to solve the puzzle of your life. We all want to have explanations for what has happened to us, and we all tend to seek fairly simple explanations, so it is very appealing to say, "Well, I have trouble with relationships, I have an eating disorder, I have trouble with my self-esteem, and these are symptoms of sexual abuse, so maybe I was abused and repressed the memory". During the height of the recovered memory movement, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, this was a common belief system, and many still believe it. So, many people – particularly women seeking therapy – were highly motivated to come up with a solution to their life problems.

Secondary gain

Secondly, there was *secondary gain* involved in almost every case I investigated. What I mean by that is that people, by being victims of sexual abuse, got a lot of attention they would not ordinarily have had. They got a lot of sympathy and, not to be harsh about it, they also could avoid a lot of responsibility for things in their lives at various points. This is not to say that this kind of belief system did not also cause extreme suffering, but there is no question that there was secondary gain.

Belief systems

The third point is, you have to have a *belief* in the theory of massive repression or massive dissociation, and many people did, and many people still do. When I was living in England for two months in the spring of 2003, I did an informal survey of people as I was travelling on trains, or when I was in pubs, or when I was walking up and down the barge canal. I asked people, "If you were eight years old and you had a terrible, terrible thing happen to you, do you think that you could block that completely out, not have any memory of it, and then remember it later in life?" The vast majority of people said, "Oh yes, you can do that, that happens." I then asked, "Well, how do you know?", and they would answer, "Well, I just know," or "I've seen it on television or in a movie". So – you have to have a belief that massive repression is something that people can do.

... to get someone to remember something horrible that never happened to them in their childhood, they have to be very motivated.

Authority figures

It also helps, although it is not necessary, to have an *authority figure* you go to who says, "Oh yes, that's true. I know this is true because I have a PhD [or "I'm a psychiatrist" or "I'm a social worker"], and I've seen many people come through my office who had exactly the same symptoms that you do – these troubled relationships, problems with self-esteem and eating disorders – and many of them had these memories come back, that they had not remembered for many years, of being sexually abused, and so I think you may have repressed memories, too." It really is an encouragement to illusory memories, but it is not necessary. I want to emphasise that. You don't need an authority figure – illusory memories can be totally self-induced and, in many cases, they are.

Use of hypnosis, dream analysis, body symptoms, and other kinds of theories

A great deal has been said or written about the hazards of *hypnosis*, but I do want to add other things, and this is primarily what you will find in the chapter on "How

to Believe the Unbelievable” in my book, *Victims of Memory* (Pendergrast, 1996). In this chapter, I went through tick, tick, tick; these are the ways that you can come to believe things that did not happen. Certainly hypnosis (or *guided imagery, visualisation, meditation, or prayer*, which are all forms of hypnosis or auto-hypnosis if used to try to recall ‘repressed’ memories) is a very good way to do that, particularly if the authority figure who is leading you in the form of hypnosis has a vested interest in this theory of massive repression and believes that you may very well have been abused. I also want to warn about something called ‘inadvertent cueing’. Many therapists are told, “Don’t use leading questions with people, don’t lead your clients”. I do not think that anybody does intentionally lead their clients, but I interviewed many, many therapists who believed in repressed memories, and they all *did* lead their clients. They told me in the next sentence, after they had told me exactly how they had led their clients – “but you must be very careful never to lead your clients. I always maintain a totally neutral stance”, and so on.

If you believe in this idea that you can forget years of horrible things and then remember them much later, you are likely to convey that belief to your clients. And so I have told therapists – “Be careful what you believe!” I think that ultimately this whole thing comes down to a belief system. Again, I just want to emphasise that. It does not really matter what modalities you use. As Harvard Professor of Psychology Richard McNally found in his studies, many people have a very firm belief that they are incest survivors without having any actual memory of anything happening to them. They simply believe it, and once you believe it, I think that it is almost a foregone conclusion that you will come up with something.

For instance, recovered memory therapists use *dream analysis*. Frequently we dream about things that we are worried about, and if you are in therapy and you think that maybe your father sexually abused you, or that someone else did, you begin to obsess over it, and that is precisely what you will dream about. Consequently, many of these things become self-fulfilling prophecies.

The same thing is true of so-called *body memories* where they tell you that you may have some panic attack or you may have some bodily symptom and then you sort of work yourself up into it, or pay particular attention to it.

Rehearsal

Once you come up with a scenario – and I saw this over and over again in this type of misguided therapy – you come up with a fragmentary image. What would happen would be that the therapists would take these fragmentary images and then they would have people *rehearse* them over and over again. In fact, they would

tell them, “Pretend that you have a movie screen or a television screen in your head and you have to visualise it, and you have to zoom in and freeze frame”. They would literally tell people to do those things – it was all very visual. So people would develop a script, a narrative, and they would have them write the narrative down over and over again, or repeat it in group sessions over and over again. The more you repeat something and the more you rehearse it, the more it becomes true for you. Many retractors who took back their memory beliefs because they decided that they were incorrect, still cannot get rid of the intrusive images. They have post-traumatic stress disorder. That would be an interesting thing to study – these people who have gone through this kind of therapy and developed a false belief system, then disbelieved it, but they still cannot get rid of the intrusive memories of something they know rationally did not happen to them, such as, say, being in a satanic cult.

Cognitive dissonance

This is a theory that was put forward by Leon Festinger quite a few years ago. It is quite an interesting theory and I think it makes sense, but it is just a theory. The idea is that you cannot have two contradictory ideas in your head at the same time. One of them is going to push the other one out like a cuckoo pushing an egg out from the nest. So if you opt for the idea that daddy did this horrible thing to you, you cannot very well have the idea that daddy was also a loving parent who did all these nice things with you, even though you have these very valid memories that he was a nice guy in many ways. So once you plump down on the side of this new belief system it is almost like a see-saw that goes ‘whomp’, and to ‘unwhomp’ it is very, very difficult to do. Once somebody opts for a belief system, and invests in it, and goes public with it, it is extremely difficult to undo.

Many, many times, people have said to me, “Why would anybody make up something so dreadful? Why would anybody want to make up something so horrible about someone as central in their lives as their parents?” But it is not a matter of wanting – it is a matter of having a seed planted in your mind and having it grow almost inevitably. So it is really a belief system, followed by methods that really are quite suggestive to your memory. Memories are always reconstructive, and they can be changed – sometimes permanently. So I can only hope that you can remember some of what I have written here at least fairly accurately.

Reference

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How (not) to talk to aliens

Mark Newbrook ponders the complexities of extraterrestrial languages

MARY RODWELL RUNS a UFO abductee/contactee support group in Perth, Western Australia, and produces associated print materials, videos, etc., aimed at promoting and endorsing extraterrestrial interpretations of the reported experiences and at supporting experiencers who embrace this kind of interpretation. This book (Rodwell, 2002) represents a recent major piece of 'Rodwelliana'.

Rodwell is, of course, entitled to her own view of how such reports are to be interpreted and of how these matters should be handled. But the nature of the book hinders critical assessment of her claims: it has a popular and often an emotional tone which militates against scepticism or even neutral scientific analysis and discourages the consideration of alternative hypotheses. Some of her procedures simply exclude such views, and she certainly does not treat the standard sceptical points at all fairly. In fact, Rodwell seems to think that scepticism insults the reporters by treating them as unreliable or even of unsound mind, whereas she herself believes that they often have advanced psychological/psychic abilities. (Of course, this does not follow: there is a difference between taking people seriously and accepting their stories as literally true.)

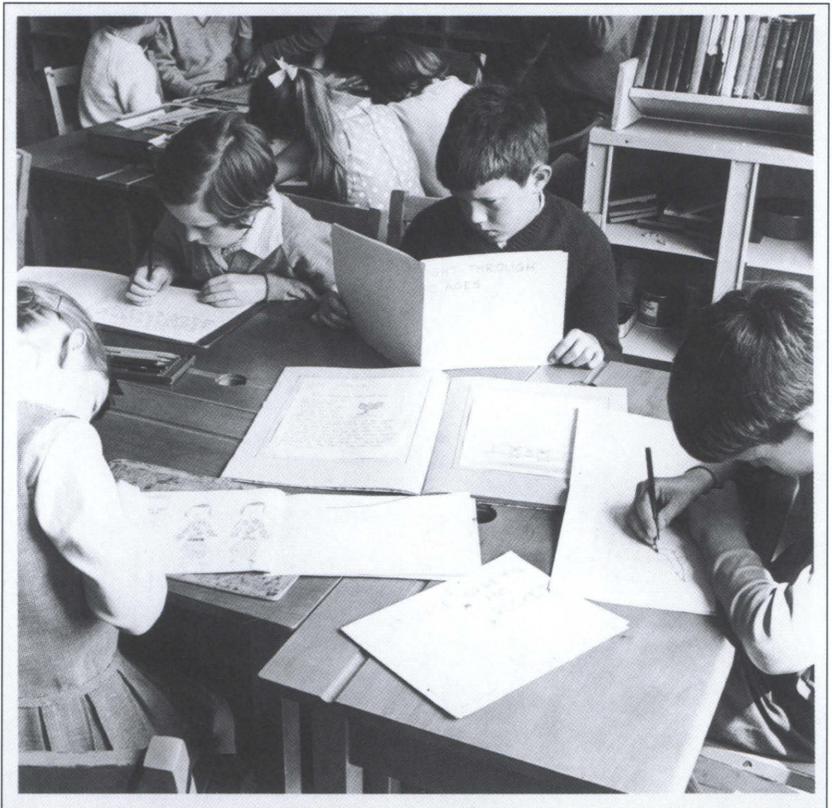
In contrast, Rodwell accepts without debate many alleged phenomena which are heavily disputed for want of persuasive evidence and in some cases are rejected by almost all the relevant scholars, such as the reality of 'ancient astronauts', UFO-related implants, 'missing pregnancies', psychic phenomena and powers, etc., etc. And she often provides little or no solid evidence for her own (dramatic) claims; nor does she provide references. Scientists will gather that no careful treatment is to be expected from her, and it can hardly be seen as surprising or disreputable if they ignore her material.

Linguistic issues are potentially important in this area and my own introduction to Rodwell's work involved her video on the subject. The treatment of language in this present book is rather more limited, but some comments are in order.

Firstly, some claims made (repeated from other sources) are so dramatic that very strong evidence is required if they are to be accepted. One excellent example of this involves Leir's claims regarding the advanced linguistic abilities of some human infants identified as

'Star Children'. Some of these claims would, if true, revolutionise the study of child language acquisition; the most dramatic of all is the claim that some babies are able to read. But I know of no properly conducted experiments which would demonstrate or even suggest that such things occur, nor of any child language acquisition experts who take these claims at all seriously.

Secondly, forms presented as spoken and written alien language are discussed in the (largely self-reported) case studies, notably that of Tracey Taylor,



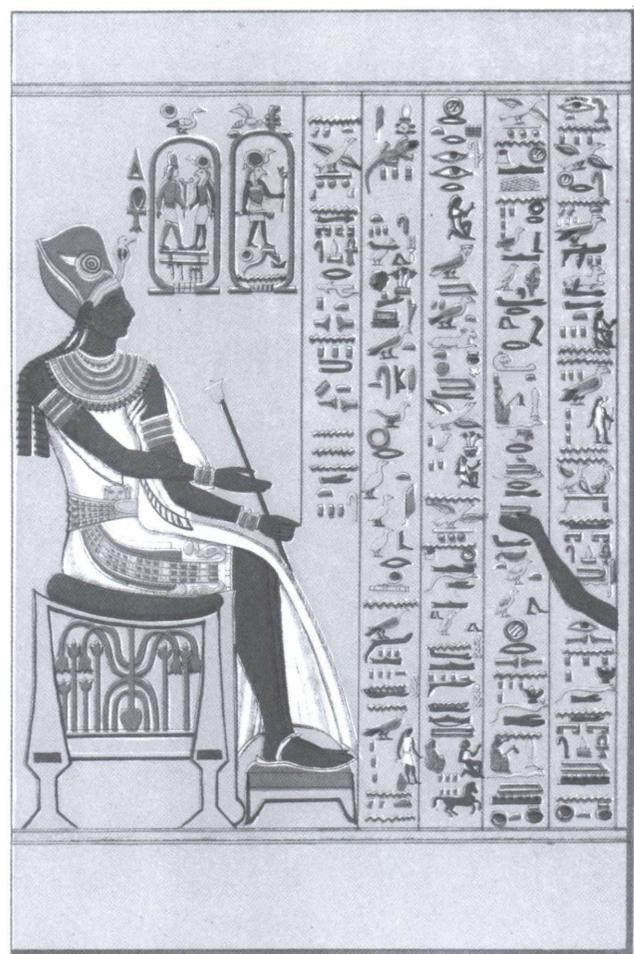
Learning to read and write can only be achieved through effort at an appropriate age. No properly conducted experiments support the idea that babies can read.

who also appears prominently on Rodwell's video. Taylor includes this material in an account of her life-long pattern of experiences. Much of the discussion is subjective in tone, involving Taylor's 'feelings' about the meanings of her experiences and her artistic and (quasi-)linguistic responses to them. The material is generated by means of automatic writing, however this may be interpreted, and Taylor links this process with an intuitively and experientially derived 'theory' of the nature of the aliens whom she regards as responsible.

Unfortunately, few of the linguistic comments made here are specific enough to permit proper analysis or testing. The written material produced by Taylor and another contactee and provided here in plates (more is

seen on the video) is described as 'hieroglyphic', although it is not clear what Taylor thinks this term means generally, or what it is supposed to mean in this context. It has the appearance of text written 'grass-stroke' style in a range of large alphabets, syllabaries, or (parts of) logographies. There is too little material in each sample to be more confident, especially in the absence of useful translations.

Taylor is reported as being able to write in more than one 'unusual' script (presumably in otherwise unknown languages; but few non-linguists make this distinction clearly). She can also reportedly speak in several 'strange' languages and ascribe meaning to some of this material and to her experience-inspired artwork. She



Comments about similarities between Taylor's material and 'hieroglyphic text' are far too vague to be of any use.

adds that she and other experiencers regularly acquire such languages and, in due course, the ability to translate them into human languages without conscious learning. Unfortunately, evidence that these claims hold up and that these languages are genuine is not presented here, which is a huge omission given the very dramatic nature of the claims.

The corroboration reported by Taylor from other members of her groups is too vague and too informal to be taken seriously. For example, the comments about 'ancient symbols' found in temples and pyramids and

about similarities between Taylor's material and 'hieroglyphic text' are far too vague to be of use, and it is not at all clear that the people who were commenting had any intellectual authority in this area.

The samples of Taylor's spoken material on Rodwell's video appear to resemble glossolalia ('speaking in tongues'), in which case the material is probably merely phonetic rather than linguistic and thus is not meaningful (though such phenomena are still very interesting in themselves). It is striking in this context that some of the sequences are reminiscent of Japanese, a language to which Taylor has been exposed. (I identified this as a possibility before learning that Taylor had lived in Japan.) It is characteristic of glossolalia and the like that the vast majority of the sounds produced are drawn from languages known or familiar to the speaker. A further reason for supposing that this present case involves glossolalia or a similar phenomenon rather than a genuine alien language derives from the fact that *all* the sounds used are familiar from human languages – and indeed not even confined to obscure languages unlikely to be known to speakers or their acquaintances. Genuine non-human (and non-terrestrial) languages would be expected to manifest different phonetic ranges.

**Any system which is recognisable
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That is the kind of thing
that a language *is***

If useful translations (preferably morpheme-by-morpheme) were provided for any of this material (spoken or written), it is possible that this kind of negative judgment might be proved mistaken. In this case, the material might be deemed genuinely linguistic and the issue would then be whether the language was indeed from an alien source, as claimed, or was of human invention. However, as will be seen, this sort of evidence appears unlikely to be produced.

In her summary, Rodwell herself raises some of these partly linguistic issues at a more general level. She reports that various viewers of her video have stated that they recognise some of the symbolism and linguistic material, suggesting a commonality of experience transcending the often very different locales and specific events involved. Some of these viewers also state that they find speaking the alien languages which they have

acquired very enjoyable and indeed more natural than speaking their own first languages. Given these very strong claims, it is again unfortunate that no better evidence for them has yet been seen.

Another passage is, however, even more unfortunate in its implications. Rodwell quotes Taylor as making a number of highly obscure and/or implausible claims about the alien languages and as drawing further conclusions from these points which are inevitably contentious in the extreme. Then, in the middle of this passage, Taylor makes a more readily interpretable claim which is apparently associated with some of the above claims and which has very dramatic upshots. She states that in these alien languages “there is no preconceived idea or concept about what a particular sound actually means because this type of language is not structured in the way the English language is”. One assumes that she means here to contrast the alleged alien languages with

One cannot be blamed for suspecting that claims of this kind might have been developed with the aim of preventing scientific analysis of this material and thus blocking any possible demonstration that the nature of the material was not as described.

all human languages rather than with English specifically, because the gist of this claim is that these languages cannot be analysed as human languages can. The claim is already incoherent, because individual sounds (as noted above) are themselves meaningless in human languages too; as expressed here, the contrast is thus invalid. But the importance ascribed by Taylor to this point suggests that she means by the term *sounds* to refer to morphemes; her next comment, indeed, is “a particular sound *or word* is not related to a particular description or meaning” (my italics). Taylor then indicates (in her own words) that this means (as indeed it surely would mean) that the meaning of each utterance could not be related to that of earlier utterances and would have to be (somehow) arrived at intuitively (?) and presumably ‘holistically’ on each occasion.

The most damaging aspect of this passage is that it is implied (and indeed this is further hinted at by Rodwell herself) that analysis of these alien languages – no matter how sophisticated and free of advance assumptions

based on the nature of human languages – is most unlikely to succeed. Such analysis would be more or less impossible, because morphemes with constant meanings could not be identified, and larger morphological and syntactic structures with more complex meanings could not be analysed as composed of these morphemes in significant specific orders and relationships (linear or other). (This is the normal practice in analysing previously unanalysed human languages or – suitably modified – other communication systems.)

However, it appears unlikely in the extreme that all this could be true. Any system which is recognisable as a language in the first place must thereby (by defini-



The Gift of Tongues: It is characteristic of glossolalia that the vast majority of the sounds produced are drawn from languages known or familiar to the speaker.

tion) have a complex and largely stable and well-defined structure of this kind (in general terms). That is the kind of thing that a language is. Languages (and indeed virtually all communication systems) depend upon the repetition of meaningful units. No ‘holistic’ interpretations unrelated to earlier texts are possible (although sometimes naive non-linguists using their first languages may perhaps have the subjective impression that this is happening). It is difficult to see how even a genuinely alien language could differ in such a fundamental respect and still be usable for its native speakers or for anyone else. Members of another species which really had the psychological abilities which this implies (assuming that these are possible in principle!) would presumably not need or use language. And it is not clear how they could succeed (or why they would expect to succeed) in using systems of this kind to

communicate with humans, given our own psychological and linguistic capabilities and habits.

It is true that even human languages vary a great deal in structural terms, and a genuinely alien language might well be very much more differently structured, perhaps in some relatively fundamental ways in respect of which human languages do not differ. Analysis of such radically novel systems might be very difficult and error-prone (especially with access only to human learners, not to native users). But this would not necessarily be an impossible task in principle. The point that humans who are naïve non-linguists can allegedly learn and use such languages would itself suggest that the differences would not be as great as might be logically possible or even probable – or as great as Taylor and Rodwell suggest in denying that the languages are morphologically structured. In this context one should note that (as stated) the phonetics, which can be observed directly and thus described readily without any comprehension, are unremarkable.

However, it is also true that any 'system' which was presented as a language but which in fact really did have no largely stable and well-defined structure could not be analysed (or at least could not be analysed using any techniques currently known). In such a case, no quasi-linguistic claims made about this 'language' (e.g. about the meanings of sequences in it) could be empirically tested, and all such claims would be immune from scientific scrutiny (unless and until wholly new principles of analysis could be developed; but this would appear unlikely to occur).

One cannot be blamed for suspecting that claims of this kind might have been developed with the aim of preventing scientific analysis of this material and thus blocking any possible demonstration that the nature of the material was (or might very well be) not as described (non-linguistic, concocted, etc). This would certainly be the actual effect of adopting such a position; nothing useful could be said about such material (other than about the phonetics).

However, once again, the onus is, in fact, upon those making these dramatic claims to justify them or at least

to co-operate in rendering them testable. If the systems identified as alien languages are such that the associated claims can be tested, they should be so presented. If the claims are really untestable, their advocates must realise that these systems will be of limited interest to linguists and other scientists, and that these scholars are liable to adopt (legitimately) the default interpretation that the alien languages are not genuine. In order to determine the real situation, we must obtain a reasonably sized corpus of data in each such language and be allowed to work with those who claim ability in it, so as to determine its actual structure.

Rodwell does refer to the critical work of Gary Anthony and his associates (one of whom is myself) on the linguistic aspects of her case. Her comments are perfunctory and somewhat loosely phrased. She seems inclined to fluctuate between what may be an over-optimistic expectation that work of this kind will 'validate' her claims and a defensive stance grounded in the evasive-sounding claims mentioned above. A reader might not obtain a clear idea of the real nature and force of this critical work from Rodwell's own statements. I therefore repeat here that, as we stated in our article in the *MUFON Journal* (Anthony & Newbrook, 2002), we are very willing to examine any alleged language of this kind with open minds – but with suitable rigour.

In summary, Rodwell and her supporters will need to provide much better evidence – including evidence arising from such analysis as Anthony and I might conduct – before the balance of probability renders her case sufficiently interesting to warrant further focused attention. Like many writers in this area, they do not seem to realise that apparently outrageous claims such as these are simply not going to be accepted without very specific, very strong evidence. If I see such evidence, my interest will be re-kindled.

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SKEPTICS IN THE PUB

Speakers:
TBA

Skeptics in the Pub is an evening held once a month (in a pub, strangely enough) for anybody who has an interest in, or is sceptical about, the paranormal. Each month an invited speaker gives a talk on their chosen specialisation. The talk is followed by an informal discussion in a relaxed and friendly pub atmosphere. You can find out more about the meetings on The Skeptic website: <http://www.skeptic.org.uk/pub>. This includes directions and maps to the Old Kings Head pub in Borough, where we meet. Alternatively, please contact Nick Pullar: 07740 450 950, nickp@coleridge.co.uk. The meeting begins at 7:30 pm and there is a suggested donation of £2.00.

Scepticism and the Kennedy Assassination

Jeremy Bojczuk disposes of some of the more ludicrous theories surrounding President Kennedy's assassination

IF THERE IS any great public event of recent history that deserves a sceptical analysis, it is the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Almost everybody who was anywhere near Dallas on 22 November 1963 has been implicated in the shooting, and almost every institution, official and unofficial, has been accused of covering up its involvement. The Mafia did it; the CIA did it; the KGB did it; anti-Castro Cubans did it; pro-Castro Cubans did it; Lyndon Johnson did it; Richard Nixon did it; the military-industrial complex did it; an alliance of Elvis Presley, the Queen, the Pope and creatures from Mars did it; Lee Harvey Oswald did it.

There is one hypothesis that we can rule out straight away: the idea that one person, acting alone and from motives private and unknown, fired three shots from a building above and behind the presidential motorcade, killing Kennedy and wounding the passenger sitting in front of Kennedy, then calmly left the building, caught a bus home, shot and killed a policeman for no apparent reason, and went to the cinema, where he was arrested, only to be shot dead himself by a public-spirited citizen two days later. That is the official version of the case against Oswald as set out in the report of the Warren Commission. Little of it stands up to sceptical analysis. The fundamental problem is that the shot that killed Kennedy came from in front of him, not behind him, and so could not possibly have been fired by Oswald. There are other problems: more than three shots were fired; even if Oswald fired them, the rifle he was alleged to have used was not capable of firing even three shots accurately in the time allowed; there was no eyewitness evidence that he was where he was supposed to have been during the shooting; what eyewitness evidence there is suggests that he was elsewhere; and there is no evidence linking him to the murder of the policeman.

The official version, in its details, is clearly wrong. This doesn't, however, rule out the possibility that Oswald played a part in the assassination. His personal history suggests a plausible motive for his involvement. He had been a Marine, had renounced his citizenship and had defected to the Soviet Union, and a few years later had returned with his Russian wife to the USA. He moved to Dallas shortly before the assassination, after having made a name for himself as a vocal Marxist in New Orleans, where he had set up a branch of a pro-Castro organisation, the Fair Play for Cuba Committee. So maybe Oswald, the leftist agitator, presumably in conjunction with others, killed Kennedy for political reasons.

None of this highly unusual personal history, however, is quite what it seems. Defecting to, rather than

from, the Soviet Union was extremely rare. For a serving Marine to do so was astonishingly rare, and treasonable, but on his return Oswald was treated more like a hero than a traitor. He faced no criminal charges, was quickly given back his citizenship, and was placed in the care of a group of anti-Soviet exiles connected to the CIA. The branch of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee that he was to set up consisted solely of him, and was run from a building occupied by a group of anti-Castro activists connected to the FBI. Evidently, the leftist agitation was not genuine. So maybe Oswald, the secret agent, presumably in conjunction with others, killed Kennedy for political reasons. Or maybe Oswald, the man with the superficially suspicious past, was set up by persons unknown to take the blame for killing Kennedy. As he famously said while in police custody, shortly before he was murdered in the police station basement, "I'm just the patsy."

**Making enemies, however,
is one of the unavoidable hazards
of politics. In the absence of
definitive evidence of their
involvement in the killing,
the mere existence of an individual's
or an organisation's enmity towards
Kennedy tells us nothing**

Oswald's killer, Jack Ruby, was likewise not quite what he was made out to be. The public-spirited citizen was in fact a Chicago gangster, sent to Dallas to represent the mob's interests there, specifically in the form of drug running and paying off the local police. Nor was his shooting of Oswald his only involvement. He turned up at the hospital where Kennedy lay dying, and at a press conference given by the district attorney shortly after Oswald's arrest, corrected the name of the pro-Castro organisation with which Oswald had associated himself (rather startlingly for a disinterested mobster). Clearly, Ruby's participation was more than that of a public-spirited citizen.

There are several Mafia connections to the case: the Kennedy family had ties with the mob from the days of prohibition, when the president's father was involved in



Rhyme and Reason

Steve Donnelly

The meaning of life...

I read an article recently by my neighbour (only 0.14mm away on the other side of this page), Julian Baggini, and it set me to thinking about life, the universe and everything. Well, I guess that's what philosophers are for – to set you thinking about profound issues. The article was published in the *Guardian* on 20 September and was entitled “Revealed – the meaning of life”. I don't want to steal his thunder by writing too much about the contents of the article; however, as an irrelevant aside, it is worth pointing out (totally out of context, of course) Julian's memorable quote: “Life is like a Celine Dion concert...” The article brought me to the unremarkable conclusion that the interest that people have in both religion and also in (other?) psychic and paranormal phenomena is largely driven by the philosophical question that is the title of Julian's new book, *What's it all about?* (Baggini, 2004).

Many years ago I attended the funeral of a colleague who died tragically of cancer at the age of 46, leaving behind a wife and three young children. The priest who conducted the Roman Catholic ceremony did as priests are wont to do and explained, in his sermon, that the loss of my colleague would appear to many to be incomprehensible but that everyone should be reassured by the knowledge that it was part of God's grand plan. Of course, this did not *explain* the meaning of life but at least it reinforced the idea that life does have meaning, presumably defined by the aforementioned grand plan. The priest's assertion provided little reassurance to me (an agnostic with strong tendencies toward atheism), but I must assume that it may have helped the faithful to rationalise their loss.

Similarly, once during a discussion with a colleague who is both a scientist and an evangelical Christian – and following a natural disaster which had involved much suffering and loss of life – I expressed some bafflement as to how his beliefs could encompass a world that seemed to contain so much human suffering. His response was that, from his perspective, the world would contain *only* this kind of suffering if it were not for the hand of God – indeed every good thing in the world stemmed from this divine intervention. Again this failed to provide me with either succour or explanation – faced with my perception that both good and bad events are either carried out by humans (deliberately or inadvertently) or are the random acts of an utterly uncaring universe.

Moving from religious faith to belief in psychic and

paranormal forces, there are many examples where it seems clear that individuals are trying, in a small way, to get some insight into the meaning of life: the grieving relation, consulting a psychic medium in order to get in contact with the departed parent/child/spouse on the other side, is seeking both reassurance that all is well with the dear departed and confirmation that their particular view of the afterlife is correct – thus providing purpose and focus to the current three-score years and ten. But even at the other extreme of someone fairly casually consulting a horoscope, there is nonetheless an element of trying to imbue my random universe with meaning and order: Mars is in Aries; therefore I am going to have confrontational interactions with people at work this week. If this comes to pass it is clearly not because of my poor management abilities, which I could presumably do something about, but as a result of some great cosmic plan as expressed by the positions of the stars and planets. And whether one consults the tarot card reader, crystal ball gazer or astrologer to get an intimation of what is to come or to shed light on what has already happened, the overall hope is that the consultation will give some insight into the meaning of life in either the backward- or forward-looking sense of the term.

All of which leads me to the critical point of these musings: in years gone by we used to talk of ‘wet’ and ‘dry’ (meaning ‘soft’ and ‘hard-line’ respectively) sceptics (e.g. Fisher, 1991) and I would guess that physicists such as myself, with our tendency to prize rationality and logic above all, would normally belong firmly in the dry camp. In recent years, however, I find that I am increasingly making an effort to balance my concerns about the negative effects that a magical belief system may have on society with consideration of the possible emotional benefits that people may gain from making apparent order out of the randomness. For instance, in the unlikely event that I were able to convince a group of people who regularly consulted a Tarot card reader that the readings gave absolutely no information about their lives, past present or future, would my success in changing their beliefs add to the grand sum of human happiness, or, for that matter, the grand sum of anything else? This is a question that clearly requires input from a philosopher.

Notes

Baggini, J. (2004). *What's it all about?* London: Granta.

Fisher, D. (1991). The case for super-skepticism. *The Skeptic*, 5(1), 18.



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



Philosopher's Corner

Julian Baggini

ON A RECENT trip to Athens I forfeited the opportunity to watch the sunset from Fillipopoulos hill in favour of a long walk through an ugly urban corner of the city, in order to end up at an unremarkable, overgrown archaeological site with no more than a few stones to admire. What would otherwise seem sheer madness becomes explicable, however, when I tell you that I have spent my adult life in devotion to philosophy and that the drab site that was the destination of my Athenian pilgrimage was Plato's Academy.

Explicable, perhaps, but sensible and sane? Why do we feel the need to visit the actual locations where our heroes lived and worked? The question is particularly embarrassing for a devotee of philosophy, for there seems to be nothing rational in the desire simply to stand where others stood.

Sometimes there are good reasons to visit the stomping grounds of our idols. For example, to see Hämeenlinna in Finland, the home town of Sibelius, is to see the landscape which helped feed his artistic imagination and thus may potentially add depth to our understanding of his work. Walking around Anne Frank's house brings home the reality of her family's ordeal.

But no such insights can be gleaned simply by standing in the same geographical position as someone you admire once did. What can be learned from staring at the tree James Dean crashed in to? How can a modern park with a few stones in it evoke the daily life of Plato's Academy?

Yet it is rare to find someone with no interest at all in this way of feeling some link with the past. They may not plan their holidays around such rituals, but very few would pass on an opportunity to see a hero's birthplace if they found themselves less than an hour away from it.

It is as though we believe in the power of a place to capture something of the individuals who have touched it. We find ridiculous the medieval trade in holy relics, which were thought to possess divine powers by virtue of the holy men who once possessed, or even in part were, them. Yet something of that same superstition seems to lie behind our desire to be physically linked, however tenuously, to those we look up to, through time and our senses.

But if relics are nonsense, then so is the modern tourist's equivalent. So was I simply being idiotic when I sought out the academy, Aristotle's lyceum and Socrates' prison cell: all sights of no conceivable interest other than their links to the past?

I'm inclined to think I was. But perhaps there is a more generous explanation. At the moment I'm reading *The Essential Difference* by Simon Baron-Cohen. Unfortunately, it is packaged to look like one of those *Women Are From Venus, Men Are Just Prats* books. But its author is a serious researcher into autism and the book presents the credible hypothesis that, on average, females are statistically more inclined to have more empathetic minds, while men are more likely to have more systematising ones.

What has this got to do with visiting the stomping grounds of dead great people? I wonder whether there is something about the knowledge that we are standing where they once stood which triggers the empathetic part of the brain. Even though we can't actually see Athens as Plato and Aristotle did, just knowing we are occupying the same space as them makes us feel as though we are sharing some kind of experience with them, and we enjoy the feeling that gives us.

To the systematising part of your brain, of course, this is plain idiocy. The sense of shared experience is an illusion and the feeling that it is real illogical. But, as Baron-Cohen's book makes clear, purely logical, systematising minds which lack empathy cannot appreciate the feelings of others, or share any of their emotions. Such people are shut off from making any deep connection with their fellow human beings.

That is why the empathetic side of human nature, although not at all logical, is to be valued. And in a roundabout way it may even help us to reason better, because it gives us a sense that other people view the world differently, and so their opinions and beliefs may be worth listening to.

So in general, it is very useful to have a non-logical faculty of empathy. But it may be, when you stand on the site of Plato's Academy, that this faculty moves into action, even though there is nothing to genuinely empathise with. What you get is thus an instinctive reaction which serves no useful purpose, other than to make us feel oddly moved.

I'm fine with that. When it comes to forming beliefs about the way the world is, nothing serves us better than reason. But to get along with others, we also need empathy. If that means we sometimes feel bonds with people who aren't there, that's fine by me. As long as we are wise to the illogicality, such feelings are at worst a harmless indulgence, and at best one of life's distinctive pleasures.

Comments welcome to julian@julianbaggini.com

Julian Baggini is editor of *The Philosophers' Magazine* (www.philosophers.co.uk) and author of *Making Sense: Philosophy Behind the Headlines* (Oxford University Press) and *What's It All About? Philosophy and The Meaning of Life* (Granta). See www.julianbaggini.com

ASKE News

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



The ASKE Newsletter

The ASKE Newsletter *Skeptica Adversaria* is up and running again and appearing quarterly. Readers who have not (yet) become ASKE members may be interested in contributions by Mark Newbrook on unusual and paranormal claims in New Zealand, Australia and India, and an account, by Peter Lucy, of the James Randi Educational Foundation (JREF)'s 'Amazing Meeting II' in January 2004 in Las Vegas. The next meeting is from January 13-16, 2005, again in Las Vegas (<http://www.randi.org>).

Recent activities of ASKE members

John Birchall of Colwyn Bay spotted a half-page editorial in a North Wales newspaper in March of this year promoting a local practitioner who claimed that all cancers are triggered by a "significant emotional event" and that "by working on and resolving the issues behind the trigger events we should be able to stop the cells from growing and allow the body to heal itself." He claimed he would be able to do this using "a mixture of hypnotherapy, NLP and imagery." Thanks to John's efforts, this man and his methods were exposed on a BBC Wales consumer programme entitled *X-Ray* broadcast on 24 May 2004. John has kindly provided me with a video recording of the programme. Anyone who would like to view this may contact me.

The ASKE email discussion network is alive and well. Recently, interest in mediums and in Derren Brown's television series has stimulated some interesting exchanges. The discussion of mediums coincided with something I have wondered about for a long time (and I am sure some readers have as well). This is whether anyone has attended several performances by the same medium and found replication of the same material – statements and questions that the medium makes when trying to identify a 'contact'. Does anyone know?

Still on the subject of mediums, Adrian Shaw was stimulated to write to the General Medical Council when the UK's 'top medium' Colin Fry claimed that spiritual healers have a code of conduct that was agreed with the General Medical Council. Accordingly Adrian asked the GMC the following questions:

1. Has the GMC agreed guidelines with anybody concerning the registering and training of those practising 'spiritual healing'?
2. Does the GMC have any guidelines concerning the use of 'spiritual healing'? If so, is there a copy that I could have access to?

3. Does the GMC recognise 'spiritual healing' as an effective treatment?

4. Are your members permitted to refer patients for 'spiritual healing' in circumstances that they feel appropriate?

5. Is 'spiritual healing' paid for by Health Authorities and Primary Care Trusts?

6. Is the GMC aware of any empirical studies regarding the efficacy of 'spiritual healing'?

Adrian duly received the following reply: "Firstly with reference to your questions 1 to 4, in 1977 the President of the GMC wrote a letter to the National Federation of Spiritual Healers. In this he explained that there was 'no reason why a doctor should not, if he considers that it would be helpful to one of his patients, either suggest or agree to a patient seeking assistance from a member of your Federation provided that the doctor himself continued to give, and to remain responsible for, whatever medical treatment he considered necessary for the patient'.

"We have not revisited the issue of referral to healers since that date, but we have revised our other advice on referral and delegation, *Good Medical Practice*, which includes the most recent guidance on this issue (see paragraphs 46 and 47). Our guidance is accessible on our website <http://www.gmc-uk.org> under Ethical Guidance.

"Technically, using the terms as defined in our guidance, a doctor who makes arrangements for a patient to consult or receive care or treatment from a person who is not registered with a statutory regulatory body is 'delegating' care. When delegating care, doctors must be satisfied that the person to whom they delegate is competent to provide the therapy involved. Usually, we expect doctors to check that the person has appropriate qualifications or experience – I am not sure whether this is feasible in the case of healers, but I do not see that as a bar to recommending a healer or arranging for a patient to see one. The doctor will also retain overall responsibility for the management of the patient. This will generally involve ensuring that the patient is receiving appropriate treatment for any condition they are known to have contracted.

"In answer to question 5 of your email you would need to speak to individual health authorities and primary care trusts. As far as question 6 is concerned we know of no empirical studies regarding the efficacy of spiritual healing.

"Jacquie Mackenzie (Tel: 020 7344 4761; JMacKenzie@gmc-uk.org)".

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

Reviews



THE ENEMIES OF PROMISE

Defending Science - Within Reason: Between Scientism and Cynicism

by Susan Haack

Prometheus Books, \$28.00, ISBN 1-59102-117-0

Susan Haack, professor of philosophy and of law at the University of Miami, discusses the many different views on science and deals with the illusion of a “scientific community” or “the” scientific method. To demarcate the borders between science and non-science is not as easy as some claim.

Scientific inquiry can best be compared to solving a crossword puzzle, using bits and pieces gathered from the works of fellow scientists, standing on the shoulders of those before, and avoiding standing on the shoulders of crackpots.

The social sciences have their merits and pitfalls: the differences between understanding and explaining, between honesty and bias are not always obvious. This seems like kicking-in open doors. The science critics are dealt with, the debunkers who claim that knowledge and rationality are relative to social context and political influences. Haack discusses the differences between scientific and literary texts, the sometimes dubious competence of scientific experts in legal trials, and the relations between science and religion. She elaborates on the pros and cons, and illustrates well, but do not expect clear answers.

But then she strongly deals with the anti-science movements. Science is not a religion, white, male dominant and Western, a mere construct of its time and place. The results endure and are valid also in other societies, although science is not the only way of acquiring knowledge. One also has to see the difference between inquiry and advocacy, and the dangers of mixing them, well-illustrated by the negative influence of dictatorships and theocracy on science. She cites Hitler: “We stand at the end of the age of reason, a new era of magical explanation of the world is rising”.

She ends by discussing whether there will ever be an end to science, and whether the ultimate laws of physics will ever be discovered. Those who are already very well acquainted with the philosophy of science literature should enjoy this book.

Wim Betz

THERE ARE NO FUNDAMENTALIST SCEPTICS

Fundamentalist World: The New Dark Age of Dogma

by Stuart Sim

Icon Books Ltd., £12.99 (hb), ISBN 1 84046 532 8

This fascinating book discusses many fundamentalist groups which it had not occurred to me to consider as such. The author analyses not just Islamic and Jewish fundamentalism but also the Hindu and various Christian

forms, post-Marxism, anti-globalisation, the British National Party, eco-terrorism, “gundamentalism” (the American militia movement), and imperialist fundamentalism with special reference to the US. The concepts of agonism and apostasy were new to me, as was market fundamentalism and the thought that the World Bank is a fundamentalist organisation.

The fundamentalist creed, whatever the variety, is (my words) that “The truth has been revealed to us and those who do not believe it are to be vilified, converted or, if necessary, killed.” “Liberal” is a dirty word and so is “sceptic”.

“What fundamentalism involves above all else is a desire for certainty and for the power to enforce that certainty over others”, says the author, and he proceeds to show at length how important the power aspect is. He brings forth arguments from other sources to show that an Enlightenment such as Christian civilisation experienced during the 18th century is what is now needed in the Islamic world. My response to that is “Lots of luck!” For the record, I see the third world war currently shaping up rapidly to be a conflict between “Islamic” and “Christian” forces and reaching full potential in the next few years. “Tens of thousands of children born to Muslim parents world-wide have been named Osama” is quoted from Rohan Gunaratna. I wonder how many have been named “Dubya”?

Fundamentalism and sexuality, male supremacy and the “compulsory heterosexuality” demanded by the Christian Right in the US are discussed. I can’t agree that “When you have to resort to terrorism to make your points, the political battle is half lost already”, but I firmly support “... we find it hard to regard religion as anything other than an excuse to exercise control over others; a method of trading on human vulnerability in order to gain power.”

No doubt other readers will find different things to agree and disagree on, but that’s what makes us sceptics, not fundamentalists, I hope.

225 pages of text, 9 of bibliography, 13 of notes, and a five-page index make this a useful working reference for further study. Highly recommended.

Frank Chambers

WHO'D HAVE THOUGHT IT?

Intuition: its powers and perils

by David G. Myers

Yale University Press, £17.95 (hb), ISBN 0-300-09531-7

I had a good feeling about this book from the moment I read about it. Vast claims are routinely made for the powers of intuition, and those pleased by its results insist that it constitutes a mode of knowing equalling if not excelling that of science, with its tedious observations and bewildering calculations, and usually preferable. Hence an up-to-date account of experiments showing the pitfalls of human judgment is more than welcome.

Of course, as Myers spells out, we’d be lost without

intuition. Natural selection has favoured the quick-witted during all those millennia when articulation and numeracy were not available to us.

However, with the wisdom of hindsight, a faculty well-diagnosed in this book, I can now see a troubling pattern emerging. There seemed to be rather a lot of biblical quotations, and C. S. Lewis popped up a bit too often.

My conscious mind discounted these signs in the race for the final (13th) chapter on Psychic Intuition. There we find a decent summary of the failure of parapsychology to come up with any evidence for psychic claims after thousands of tests. Then, right at the end, comes a really disappointing straw-man argument that we should credit people who make a leap of faith, betting their lives “on a humble spirituality, on an alternative to purposeless scientism, gullible spiritualism, and dogmatic fundamentalism.”

These are people who, according to psychologist Robert Emmons, “perceive a reality that transcends the material and physical”. They seem to include, for Myers, that vile obscurantist, Mother Teresa (exposed in Christopher Hitchens’ *The Missionary Position*, 1995).

If only the author had pondered the intuitionist sins of belief perseverance, availability and illusory correlation in respect of spiritual world-views, and made more of the counter-intuitive insights of Darwinism, we could have ended on a more constructive note.

Paul Taylor

SCALY MONSTERS

Only One Sky to Fly in: Embracing the Reptiles

by Jacqueline Maria Longstaff

Quester Books, ISBN 0954190440

There are two reasons why you might read this book. One is that you are mad. The other is that you are required to write a review of it for *The Skeptic* magazine.

Not that this is a boring book. At one point the author relates making love to a man who, during intercourse, changes into a reptile from another planet. (Incidentally, it turns out that alien reptiles are even worse lovers than terrestrial men.) A few pages further on it is revealed that the United States is a puppet of the English royal family. Mind you, it’s easy for them: the Queen Mother was a solar angel, while the Queen tops enormous wealth with a very vibrant light body on Sirius.

For older readers, the puzzle of Bill and Ben the Flowerpot Men is brilliantly unravelled. Bill is of course Baal, the Phoenician Sun God, and is locked in eternal struggle with the mechanization of time perpetrated by

(Big) Ben. No, of course it isn’t that simple: the Mayan calendar and the mis-channelling of female energy in Little Weed come into it as well, but you get the general idea (or energy level/consciousness-frequency, etc.).

Anyway, the good news is, if we all play our parts sincerely, the Universe will move on to higher frequencies, although the implanting of micro-chips by the elite who are running the New World Order may prevent us from reaching those levels, unless we are saved by the constant prayers of thousands of Tibetan monks and David Icke.

Nuts, isn’t it? Though hang on: what was that about Donald Rumsfeld implanting micro-chips...

Gaius Vincent

IN THE MEME TIME

Sense and Nonsense: Evolutionary Perspectives on Human Behaviour

by Kevin N. Laland and Gillian R. Brown

Oxford, £17.99 (hb), ISBN 0-19-850884-0

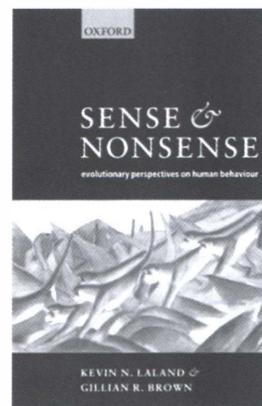
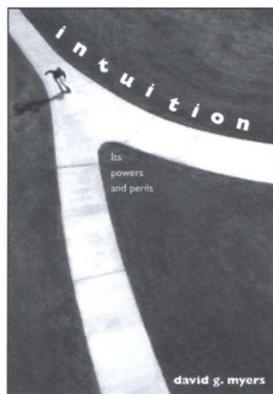
Evolution is the central idea in biology, so it makes sense to use it to take a good scientific look at human behaviour: in principle, human sociobiology is unobjectionable. So why did the actual results of this discipline (or at least the results as they reached a mainstream audience) seem such tosh: oversimplified and skimpily-supported speculations which conveniently reproduced historically local social norms? And just what do memeticists do all day?

If, like me, you have ever asked these questions then you will be both pleased and illuminated by this book. The authors are Cambridge zoologists whose preparation for this book included talking to many of the major current researchers. The result is a model of clear science writing (I found myself agreeing with the flattering blurb).

It starts with a historical discussion which takes us from the ethologists (politely trashing the deeply irritating populariser Desmond Morris, I’m pleased to say) to the fracas which followed the publication of E.O. Wilson’s *Sociobiology*. In fact, the term ‘sociobiology’ is rarely used these days.

The authors then take us through the strengths and weakness of the four contemporary approaches. It seems that much of the work now being done is genuinely low on speculation and high on actual data: ‘human behavioural ecology’ seemed the most fanciable of the options to me. So what *do* memeticists do all day? Well, the authors tell us what they *could* be doing: just give it a few years...

Martin Parkinson



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



LETTERS

Faith versus atheism: Each to their own...

I am surprised that your correspondent, in addressing the question *Organised religious faith – why?* (*The Skeptic*, 16.4), omitted to mention some of the positive rewards. Though an atheist myself, I can see that others might well consider them good reasons for affiliating themselves to one faith or another:

Demons: while there are many competent and sincere amateur exorcists offering their services as demon eradicators, there is no doubt that the professionals do it better. For one thing, demons are best addressed in Latin; and for another, the use of incense and suchlike commodities is of proven efficacy. The Roman Catholics offer a service second to none.

Paradise: not all of us, I am glad to say, envisage the after-life as best spent in the company of alluring houris who will cater to our every whim, however decadent; but those who nourish such tastes will surely do well to sign up with Islam, where such posthumous pleasures are guaranteed to those who give their lives for the faith.

Cannibalism: as a recent highly publicised case has shown, there exist people who are not only *not* vegetarians, but actually prefer to consume human flesh. The Roman Catholic Church provides for the needs of such people, not only offering them the actual transubstantiated flesh of Jesus to chew, but inviting them to wash it down with a measure of his blood.

Circumcision: anyone who chooses can divest of himself of his foreskin easily enough with a Stanley knife or the equivalent, but only by joining the Judaic faith do you get to celebrate it with a party.

Licence to kill: the churches are less permissive than they used to be about authorising slaughter of one's enemies, but most are pre-

pared to bless soldiers going into action in a perceived righteous cause. Christians who participated in the recent escapade in Iraq, for instance, did so with the comforting reassurance that any killing was just and divinely-approved. True, the other side cherished the same belief, but their defeat showed that their God wasn't as powerful as that of the Allies.

Nude dancing: few outdoor sports are as bracing as dancing naked in the dew at the Spring Solstice, and devotees will find that several pagan institutions provide the requisite facilities.

Buck-passing: the hierarchical structure of the Roman Catholic faith enables one to transfer your pangs of conscience onwards and upwards to the Pope himself, who can absolve you of any guilt you may have acquired with two raised fingers before passing it on to his Lord and Master.

I am sure this sampling represents only a few of the many blessings that organised religion has in its power to bestow. No doubt others will occur to your readers.

Hilary Evans, London

How much of Neuro-Linguistic Programming is 'linguistic'?

Paul Burns (*The Skeptic*, 17-1, letters) seeks to downplay Martin Parkinson's reservations about the supposed grounding of aspects of Neuro-Linguistic Programming in linguistic theory. However: 1) Parkinson's judgment that the tie-in between NLP's 'Meta Model' and Chomskyan transformational grammar is unconvincing is shared by all the genuine linguists I know of who have examined NLP. 2) Chomskyan grammatical theory (which has long abandoned 'deep structures' and 'transformations' in any case) is itself much more contentious than its advocates mostly acknowledge. 3) Alfred Korzybski, cited by Burns as an earlier linguist

whose ideas overlapped with NLP, was NOT in fact a qualified linguist and is himself seen as a fringe figure. Some of his positions are very generally regarded by linguists as exaggerated and some as platitudinous (the small residue are popularisations of ideas already better formulated by genuine linguists such as Benjamin L Whorf). In fact, I know of no specific and valid link between NLP and any part of real linguistics. 4) The term neuro-linguistic is obviously better reserved (as it is by genuine linguists) for the much more recent work on the actual neurology of language; in NLP it is simply misleading.

Mark Newbrook, Wirral

Too sceptical of NLP?

Martin Parkinson reflected on the attractions of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (see *The Skeptic*, 16-4) in a way that fell short of the standards I want in a journal for sceptics. All approaches to psychology and therapy, especially the ones most marketed, deserve critical review. However, it is bizarre if not hypocritical for Martin to condemn NLP for lacking "apparent empirical support" while he uses pop-psychology.

There is no reference in his article to more recent NLP books. The one he cites is 25 years old. Nothing suggests that Martin has attended NLP training or has spoken to people about what it was that attracted them to NLP. There is no reference to research or standard texts on motivation. Rather, Martin speculates like a Freudian except that psychoanalysts at least first listen to the ramblings of others.

Martin's article contains at least four unsubstantiated or otherwise unjustified comments about aspects of NLP.

"I now think that hypnosis is the one unifying element of what is otherwise a miscellany of borrowed ideas..." No evidence is pre-

sented in support of “the one unifying element” hypothesis. NLP owes much to Erickson’s approach to hypnosis but started with studies of Fritz Perls and Virginia Satir, who did not overtly use hypnosis. For example, the introduction in Dilts (1976) includes a three page ‘basic outline’ of NLP that makes no mention of hypnosis.

“... many of NLP’s instructions about the use of language derive from the way Milton Erickson was supposed to have addressed his patients.” Why the insertion of “supposed”? There are transcripts, audiotapes and films of Erickson at work and his methods are therefore literally a matter of record.

Martin builds too much and with little logic on a single, somewhat confusing, part quote from Gibson & Heap (1991, p.64), “[in the context of hypnosis] ...simple verbal instructions are a potent, though limited, means of effecting therapeutic change”. The implication is that NLP relies on simple verbal instructions. Compare with, “Ericksonian techniques of trance induction are rich in nuance and complexity”, from a professor of psychiatry (Bloom, 1997, p.65). Ericksonian hypnosis is distinguished from ‘authoritarian’ hypnosis by the use of naturalistic trance (e.g. see O’Hanlon, 1987, pp. 7–8). The originators of NLP studied Erickson’s use of language (Bandler, 1975; Grinder, DeLozier & Bandler, 1977).

“I shall illustrate this [what desires might underlie a willingness to accept exaggerated claims made about NLP] with examples from *Frogs into Princes* (Bandler & Grinder, 1979).” The desires then identified by Martin are, in abridged form: a) Ally yourselves to the wielders of power and thereby attain power yourself. b) Identify with people who are cleverer to avoid being ridiculed. c) Join the elite and dispense with rules that govern lesser mortals. d) Helping people is seductive

because it’s an exercise in covert power.

It is not made clear to what extent these attributed motives are seen by Martin to be unique to NLP. They might apply equally to much advertising. The same attractions possibly encourage people to become, for example, actors, lawyers, clerics or psychologists. Towards the end of his piece Martin notes “people are complicated...”. Indeed they are and therefore it is likely that there are many other individual motives, perhaps far more significant, that influence people to favour NLP and other social phenomena.

It may reassure Martin to know that the organised NLP therapists in his country have adopted a code of ethics that is no less stringent than that of other member organisations of the UK Council for Psychotherapy (see www.nlptca.com/ethics.htm). Regrettably though, many people still are introduced to NLP without being made aware of ethical issues, including the importance of knowing one’s limitations.

The use of the word “hypnobabble” in the title of the article and the reference to “Crazy” Therapies (Singer & Lalich, 1996) might lead some to think unfairly that Milton Erickson had little standing in the academic world. While Erickson was abhorrent to both the behaviourists and psychoanalysts who dominated U.S. psychology for most of his career and remains controversial, he had many credentials including an MA in psychology, Fellow of the American Psychiatric and Psychological Associations, honours from many societies of medical hypnosis, was founding president of the American Society for Clinical Hypnosis, and editor of that society’s professional journal. His career included a number of respectable professorships. (For fuller details see www.erickson-foundation.org/early.htm.)

The popularity of a following, such as Erickson’s or NLP, should add to the concerns about what is being taught and its likely effects. However, I suggest that rather like over-blown drug scare stories, articles like Martin’s do not serve the long-term interests of scepticism

Paul Burns, Wembley

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