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The **Skeptic**



Alien Abduction or Bad Medicine?

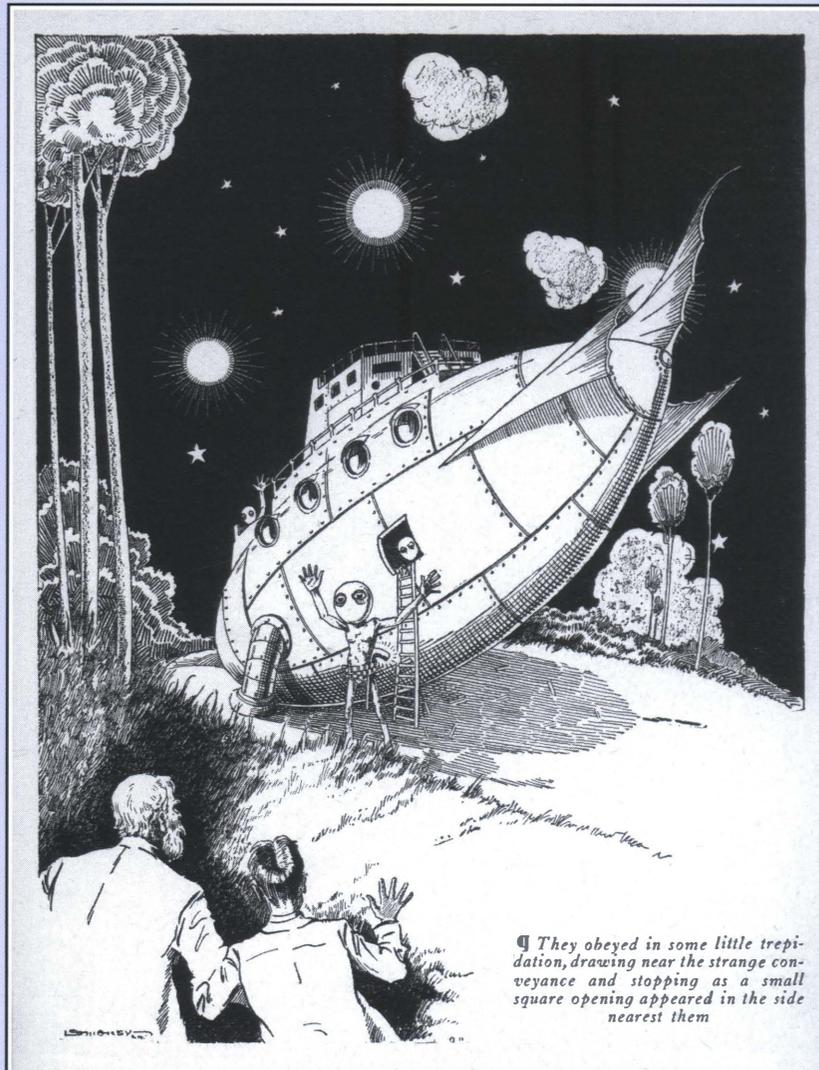
Also in this issue:

The Mystery of Hellfire Pass: Part 2

**The Problem of the Existence of God
Seen Through the Eyes of a Physicist**

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

Hilary Evans' Paranormal Picture Gallery



HAPPY LANDINGS!

Today's aliens are less amiable than they used to be. They abduct people onto their spaceships without their say-so, and subject them to humiliating body-scans. Moreover, it seems this is just Item One of a sinister agenda whereby they take over our planet and reduce you and me to second-class citizens. It wasn't like that in the old days. When, back in 1929, the protagonists of Harl Vincent's *Microcosmic Buccaneers* happened to spot a party of visiting extraterrestrials exiting their spacecraft, the aliens just gave them a cheery wave of greeting before a friendly get-together.

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Editorial

Victoria Hamilton and Chris French



HELLO AND WELCOME to issue 18.4 of *The Skeptic*. The articles in this issue see us leap from phantom snipers, to aliens, and to the fundamental debate of whether or not it is possible that God could exist. We hope you enjoy the variety!

Following on from Part One's descriptive tone, Chambers and Bartholomew take us down the path of reason when considering various hypotheses put forward to account for the high number of cracked wind-screens reported on the A3 in the early 1950s. Supersonic booms, as a possible cause of the cracked window phenomena, were considered briefly by the media, but did not catch the popular imagination as much as the notion of a human culprit. The view that using inferior glass could wreak such havoc was also dismissed quickly, possibly because it was an incredibly dull, as well as entirely implausible, theory. What did receive a substantial amount of attention was the idea that there might be a malevolent individual with an irrational grudge against the people of Esher. The conclusion reached by Chambers and Bartholomew is perhaps not one that would be enthusiastically propagated by the media and public alike. Certainly, gunmen and naughty schoolboys are far more captivating as theories than a few loose stones.

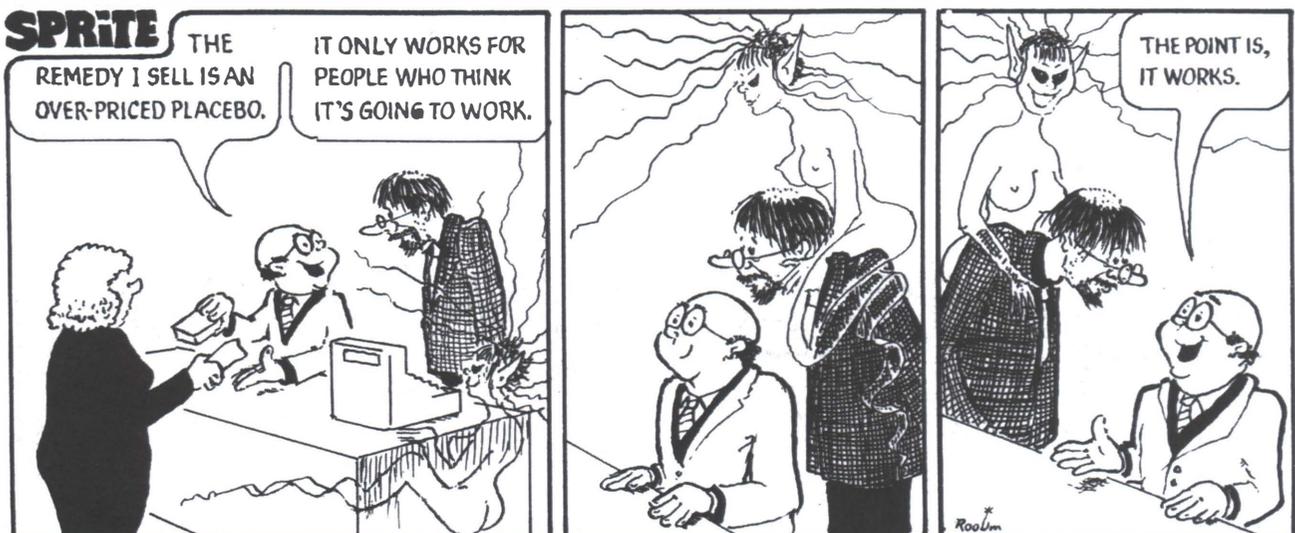
Jamie McCartney provides his theory on what he believes *actually* happens to people when they claim to have experienced abduction by aliens. Not doubting the sincerity of abductees' assertions, McCartney focuses on an alternative explanation to the ET hypothesis which may contribute to an inaccurate interpretation of a real

event, leading some people to believe that they really were abducted by extraterrestrials. McCartney's central tenet is that 'abductees' are misinterpreting traumatic events in their life; a misinterpretation which can often be a result of undergoing hypnosis. One unifying link between abductees is that their descriptions are often uncannily similar. This commonality, McCartney earnestly suggests, illuminates an experience they're all likely to have shared – surgical procedures. But how much do we really know about wakefulness during surgery? In the great scheme of things, not a lot. What is suggested in this article is that research be conducted in an effort to establish whether the surgery experience is over-represented in abductee populations. Any takers out there?

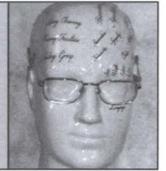
Alfred Bahr tells us just exactly what his problem with God really is. Without disparaging believers in God, i.e., the majority of the earth's human population, Bahr methodically considers all the possibilities that could demonstrate the existence of God. He comes up with 'nothing'. For Bahr, the problem with a believer's concept of God creating the universe is a little like the problem of the chicken and the egg! Let us know what you think!

As always, we hope you enjoy our array of regulars: book reviews; cartoons; columns; and letters. In fact, we'd love to hear more of your opinions on anything you believe might be of interest to fellow readers of *The Skeptic*.

With best wishes until our next issue, Victoria and Chris.



Hits and Misses



His Noodly Appendage

As if the Kansas Board of Education didn't have enough problems trying to decide how the world began, in June 24-year-old Bobby Henderson of Corvallis, Oregon, sent them a letter saying that if they were going to require Intelligent Design to be taught in Kansas science classrooms alongside evolution, he felt strongly that they should include the "alternative theory" of Intelligent Design he espouses. To wit: the universe was created by a Flying Spaghetti Monster, who continues to change scientific measurements relating to evolution with His Noodly Appendage.

"We have evidence" he wrote, adding, "it is disrespectful to teach our beliefs without wearing His chosen outfit, which of course is full pirate regalia." Henderson included – and has reproduced on his Web site at www.venganza.org – a graph showing the correlation between the declining number of pirates in the world and global warming. Henderson's letter has been joined by many others from Pastafarians, as Flying Spaghetti Monster worshippers are known. And the cult is growing, supported by sales of T-shirts, coffee mugs, and other items.

BoingBoing, a blog run by three California technologists and writers who post about pop culture oddities, posted a small item about Pastafarianism's growing popularity, which in turn got them a large mailbag of complaints from ID supporters. Some of these pointed the BoingBoing writers at the work of Kent Hovind, who founded Creation Research Evangelism in 1989 and who has a standing promise to pay \$250,000 to anyone who can give any empirical evidence for evolution. BoingBoing, not to be outdone, made a counter-offer: "We are willing to pay any individual \$250,000 if they can produce empirical evidence which proves that Jesus is not the son of the Flying Spaghetti Monster." After reader donations flooded in, BoingBoing raised its prize to \$1 million but has capped it there "in part because the number contains a lot of pretty, round zeroes that resemble holy meatballs".

Three members of the Kansas Board of Education have said they will support the inclusion of the Flying Spaghetti Monster in the science curriculum. "It is as 'logical' as any other theory", wrote one.

Homeopathy under fire

In August, *The Lancet* published the results of a Swiss-UK review of 110 trials of homeopathy, matched with 110 conventional medicine trials, and concluded that "the clinical effects of homeopathy are placebo effects". The article noted that in both types of trial smaller, lower quality trials showed more beneficial treatment

effects than the larger, higher quality ones, suggesting that bias might be a possible explanation for any positive findings.

The journal's editors took advantage of the article's publication to stage a militant attack on homeopathy's continued popular acceptance, saying "For too long, a politically correct laissez-faire attitude has existed towards homeopathy... Now doctors need to be bold and honest with their patients about homeopathy's lack of benefit, and with themselves about the failings of modern medicine to address patients' needs for personalised care". Investment in research should stop (despite the editors' comment, "The more dilute the evidence for homeopathy becomes, the greater seems its popularity").



The editorial also notes that the Swiss government has withdrawn insurance coverage for homeopathy and four other complementary treatments "because they did not meet efficacy and cost-effectiveness criteria". Meanwhile, the Patients Association has called for all GPs to provide patients with the choice of using complementary medicine – although this demand is qualified with "where it has been proven to work".

We psychically predict no such sanity will hold sway in Britain as long as the Royal Family and other celebrities continue to support homeopathy. And they do: not content with issuing a guide to alternative therapies earlier this year, Prince Charles commissioned a report from an independent economist, published in autumn 2005, into how much money alternative therapies

could save the NHS. We have to suppose the answer will be 'lots': cheaper therapies, and then the patients die faster.

Crystal Clear

At last, a practical reason not to indulge in paranormal beliefs. *The Times* recently reported on the case of Herve Vandrot, a French amateur psychic studying botanics at Edinburgh University. It seems that Vandrot placed the crystal ball he uses for his psychic pastime on his windowsill and sallied forth to Edinburgh's Royal Botanic Garden. By the time he came back, sun shining through the crystal ball – nice, clear, round glass, filled with liquid, a perfect concentrator for a sunbeam – onto a pile of washing had started a fire, and both his flat and two others had been destroyed. Several more were uninhabitable. Vandrot spoke up in defence of his crystal ball, but the fire-fighters were adamant it had caused the fire.

Now, we know you're going to say he should have known...

What time is it?

The US has sent a proposal to the International Telecommunications Union, which is responsible for the broadcasts that allow us all to synchronize our watches, to the effect that the practice of adding leap seconds should be abandoned. The problem in a nutshell: GPS can't handle them.

Currently, time as we know it is measured in two ways: first, the atomic clock whose electrons decay at precisely the right intervals; second, the rotation of the earth. Because the earth's rotation is uneven, every so often the difference between the two times must be corrected by adding (or subtracting, though this has so far never happened) a leap second. Humans barely notice. But time and location are intimately connected, and the difference between atomic time and universal time (formerly known as GMT) has reached 32 seconds, with GPS stuck in the middle, 19 seconds behind atomic time (TAI) and 13 seconds ahead of universal time (UTC). Give it a while longer, and your taxi may not be able to find your house.

But the converse problem exists for astronomers, who are enraged by the proposal, which would decouple time from its physical meaning. As Mike Hapgood, the geophysical secretary of the Royal Astronomical Society explained it, "One second off will be within beam, but once you disconnect, within two to three years a spacecraft wouldn't be in the radio beam and you wouldn't be able to communicate with it".

The ITU discussed the proposals at its November 2005 meeting.

Curses, foiled again

In August, residents of South Wales experienced a second wave of "curse letters" – letters that threaten that the recipient's life will be destroyed unless the person tears the enclosed Jack of Spades into four pieces and sends them, along with £10, to an address in Austria. The purported sender, a clairvoyant named Samantha, can't be all that clairvoyant, since several of the residents so targeted contacted the *South Wales Echo*, which promptly alerted readers to the scam. Anyone receiving such a letter is asked to contact Trading Standards.



R.I.P.: Philip Klass

Sadly we report the death of Philip J. Klass, who spent much of his 50-year career researching aviation technology and much of his spare time debunking UFO claims. Born in Iowa, Klass was a senior editor for *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, author of five books on UFOs, and a founder of CSICOP. He died without ever having had to pay out the \$10,000 reward he offered to anyone whose claim to have seen a UFO or been abducted by an alien could be confirmed by the FBI.

Keep up with *The Skeptic*

Between issues, read our blog at www.livejournal.com/users/ukskeptic. An RSS feed of *The Skeptic's* discussion forum is available at www.skeptic.org.uk/forum/rss.php.

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 p. 3, rather than the old PO Box address, which has been phased out.

Skeptic at large . . .

Wendy M Grossman



Be Prepared

I DON'T KNOW if the *Guinness Book of World Records* has an entry for "most often abducted by aliens", but if they do I suppose James Basil would be a contender. Basil claims to have been abducted more than 12 times starting when he was five – he's only 26 now. His web site is serious, almost professorial, but in person he's intense and very, very anxious to talk. 'His' aliens are of two types, one sort of reptilian and rather small, the other 'the greys', which are larger and smoother. It's hard to know what he or any other abductee really believes, but on a recent edition of the Midlands program *Central Extra*, he said he was so disturbed by these experiences that he tried to commit suicide twice at 12. He is clearly very disturbed by something.

But here's the thing: from those dozen abductions, Basil can still produce no physical evidence to bolster his contention. The one piece of evidence he did have, he says, was from one of the very first visits, a dusty box that had been on top of a cupboard and that contained two small footprints of the reptilians. His mother threw it away.

We - Tony Youens and I – suggested to him that as a serial abductee he could prepare for his next abduction by equipping himself with a kit of tools that might help him collect physical evidence. Why not take advantage and plan, as if he were a policeman who regularly got called out to crime scenes? After all, although the first few abductions must be terrifying, even paralyzing, experiences, surely on later occasions experience alone would enable someone to think clearly enough to collect a skin swab or some kind of impression.

What should be in the kit? First of all, a small digital camera. These days, cameras are so light and inexpensive they're even packed into mobile phones. Since most people carry their phones all the time, it's no hardship to expect to have them along if they're abducted. Of course, a photograph of an alien by itself doesn't mean much, not with today's special effects, but it would be a start. At least then we'd have a better idea what we were looking for and might even be able to make some guesses about what kind of planet would support such a life form. Abductees who were wounded by their alien abductors could also photograph any wounds before they started to heal. (Basil said the wounds he sustained from his first abduction, on one leg and his abdomen, were already scars by the next morning when he saw them. Yes, he says he still has the scars, but he didn't offer to show us his leg.)

Second of all, some kind of fingerprinting kit. That might be any kind of tape (though you'll need to protect it carefully after you use it), and a small amount of some kind of powder you can use to dust for fingerprints. If you want to get classy, you can buy gelatine lifters (\$20/pack), which are just tacky enough to lift latent fingerprints or footprints but not so adhesive that they'll damage any substrate. As Tony pointed out, these days you can get DNA samples from a lifted fingerprint, so even placing a piece of tape over a spot an alien had touched to lift any residue might give quite a lot of information. If you can't afford or don't know where to get that sort of specialist tape, even ordinary Sellotape would at least grab a few fibres or hairs.

Third, a bunch of plastic bags. Useful for stowing any small items the abductee might be able to grab unnoticed. Now, don't get all moralistic on me. These are people who knocked you unconscious, kidnapped you, and even now might be planning to go after you with an anal probe. Given that, I say it's all right to knock off a tiny piece of their spaceship or any odds and ends they might have lying around in the interests of science.

Fourth, a small brush. Useful for collecting dust (in another of those plastic bags) and so on. Bring a small vial of known powder too.

Fifth, a small pair of scissors. See if you can get a hair sample, there's a good chap. Although, it's true: most abducting aliens seem to be bald. Why is that?

Sixth, several cotton swabs. You probably won't get close enough to the aliens to stick one in an orifice such as nose or mouth (although if you can, so much the better), but you could certainly take samples of any liquids you're given to drink, or that are left lying around. Remember to stow each used swab in a separate plastic bag.

Seventh, a star chart and pen. If the aliens are friendly, get them to show you where they live. You can use the pen to mark the chart so you don't forget.

All these items are pretty inexpensive, most are ubiquitous, and none take up much space. Of course, the idea would be to adopt a lifestyle of that of University of Toronto professor, Steve Mann, who for more than 20 years has gone around with a video camera and other equipment attached to himself, recording everything that happens to him. He'd be an ideal abductee for our edification, but unfortunately so far whatever aliens are buzzing around the planet don't seem to be interested in him.

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

The Mystery of Hellfire Pass: Part Two

Paul Chambers and Robert Bartholomew consider some theories as to the 'sniper's' identity

THE LAST ISSUE of *The Skeptic* outlined the panic and mayhem that ensued when the small English town of Esher apparently became the target of a mysterious sniper. The phantom gunman based himself on a four kilometre stretch of road between Esher and Cobham and, between December 1950 and December 1953, was alleged to have shot out the windscreens of at least 51 motor vehicles. A suspect was never even seen, let alone caught, and no bullets were ever recovered. As the number of incidents mounted so did the sense of hysteria in Esher, but who or what could be responsible?

What was happening on Hell-Fire Pass?

Trying to solve the mystery of the phantom sniper of Esher was no easy task. No firm solutions were offered at the time and no further work has been done in the fifty years since the trouble began. During this time much valuable evidence, in the form of local police records, has been destroyed. Nonetheless, the authors have the detailed records from the *Esher News and Advertiser* (ENA) and a few scraps of evidence from other sources (see *The Skeptic*, 18.3). From these we believe it is possible to test some of the possible solutions to the phantom sniper mystery and ultimately to offer our own opinion as to what exactly did occur on the Portsmouth Road during the early 1950s.

In this section we will test the four main theories put forward as the cause of the broken windows. More minor ideas, such as the ghostly highwayman and falling pinecones, are excluded because they are unworkable.

1. Supersonic booms

Early on, during the second wave of windscreen shattering, a national newspaper put forward the idea that sonic booms from low-flying military aircraft may have been responsible for shattering the windscreens on the Portsmouth Road. This idea was picked up by both the ENA and some of its readers.

The first acknowledged breaking of the sound barrier occurred in October 1947, only a few years before the Esher incidents. In the years following this achievement the term 'supersonic' entered popular culture as a euphemism for anything that was fantastic or great. There was, however, also concern over the effect of supersonic booms on local property, especially windows which could potentially shatter as a consequence. Although few, if any, people in Esher could ever have heard a supersonic boom at this time, there was already talk about the possibility of these noises being heard in the region, and the town itself is on the flight path from nearby Heathrow. It is probably for this reason that this theory gained local popularity. It is, however, a poor idea in practice.

The pattern of the windscreen shattering, as reported by the ENA and others, does not suggest a supersonic cause. Surely cars from a wider area would be affected as would the windows of houses, let alone the side windows of cars. It is also questionable as to how many supersonic aircraft there would have been operating in the area at that time. With the aid of hindsight we now also know that supersonic aircraft may well rattle a few windows, but they very rarely break them and then certainly not the toughened glass of car windscreens. Even the ENA rejects this idea itself.

With the aid of hindsight we now also know that supersonic aircraft may well rattle a few windows, but they very rarely break them

2. Lone gunmen and naughty schoolboys

A chief reason for rejecting the supersonic boom theory is that in a large majority of cases motorists actually reported hearing an object strike their windscreen and in a number of cases there is clear evidence in the form of circular pock marks in the glass (e.g. Robert Bruce had a circular crack in his windscreen after driving along the Portsmouth Road on 4th June 1952). In the majority of cases it seems as though a missile of some kind is the most likely explanation. It is the origin of these missiles that forms the mystery.

Throughout its coverage of the windscreen incidents, the ENA favoured the idea of there being a genuine sniper hiding at the roadside and taking pot shots at passing cars. In favour of this idea are the tight distribution of incidents, most of which occur along the same short section of the Portsmouth Road, and the sound of a gun shot that accompanied many of the broken windscreens. With reports like that of Mr Tickner, who said he saw a flash and then heard an explosion just prior to his windscreen shattering, it is no wonder that a gunman was suspected. It is clear that at least some members of the local constabulary favoured this idea too, judging by their willingness to comb the surrounding countryside for evidence.



Supersonic aircraft may well rattle a few windows, but they very rarely break them

However, the one consistent problem with this theory has been the lack of a single bullet to be recovered from either inside the car or from the roadside. At other incidents where windows or cars have been shot at, the bullet is normally quite easy to find. The *ENA* and members of the local council overcame the problem of a lack of bullets by consistently advocating that an airgun must have been used. An airgun is a light rifle which uses compressed air to fire light bullets, pellets or even stones over relatively short distances. They are low-powered and their ammunition fragile so whilst it might be possible for an airgun shot to break or damage a windscreen, the bullet itself would probably not survive the impact and certainly wouldn't penetrate the glass to land inside the car. This would adequately explain the lack of a bullet at the scene of the crime. In addition, airguns are light, cheap and did not require the owner to hold a licence and so could easily have been operated by a local youth or other mischief-maker.

Although airguns vary in power and accuracy, it is reasonably certain that if fired from close range a pellet or rock from one could shatter a windscreen. Several experiments have been performed with airguns and windscreens, the results of which all show that airgun pellets can indeed shatter all types of windscreen glass.

Whilst it is certainly possible that there was indeed a sniper with an airgun hiding in the bushes surrounding the Portsmouth Road, there are a certain number of problems with this idea.

The first of these concerns the accuracy available from an airgun. Being low-powered, the effective range of most airguns is only a few hundred metres and, like all guns, their accuracy decreases with increasing distance from the target and with increased wind and rain. Despite all these factors the sniper seems to have been an uncannily good shot under all types of light and

One reason that the Esher incidents look so abnormal is that a large number of windscreens were not just chipped or starred, but actually shattered

weather conditions. The sniper managed to shoot out the windscreens of dozens of cars accurately, without missing and hitting other parts of the car, most notably the bodywork and side windows. On top of this the sniper was capable of doing it at night and in all weather conditions including on one occasion a snow-storm blizzard! To accomplish this, the sniper would

have to be very close to the roadside indeed, and yet he or she was never once spotted by passing motorists, police patrols or people who have pulled over after having had their windscreens shattered. This seems very strange indeed.

The strongest piece of evidence in favour of a sniper is the case of Mr Frank Smith whose car was apparently hit on the driver's door by a .317 bullet which left a sizeable hole (see *The Skeptic*, 18.3). All this would seem to point strongly in favour of Mr Smith having been shot at, but there are some strange inconsistencies noticeable in the reporting of this incident. Firstly there is the cal-



Were schoolboys with catapults responsible for the damaged windscreens?

ibre of the bullet which, at .317, is much larger and more powerful than the airgun pellets hitherto believed to be responsible for the other broken windscreens. Either the sniper had changed his means of operating or was using a different gun for this one occasion. More puzzling though is the lack of any mention of a bullet being found embedded in the door even though, according to the *ENA* article, a 'ballistic expert' was involved in the case. However, the article never states that the ballistic expert actually examined the car, merely that he suggests that it could be a .317 bullet. Stranger still his assertion that the bullet could have "ricochetted [*sic*] off the road surface before hitting the panel". Does this imply that the angle of entry was such that the missile had to come from a downward direction, which would seem to be very odd indeed? We are not given enough information to decide, but this case has enough inconsistencies to suggest that either a bullet was not involved or that maybe this shooting is not related to the other windscreen incidents. It is also interesting that despite this apparent *prima facie* case of a shooting along the Portsmouth Road, for several months afterward the police still maintained that there

was no evidence of malicious damage to any of the cars involved in the sniper incidents.

A further suggestion made on a number of occasions was that schoolboys with catapults were responsible for the damage. A good catapult with a stone or steel ball-bearing could easily damage a car windscreen and could even be more powerful than some airguns. The suggestion that schoolboys could be involved came early on in the second wave of incidents, when a police sergeant told the *ENA*: "Perhaps it will stop when the children go back to school". However, the catapult theory, which was suggested on more than one occasion, has all the

same problems of accuracy in adverse conditions as the airguns do. There is also the prolonged period of time over which the incidents occurred and the wide spread of incidents beyond the Portsmouth Road. All these work against the theory of non-mobile children with catapults. There is also only one windscreen broken at a time which suggests a remarkable patience for impudent children.

Interestingly, during some library research in Esher, one of the authors was approached by a local woman (to whom we shall afford anonymity) who said she was around the age of 12 when the sniper was in full swing. She claimed that many of the incidents were down to herself and her friends

throwing tomatoes at passing cars, something that does not tie in with any of the *ENA* reports. She also mentioned that she knew of 'older boys' who were using airguns to take shots at car windscreens, but her stories sounded remarkably like those that are reflected in the *ENA's* letter columns and may well have been based on local gossip at the time.

Although the sniper theory has some credibility to it, there are massive problems with the feasibility of carrying out this task with such accuracy over such a long period of time. It was a theory that was eventually dismissed by the police and is not favoured here either.

3. Inferior glass

The Automobile Association (AA) is quoted as saying that the damage was most likely to be due to inferior glass. The AA was consulted over this but could provide no further help, being unable to find any reference to the Esher incidents in their newsletters or press releases of the time.

It is unknown how inferior glass could be responsible for the Esher incidents except possibly being in conjunction with movements in the frame of the vehicle

causing the glass to flex and crack. This, however, would not explain the starred windscreens or indeed the other evidence of impact that most people reported.

4. Stones on the road

An obvious explanation for the broken windscreens is that loose stones on the road were being flicked into the air by passing traffic and then impacting into the windscreens of other cars. This possibility was suggested right from the outset of the Esher incidents and was repeated many times by many different people. It is also clear that the local authorities favoured this theory when they sent a sweeper lorry to clear the Portsmouth Road, and that the police and Ministry of Transport, with their insistence that there was no evidence of malicious damage, also favoured an explanation along these lines. There is little doubt that flying stones can cause the kind of damage seen along the Portsmouth Road, but given the large number of incidents in such a short space of time, how likely is it?

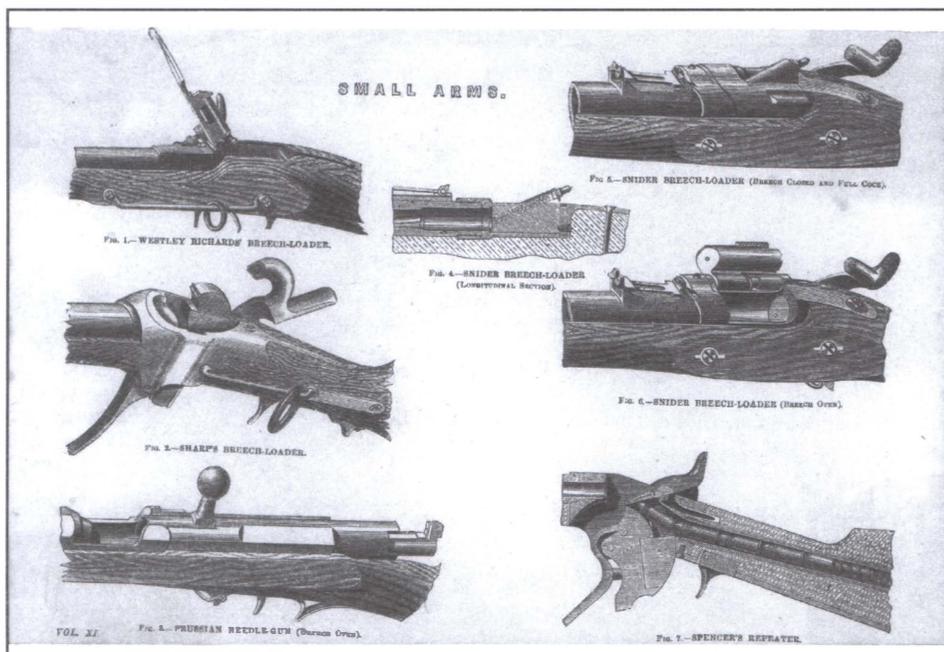
When looking at the likelihood of stones being the cause of the Esher incidents, it is necessary to take a number of factors into account including the volume of traffic, the pattern of windscreen breakage and the type of glass used in cars of the day. We shall deal with these points individually.

i) Volume of traffic on the Portsmouth Road

During the early 1950s the Portsmouth Road (then the A3 road) was the major route for driving between London and south coast cities such as Portsmouth, Brighton and Southampton. It was therefore very busy indeed and the *ENA* had been campaigning for some time on the issue of traffic accidents and pollution through Esher itself, and with good cause (this is dealt with more fully in part three of this study). In September 1951 a census by the Automobile Association showed that there was an average of 987 cars an hour passing through Esher during the daytime, making that stretch of the Portsmouth Road officially Britain's busiest highway. Allowing for slack periods at night, that would mean that around 12,000 to 15,000 vehicles a day passed through Esher town centre, a staggering number for an old Roman Road not designed for the purpose.

Given that somewhere in the region of 84,000 vehicles were travelling along the Portsmouth Road in a

week, the occurrence of one or two stone-damaged windscreens does not make that look statistically unlikely. When one realises that during the three years in which the "phantom sniper" operated, something like over 12,000,000 cars must have travelled the road, then the 51 recorded damaged windscreens during this time actually looks statistically quite low (it equates to a 0.004% chance of a car along the Portsmouth Road being damaged during this time). In other words, the damage occurring to the windscreens is not that statistically unusual.



There are problems with the theory that a lone gunman was responsible for the mayhem

ii) Damaged windscreen statistics

There are statistics for everything in this world, including stone damage to windscreens. In 1998 Edgeguard International, an American glass manufacturer, undertook a survey of nearly 4,000 parked cars; 45% showed evidence of stone damage on their windscreen. This survey was backed up with another statistic which states that 'stones cause 90% of windshield replacements'.

The seriousness of stone damage was also outlined in a report for the Ministry of Transportation and Highways of British Columbia, Canada, where loose aggregate on roads was causing a serious problem with broken and damaged windscreens. They recommended using smaller aggregate during their winter road gritting programme.

These results would appear to suggest that windscreen damage by loose stones is very common indeed with up to half of all cars showing evidence of stone damage. When these statistics are put together with the huge volume of traffic seen on the Portsmouth Road, the number of incidents again does not look statistically abnormal.

iii) Patterns of windscreen damage and windscreen type

One reason that the Esher incidents look so abnormal is because of the large number of windscreens that are not just chipped or starred, but actually shattered. According to the information given in the *ENA* and others, of the 51 damaged vehicles 32 actually had their windscreens completely destroyed. Although much was made of this destruction at the time, this may come down to the windscreen types being used in the 1950s.

Virtually all modern cars have laminated windscreens which have a thin layer of rubbery plastic sandwiched between two layers of glass. When hit by an object a laminated windscreen will not shatter or frost over, it will merely produce a spider-web pattern.

This might well explain what caused the physical damage to the cars but it does not offer an insight as to why the town of Esher acted in the way it did when faced with a few damaged windscreens

However, laminated glass was only just coming into regular use in the early 1950s and a great many cars travelling along the Portsmouth Road would have had windscreens that were made of tempered glass which, when hit by an object, shatters into thousands of small pieces. It is this shattering that produces the characteristic 'frosted over' effect that can still be seen in broken side and rear windows of modern cars.

This difference in design leaves tempered glass more open to shattering than laminated glass. The fact that in the early 1950s tempered glass was more common than laminated glass would explain why so many windscreens were shattered. The glass type is only mentioned in two of the Esher incidents; both of these were lami-

nated windscreens and both received only minor damage, not shattering which, whilst not conclusive, does follow the above pattern.

Further evidence in favour of loose stones comes from the pattern of the windscreen damage. For a start, most of the damage was to windscreens suggesting that the missile was coming towards the vehicle. Whilst a sniper could hit windscreens, it would be more likely that they would end up taking out side windows instead. Only one side shot was reported and that was the 'bullet hole' in Frank Smith's car door. A second piece of evidence comes from the area in which the windscreen was hit. Of the four reports in which the area of impact is listed, all are on the driver's side of the car. This is significant because stones flicked into the air are usually done so by traffic going in the opposite direction, which means that the stones are most liable to hit the driver's side. However, stones lifted by a car in front can hit the windscreen anywhere at all.

The noise of a stone hitting a windscreen, from first-hand experience, is like a loud, sudden crack. Some people associated this noise with the shot of a gun, but given that the weapon most commonly cited was an air-gun, and that the noise always came with the damage, this is again better evidence of a stone than a gunman. A shot would be expected to be heard after the damage if the shot came from some distance away.

It is also possible that there was something wrong with the road surface between Esher and Cobham which led to a greater than usual amount of loose stones on the road although, given the large volume of traffic, an abnormal road surface would not be necessary to produce the level of damage seen.

Conclusions

Given the evidence cited here we feel that at least the majority, if not all, the incidents along the Portsmouth Road can be explained by loose stones on the road being flicked into the path of other cars.

This might well explain what caused the physical damage to the cars but it does not offer an insight as to why the town of Esher acted in the way it did when faced with a few damaged windscreens. In the next issue we shall look for an explanation behind this episode of mass panic and look at other incidents round the world where broken windscreens have led to civil unrest.

Dr Paul Chambers is a television producer and science writer based in Hertfordshire. His book *Bones of Contention*, which concerns the controversy surrounding the *Archaeopteryx* fossil, was published in July 2003.

Dr Robert Bartholomew is a sociologist specialising in culture-specific psychiatric disorders and is the author of several books and numerous articles on the subject. He lives in Whitehall, New York. References and further information can be obtained from the authors at: pmc@bicameral.co.uk

Skeptical Stats

1. Percentage of conclusions drawn in papers published in scientific journals that are arguably false: **50**
2. Government's estimate of cost of the national ID card: **£5.5 billion**
3. LSE's estimate of cost of the national ID card: **£19.2 billion**
4. Percentage of UK hospital consultants suffering from poor mental health and emotional burnout in 1994: **27**
5. Percentage of UK hospital consultants suffering from poor mental health and emotional burnout in 2002: **32**
6. Average length of calls to phone psychics: **30 minutes**
7. Average cost per minute of those calls: **\$1 to \$4**
8. Number of acupuncture colleges in the US: **20**
9. Cost to spend 32 hours in Montana's Radon Health Mine: **\$150**
10. Bookmakers' odds that Elvis is still alive: **1000/1**
11. Percentage of Americans who think that creationism should be taught alongside evolution in public schools: **nearly 67**
12. Percentage of the human and chimpanzee genomes that are the same: **96**
13. Number of divorces in Britain in 2004: **167,116**
14. Number of years the Home Office would like Britons to go to jail for downloading violent pornography: **3**
15. Amount psychic Miriam Gifford charges for "soul retrieval": **£35-£50**
16. Cost of a holiday for your teddy bear offered by a German travel agent: **£68 to £100**
17. The answer to the puzzle "(first 10 digit prime in consecutive digits of e).com" that Google posted on billboards in Silicon Valley in 2004 as part of a recruitment drive: **7427466391**
18. Amount Scientology charges actors for workshops at its Los Angeles Celebrity Center designed to help them succeed in show business: **\$17**
19. Percentage of voices in hallucinations (among both men and women) that are male: **71**
20. Height of a statue of St Anthony of Padua, patron saint of lost and stolen items, that disappeared from a Peterborough church in July 2005: **two feet**
21. Amount for which athletes swimming in Loch Ness as part of Scotland's July 2005 triathlon were insured against monster bites: **£1 million**
22. Amount for which a Russian astrologer sued NASA in "moral damages" for molesting a comet (using the Deep Impact probe) and disrupting the moral balance of the universe: **£310 million**
23. Date of the first wedding in Britain legally carried out by a humanist celebrant: **June 18, 2005**
24. Percentage of global greenhouse gas emissions caused by the UK: **3**
25. Percentage of the world's population that lives in the UK: **1**

1 Epidemiologist John P. A. Ioannidis, in *Public Library of Science Medicine*, http://www.boingboing.net/2005/08/30/journal_article_50_o.html; 2 November 2004 estimate, <http://news.ft.com/cms/s/fbc6527a-4276-11d9-8e3c-00000e2511c8.html>; 3 LSE report, June 2005, http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/pressAndInformationOffice/newsAndEvents/archives/2005/IDCard_FinalReport.htm; 4, 5 *The Lancet*; 6, 7 www.e-phonepsychic.com; 8 *American Chronicle*; 9 www.radonmine.com; 10 Channel 4 News; 11 *New York Times*, July 2005 poll by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life; 12 *Nature*; 13 Office for National Statistics; 14 *TheInquirer.net*; 15 www.psychicfayres.co.uk; 16 *Ananova*; 17 mathematician John Allen Paulos, writing in the *Guardian*; 18 ads in *Backstage* magazine; 19 BBC, reporting on a study in *NeuroImage*; 20 BBC; 21 *Guardian*; 22 *Pravda*; 23, 24, 25 BBC

Thanks for contributions to Sid Rodrigues and Jason C. Snowden.

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 (p.3). Make sure all clippings are clearly marked with the date and the name of the publication.



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

The Problem of the Existence of God seen through the Eyes of a Physicist

Alfred Bahr

IN ALL LARGE religions God is thought of as being the creator of men and the world, that is, the creator of the universe. And God existed already before space, time and matter was created. God was therefore able to reside and govern in an absolute 'nothingness', according to the theologians. Great thinkers of all times have attacked and criticized this 'God-idea' with philosophical arguments. Despite that, the God-idea is still alive, and is being kept alive with questionable arguments and means. What follows is an analysis and scrutiny, with the logic of a physicist, of the concept of a Creator/God.

The belief in a Creator/God stands and falls with the 'nothingness'. If it can be proved that in nothingness nothing, absolutely nothing, can exist then the God-idea is finished. And when, in addition, it can be shown that this nothingness of the theologians does not exist in reality, but can exist only as a thought, as a speculative idea in our brains, then the foundation for the existence of a God has vanished. This God is revealed as only a thought of the brain, which does not exist in reality outside the brain.

Before the Beginning

It is maintained that God already existed before 'he' created the Universe. This implies that he was capable of residing in an absolute 'nothingness'. This nothingness is conceived as being some kind of 'super-emptiness', or 'super-vacuum' in which God resides, and in which space, time and matter is located after it was created by God. However, 'nothingness' is only a synonym for 'non-existence'. If it is maintained that God resided in 'nothingness', this only means: God resided in 'non-existence'. In other words, as nothing yet existed, as there existed neither space, time nor matter, we had the non-existence of the universe. And this 'non-existence' expresses only a condition, namely the non-existence of something, and this does not mean that this non-existence is a kind of a vacuum, where at the time 'X' something can be created and can exist. A vacuum is space-like, is empty space. A vacuum which is not space-like, that is, a vacuum which does not even contain space, does not exist, and never has existed! One cannot remove the space from the inside of an evacuated container. Therefore, where nothing exists, that is, where we have a 'nothingness' or 'non-existence' respectively, we can not suddenly have space, time and matter.

An Infinity of Universes

From this, it follows that the universe cannot have emerged out of nothingness. Indeed, modern cosmology teaches today that the universe emerged out of a quantum-mechanical state. In other words, before our universe emerged, there was already something existing,



Before the creation, could God reside and govern in absolute nothingness?

The universe existed at that time, so to speak, in an embryo state, which separated in space, time and matter with a bang; the 'Big Bang'! In addition, according to the newest theories of the cosmologists (physicists)

There is no nothingness and there is no God residing in a nothingness. These ideas can exist in our brains only as a thought or fantasy, but not in reality outside our brain

there exists not only one universe, but infinitely many, all of which exist separately and are causally independent of each other. This conclusion of the cosmologists seems plausible; if one universe exists, why should there not somehow be very many? In this 'world-of-many-

worlds', of course, no room is left for the 'nothingness' of the theologians and their God, who resides in this nothingness.

But let us assume for a moment that there is such a nothingness and God resides in this nothingness, and let us look at the consequences of this condition. God must have at least a form and a size. In addition he must be of some kind of substance in order to distinguish himself from nothingness. God cannot be just a plain nothingness. But the notion of form and size already depend on space. But where there is no space, that is, in non-existence, nothing can have a form and a size and a substance. In non-existence there are no means to differentiate and to distinguish. In nothingness there is also no time-flow possible. Time-flow is possible only in space in the presence of matter, which moves and undergoes changes. In nothingness there is nothing that can move and undergo changes. There are therefore no clocks possible in nothingness. Only in space we can have time and only in space something can have a form, a size and also a substance. In nothingness everything loses its distinguishing marks, and also a God would not be able to distinguish himself from nothingness; would not be able to choose the time 'X' for the creation of space, time and matter; would fuse together with nothingness; would become identical with nothingness and lose his existence, because the nothingness is non-existence. That applies also if we imagine God to be of a spiritual nature, whatever the meaning of that notion may be. In order for God to exist, the nothingness would have to be space and time. Only in space-time is existence possible. But space-time always appears together with matter. That means God could exist only inside the universe, provided he existed. But then this God could not be a 'Creator-God', but has been created at the 'Big Bang' together with the universe – as a perishable creature!

Surrounded by Nothingness?

But let us assume again for a moment, that the universe has been created by God out of nothingness. Logically, this universe must then be surrounded by nothingness, in order for God to continue to reside and govern in nothingness. However, as we have seen already, in nothingness there are no distinguishing marks possible. In nothingness therefore nothing can distinguish itself from nothingness. In particular in nothingness nothing can have a structure, a form and a size, and the universe, seen as a whole and an object, would lose its characteristic feature of being an object; it would not be able to distinguish itself from nothingness; it would fuse together with this nothingness; it would lose its existence by not being able to exist in nothingness. However, we know that the universe is existent. Therefore there cannot be such a nothingness outside of the universe, and we must have space-time outside the universe instead, so that the universe can exist. But in that case, there cannot have been such a nothingness before the universe came into being. This in turn means that there cannot be such a 'Creator-God', since there is

no nothingness as a domicile for this God. It is therefore wrong to believe that there is a 'Super-Emptiness' outside the universe, or a 'Nothingness' outside the universe, or a region of 'Non-existence' outside the universe, or a beyond of space and time. The 'nothingness' of the theologians with a God residing in this nothingness, who possessed a clock and decided to create the universe at the time 'X' together with heaven and hell, is an impossibility and an unsur-



Immanuel Kant showed that proofs for the existence of God were all wrong

passed absurdity! There is no nothingness and there is no God residing in a nothingness. These ideas can exist in our brains only as a thought or fantasy, but not in reality outside our brains.

Besides, the notion of a nothingness outside the universe would introduce an invisible border at the place, where space ends and the nothingness begins. Imagine a cosmic traveller, who suddenly reaches this border. One more step and he has vanished in nothingness. But not only would our cosmic traveller have vanished in nothingness, if he wanted to leave the universe, the universe itself would have vanished in nothingness long ago, namely at that moment of its supposed creation by God. It would not have been able to exist in nothingness and would have vanished immediately after its creation, like this cosmic traveller. We recognize how absurd this notion of a nothingness outside of the universe is.

No Heaven or Hell

Since there is no 'nothingness' as a domicile for God, there cannot be regions like a 'Beyond', or a 'Paradise'

and a 'Hell' as a domicile for the souls of the believers in God, and for the souls of the unbelievers, or for the souls of the Islamic martyrs and for the souls of the soldiers of Allah, etc., etc. But when there does not exist a region outside the Universe or beyond space and time as a domicile for the souls, then the souls themselves cannot exist and are thereby revealed as being notions of plain fantasy only. With God also the souls are gone, and we all will have to live in future without a soul! And since there is no God, there cannot have been a 'Son of God' named Jesus Christ and no holy miracles making the 'holy Virgin Mary' mother of 'God's son'. For the Christian, this means that he will have to live from now on without sinning, since there is no God-son, who can give him absolution of his sins.

If there is no 'nothingness' outside the universe, then this has serious consequences for our world view. Since we know that only in space-time can something exist, we must have space and time outside of the universe. And at any border of that space-time, that we may imagine, we find again space-time beyond this imagined border as a necessary condition for existence of the whole inside the border. This goes on and on and on and we have an infinitely large 'space-time-world' before us. However, this 'space-time-world' cannot be an empty world, or hosting somewhere just a single universe, namely ours. We know that a single universe is enormously large, but always finite in size due to its 'big-bang' origin. We also know that the duality 'space-time' is possible only in the presence of matter. Without matter, there are no space-intervals possible, and without matter, which moves and changes, there are no time-intervals possible; that is, without matter, there can be no space-time, and wherever we have space-time, we must also have matter. From this follows that there must be an infinite number of universes in this infinitely large 'space-time-world', since a single universe is always finite in size. And this 'World of many Worlds' exists for ever, but there is a persistent change: continuously new universes are born and others die and vanish. The universes are not only finite in size, but have also only a finite lifetime. By arguing about the 'nothingness' we have arrived at an infinite 'space-time-world', which is also postulated by modern cosmology, but which is based there on different arguments.

No God, No Souls

The recognition, that there can be no God and no souls, has, of course, other consequences. For instance, there is no justification any more for the so-called religious education of our children. And, of course, the priest-seminars have to be closed. However, the non-existence of God has other consequences, which concern the church itself. After the church had established itself, their bishops found it necessary to do something

in order to reach the educated class and the rulers also. This was considered a prerequisite for spreading Christianity to other countries – for expanding the power of the church. It was recognized that it was necessary to give Christianity a philosophical basis in order to achieve this goal. Plato and later Aristotle were subsequently discovered to be very Christian in their ideas. However, a few hundred years later this was suddenly not true any more. (The birth and death of the Scholastic in Christianity.) In the time that followed, proofs for the real existence of God were constructed, because the educated people and the rulers would ask questions and would want to see proofs. The most important of those proofs were the ontological argument, the cosmological argument and the teleological argument. However, we cannot go into details about these proofs, since we cannot do philosophy here. All

Since there is no 'nothingness' as a domicile for God, there cannot be regions like a 'Beyond', or a 'Paradise' as a domicile for the souls of the believers in God ...

that can be said here is that until the time of Immanuel Kant (1726 – 1806) practically everybody believed in God and the Devil (and in the Witches, the brides of the Devil). Immanuel Kant showed that those proofs for the real existence of God were all wrong. However, Kant was not the first to criticize the teachings of the church. The first one was actually the Scotsman David Hume (1711 – 1776), who initiated this process with his criticism. After Kant many other great thinkers entered in this hard disputation with the church, which has lasted to the present time. Today the position of the church is: "The real existence of God can indeed not be proved with certainty, but the 'non-existence' of God can also not be proved". Since the year 2003 the church is here wrong; the non-existence of God has here and today been proved with certainty. What are the consequences the church is going to draw now from this new situation? When is the church going to close its doors?

Alfred Bahr is an American-trained physicist of German nationality with a Masters Degree in Physics. He was born in Koenigsberg, and spent most of his professional life studying the field of satellite technology and related fields in Germany. He is now an active researcher in cosmology.



Alien abduction or bad medicine?

Jamie McCartney gives us his suggestions on the 'reality' behind alien abductions

The Standard Story

IS IT JUST me, or have you ever felt more than a little uneasy with the standard 'alien abduction' story? The majority of 'abductees' seem to describe remarkably similar experiences. They tend to involve being paralyzed, taken down brightly-lit corridors to a brightly-lit room, where they are experimented on (often concentrating on their genitals) by large-eyed, mouth-less, grey humanoids. They then reawaken in their own beds or cars having no immediate memory of the experience, with a bit of missing time being the only 'evidence' of their having been 'taken'.

Forgive me for stating the obvious, but don't many of us find, for instance, that we 'miss' a bit of time when we're asleep? Okay, we've probably all seen the *X-Files* (which, I admit, makes pretty compelling, even convincing, viewing) or *Close Encounters*, but they are both perfect examples of why we must seek a more rational explanation for these alleged incidents. By perpetuating these modern-day fairy tales, we lend credence to the notion that aliens are running around our planet performing sadomasochistic rituals on a growing number of nervous earthlings.

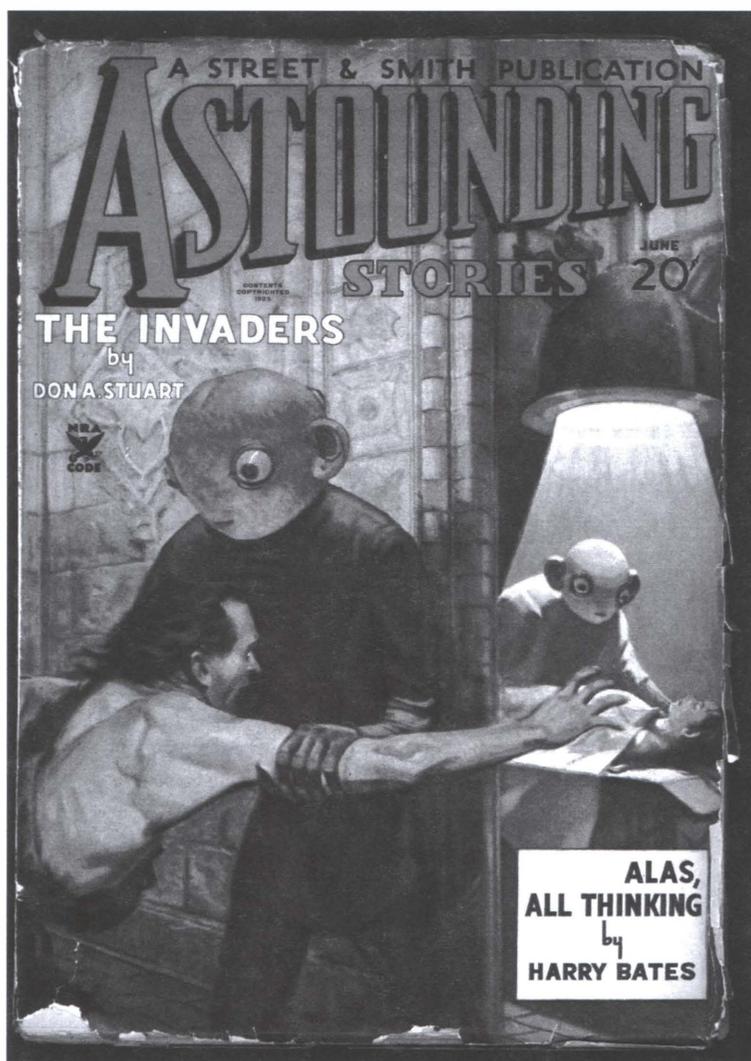
Surely most of us cannot possibly believe that to be the case? So what inspires people to tell these stories, in the full knowledge that they will face ridicule from all but the minority? At best they will be pilloried as liars, and at worst they will be dismissed as mentally ill – which, oddly, may be closer to the truth than their detractors imagine.

Many abduction stories come to light whilst the subjects are in the care of psychotherapists with a prior belief in alien abduction, or other mental health practitioners. Many are recounted whilst the patient is under hypnosis. Usually, they will have no prior recollection of the alleged events, which are themselves very disturbing. But the question is; are they recounting real, or imagined, events?

It is tempting to want to divide abductees into the two camps of 'liars' and 'loonies', based simply on how the story is manifested. We can be fairly sure that people usually do not deliberately invent stories whilst under hypnosis. They are acting and reacting from the subconscious and are therefore unable to exercise conscious control. Hypnosis provides a context in which a narrative is produced based upon a mixture of known facts, expectations, fragments of memory, and imagination. The resulting story may be so compelling that it

mistaken for a real memory of events that actually occurred. One could assume that those who *decide* that they have been abducted, without hypnotic regression, are just making it up to get attention. Inevitably this is the case with some but it cannot account for them all.

Hypnosis, however, is not the only window into the



Medical examination by aliens has been a common theme of science fiction for many decades, as illustrated by this magazine cover from 1935.

subconscious. The dreaming state is another, as is the abuse of psychotropic chemicals. It's a fairly safe bet that all abductees sleep and that some have taken the odd recreational pill. Hence, there *are* other ways to 'remember' an abduction experience. It is frequently the trauma caused by vivid, frightening dreams that lead these subjects to seek mental health advice. Patients are often terribly concerned that they may be going mad.

Some may in fact be suffering from serious mental illness, such as paranoid schizophrenia. Paranoiacs can

find any number of bizarre hypotheses to hang their feelings of isolation, victimization and fear on. As abduction stories and images have entered popular culture *via* film, TV and the media, so too have the number of schizophrenics proclaiming their recent return from the mother ship. It is a scenario which perfectly fits their neuroses. Add to this the link between drug abuse (particularly psychotropics) and mental illness and it is inevitable that some abduction stories will be recounted by those who have serious psychological problems. What can be shown, however, is a causal link to real-life events, experienced by such people, which have been twisted by their psyches to induce their preposterous claims. This also holds true for those who are not clinically mentally ill but who have presented to

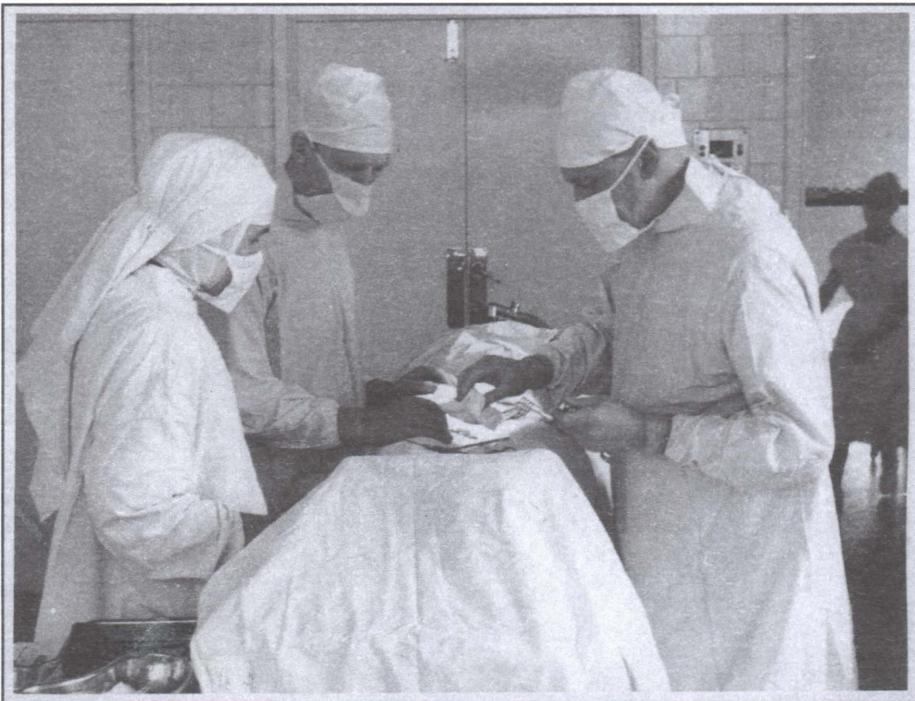
abducted, who do so neither for self-gain nor because of severe mental illness. So, thus discounting the 'liars' and the 'loonies' (whose stories tend to be particularly extravagant, anyway) there are many claimants worthy of further study. These tend to be patients who present with mild mental health problems. Very often the diagnosis is *post-traumatic stress disorder* (PTSD). It is often the case that sufferers cannot consciously recall the event that has led to their neurosis. It is common practice, under these circumstances, for the patient to be subjected to hypnotic regression as a part of their therapy. Of the claimants who *do* recall these abduction experiences prior to entering analysis, many are just as sceptical of the whole 'alien abduction thing' as most people. Imagine how disturbing it must be to be a member of this group.

However, help is at hand. I do not believe for one second that these poor people have been 'felt-up' in the back of a space ship and dumped back on earth without so much as a 'How was it for you?' As an aside, why the hell would aliens bother putting people neatly back in their beds afterwards anyway? Fear of prosecution? Perhaps damage to their reputation worries them. What would their superiors say to headlines like, "Sex Pest Alien Stole My Virginity"?

Back to reality... what I believe is really happening to these people is that they are recalling events from their past, which are being misinterpreted in the course of recollection. One term to describe this phenomenon is *False Memory Syndrome*, the causes of which

are a topic of intense speculation in the psychotherapy world. The effects of such unreliable testimony have frequently proven catastrophic to the patient and others whom they may falsely accuse.

Beyond the suggested reasons of 'fantasy proneness' amongst subjects, overt or subliminal suggestion by the therapists involved and other socio-perceptual factors, there is the very real possibility that traumatic events have befallen the subject that are inexplicable to them. In order to make sense of these bizarre memories they interpret them as best they can, within the cultural and linguistic frameworks available. Other-worldly experiences have commonly been described by those who have witnessed events which they could not find a rational explanation for. However, people only began to explain these events in terms of alien abductions from the 1950s, when talk of aliens and their craft became commonplace in the media and in popular entertain-



Is it possible that alien abduction memories are based upon half-remembered episodes of wakefulness during surgery?

mental health practitioners with mild problems and are subsequently treated with hypnosis.

These people are not all straight from central casting, living in trailer parks on dried-out lakes in Western Nebraska. Abductees are of all ages and from all walks of life. It is true, however, that most of them hail from North America. The incidences of abduction trail off across the Atlantic, with a fair number in the UK, reducing in frequency across Western Europe and falling to virtually none in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet states. This would correlate roughly with the popularity of UFO/alien folklore in these countries and the willingness of these populations to listen to the claims of abductees. If social factors thus influence the reporting of these incidents, we must ask; what is it that is *actually* being reported, and how is that being *interpreted* as alien abduction?

There are many people who claim to have been

ment. Prior to this time, similar traumas were described in different terms, in common with the popular mythologies of the day. Sightings of, and abductions by, sprites, fairies, monsters, devils, angels, gods, ghosts and ghouls stretch back into history, as far back as recorded language itself. With particular regard to alien abduction, though, it is the similarities in the type of experience, which gives rise to a very simple and logical explanation for these illogical beliefs.

Working on the assumption, once again, that our

By perpetuating these modern-day fairy tales, we lend credence to the notion that aliens are running around our planet performing sadomasochistic rituals on a growing number of nervous earthlings

planet is not the 'fetish night' stopover for interstellar sex tourists, we have to believe, firmly, that the events described are absolutely not real (not, at least, as related by the patient). However, the similarity of the descriptions would suggest that there is a common experience being suffered by these people. To my mind, it is very possible that the false recollection of previous surgical procedures is the simple cause of all this fuss. The phenomenon of 'wakefulness during surgery' is an area of study currently attracting much attention. If it can be proved that subjects *are*, in fact, responding to the *same* real event; if a link can be proved between this experience and abduction paranoia, then a great service would be done for those who claim to have been abducted. Their treatment would become hugely more straightforward.

What is striking is how accurately the stories of those who have experienced the appalling trauma of waking up during an operation match those stories recounted by alleged alien abductees. It is abundantly obvious, in my opinion, that these people are experiencing the same events, perhaps to different levels of consciousness, and are simply 'remembering' them in different ways.

Wakefulness During Surgery

Let us, for a moment, analyze the experience of wakefulness during surgery. The common experience is of complete paralysis and thus a total inability to alert hospital staff. Sensations of pressure and tugging are often felt, with pain experienced in 50% of cases. Many report being able to see and hear the process of their operation and discussions between medical staff. Half of the patients who have this ghastly experience will suffer long-term psychological trauma, manifested largely as PTSD.

Wakefulness during surgery is a fairly uncommon experience, only affecting an estimated 0.2-0.7% of patients. Although this is a tiny percentage, it equates to an average of 100 people a day, or roughly 40,000 a year, in the USA alone. However, there are different levels of consciousness which one can experience whilst under anaesthetic. To become fully conscious is extremely rare. This may explain why it is relatively uncommon for patients to have any recollection of wakefulness directly after surgery. However, unconscious recollection of the experience is far more widespread.

Furthermore, if a patient becomes not fully, but only partially, conscious, then his or her whole perception of the experience will be from the perspective of someone in an altered state; that is to say 'drugged'. Sights, sounds and sensations may then be widely misinterpreted at the time, and on recollection, in any number of bizarre ways. It is inevitable that the imagination will play a role in how these 'stoned' experiences are interpreted, and the imagination itself is susceptible to influences from contemporary popular culture. In order to understand how a 'drugged' patient may experience this phenomenon, and its possible correlation with the abduction experience, it is important to appreciate what anaesthetic actually is and does.

Anaesthesiology is a very complicated matter and by no means an exact science. The object is to try and keep the patient somewhere between awake and dead. Needless to say one would tend to err on the side of caution, by administering too little anaesthetic rather than too much. Our increasingly litigious society takes a dim view of doctors who kill or make you ill and anaesthesiologists are only too aware of how easily that can happen. Perhaps this would tend to make patients increasingly prone to experiencing some level of consciousness whilst under the knife.

Modern anaesthesia consists of three parts: an intravenous muscle relaxant to keep you still; an inhaled nar-

The 'other-worldliness' of the whole experience might lead you to erroneously seek a non-terrestrial explanation

cotic to make you sleep; and an intravenous analgesic to control the pain. General practice, until quite recently, would be to administer a narcotic pre-med injection, prior to the patient being transferred to theatre. The job of the anaesthetist is to control the doses of these drugs before and during the operation, in order to keep you under and comfortable but also to speed post-operative return to consciousness. It requires extreme skill and vigilance on behalf of the anaesthetist to achieve this balance successfully. The margin for error is very

wide. Even a small miscalculation in the doses of the narcotic or analgesic will allow patients to begin regaining consciousness or to experience pain. The most common experience of those who do become conscious whilst in theatre is to hear noises and feel pain, less common is for the eyes to open, although there are many documented cases where this has occurred.

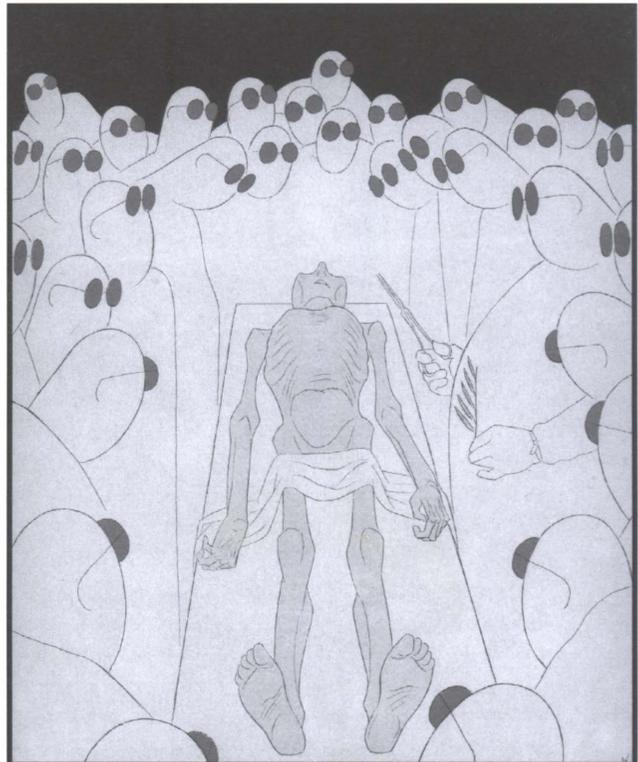
Aside from general anaesthetic, sedation is used in a growing number of operations. Under sedation the patient is administered much lower doses of anaesthetic and is able to breathe for themselves, for instance, rather than on a respirator. The incidences of consciousness during these procedures are necessarily much greater. The explosive growth of non-vital surgery, such as cosmetic procedures, and the increasing access to general surgery worldwide may go some way to explaining the increase of alien abduction claims, if we subscribe to the causal link between the two phenomena.

Let us seek to establish that link by examining the direct similarities between them. All of the common experiences described by abductees can easily be explained as manifestations of this surgical anomaly. The classic alien abductee experiences:

1. **Floating down brightly lit corridors** – explained easily as hospital corridors seen through semiconscious eyes after the pre-med *en route* to surgery. Dilated pupils, which allow in too much light and make focussing impossible, coupled with the dreamlike effect of the opiates on the mind, would make traveling on a gurney down these corridors a fairly ethereal experience.
2. **Brightly lit rooms** – explained as the operating theatre and its bank of overhead lights as experienced in the same ‘drugged-up’ state of mind.
3. **Being laid flat out** – lying on the gurney or the operating table.
4. **Paralysis** – explained by the muscle relaxants administered.
5. **Buzzing and humming sounds and beeps** – made by operating theatre equipment.
6. **Experiments done on them** – their operation.
7. **Pain** – explained by too small a dose of analgesic.
8. **Terror** – hardly surprising, really.
9. **Surrounded by short, grey, blue, or green, mouthless, hairless, wide-eyed humanoids** – theatre staff wear masks over their nose and mouth, hair covers and white, pale blue or green scrubs. Again, staring with dilated pupils into bright theatre lights, doctors and nurses would look remarkably like the ‘classic’ alien. The eyes, being the only recognizable feature, may gain prominence in the mind and appear larger. This may also be accounted for by the glasses, and other ocular devices, often worn by surgeons for close-up work. People often recall these events as beginning in

their beds from where they are taken, unconscious, to a space ship where the rest of the experience occurs. In recollection, the height of the gurney or operating table, misinterpreted as a bed only a foot or so off the ground, would make the theatre nurses and surgeons appear extremely short. Dubious, I know, but worth mentioning.

10. Reawaking in their beds – as people tend to recall these events long after they occur, waking up still somewhat stoned in a recovery ward bed is as likely to be confused with their own bedroom as anywhere else.



The eyes of the surgeons, being the only recognizable feature, may gain prominence in the mind and appear larger...

The patient is unlikely to have any conscious recollection of waking during their surgery. However, either whilst dreaming, or under the influence of drugs or hypnosis, memories of this event may begin to emerge. Imagine now trying to explain your experience, without necessarily having any recollection of ever having had surgery at all (it may have been as a young child). The ‘other-worldliness’ of the whole experience might lead you, erroneously, to seek a non-terrestrial explanation. Whereas in the past many other manifestations, largely with angelic or diabolic undertones, may have come to mind, today we seek our mysteries in the skies. Suggestion from the volley of alien-based TV shows, etc. would no doubt have great influence on a mind struggling to fill in some very uncomfortable gaps.

So, the mechanism and the opportunity for this confusion are easily verifiable. What is not in evidence is any tangible proof that this is what alien abductees *are*

actually experiencing. One could gather further data, perhaps, on how, when and where people awake during surgery and map this against the demographics of alien abduction reports. Women, apparently, appear less susceptible to anaesthesia and are more likely, thus, to gain consciousness. Caesarians, for obvious reasons, are the most likely operation in which to do so. If women were over-represented in an abductee cross-section then this

**Perhaps the light at the end of
the tunnel is a new device,
only recently available
to theatre surgeons**

may appear to be further circumstantial evidence. However, the clearest support for this argument would simply be to ask every person claiming abduction if they have ever had surgery. My suspicion would be that a very great number of them have, far in excess of the national averages for the countries they are from. Careful and non-hysterical examination of the facts may help to unearth the truth. Far more importantly, the poor souls who not only have suffered the horror of waking whilst sliced open and then suffer the bewildering suspicion of having been abducted, would be better treated for their PTSD if they were given the opportunity of a terrestrial explanation for their neurosis. They would also be less likely to fall prey to the numerous charlatans and lunatics willing to indulge and exploit their fantasies.

I'm not one to indulge conspiracy theories, but one suspects that these people actually slip through the net for quite sinister reasons. In truth, they are quite neces-

sary to the multi-million dollar alien business. They are the 'living proof' that allows the myth to continue, largely unchallenged. Hugely irresponsible claims such as those made by the Roper Poll, based on a large public psychology survey in the early 1990s, suggested that up to 4 million Americans had been abducted by aliens. Talk about fanning the flames. An already susceptible and hungry public now had the apparent evidence on which to fall back, whilst bandying about any crackpot claim that sprang to mind. Nor is it in the interests of hospitals to highlight how many of their patients have suffered this awful experience. By offering abductees a rational explanation for their trauma they would be inviting lawsuits for malpractice. Better, I think, to leave these bewildered people either disillusioned or thinking they are just plain bonkers than telling them the truth. But, to paraphrase a certain TV program, the truth *is* out there.

Perhaps the light at the end of the tunnel is a new device, only recently available to theatre surgeons. The Bispectral Index Monitor (often referred to as a BIS monitor) is a more effective way of judging a patient's level of consciousness than has previously been possible. It uses brain waves to show how asleep one is, rather than the traditional vital signs and drug guidelines, which have proved fallible in the past.

So, perhaps as this new technology is adopted, we will see a slowing of the rate of alien abductions reported. In time the whole alien bandwagon may lose its allure and we will move onto the next big thing, perhaps with a little more attention to what is 'real'. Maybe we will rediscover the gods as a way to explain odd phenomena. Perhaps we'll see a return to wholesome ecumenical, rather than economical, values. Let's hope somebody takes my suggestion and does that simple, 'Have you ever had an operation?' study of abductees and sets the rot in progress. Perhaps that would be a responsible direction in which to take future research. In the meantime, we had better keep watching the skies. Just remember to ask not, "Are they out there?", but instead, "Are they out of their... tiny minds?"



Jamie McCartney is a maverick creative, dividing his time between a professional sculpting career and freelance writing. A background in science and the arts informs and influences his choices of subject matter. Jamie is currently engaged in writing his first novel, whilst fighting off a backlog of other projects with a stick.

**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.

SKEPTICS IN THE PUB



Rhyme and Reason

Steve Donnelly

All the ones

FOR TWO OR three years at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s I had an experience that got closer to driving me into paranormal modes of thought than anything else that's ever happened to me. It was in the early days of digital clocks — they had been around for a few years by then but the analogue clock-face was only beginning to be challenged by the digital display and I also had my first digital watch at round about this time. Over a period of a few months I became increasingly aware that when I looked at a digital clock or watch, the display was frequently showing either 11:11 or 1:11. This began to freak me out a little bit and I remember on some occasions, as I began to raise my arm to consult my watch, deliberately resisting the impulse and waiting for a minute or two — only to find that the watch nonetheless indicated 11:11. Now I know that memory tends to embellish good stories as time goes on but I am pretty certain that, on average, I would see this preponderance of ones at least 10 times a week. Allowing for 8-hours sleep a night and assuming that I did not drop off before 1:12 am, there were 28 minutes when a digital clock would be exhibiting one of these two configurations out of the 6720 minutes during which I was awake in a week. Assuming that I consulted a (digital) clock or watch 20 times a day (surely an exaggeration) then this gives 140 consultations a week. Putting these numbers together, yields the conclusion that I might have expected to see an all-ones display on average once every 12 weeks or so. Now this reasoning does not allow for the fact that one might be more likely to want to know the time close to lunchtime and bedtime and this would affect the calculation of probabilities somewhat but would be unlikely to affect the result by more than a factor of two or so — reducing the period between seeing 1111 displays to about six weeks. And, indeed, this seems to agree with my experiences nowadays. But back in 1980, this was happening more than once a day and, having gone through this type of calculation, I was very perplexed. I don't (and didn't then) have any great tendency to believe that the cosmos was sending me coded messages but if, during this period, I had discovered that I was booked to fly with American Airlines from Boston to Los Angeles (flight AA11) on 11th November (with

take-off delayed until 11:11), I really suspect that I might have been unwilling to get on the plane.

I eventually reasoned that this was actually a complicated psychological phenomenon revolving around the fact that clock/watch displays are frequently in our peripheral vision and we are not consciously aware of them; however, when this 1111 phenomenon had become firmly established in my mind, every time I became subconsciously aware of an all-ones display it crossed the boundary into my conscious mind and I registered it. Eventually, I guess I accepted this type of explanation and was thus less perturbed by the phenomenon until little-by-little it faded out so that by the mid-1980s it completely stopped occurring.

Had the web been around in 1980, however, I would not have accepted such an unlikely, sceptical, explanation and would have realised that I was experiencing a worldwide (cosmos-wide?) phenomenon. In reality, “the symbol of 11:11 was pre-encoded into our cellular memory banks long ago . . . It was placed into us, seared into our very fibers and DNA of our beings, as part of our preparations prior to beginning our cycles of incarnations upon the Earth . . . now with the dissemination of this information, the 11:11 is finally being activated” (<http://www.v-j-enterprises.com/gate1111.html>). “11:11 is a wake-up call for lightworkers. Lightworkers are people who signed up for a ‘green beret’ type of mission when they were on the spirit plane (before being incarnated on Earth). What the mission is, in short, is to hold as much Light as possible, as strongly as possible, on this planet. This twenty-year period (starting on January 11, 1991) will see matter holding more light than it has ever held before. The vibration on this planet has dropped to a very, very low frequency. That is why it is so difficult to remember our origin, remember that we are all connected, remember who we really are. This is often referred to as the Fall. This mission is very important and very difficult” (<http://www.crystalinks.com/11.11.html>). (To find more than you every wanted to know about this cosmically important phenomenon, just type “11:11” into Google.)

Difficult it may be but if, after having had your awareness raised by this article, you start seeing 1111s everywhere please do your utmost to hold strongly on to reasonable quantities of Light in order to make a serious effort to increase our planet's frequency.

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



Philosopher's Corner

Julian Baggini



MY LOCAL PUB recently held a psychic night. Between 4 o'clock and 11, punters paid £20 each for half an hour with a psychic they had never heard of, but whose posters said he had been on television and that he would not tell you anything bad. It was an irresistible sales pitch. Almost every session was sold.

The landlady of the pub, who had organised the whole thing, didn't seem that impressed by him. She told me how the first time he did this at another pub she used to run, she asked everyone coming out what he had said to them. The answer was always the same: there would be a wedding and a baby in the offing.

Not only that, but she also revealed that every time he came he gave her and her husband a reading, and so far nothing he had said to them had come true. For example, they were supposed to have come into a life changing amount of money, but many lottery tickets later, nothing had happened. Her sister was supposed to have got herself a man, but she remained resolutely single. A new woman was due to enter her son's life, but he already had a prodigious turnover of female companions anyway. Once he even gave her husband some specific lottery numbers which didn't win.

I assumed, therefore, that the landlady had him down as a fraud or incompetent. And yet, that night the same failed psychic had told her she would come into money with another woman. And straight after telling me of his terrible record, she was on the phone to her sister telling her to send her some money so they could buy a lottery ticket together. "We've got nothing to lose, except 50p," she says.

Of course, if the psychic is seeing the future, the windfall would happen whatever she did. So there was no need for her to buy a lottery ticket. But set that aside for one minute and think about her "we've got nothing to lose" attitude. How can we explain this, without simply dismissing the landlady as a stupid idiot who needs a good slap and a lesson in inductive reasoning? Well, just consider how close her reasoning is to two highly respectable arguments.

The first is the use of the precautionary principle. This roughly states that you should refrain from doing something with a potentially disastrous outcome unless, and until, you have enough evidence to conclude that the bad outcome is almost certain not to happen, or that the risks, though high, are outweighed by the benefits.

There are big questions about how exactly this rough definition should be filled out. But some kind of version

of it is accepted by many sensible folk, including government scientific advisors and the Prime Minister Tony Blair, who back in 2002 said "Responsible science and responsible policymaking operate on the precautionary principle."

Now go back to our landlady. The potential misfortune she was faced with was missing out on a large cash windfall. So she had a great deal to lose if the psychic was somehow right in a way that was conditional on her putting herself in a position where he could be right. What seemed to motivate her was therefore something rather similar to the precautionary principle: she should refrain from doing something that would rule her out of a potentially wonderful outcome because she did not have enough evidence to conclude that this good outcome was almost certain not going to happen; or that the cost of entering the lottery was outweighed by the potential benefits of winning it.

Of course I'm not saying this line of reasoning stands up, not least because the psychic's track record would seem to you and I to provide all the evidence she needed that the cash dividend was not going to appear. All I'm saying is that you can see how a bit of wishful thinking, added to a lack of basic logic skills, which people are rarely taught, can lead someone to follow a perfectly reasonable principle in a misguided way.

Consider also the case of Pascal's Wager. This is the famous argument that you ought to believe in God, because you can't be sure if he exists; and if you believe and are wrong the price you pay is much less than if you don't believe and are wrong, in which case you end up in hell.

It's a bad argument, but many have been and still are persuaded by it, including very intelligent people like Blaise Pascal himself. And again, you can see how the landlady's own thoughts pretty much echo his: entering the lottery costs me little and could earn me much, and not entering saves me little and could cost me enormously.

All this suggests to me that superstition and nonsense exert a grip on people in part because the reasoning that makes them think there may just be something in it is of a form which is both natural and, used properly, perfectly rational. And because there are also psychological reasons for wanting to reason in these fallacious ways, it can be very hard to show people they are just mistaken.

If I'm right then we can predict in an utterly non-supernatural way that in the battle against irrationality, many people who are not completely stupid will find our opponents much more seductive than us.



Julian Baggini is editor of *The Philosophers' Magazine* (www.philosophers.co.uk) and author of *The Pig that Wants to be Eaten and 99 Other Thought Experiments* (Granta), *Making Sense: Philosophy Behind the Headlines* (Oxford University Press) and *The Meaning of Life* (Granta). See www.julianbaggini.com



ASKE News

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

The status of parapsychology

ISSUE TWO OF the 2005 *Skeptical Adversaria*, the quarterly newsletter of ASKE, contains a report that I penned on a symposium entitled 'Developing Perspectives on Apomalous Experience'. This was held on June 4th this year at Liverpool Hope University College and consisted of papers, mainly by research psychologists, on the investigation of 'anomalous experiences'.

One anomaly of this conference was the fact that some people considered there to be no evidence at all for psi phenomena (and this is the usual sceptical line), whereas some presenters (who were all committed to scientific experimental psychology) seemed comfortable about referring to research in which these phenomena appear to have been demonstrated, often at a high level of statistical significance. In the latter group was Daryl Bem, Professor of Psychology at Cornell University. Having obtained his PhD in social psychology in 1964, Professor Bem developed an international reputation in that field, but in more recent years he has turned his attention to parapsychology and has presented review papers that he and others contend demonstrate the reality of telepathy (ganzfeld studies). The experiments that he presented at the symposium support two remarkable claims. The first is for reverse causality: the choice of a picture, so the research claims to demonstrate, can be influenced by procedures that modify the subject's emotional response to it *after* the choice has been made! Professor Bem also claims to have discovered the Holy Grail of parapsychological research, namely a protocol for demonstrating the reality of psi phenomena – e.g. ESP – that can be used in any laboratory in the world and can reliably generate statistically significant effects. The snag however is that the effects are so weak that, for statistical power, several hundred subjects (over 300 in one study) are required. I can't imagine undergraduate lab classes featuring any such experiments in their programme.

However, according to some speakers at the symposium, psi effects are stronger for certain groups of people, such as female meditators. So, if you have ready access to such people, you can reduce the sample required for statistical significance. Eventually you may be able to whittle your sample down to just one subject (or one pair of subjects in a remote viewing test). Having achieved that, you could then submit your claim to ASKE for a preliminary screening; then, if successful, head off to the States and take up the Randi Challenge for a prize of \$1,000,000.

Has parapsychology finally made the grade? Can we

now reliably demonstrate, in any properly equipped laboratory in the world, the existence of psi phenomena? I am presently approaching some respected authorities in this field for their comments on the current status of parapsychology and hope to be able to present their answers to these questions in the 2005 issue of the *Skeptical Intelligencer*.

The minuteness of the effects reported for psi phenomena naturally makes one suspicious that the statistically significant effects occasionally reported are still due to some leakage in the controls for such artefacts as experimenter effects or non-randomness in sequences of stimuli or conditions. Even if the effects prove to be robust, I am very sceptical as to whether laboratory studies of psi have any relevance to paranormal claims, – e.g. of psychic abilities – in everyday life.

The European Council of Skeptical Organisations (ECSO)

By the time you read this, the 12th European Skeptics Congress will have taken place in Brussels in October 2005. You may recall that the 11th Congress was held in 2003 in London and was hosted by ASKE. As usual during that event, we had the biennial meeting of ECSO. At the meeting it was resolved to make special efforts to target homeopathy, which has been gaining ground in some continental countries. This was particularly apposite, 2005 being the 250th anniversary of the birth of the founder of homeopathy, the German physician Samuel Hahnemann. Since that meeting there has been a considerable exchange of emails amongst ECSO members concerning apparently favourable developments for homeopathy in Germany and Belgium and within the European Union and the World Health Organisation.

These developments are, by the way, political. When we hear of the advancement of mainstream medicine we immediately think of discoveries or improvements in the efficacy of treatment or the understanding or detection of disease. When we hear of the advancement of alternative medicine we immediately think of its promotion and expansion in the marketplace, including the National Health Service.

The German sceptical society, GWUP, recently organised a petition expressing concern at moves to include this pseudoscientific practice under arrangements for medical insurance. It will be interesting to hear at the Brussels meeting what the latest developments are. Meanwhile ASKE is hoping to have a paper on the use of homeopathy in veterinary practice in the 2005 issue of the *Skeptical Intelligencer*.

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



WEIGHING THE EVIDENCE

The Obesity Epidemic: Science, Morality and Ideology

Michael Gard & Jan Wright

Routledge, £22.99, ISBN 0415 31896-3

Concern about obesity is nothing new: even Hippocrates saw it as a disease. According to Gard and Wright, scientific understanding has made little real progress since, with current research a mass of contradictions, assumptions and moral bias. Media hype about an 'epidemic' has added to the confusion, playing on public fears about the risks of modern life.

Methods of measuring obesity are inconsistent, research is flawed, conflicting 'evidence' abounds, and even the World Health Organization acknowledges the difficulty of evaluating health consequences of obesity.

This is a deliberately controversial book, challenging the idea that diet/exercise are directly related to weight or that TV/computer use in children has any proven link with obesity, for example. It quite rightly points out (repeatedly) that moral censure permeates research (fat = lazy, gluttonous, weak-willed), that there are socio-economic and political factors involved and that every society since the Ancient Greeks sees itself in decline from some supposed Golden Age.

However, these are fairly obvious, unoriginal ideas. The book is highly repetitive, sometimes contradicts itself and is in places as over-generalising as those it criticises. The socio-economic theory is not sufficiently expanded either. It does not propose any new theories, preferring to attack or repeat the obvious.

The authors believe science has failed miserably and should be abandoned: "the ability to think beyond science is a great untapped resource" because "there are some domains of life where scientific knowledge is crucial and it is probably right that scientists have the final word. Overweight and obesity do not constitute one of those domains... The reason why the 'obesity epidemic' has come about could not be less important".

After 200 strident pages, the flaccid solution is that we should either "get over body weight all together" or "leave the model of body as machine behind". Despite the weight of evidence presented, some may find the conclusion that obesity is a moral and ideological issue, not a scientific matter, unsubstantiated, unoriginal and woolly. This is a missed opportunity to make some highly valid points.

Tessa Kendall

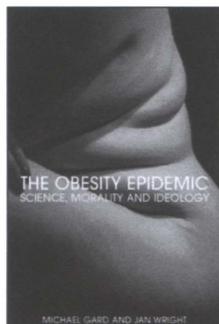
PARADISE POSTPONED

Desperately Seeking Paradise: Journeys of a Sceptical Muslim

By Ziauddin Sardar

Granta Publications, £8.99 (pbk), ISBN 1-86207-755-X

I confess I had never heard of Ziauddin Sardar, who has pub-



lished over forty books and a vast amount of journalism, and has been active in many social enterprises. He is the British-educated son of Pakistani immigrants, born in 1951. He writes with both passion and clarity, and I found the book fascinating. It is the story of his search and struggle, constantly thwarted, for what he sees as the true values of Islam, and their practical implementation. The story is one of incessant travel, both physical and intellectual, and of his interactions with a host of scholars, thinkers, and activists, of all shades of opinion. I take the account to be essentially veracious, with (perhaps) a little literary license when it comes to detailed conversations.

What interested me was, first, getting a view of Islam in the modern world from the inside. Islam is still, perhaps, seen by some as monolithic, and often now as extremist. In fact it is, and always has been, highly variegated, driven by factions, and (especially now) in an intellectual, political and spiritual turmoil. It is sometimes said that Islam is in need of a Reformation. Sardar rejects this, arguing that it has already had several. But then so did Christianity before Luther. And the second thing I find interesting is the impression I get of a (in some ways) mediaeval world. The Islam Sardar inhabits seems much like the Christendom of Bede or Chaucer. There is incessant debate about the true meaning of the Qur'an, the revealed word of God, and how to implement it. But there is no hint that the word might not be true at all. Sardar, at least in this book, encounters non-Muslims, and Islam is accepted like night and day. There is an outside world, but it is intrinsically less civilized and potentially, often actually, hostile. He ends, in the midst of the disasters of the 21st century, with yet another journey: "Paradise awaits". One might dare to suggest that what is needed is not a Reformation but an Enlightenment.

John Radford

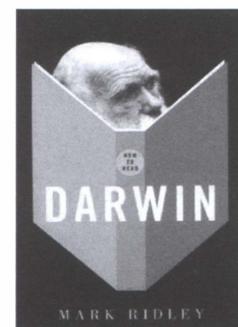
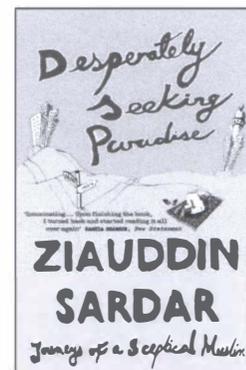
FIT FOR THE PURPOSE OR EVOLUTIONARY DEAD END?

How to Read Darwin

by Mark Ridley

Granta Books, £6.99 ISBN 1-86207-728-2

How to Read Darwin is one of a new series of slim guides from Granta, the first batch of which also deals with figures as diverse as Freud, Hitler, Nietzsche, de Sade and Wittgenstein. The intention appears to be to emu-



late the success of series such as Fontana's *Modern Masters* and Oxford's *Past Masters*, both of which published volumes on Darwin in 1982, the centenary year of his death.

"How to Read", though, claims to take an original approach, skipping biography and cutting to the ideas. Thus, apart from a brief chronology, we hear little about Darwin's personal life. What we do get is a distillation of the ideas, liberally quoted, with a commentary. Six chapters cover "*The Origin of Species*" (as it is called throughout), three *The Descent of Man* and the final one *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*.

As to originality of approach, it is hardly novel to quote quantities of a writer's own words, though it is novel to dispense with the potted biography. But the attempt to do justice to the complexities of Darwin's thought is undermined by the marketing decision to limit the number of pages. The extracts, while interesting, seem arbitrary. This might not be an issue with a writer like Wittgenstein, who published relatively little, but we are not told why the selections here are deemed representative of the enormous quantity that Darwin wrote, and his range is barely hinted at.

Where the book does score highly is in setting Darwin's mid-Victorian ideas in the context of modern discoveries, particularly in genetics, showing what is still of value and what has been superseded. In this regard the book, despite its ridiculous cover, will make a useful contribution to the literature for the busy student. However, one is still left uneasy in these post-modern times by the dogmatic "How to Read". Perhaps "Ways to Read" would be more appropriate.

Tom Ruffles

NEXT HANDCART TO HELL

The March of Unreason: Science, Democracy and the New Fundamentalism

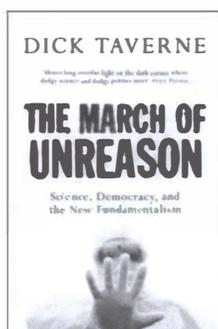
by Dick Taverne

OUP, £18.99, ISBN 0-19-280485-5

The title is a sexy one for the sceptically-inclined: a brazen invitation to shake our heads at growing cultural insanity and enjoy some pleasurable indignation. Yes, Taverne has seen the enemy and the enemy is ... oh dear, it seems to be *me*. This book turns out to be outside the usual remit of *The Skeptic*, as it is actually a political polemic claiming that we are all going to hell in a handcart because 'anti-science eco-fundamentalists' are ... claiming that we are all going to hell in a handcart.

With an unusually high rhetoric-to-meat ratio this book reads like a debating speech (unsurprisingly, as the author was once a well-known politician and lawyer). I used to go in for debating societies myself so I know the tricks: the throwaway phrase gesturing at a hinterland of understanding that one doesn't quite have, the self-deprecating "I'm no expert" making one sound like an honest broker, the apparently fair-minded concession of minor points.

Taverne unfortunately shoots himself in the foot by writing this way because the overall effect created is of glib untrustwor-



thiness. Political debate about environmental issues (which he unfairly bundles up with homeopathy and what-have-you) can get extremely nasty and people on both sides make things up, exaggerate, and devote much energy to constructing and demolishing straw men which they insist are true representations of their opponents. How do I know he isn't doing the same?

Two fifths of this book is taken up with a rant about agriculture, in particular GM, doubts about which he caricatures as ninnyish 'anti-science'. Colin Tudge, a respected science writer with a biology background and specialist experience of the area, wrote the recent *So Shall We Reap* which expresses some very measured criticisms of conventional agriculture and the proposed spread of GM. I really don't know if Tudge is right but his views are intellectually respectable; he is not a ninny and not 'anti-science'. So why should I believe a mere politician (particularly one who foams at the mouth and skates over complicated points) in preference to him?

Martin Parkinson

NOT ALL GLOOM AND DOOM

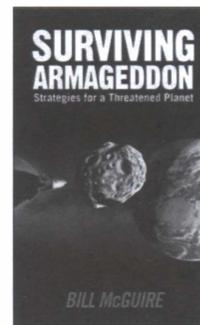
Surviving Armageddon: Solutions for a Threatened Planet

By Bill McGuire

Oxford University Press, £14.99,

ISBN 0-19-280571-1

Bill McGuire is a distinguished volcanologist with many scientific and popular publications. In *A Guide to the End of the World: Everything You Never Wanted to Know* (2002) in particular, he described the various geophysical disasters that threaten our species, and others. (Of course there are other devastating natural evils such as famine and disease.) Here, while reiterating the dangers, he explores



what can be done to avoid, mitigate and survive them. These Global Geophysical Events (GGEs or Gee-gees as they are known with inappropriate levity), are few in type, rare in occurrence, but catastrophic in effect. There are five: giant tsunamis, major earthquakes, the impact of a large asteroid or comet, volcanic super-eruptions, and abrupt climate change. The effects depend on various factors, principally size and where they strike. At the extreme, there is the potential to wipe out most living species, as has happened five times in the past. Climate change is distinct from the others in that it is occurring now, and seems to be due mainly to human activity. In principle, it can be stopped or even reversed. In all cases, however, there is a good deal that can, or could, be done to ensure early warning and lessen the effects.

We are at risk, we have much of the knowledge, but (largely) we lack the will. But it is a different 'we' in each case: the first is everyone, the second is scientists, the third is politicians and leaders of opinion. Some of the latter deny the facts, especially of climate change. Most reject measures that would be electorally unpopular, such as restricting air travel, or threaten economic growth and political power. McGuire describes himself as 'an optimistic pessimist'. He fears the worst, but hopes for the best. His short (238 pp.) book is strongly recommended to anyone who wants the facts



LETTERS

More on *Why We Exist*

Eugene Bell-Gam (Letters, *The Skeptic*, 18.2, Summer 2005) takes umbrage at my negative review of his book, *Why We Exist*. When I described his theory as far worse than a quasi-religious viewpoint my wording was clumsy and what I should have said is that his theory is worse in that it's 'merely bizarre'. One especially sees how bizarre it is when reading the chapter "The solar laboratory theory" which is littered with spurious analogies.

I'll take his word for it that he's not sympathetic to Young Earth Creationism, some wording in the chapter Religion on Origin gave me that impression. I'll also take his word that he doesn't believe we are part of a cosmic experiment and that he's only speculating.

It's true that I didn't give any examples from the book to support my accusations. Book reviews have restrictive word counts so I decided to stick to generalities rather than go for details. Anyway, mainly for their entertainment value I now present some examples from the book. Spurious analogies: Bell-Gam likens sleep to, among other things, backing up short term

memory to long term external storage. He draws an analogy between sleep cycles and data packets, and suggests that the brain cannot packet data quick enough to keep up with an "ultra high-speed external processor". Obviously the Experimenter doesn't know much about communication protocols. Bell-Gam also shows an ignorance of computer technology in claiming that "RAM is flushed out" when a program ends. In my experience, operating systems simply free memory for use but don't clear its content. Okay, now to muddled thinking: he cites a 1985 study showing that some ancient bones were revisedly dated at 5000 radiocarbon years (what's that in chronological years?) as support for a biblican and mythical worldwide flood 5000 years ago. How the two are related beyond the number 5000, both in different units, is beyond me.

Unfortunately, I must report that his theory still holds no appeal for me even though Anthony Flew has now taken up a deist viewpoint. I've taken an interest in the Intelligent Design movement for several years, in that time I have not seen them present any credible

arguments for the intelligent design of the universe and life – nor ones that haven't been made in one guise or another by Creationists or philosophers of old. Bell-Gam is right that self-publishing is not an indication of a book's merit, I just argued that he should have saved his money. The marketing was also somewhat inept judging by the decision of someone to announce the book to the Internet newsgroup alt.atheism.satire.

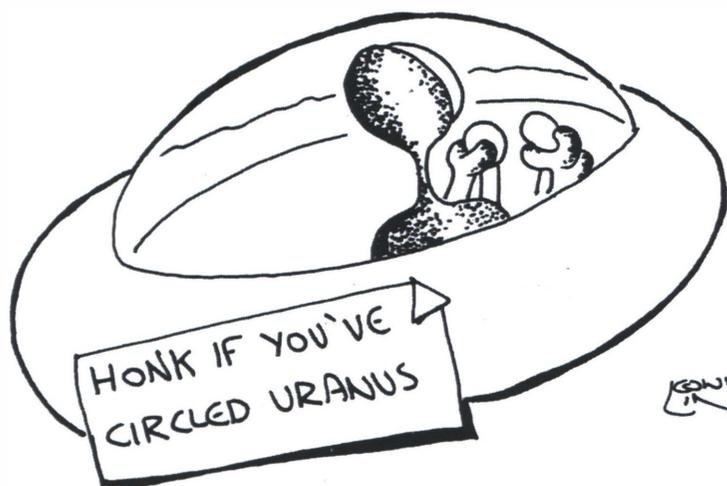
Dene Bebbington
Gloucestershire

Infants and Language

I had not been aware of Steinberg & Steinberg's work on an infant's ability to recognise specific written words (letter from Rooum, *The Skeptic* 18.2, p. 27). This ability is impressive and interesting, but does not constitute reading (a language), for which a fair grain of adult grammar is required. Inevitably, such a grasp is achieved only through the acquisition of the relevant spoken language(s) at a rather greater age.

Mark Newbrook
Australia

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