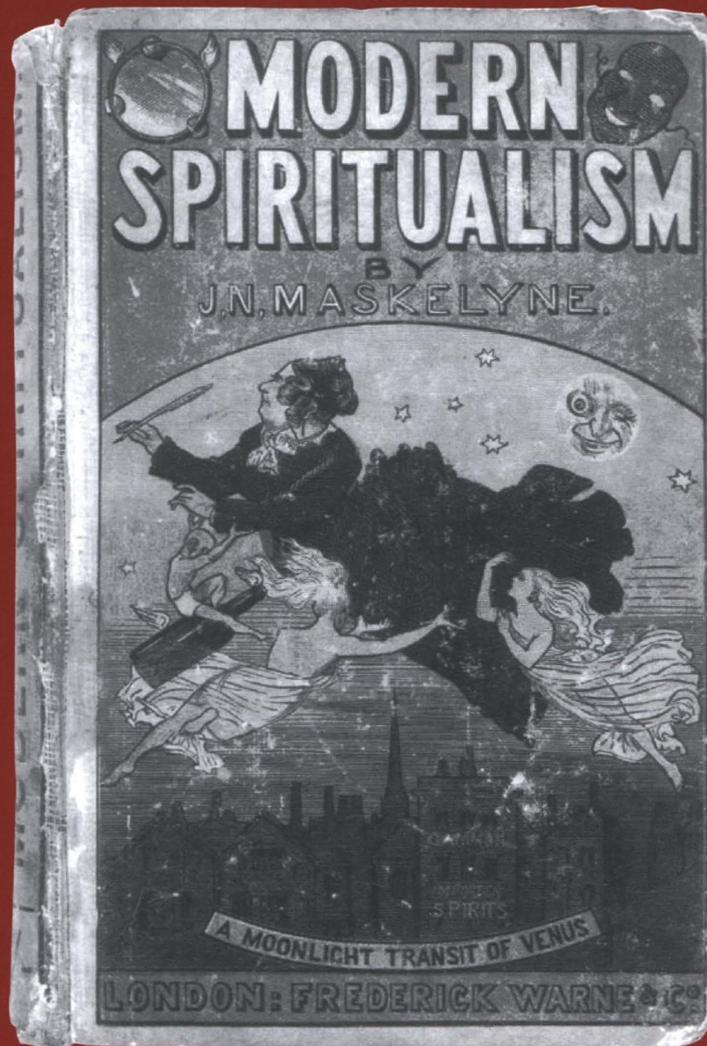


Volume 19 Number 1  
Spring 2006

# The **Skeptic**



## **Second Sight? Or Just the Blind Leading the Blind?**

*Also in this issue:*

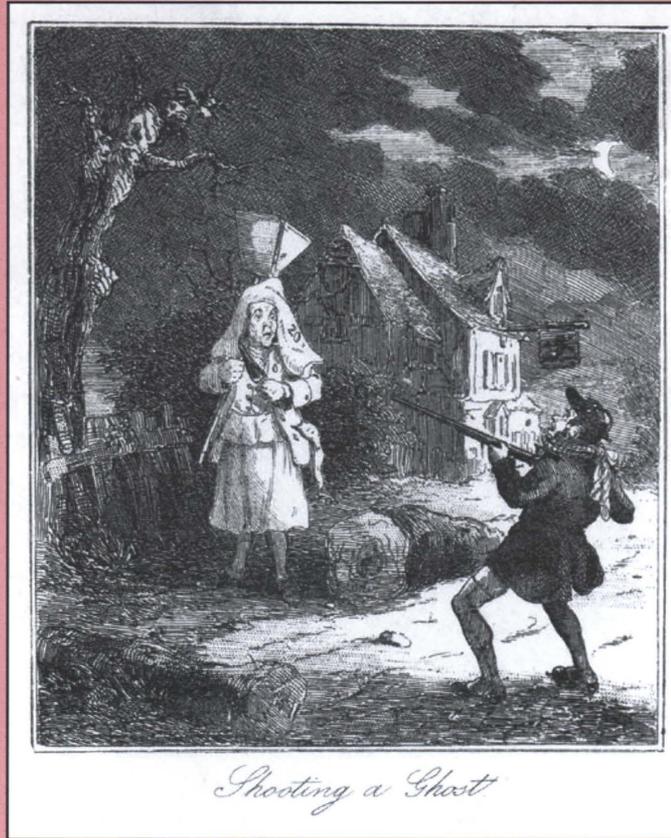
**The Mystery of Hellfire Pass: Part 3**

**Just Your Imagination: Part 1**

**Engels on the Spirit World: Part 1**

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

## *Hilary Evans' Paranormal Picture Gallery*



*Shooting a Ghost*

### **THE 'HAMMERSMITH GHOST'**

There is no folly more predominant than a ridiculous and superstitious fear of ghosts and apparitions...The inhabitants of the London suburb of Hammersmith were much alarmed by a nocturnal appearance which for a considerable time eluded detection. In the course of this unfortunate affair, two innocent persons met with an untimely death...

Joseph Taylor's book on Apparitions is a sceptical work, and the contemporary tale of the Hammersmith Ghost confirmed his finding that "servants, nurses, old women, and others of the same standard of wisdom, to pass away the tediousness of a winter's evening, please and terrify themselves with strange relations". When, in December 1803, rumours began to circulate that a tall, white figure, resembling a ghost, had been seen in the lanes at night, the public was alarmed, and several self-appointed vigilantes lay in wait. Francis Smith, an excise officer, must have thought luck had favoured him when a ghostlike figure came in sight. He challenged it but received no reply, so he then fired at the figure, which fell. Alas, it was found to be Thomas Milwood, a bricklayer, wearing the white clothing customary in his occupation. Smith was convicted of wilful murder and sentenced to be hanged, but pardoned on condition of being imprisoned one year<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>*The Newgate Calendar*

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



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

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

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

Editors  
**Victoria Hamilton**  
**Chris French**

Editorial Assistance  
**Wendy M Grossman**  
**Steve Donnelly**  
**DLF Sealy**  
**Julia Santomauro**

Founding editor  
**Wendy M Grossman**

Webmaster  
**Phil McKerracher**

AOL Area  
**Liam Proven**

Finance Manager  
**Mike Hutchinson**

Skeptics in the Pub  
**Nick Pullar**

Cartoons  
**Donald Rooum**  
**Tim Pearce**  
**Gareth Cowlin**

Special Consultant  
**Cyril Howard**

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

Illustrations  
**Mary Evans Picture Library**

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# Editorial

Victoria Hamilton and Chris French



**HELLO AND WELCOME** to issue 19.1 of *The Skeptic*. The high level of interest in paranormal phenomena defies the lack of evidence available to support its existence. Media coverage of such phenomena as crop circles, UFOs, ghosts, and psychics, is often presented from a biased perspective for an audience largely 'wanting to believe'. Krissy Wilson took a night out recently (from her fundamentally sceptical disposition) to watch Sharon Neill display her psychic abilities in front of a live audience. We assume that sceptics make up only a small minority of the audience at these types of events and that even then they are probably there mainly out of academic interest. However, we believe that it is important, in order to critically evaluate 'psychics' and other such phenomena and claims, that sceptics do continue to be present at such events. In this instance, we can get a sceptical glimpse of Neill 'at work', albeit vicariously through Wilson, who walks away from the evening as unimpressed and as sturdy in her sceptical shoes as ever.

In the final instalment of *The Mystery of Hellfire Pass*, Chambers and Bartholomew draw some comparisons with similar worldwide incidents, most notably, the cracked windscreens which occurred over a brief period in Seattle in the early 1950s. Did the sudden widespread media-evoked interest in these events make them larger than life? Is this similar to hearing a new word or phrase for the first time, and noticing that the word or phrase is suddenly ubiquitous (though you'd never noticed it before)? With the roads of Esher becoming a focal point for the community, it is possible that general interest would allow for relatively minor events to be over-reported and overblown. It is suggested in the article that greater public interest no doubt increased the reporting of such occurrences, and

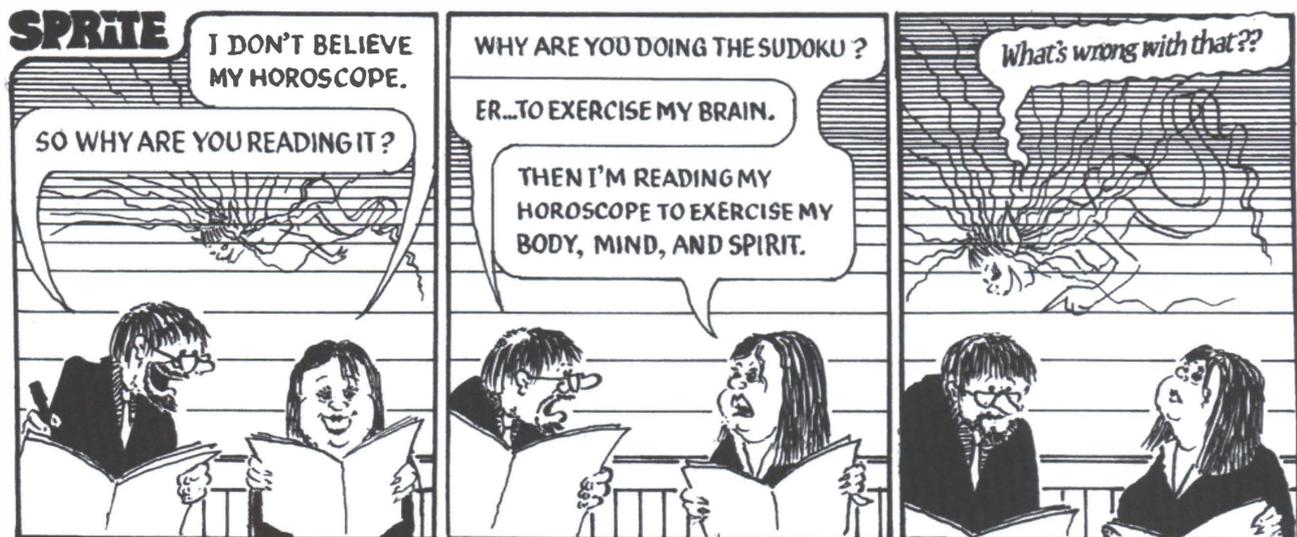
in combination with media encouragement, turned loose stones (the probable cause) into bullets. We're sure we don't have to look too hard to find other examples where mass panic has overridden logic.

We're very pleased to have been given kind permission to reprint, for *The Skeptic* readers, a section taken from Friedrich Engels' *The Dialectics of Nature*. Engels, often overshadowed by his better known friend and colleague, Karl Marx, defined dialectics as "the most general laws of motion of nature, society, and human thought"; and in his writings attempted to demonstrate that "the workings of nature are dialectical", implying that the condition of constant motion is core to nature: "All nature, from the smallest thing to the biggest, from a grain of sand to the sun, from the protista to man, is in a constant state of coming into being and going out of being, in a constant flux, in a ceaseless state of movement and change". Whatever your school of thought, we hope you appreciate this first instalment of two dealing with Engels' views on natural science and the spirit world.

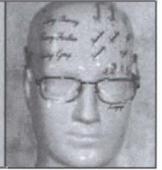
Martin Parkinson is back with a two-part article. He starts by considering the ties between acting and performance, personality, and 'psychic abilities'. Of course, the emotions created for an acting role must come from the human condition, being drawn from our own capability to experience and express these emotions. Parkinson suggests that tapping into this and becoming conscious of our innate capacity to 'read' each other can be misconstrued as psychic ability. We look forward to his follow-up!

As always we bring you our regular columns, cartoons, book reviews and letters.

With best wishes until our next issue, Victoria and Chris



## Hits and Misses



### Hypnotic enhancement

Anyone who has an email address knows that a mainstay of the torrent of junk that bombards us daily is the offer of breast enlargement. Spammers are always coy about the exact method by which the enlargement will be accomplished (we refuse to say “enhancement”; bigger is not always better). Steve Burgess, who runs a National Therapy Centre in Beverley, North Yorkshire, however, has a method we suspect the spammers are not using: hypnosis. Yes.

We first heard of Burgess via a clipping from the *Hull Daily Mail* sent in by one of our Yorkshire correspondents. It credulously recounted the usual stuff: depression, alcoholism, smoking, weight loss, past-life regression, alien abductions, in which he now believes because of his patients’ stories, yada, yada, yada. And then we looked at his Web site, where he claims this more unusual service “really works”. Exclamation point.

Burgess claims that success in this area has been documented as far back as 1949, and says, “It’s a well known fact within the hypnotherapy profession that the mind can effect phenomenal changes on the body”. If, he argues, hypnosis can cure illness and get rid of pain, then it’s only logical to use it to increase the flow of blood to the breasts and reposition fat. “The fat is usually taken from the waist area, so there is often a reduction in waist size or shape also.” Of course, you can achieve the same effect with better posture...

“Don’t laugh,” his Web site advises before explaining all this. Sorry. Will too.

### Al-most Haunted?

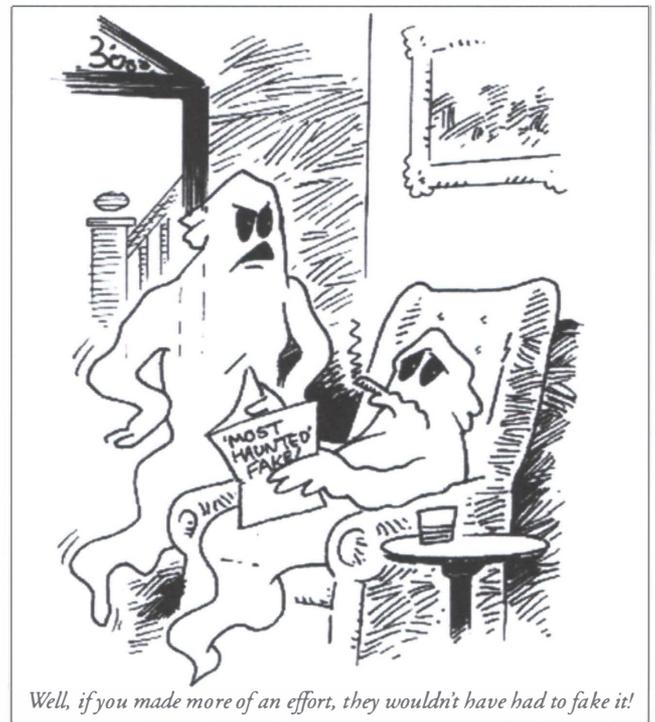
The *Daily Mail* revealed in October that the TV show *Most Haunted* was a fake, when one of its own stars, resident parapsychologist Dr Ciaran O’Keeffe, blew the whistle, saying people were being deceived by “showmanship and dramatics” and that, “In my opinion, we’re not dealing with genuine mediumship”. The *Mail* also said it had obtained unedited footage in which the show’s presenter, Yvette Fielding, and her husband faked ghostly knocks and bumps. O’Keeffe, who is a psychology lecturer at Liverpool Hope University, is (according to his Web site, at [www.theparapsychologist.com](http://www.theparapsychologist.com)) working on a doctorate under the supervision of Richard Wiseman.

### Alternative deception

There’s been a lot of discussion lately about alternative remedies and their funding by the NHS. You can see why the alternative therapists would want it: there’s a lot of gold in them thar government hills. The government’s own ideas are likely to be more divided

between the expense of funding more types of treatments and the savings due to the fact that things like faith healing and homeopathy are cheaper than things like MRI scans and Avonex. Long-term, of course, while some people’s bodies will heal naturally, with or without any kind of remedy, the really serious ailments will become much more expensive because the later you begin to treat a condition, the more expensive the treatment is likely to be.

Opinions seem to be seriously divided, sometimes within the same publication. *The Yorkshire Post*, for example, wrote an admiring piece about the prospects for using acupuncture in A&E. And of course most



publications frequently run credulous pieces about this or that fashionable therapy. One that stood out, however, was Nick Cohen, writing in *The Observer*, who argued that spending public money on alternative remedies, even if doing so is popular, is wrong because “the government is dealing in deceit...a government which is prepared to deceive about medicine will deceive about much else besides”. Like that’s a new phenomenon?

### Cold comfort

Yet another prospective cold remedy has bitten the dust: a study in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in July found that Echinacea does not protect against (or cure) the common cold (or what one friend calls “man-flu”).

*The Observer's* writer, Dr John Biffa, didn't like the conclusion, and therefore carped about the study's methods, complaining that instilling rhinovirus into test subjects' nostrils isn't how people are actually exposed to colds in the real world. Well, it isn't – but it's how colds have been studied for decades. You might expect people to be more prone to catch a cold with such a method, but if Echinacea had a protective effect you'd still expect the symptoms to be less severe. We have a little more sympathy with Biffa's complaint about Wallace Sampson's editorial in the same issue of *NEJM* questioning why scientists test such remedies as Echinacea when they are unproven; rather, he thought that research and public funding should be focused on things that have a reasonable chance of working. Sampson's reasoning: people continue to use things like Echinacea even when they've been shown not to work, so why bother? In the end because, we think, consumers deserve to make an informed choice, even if the choice they make is a stupid one.

Still, not much comfort if you have a cold: Echinacea doesn't work, vitamin C doesn't work, going to bed and drinking hot lemon and honey doesn't work. You might as well try the final suggestion from Mark Twain's *How to Cure a Cold*, written in 1863: two quarts of whiskey every 24 hours. "Let them try it – if it doesn't cure them, it can't do more than kill them."

**MMR in the clear**

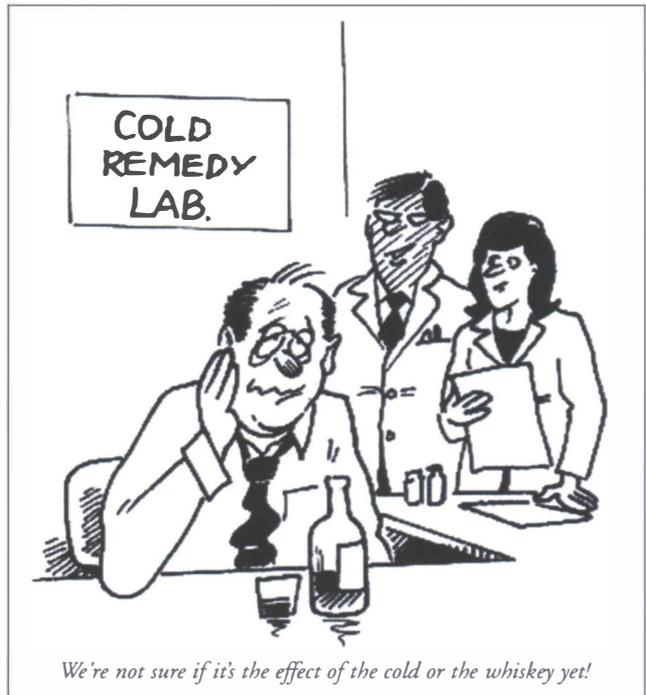
We may, just may, have seen the last of the sane phase of the fights over whether MMR vaccines are linked to autism. In late October, the Cochrane Collaboration released its systematic review of the literature and concluded that MMR is probably safe and not linked to autism. However, as Dr Michael Fitzpatrick, a GP and author of *MMR and Autism: What Parents Need to Know*, points out in a *Spiked Online* editorial, this hasn't stopped the *Daily Mail* from insisting that the Cochrane review has it all wrong, while *Private Eye* has gone on saying that the scare's originator, Andrew Wakefield, has been unjustly vilified but adding that it's been pro-immunization all along. Wakefield's original claim was published in 1998; we suspect it will go on being repeated for the rest of our sceptical lives. As "Bad science" columnist Ben Goldacre wrote in the *Guardian*, "Health scares are like toothpaste: they're easy to squeeze out, but very difficult to get back in the tube". We couldn't have said it better ourselves.

**Individualism**

It was with a heavy heart that we read online that Scott Adams, creator of Dilbert, the comic strip that exposes the utter absurdity of modern office life, has posted a defence of Intelligent Design on his blog (<http://dillbertblog.typepad.com>).

A careful reading of what Adams actually said shows this isn't true: what he says is, "I'd be surprised if 90 percent-plus of scientists are wrong about the evidence for Darwinism. But if you think it's impossible you've led a sheltered life." After all, he argues, in a corporate setting lots of reasons are given to justify beliefs that when examined don't hold water. The ID people allege that within each field where evidence is found to support Darwinism there are some experts who are not convinced. Therefore, isn't it possible that scientists are giving in to peer-pressure? Naturally, we hope that science doesn't work like any of the corporations Adams has known. Unfortunately, there are human beings everywhere, so you never know.

Meanwhile, the best argument we've heard comes from a friend who is seven months pregnant: "No one would make ribs this unbendy if they had planned such a large person to be kicking them / fitting behind them along with all the other stuff that normally takes up the space. Intelligent design my arse".



**CSICOP goes to the UN**

The Center for Inquiry, the parent organization of CSICOP (which assists us with production, printing, and posting *The Skeptic*), has been granted special consultative status as a non-governmental organization under the United Nations Economic and Social Council. This status will allow the Center for Inquiry to participate in meetings and conferences open to NGOs, which can only be good news for the endeavour of spreading scientific rationalism. Congrats to CSICOP.

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



IN GENERAL, fantasy and the supernatural make better stories than scepticism does, and therefore a Sceptic's Top Ten Movie list might not make it to the full double digits. This is particularly true lately, as the success (especially in post-TV-run form such as DVD) of shows like *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer*, *The X-Files*, and *Buffy* spin-off *Angel* spawns a new generation: *Medium*, *Ghost Whisperer*, *Supernatural*, and a long, long list behind them. And then there are the recent movies, as Barry Karr recently noted in *Skeptical Inquirer: The War of the Worlds, What the Bleep! Do We Know?*, and another long list.

But every so often someone does a piece of work a sceptic can appreciate, and so it was when I got around to taking a look at the DVD of the 2003 movie *Capturing the Friedmans*, an extraordinary documentary about the tribulations of a Great Neck, Long Island family when the father, Arnold Friedman, was caught trading child pornography in a sting operation.

Things got very bad very fast. The police obtained a warrant and searched his Long Island home, they found more illegal material. They also found out that Arnold and his youngest son, David, then 17, taught computer classes in their basement. This was all happening in 1987 and 1988, when there was a run of what one can only call sexual abuse hysteria cases – the McMartin and Kelly Michaels cases, for example. Arnold Friedman's guilt meant that the police investigating the Friedmans were sure they'd find something. They interviewed quite a few of the children, and in the end a number of them accused Arnold and his youngest son, Jesse, of abusing them. Both Arnold and Jesse, who was only 18 at the time he was arrested, eventually pleaded guilty and went to prison for 13 years (he was finally released in 2001). Arnold died in prison. Jesse is still trying to clear his name. (You can read the details and progress of his efforts at [www.freejesse.net](http://www.freejesse.net).)

The filmmaker, Andrew Jarecki, didn't originally set out to make this movie at all; his goal, in fact, was to make a movie about party clowns, focusing on the one who was generally acknowledged to be the best party clown in New York City: David Friedman, Arnold's oldest son. As he interviewed David, there were hints of a less than happy past, and eventually the truth about his family came out. The movie Jarecki wound up mak-

ing recounts the story above in detail, but it does a lot more, in part because shortly after the arrest David went out and bought a video camera and began taping the family, continuing throughout as the family broke down and Jesse went to prison.

The result is an extraordinary, close-up look at both a family under extreme stress and the utter failure of the justice system, documented most clearly in the extras in the two-disc set rather than the original film. In fact, when the movie first came out, Jarecki was criticized for never explicitly making clear whether he believed the Friedmans were innocent. Since then, more of the computer students have come forward to say that they never saw any abuse take place (a point many of them made to the police at the time without being believed), and this material and other information that was withheld by the prosecution forms part of Jesse Friedman's efforts to appeal. There is no doubt in my mind from the movie and additional footage that Jesse Friedman was innocent; but that he and his father were doomed given the child pornography his father had. That Arnold Friedman is shown at once as a gifted teacher and devoted family man and as a man with proclivities we think of as evil is one of the rare things about this movie. Everything is so black and white, most of the time.

It is probably easier now – especially with a sceptical background – to believe the Friedmans were innocent than it was in 1988. For one thing, enough time has passed for the hysteria fuelling the cases of the 1980s to have passed. Quite a few of the high-profile defendants in those cases have been cleared and released. We have come to know the work of investigative reporter Debbie Nathan (interviewed in *Capturing the Friedmans*) and psychology professor Elizabeth Loftus, both of whose work has helped discredit some of these cases, either by documenting the wrongness of those investigations and showing that children (like adults) can respond to loaded questioning and pressure with untruths, or by casting doubt on the psychological basis (such as Loftus' work discrediting the hypothesis of recovered memory).

In any case, this movie is definitely one for the sceptical bookshelf. Highly recommended.

► **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 Three

Paul Chambers and Robert Bartholomew round off their investigation into the 'Phantom Sniper of Esher'

## A possible solution to the mystery?

GIVEN THAT THE majority of smashed windscreens on the Portsmouth Road are likely to have been caused by loose road chippings, how is it that something so inoffensive could lead to a national mystery?

We believe that there are two crucial factors in the origins and level of interest in the phantom sniper incidents. These are: (1) the volume of traffic along the Portsmouth Road and (2) the campaigning nature of the *Esher News and Advertiser*.

When visiting modern-day Esher, one is immediately struck by how dominant the Portsmouth Road is within the village. This road is one of the main trunk routes from London to the south coast and it cuts through the middle of the village. Even now, years after the building of the Esher bypass road, it carries a massive volume of traffic along it creating much noise and congestion.

At the time of the sniper incidents there was a great deal of concern in Esher about the level of traffic running through the village and of the number of accidents this was generating. Practically every issue of the *ENA* was dominated by articles about the road. Each issue would carry several items concerning that week's traffic accidents and each month there would be a tally of accidents in comparison with the previous month. Throughout the entire span of the phantom sniper the *ENA* showed extreme concern at what the traffic was doing to the village and was actively involved in the local campaign for a bypass road to be built.

Given that the Portsmouth Road was then the busiest highway in Britain (see *The Skeptic*, 18.4, Part Two) it is no wonder that traffic would be high on the list of concerns of locals and the council alike. This local obsession with traffic may have laid the foundations for the phantom sniper.

It is probably no coincidence that the first acknowledged shooting was a very high profile one involving the celebrity journalist Richard Dimbleby, who reported his broken windscreen to the Esher police. This would have made both local people and the *ENA* aware of the idea that there was a sharp shooter abroad on the Portsmouth Road. As further reports of smashed windscreens came in, so the *ENA* assumed that there was a connection between them and promoted the idea of a sniper.

Judging by the number of times that the *ENA* mentions the Esher Police Station, it would appear that the newspaper was getting most of its reports from a con-

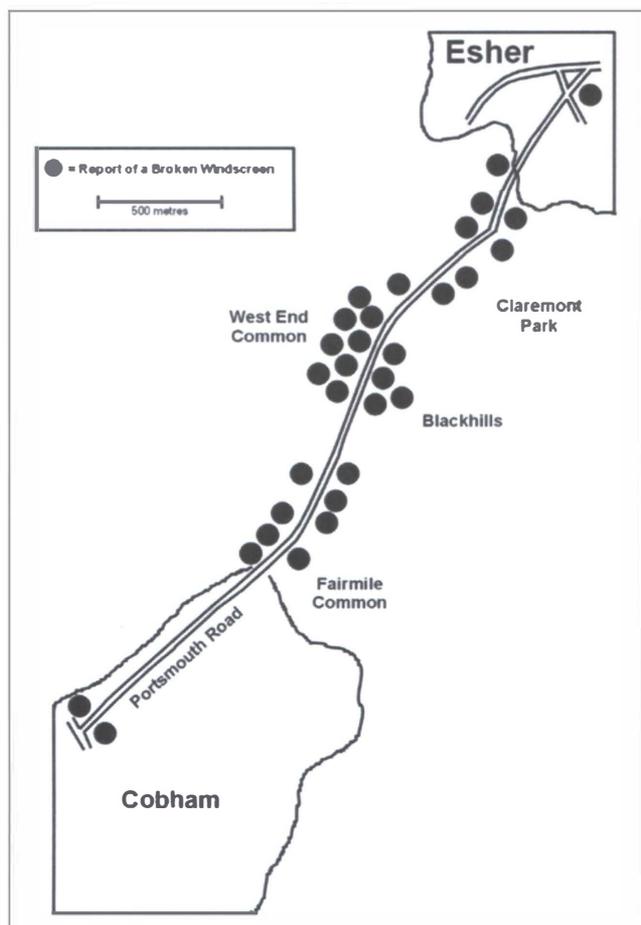
tact inside the Esher police station. This would explain not only how the *ENA* got to hear of so many broken windscreens but also why the incidents are so tightly clustered on the road between Esher and Cobham (see map). Anybody who received a damaged windscreen on this stretch of road, and who thought that they had been shot at, would automatically call in at the nearest police station which would be in either Esher (if heading northbound) or Cobham (southbound). Assuming that there was some communication between the Esher and Cobham police stations, the *ENA* would get to hear of all such incidents.

**At the time of the sniper incidents there was a great deal of concern in Esher about the level of traffic running through the village and of the number of accidents this was generating**

It is also noticeable that a good many of the drivers reporting these incidents lived locally. Local drivers who were aware of the sniper rumours would be more likely to report their damaged windscreens to the authorities than passing motorists who might put the incident down to loose stones.

After the start of the second wave of damaged windscreens the *ENA* started to take an interest not only in the 'shootings', but also actively campaign to get them looked at by the authorities. It would appear that this campaigning, which resulted in it carrying 40 articles on the matter in 36 months, caused a mild form of hysteria in which any windscreen damage from anywhere within a 20 kilometre radius around Esher, could get reported. The eventual involvement of the national press, the local council, the Minister for Transport and the Metropolitan Police was seen by the *ENA* as a vindication of its position on the matter. The editorial of the 20th June 1952 makes it clear that the *ENA* sees itself as having been crucial in the promotion of this affair, and they are probably correct in this.

Like all bouts of social delusion, there comes a point when the number of incidents peak and interest begins to fall away again. This seems to have been reached in about late September or early October 1952 when after over six months solid coverage the number of reports and news items began to decrease markedly. Although there was the odd burst of interest, the phantom sniper had become yesterday's news.



Map showing the distribution of reports of broken windscreens between Esher and Cobham.

The last piece of the puzzle concerns the large number of smashed windscreens on that one small stretch of the Portsmouth Road. By our count at least 43 windscreens were smashed over a 36 month period (this excludes windscreens that were broken outside the Esher area). It was this large number that drew the *ENA's* attention in the first place and which helped perpetuate the idea of a local sniper. Is it really feasible that loose stones or structural failure could cause so many breakages in such a short space of time?

Unfortunately, we do not have the police incident books from Esher or Cobham, so it is impossible to know how many reports of windscreen damage they were receiving in the periods before and after the sniper

incidents. We also know nothing of the road surface conditions. We do, however, have some other clues.

On average there were one or two windscreens a week being reported to the *ENA* during the peak period between March and October 1952. According to the traffic census and stone damage data quoted in the last issue, the number of incidents is perfectly within the bounds of normality. The levels of damage do not look excessive when compared with the volume of traffic and the susceptibility of car windscreens to damage from loose stones.

**Like all bouts of social delusion, there comes a point when the number of incidents peak and interest begins to fall away again**

#### **A comparison to other phantom sniper incidents**

Given that the scenario outlined above relies on circumstances that are capable of being replicated elsewhere in the world, how does the Esher episode compare to other phantom sniper incidents?

#### *Fort's Phantom Snipers:*

Charles Fort mentions a number of phantom sniper incidents in his book *Wild Talents*. Most of these concern people who have been shot and the bullet found but not the sniper – these do not concern us here. There are, however, two apparent episodes of mass shootings that interest us that took place in London in April to May 1927 and Camden, New York from November 1927 to February 1928.

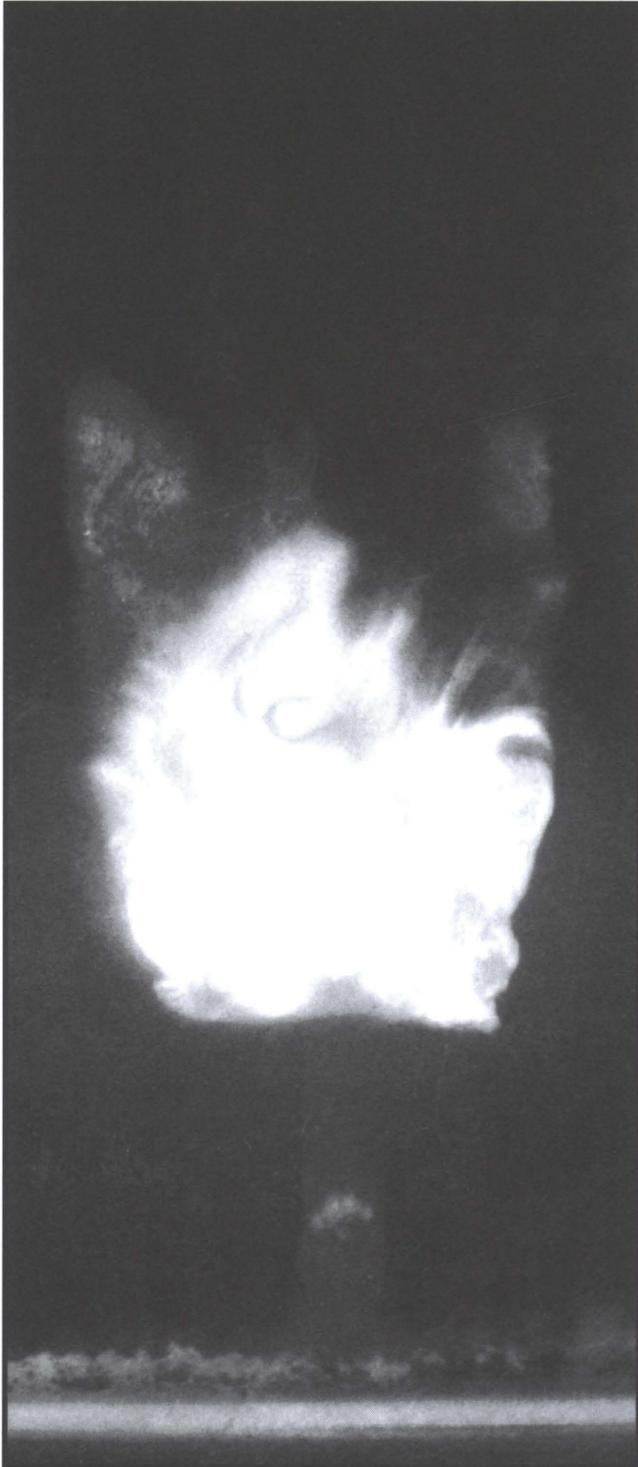
An investigation of local London papers revealed that the incidents listed by Fort were totally unconnected to each other and most involved genuine shootings in which real, not phantom, bullets were recovered. Through pressure of time, the New York incidents were not investigated but they superficially would appear to have more in common with the Esher incidents than the 1927 London ones.

#### *The Seattle panic:*

During March 1954, police in the city of Bellingham in north-west Washington State were baffled by reports that

a ghostly sniper was shooting at car windcreens. The situation soon reached crisis proportions. Over a one-week period in early April over 1,500 windcreens were reported damaged. Despite the massive number of 'attacks', police chief William Breuer had no suspects and no tangible evidence. Authorities surmised that the most likely weapon 'was a BB-gun barrel attached to a compressor in a spark-plug socket, fired from a moving car'.

At the height of the episode, people across the city of



*During the Seattle panic of 1954, strange pit marks on windcreens were frequently attributed to fallout from hydrogen bomb tests.*

34,000 placed various items, from newspapers to door masts and even plywood, over their windcreens for protection. Meanwhile, downtown parking garages were under heavy security. The phantom pellet-shooter seemed to be everywhere; even police cars reported being struck. In lieu of a lack of evidence for vandals, by mid-April local and national media began emphasising the mysterious nature of the damage. On April 12, a reporter for *Life Magazine* came to Bellingham and referred to the episode as 'ghostly' and the perpetrators as 'phantom'-like. The next evening, the *Seattle Times* talked about 'elusive BB-snipers'. In time, reports of the mysterious windscreen attacks moved closer to Seattle, Washington, 80 miles to the south. Reports of strange pit marks on windcreens first reached Seattle on the evening of April 14, and by the end of the next day, weary police had answered 242 phone calls from concerned residents reporting tiny pit marks on over 3,000 vehicles. In some cases, whole parking lots were reportedly affected. The reports quickly declined and ceased. On April 16 police logged 46 pitting claims, and 10 on the 17th, after which no more reports were received.

**Reports of strange pit marks on windcreens first reached Seattle on the evening of April 14, and by the end of the next day, weary police had answered 242 phone calls from concerned residents reporting tiny pit marks on over 3,000 vehicles**

Nahum Medalia of the Georgia Institute of Technology and Otto Larsen of the University of Washington studied the episode. They stated that the most common damage report involved claims that tiny pit marks grew into dime-sized bubbles embedded within the glass, leading to a folk theory that sand flea eggs had somehow been deposited in the glass and later hatched. The sudden presence of the 'pits' created widespread anxiety as they were typically attributed to atomic fallout from hydrogen-bomb tests that had been recently conducted in the Pacific and received saturation media publicity. At the height of the incident on the night of April 15, the Seattle mayor even sought emergency assistance from US President Dwight Eisenhower.

In the wake of rumours such as the existence of radioactive fallout, and by a few initial cases amplified in the media, residents began looking at, instead of through, their windscreens. An analysis of the mysterious black, sooty grains that dotted many Seattle windscreens was carried out at the Environmental Research Laboratory at the University of Washington. The material was identified as cenospheres – tiny particles produced by the incomplete combustion of bituminous coal. The particles had been a common feature of everyday life in Seattle, and could not pit or penetrate windscreens.

Medalia and Larsen noted that as the pitting reports coincided with the H-bomb tests, media publicity on the windscreen damage seems to have reduced tension about the possible consequences of the bomb tests. Secondly, the very act of phoning police and appeals by the Mayor to the Governor and even President of the United States “served to give people the sense that they were ‘doing something’ about the danger that threatened”.

Although on a shorter time scale, the Seattle panic has clear similarities to the Esher one and is undoubtedly the best studied comparison that we could find.

#### **Glasspox:**

Three articles from 1950s editions of *FATE* magazine cover smashed windscreen incidents and refer to these epidemics as being due to ‘glasspox’. According to *FATE*, ‘glasspox’ was apparently a very common phenomenon in the 1950s. They make mention of mass windscreen damage in Pittsburgh and Rome as well as carrying several individual accounts from readers. Theories cited include sonic booms, a reaction to windscreen cleaning fluids, radioactivity, and even microscopic organisms attacking the glass! One reader even asked an Ouija board about the cause of glasspox; the ‘spirit’ placed the blame on airborne ‘bantom ash from radium deposits’.

#### **Miscellaneous others:**

Frank Edwards, in his book *Stranger than Science*, which carries a brief report on the Esher incidents, notes that ‘...in June of 1952, State police in both Indiana and Illinois found themselves chasing a phantom gunman who was fully as elusive as the one in England’. Attempts were not made to find these incidents



*At the height of the Seattle panic, the mayor sought emergency assistance from US President Dwight Eisenhower (above).*

although it is probable that Edwards heard of these through his connection with *FATE* magazine, as was the case with the Esher incidents.

#### **And finally...**

The search through four years’ worth of the *ENA* produced one other item of interest. This concerns two UFO sightings that were reported in the *ENA*, both of which are extremely tame in comparison to today’s surgically obsessed extraterrestrials. We can only agree with the author of a letter to the *ENA* who says of the UFO: “It is a pity that your eyewitness did not notice which side of the road the object flew along so that we might have gathered whether the aircraft was British or Continental?”

#### **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to thank staff at the Esher Library, British Newspaper Library, D M S Watson Science Library, Automobile Association, *The Esher News* and *FATE Magazine*.

▶ **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](mailto:pmc@bicameral.co.uk)

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## Skeptical Stats

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1. Number of pounds of carbon dioxide emissions produced annually by the average American: **12,000**
2. Percentage this represents of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions worldwide: **36.1**
3. Percentage the USA represents of the world's population: **5**
4. Percentage of executives at large companies who say their communications are unmanageable: **25**
5. Number of UFO sightings in 2005 in the eight-mile stretch of North Yorkshire between Scarborough and Filey: **85**
6. Amount of money spent annually in Britain on gambling: **£64 billion**
7. Length of time it takes mass-produced British bread to rise, ready for baking: **3 minutes**
8. Number of Britons who consult homeopaths each year: **470,000**
9. Amount Britons spend annually on homeopathy: **about £25 million**
10. Percentage of British GPs who refer patients to homeopaths: **up to 40**
11. Percentage of British school-aged children who will be obese by 2020 if current eating habits persist: **over 50**
12. Percentage of airline passengers in 568 crashes between 1983 and 2000 who survived without serious injury: **95**
13. Price of a magnetic device called MoodMaker intended to cure impotence: **£49.99**
14. Percentage of mercury found in Fufang Lulhui Jiaonang capsules by the MHRA in an unannounced April 2005 inspection: **13**
15. Amount fraudsters operating a letter-writing scam and claiming to be clairvoyant asked Thames Valley residents to pay to protect themselves from an evil presence: **£17**
16. Number, out of nine, of Dover, Pennsylvania school board, voted out after the debate over whether to teach Intelligent Design landed in court: **8**
17. Percentage of the population who voted: **16**
18. Kansas Board of Education vote to redefine science so that it is no longer limited to the search for natural explanations: **6-4**
19. Number of US states that have had some local or state level anti-evolution activity: **40**
20. Percentage of Americans who go to church at least once a week who voted for Bush: **61**
21. Percentage of American 'church attendees' who never attend church who voted for Bush: **37**
22. Estimated number of people in Britain who claim to have psychic abilities: **150,000**
23. Number of pieces of peer-reviewed research that have been published about Flying Spaghetti Monsterism: **2**
24. Number of cows a Leeds woman was told by a local healer to slaughter to save her relationship: **3**
25. Percentage of US meals consumed in cars: **19**

1 *The New Yorker*; 2 BBC; 3 <http://www.bep.treas.gov/store/section.cfm/73/435>; 4 *Business Week* (McKinsey report) ; 5 *Yorkshire Post*; 6 *The Times*; 7 *Daily Telegraph*; 8,9,10 *The Independent*; 11 Barnardos research study; 12 *Skeptical Inquirer* (statistic from NTSB); 13 [www.dash.co.uk](http://www.dash.co.uk); 14 [www.mhra.gov.uk](http://www.mhra.gov.uk); 15 BBC; 16,17 *Austin American Statesman*; 18 *Independent*; 19 National Center for Science Education; 20,21 *Business Week*; 22 Channel 5; 23 The Panda's Thumb blog ([www.pandasthumb.org](http://www.pandasthumb.org)); 24 *Yorkshire Post*; 25 *Harper's* (Culinary Institute)

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](mailto:news@skeptic.org) 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**.

# Natural Science and the Spirit World: Part One

The following is the first of two instalments of an article taken from **Friedrich Engels' *Dialectics of Nature***...

THE DIALECTICS THAT has found its way into popular consciousness finds expression in the old saying that extremes meet. In accordance with this we should hardly err in looking for the most extreme degree of fantasy, credulity, and superstition, not in that trend of natural science which, like the German philosophy of nature, tries to force the objective world into the framework of its subjective thought, but rather in the opposite trend, which, relying on mere experience, treats thought with sovereign disdain and really has gone to the furthest extreme in emptiness of thought. This school prevails in England. Its father, the much lauded Francis Bacon, already advanced the demand that his new empirical-inductive method should be pursued to attain by its means, above all, longer life, rejuvenation – to a certain extent, alteration of stature and features, transformation of one body into another, the production of new species, power over the air and the production of storms. He complains that such investigations have been abandoned, and in his natural history he actually gives recipes for making gold and performing various miracles. Similarly Isaac Newton in his old age greatly busied himself with expounding the revelation of St. John. So it is not to be wondered at if in recent years English empiricism in the person of some of its representatives – and not the worst of them – should seem to have fallen a hopeless victim to the spirit-rapping and spirit-seeing imported from America.

The first natural scientist belonging here is the very eminent zoologist and botanist, Alfred Russell Wallace, the man who simultaneously with Darwin put forward the theory of the evolution of species by natural selection. In his little work, *On Miracles and Modern Spiritualism* (1875), he relates that his first experiences in this branch of natural knowledge date from 1844, when he attended the lectures of Mr Spencer Hall on mesmerism and as a result carried out similar experiments on his pupils. "I was extremely interested in the subject and pursued it with ardour." He not only produced magnetic sleep together with the phenomena of articular rigidity, and local loss of sensation, he also confirmed the correctness of Gall's map of the skull, because on touching any one of Gall's organs the corresponding activity was aroused in the magnetised patient and exhibited by appropriate and lively gestures. Further, he established that his patient, merely by being touched, partook of all the sensations of the operator; he made him drunk with a glass of water as soon as he

told him that it was brandy. He could make one of the young men so stupid, even in the waking condition, that he no longer knew his own name, a feat, however,

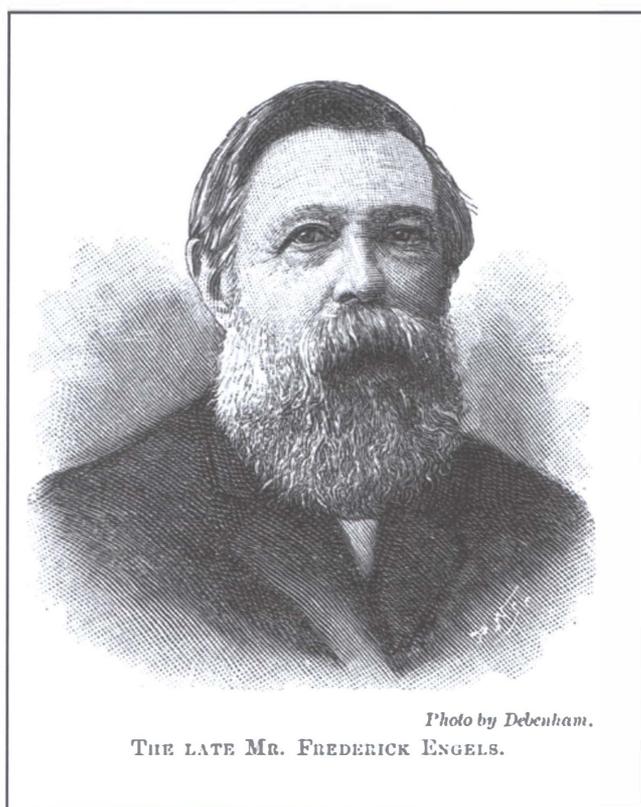
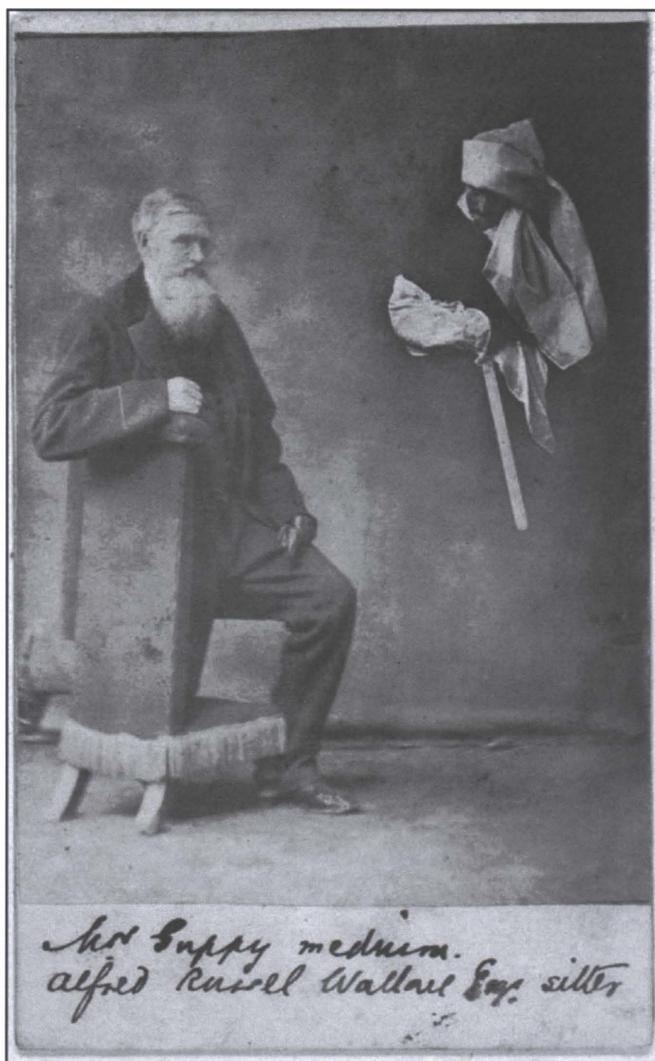


Photo by Debenham.  
THE LATE MR. FREDERICK ENGELS.

*Friedrich Engels, 1820-1895*

that other schoolmasters are capable of accomplishing without any mesmerism. And so on.

Now it happens that I also saw this Mr. Spencer Hall in the winter of 1843-4 in Manchester. He was a very mediocre charlatan, who travelled the country under the patronage of some parsons and undertook magnetico-phrenological performances with a young girl in order to prove thereby the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, and the incorrectness of the materialism that was being preached at that time by the Owenites in all big towns. The lady was sent into a magnetico-sleep and then, as soon as the operator touched any part of the skull corresponding to one of Gall's organs, she gave a bountiful display of theatrical, demonstrative gestures and poses representing the activity of the organ concerned; for instance, for the organ of philoprogenitiveness she fondled and kissed an imaginary baby, etc. Moreover, the good Mr. Hall had enriched Gall's geography of the skull with a new island



*Alfred Russell Wallace photographed with a male spirit, thanks to the mediumship of Mrs Guppy*

of Barataria: right at the top of the skull he had discovered an organ of veneration, on touching which his hypnotic miss sank on to her knees, folded her hands in prayer, and depicted to the astonished, philistine audience an angel wrapt in veneration. That was the climax and conclusion of the exhibition. The existence of God had been proved.

The effect on me and one of my acquaintances was exactly the same as on Mr Wallace; the phenomena interested us and we tried to find out how far we could reproduce them. A wide awake young boy of 12-years old offered himself as subject. Gently gazing into his eyes, or stroking, sent him without difficulty into the hypnotic condition. But since we were rather less credulous than Mr Wallace and set to work with rather less fervour, we arrived at quite different results. Apart from muscular rigidity and loss of sensation, which were easy to produce, we found also a state of complete passivity of the will bound up with a peculiar hypersensitivity of sensation. The patient, when aroused from his lethargy by any external stimulus, exhibited very much greater

liveliness than in the waking condition. There was no trace of any mysterious relation to the operator; anyone else could just as easily set the sleeper into activity. To set Gall's cranial organs into action was the least that we achieved; we went much further, we could not only exchange them for one another, or make their seat anywhere in the whole body, but we also fabricated any amount of other organs, organs of singing, whistling, piping, dancing, boxing, sewing, cobbling, tobacco-smoking, etc., and we could make their seat wherever we wanted. Wallace made his patients drunk on water, but we discovered in the great toe an organ of drunkenness which only had to be touched in order to cause the finest drunken comedy to be enacted. But it must be well understood, no organ showed a trace of action until the patient was given to understand what was

**He could make one of the young men so stupid, even in the waking condition, that he no longer knew his own name, a feat, however, that other schoolmasters are capable of accomplishing without any mesmerism**

expected of him; the boy soon perfected himself by practice to such an extent that the merest indication sufficed. The organs produced in this way then retained their validity for later occasions of putting to sleep, as long as they were not altered in the same way. The patient had even a double memory, one for the waking state and a second quite separate one for the hypnotic condition. As regards the passivity of the will and its absolute subjection to the will of a third person, this loses all its miraculous appearance when we bear in mind that the whole condition began with the subjection of the will of the patient to that of the operator, and cannot be restored without it. The most powerful magician of a magnetiser in the world will come to the end of his resources as soon as his patient laughs him in the face.

While we with our frivolous scepticism thus found that the basis of magnetico-phrenological charlatanism lay in a series of phenomena which for the most part differ only in degree from those of the waking state and require no mystical interpretation, Mr Wallace's 'ardour' led him into a series of self-deceptions, in virtue of which he confirmed Gall's map of the skull in all its details and noted a mysterious relation between operator and patient.<sup>[1]</sup> Everywhere in Mr Wallace's account, the sincerity of which reaches the degree of naïveté, it

becomes apparent that he was much less concerned in investigating the factual background of charlatanry than in reproducing all the phenomena at all costs. Only this frame of mind is needed for the man who was originally a scientist to be quickly converted into an 'adept' by means of simple and facile self-deception. Mr. Wallace ended up with faith in magnético-phrenological miracles and so already stood with one foot in the world of spirits.

He drew the other foot after him in 1865. On returning from his twelve years of travel in the tropical zone, experiments in table-turning introduced him to the society of various 'mediums'. How rapid his progress was, and how complete his mastery of the subject, is testified to by the above-mentioned booklet. He expects us to take for good coin not only all the alleged miracles of Home, the brothers Davenport, and other 'mediums' who all more or less exhibit themselves for money and who have for the most part been frequently exposed as impostors, but also a whole series of allegedly authentic spirit histories from early times. The Pythonesses of the Greek oracle, the witches of the Middle Ages, were all 'mediums', and Iamblichus in his *De divinatione* already described quite accurately "the most astonishing phenomena of modern spiritualism."

Just one example to show how lightly Mr Wallace deals with the scientific corroboration and authentication of these miracles. It is certainly a strong assumption that we should believe that the aforesaid spirits should allow themselves to be photographed, and we have surely the right to demand that such spirit photographs should be authenticated in the most indubitable manner before we accept them as genuine. Now Mr Wallace recounts on p. 187 that in March 1872, a leading medium, Mrs Guppy, *née* Nicholls, had herself photographed together with her husband and small boy at Mr. Hudson's in Notting Hill, and on two different photographs a tall female figure, finely draped in white gauze robes, with somewhat Eastern features, was to be seen behind her in a pose as if giving a benediction. "Here, then, one of two things are absolutely certain.<sup>[2]</sup> Either there was a living intelligent, but invisible being present, or Mr. and Mrs. Guppy, the photographer, and some fourth person planned a wicked imposture and have maintained it ever since. Knowing Mr and Mrs. Guppy so well as I do, I feel an *absolute conviction* that they are as incapable of an imposture of this kind as any earnest inquirer after truth in the department of natural science."

Consequently, either deception or spirit photography. Quite so. And, if deception, either the spirit was

already on the photographic plates, or four persons must have been concerned, or three if we leave out as weak-minded or duped old Mr Guppy who died in January, 1875, at the age of 84 (it only needed that he should be sent behind the Spanish screen of the background). That a photographer could obtain a 'model' for the spirit without difficulty does not need to be argued. But the photographer Hudson, shortly afterwards, was publicly prosecuted for habitual falsification of spirit photographs, so Mr Wallace remarks in mitigation: "One thing is clear, if an imposture has occurred, it was at once detected by spiritualists themselves." Hence there is not much reliance to be placed on the photographer. Remains Mrs Guppy, and for her there is only the 'absolute conviction' of our friend Wallace and nothing more. Nothing more? Not at all. The absolute trustworthiness of Mrs. Guppy is evidenced by her assertion that one evening, early in June, 1871, she was carried through the air in a state of unconsciousness from her house in Highbury Hill Park to 69, Lamb's Conduit Street - three English miles as the crow flies - and deposited in the said house of No. 69 on the table in the midst of a spiritualistic séance. The doors of the room were closed, and although Mrs. Guppy was one of the stoutest women in London, which is certainly saying a good deal, nevertheless her sudden incursion did not leave behind the slightest hole either in the doors or in the ceiling. (Reported in the *London Echo*, 8 June 1871.) And if anyone still does not believe in the genuineness of spirit photography, there's no helping him.

## Notes

1. As already said, the patients perfect themselves by practice. It is therefore quite possible that, when the subjection of the will has become habitual, the relation of the participants becomes more intimate, individual phenomena are intensified and are reflected weakly even in the waking state. [*Note by F Engels.*]

2. The spirit world is superior to grammar. A joker once caused the spirit of the grammarian Lindley Murray to testify. To the question whether he was there, he answered: "I are." (American for I am.) The medium was from America. (*Note by F Engels.*)

## References

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- Rev Davies, C. M. (1875). *Mystic London*. London: Tinsley Brothers.

From a manuscript of Engels probably written in 1878, and first published in the "*Illustrierter Neue Welt-Kalender für das Jahr, 1898.*" The article is taken from Engels' *The Dialectics of Nature*, translated and edited by Clemens Dutt, and published by Lawrence & Wishart in London in 1940. It is reproduced here with the kind permission of Lawrence & Wishart.

# Second Sight? Or Just the Blind Leading the Blind?

Krissy Wilson reviews the not-so-amazing performance of psychic Sharon Neill

THE POPULARITY OF spiritualist groups, mediums and psychics, appears to be on the increase. All over Britain various individuals are prepared, and able it seems, to talk to your dead relatives in front of an audience of like-minded individuals for the price of a glass of wine. This popularity is clearly compounded by the largely uncritical coverage of such activities by the media. On a typical evening on British television for example, it is possible to watch allegedly psychic performances such as *Crossing Over* with John Edward, Britain's own Colin Fry, the star of the programme *Sixth Sense*, or to watch Derek Accorah allegedly contact the dead in a selection of *Most Haunted* locations.

**"Is there a Margaret please?"  
My heart sank.  
Was there a Margaret?  
A dead Margaret?  
A living Margaret?  
A Margaret in the audience?  
In Bracknell? On the planet?"**

One of the rising stars on the "psychic" circuit is Sharon Neill. Modern, popular mediums, it seems, all have their own particular gimmick. John Edward for example, talks at breakneck speed, firing off statements that include every possible scenario until he appears to get a hit, "I'm getting a ring here, anything important about a ring? I sense a watch, a bracelet, something on the wrist or arm". Colin Fry soothes and consoles with his soft voice and smiling face, "so, I'm going to leave your dad's love with you, alright, my darling?" And Derek Accorah... well, he looks good in green!

Belfast born, Ms Neill, however, is interesting because she has been blind from birth. So if she is merely using cold reading and other such techniques (as many similar performers allegedly do), I wondered how

she would be able to read body language and pick up on all those non-verbal signals that are among the tools of the trade of any cold reader? It was worth a look, I thought, and so in the 'spirit' of enquiry, on a rainy night in Bracknell, I decided to leave my cynical, sceptical prejudices at home and open my mind to spiritualism....fifteen minutes into the show and I wished I had stayed at home.



Apparently, this postcard from 1900 illustrates the Twentieth Century welcoming the Dawn of "Spiritual Science". Over a century later, "Spiritual Science" does not appear to have made much progress...

Before the show began a voice over the PA told us that if Sharon approached any of us, we were under strict instructions to only give "yes" or "no" answers and to give no other details. Fine. Ten minutes later Sharon

was led onto the stage and took up a central position behind a microphone. Behind her was a screen onto which was shown a projection of her for the benefit of those at the back of the auditorium. She was here, she told us, to “give information and comfort” and that it was a “privilege to prove” that death is not the end. Well! Quite a claim, Ms Neill. This should be good.

Finally, some fifteen minutes into the show, the messages began to come through. “Is there a Margaret, please?” My heart sank. Was there a Margaret? A dead Margaret? A living Margaret? A Margaret in the audience? In Bracknell? On the planet? It was a brave opening to be sure – in an audience of 250 people (95% women), could there actually be a Margaret there or another woman for whom the name Margaret meant something? Amazingly, a chorus of about six women chirruped, “Its me Sharon!” “Over here Sharon!” “Me!” Sharon then explained that she had to determine which of these “Margarets” the message was intended for. Apparently cross-communication is a common problem. Yes, I hate it when that happens. I began to wonder why the dead simply don’t say, “Look Sharon, it’s for Margaret Brown, she’s sitting in the fifth row, wearing a cheap pink top she bought in Dorothy Perkins with the last of her dole money!” But what can you expect from the dead anyhow?

So we were then told there was a link with a William (in uniform) and a James. “Can any of the Margarets (or people for whom Margaret meant something presumably) take this?” Two could. Then followed the usual patter of rings, roses and photos. I glanced at my watch. This first “communication” had taken nearly 20 minutes, but we hadn’t actually discovered whom William or James were. No specifics were given. Nevertheless this first “proof” of the after-life received a hearty round of applause.

Sharon then gave us a five-minute talk on the mechanism behind how these messages come through. She has a “team” apparently who pass on pictures and words that she can “see” in her head.

Next message was on its way. A young man was com-

ing through. A suicide. Calls of assent from the audience. October? The name of Robert? Interestingly, I had been told prior to the show, to watch out for the suicide, as this appears to be a regular ‘communication’ shall we say, in the Neill ‘repertoire’. The dead are rather repetitive it seems.

Robert, the suicide, had a silver or white car? No. Did he have a friend who had a silver or white car? No. Did any of the family own, or have owned a silver or white car? No. Ah! This could be a message for someone else! One of those cross-communications she mentioned, no doubt. Interestingly, although she had found someone who could take the name Robert and the suicide, it was never established who Robert was, and as for the phantom silver and white car, not even the dead seemed to know who it belonged to. Maybe the “team” were not playing ball?



*An evening with Sharon Neill is one long fishing trip with the fish eager to be caught*

Time for Ms Neill to move on. A truly painful fishing trip ensued. This time she picked up messages from a pair of twins who had passed over. The prey in the audience took the bait. But Neill got the wrong sex, the wrong age, in fact they hadn’t even been born, yet apparently they were safely with Anne or was it John? Sipping red wine no less. It seemed like very odd behaviour for foetal twins to engage in. What exactly did the dead get up to, one wonders? Anyway, we were comfortingly told that they were all “grand”.

Next up. “I’m getting a Samuel? Is there a Samuel?”

Yes, there was. "Who is the footballer please?" No response. "Well... not himself but someone near him?" No response. "Well, not a footballer as such, but interested in football?" Finally the audience member said "yes". Dead Samuel, it seemed, liked football. Reassured by this "hit" Neill continued, "he was a real party lover wasn't he?" Silence. "Well, I'm not saying he was the life and soul of the party but he liked them...?..well...he was... always there, in the background..." "...well he

**Why are the dead always  
so happy to be dead?  
You would think that  
at least one of them might  
be a bit annoyed**

just wants to tell you that he is grand!" Why are the dead always so happy to be dead? You would think that at least one of them might be a bit annoyed.

Next message was coming through. "Anne...is there an Anne?" I could feel the familiar sensation of thirst at the back of my throat. We had been promised an interval. Sharon "found" her Anne. "Well she's back to her usual self!"

Over a more than usually welcome gin and tonic, I cynically suggested to my companions that since we

had had Margaret, William, James and Anne, we should be expecting a George soon.

The second half began. "Is there a George, please?" An audible chuckle rang out from row 6. "I'm seeing a car accident? A vehicle went out of control. Can anyone take this please?" Bizarrely, I *could* have called out yes to this, as my brother was killed in a similar way and my father's name is George. I felt an elbow in the ribs, "Go on!"

I started to think that perhaps *I* was the real psychic here, after all I had predicted the suicide, and George!

The second half did not go so well. And it got worse. "Is there a Rita?" Yes, there was. "Are you wearing navy or black?" No she wasn't. "Well, do you have a navy or black handbag with you?" No she didn't. "Ok, so do you have a dark handbag...(no response)...or wallet...(still no response from the now seemingly mute Rita)... the audience began to fidget nervously..." or something that you keep things in?" Maybe the "team" were playing away from home in the second half? Or had Ms Neill been caught offside? No she wasn't wearing navy or black and did not own any such article of either colour. A voice snorted cynically in my ear "She must be the only woman in Berkshire who doesn't own a black handbag!" But Sharon would not let this go. "Well can you look and check for me, and will you let me know, because they are telling me that there is something you need to check in a black handbag, or wallet (or something you keep things in?)."

Finally after an hour and a half, Sharon struck gold. Lindsay and Pat, a young couple in the front row decided they could take everything and this long, painful fishing trip would finally end with a catch. "Miss" Neill had scored her one and only hit of the night.

**Krissy Wilson** is currently studying for a doctorate at Goldsmiths College. Her main research interests include memory distortion, the creation of false memories and their relationship to belief in, and experience of, the paranormal. She recently presented at the European Skeptics Congress in Brussels.



## SKEPTICS IN THE PUB

**Speakers:  
TBA**

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

# Just Your Imagination? Part 1: Acting

Martin Parkinson looks at some of the things he learned in drama class....

PROFESSOR EDZARD ERNST, speaking at the ECSO conference in September 2003, described the design of an experiment to test the efficacy of 'spiritual healing'. To begin with, the control for the group of healers being tested had been a group of actors but the healers complained that this was unfair because the actors possessed genuine healing gifts of which they themselves were unaware. I laughed out loud at this: it was clearly the healers who had untapped *acting* talent of which they were unaware. Drama deals in fiction but this is not necessarily the same as falsehood or lying; drama is valued for the emotional engagement it can generate, for its power in the emotional realm. It can make you experience things more intensely, make you see the world differently; shed new light on old problems. In a broad sense it can make you feel better when you feel bad. A good actor can do this: indeed the ability to alter peoples' feelings is what 'good' means in acting terms. And what does a good spiritual healer do?

In my article on motivation gurus (*The Skeptic*, 16.1, 2003) I commented that "Anyone who has undergone even a small amount of drama training will have experienced the emotional energy that can be generated by a well-directed group...." I certainly don't claim to be any sort of major thesp but in the mid to late nineties I took a number of adult education classes in drama at the City Lit in London, and when I wrote those words I was thinking of a two-week summer school I attended. By the end of the fortnight I felt that I had completed a pretty intense experience. I felt a bit odd; emotionally opened out and very bonded with the other dozen or so course members. If you think about it, this is hardly a surprising result. One way or another, the only raw materials that actors have, the stuff that has to be studied, manipulated, transformed, and then re-presented to the world, are their own feelings. This means that drama training will inevitably have something in common with psychotherapy.

There are courses, 'seminars' and programmes which promise personal transformation: attend the course and your thought and behaviour will change so much that you in effect become a new person. It is indeed true that you can change your personality thoroughly and rapidly: the technical term for this is *acting* and the effects are fortunately only temporary. In drama training you are carefully taught how to become a different person for a short while; in self-transformation programmes you seem to be forcibly tipped into it without precautions. I recently read Margaret Thaler Singer's *Cults in Our Midst* (2003) and was struck by the accounts of people who have been damaged by 'large group awareness training'. It may be a cliché to talk about 'the power of the imagination' but such people

are the victims of the misunderstanding and misuse of this power.

So if I were an agony-uncle I would urge my readers: "you don't need to bother with this commercial muck that has all the goodness taken out and replaced with dubious additives because there is an alternative that is cheap, nutritious, and healthy". In contrast to seminar leaders and motivation gurus, I would like to introduce you to drama teacher Keith Johnstone, well known for his work on improvisation (many of the exercises I encountered in drama classes were devised by Johnstone). As you might expect, he is an acute natural psychologist and I shall be quoting extensively from his books *Impro* and *Impro for Storytellers* (Johnstone, 1989, 1999).



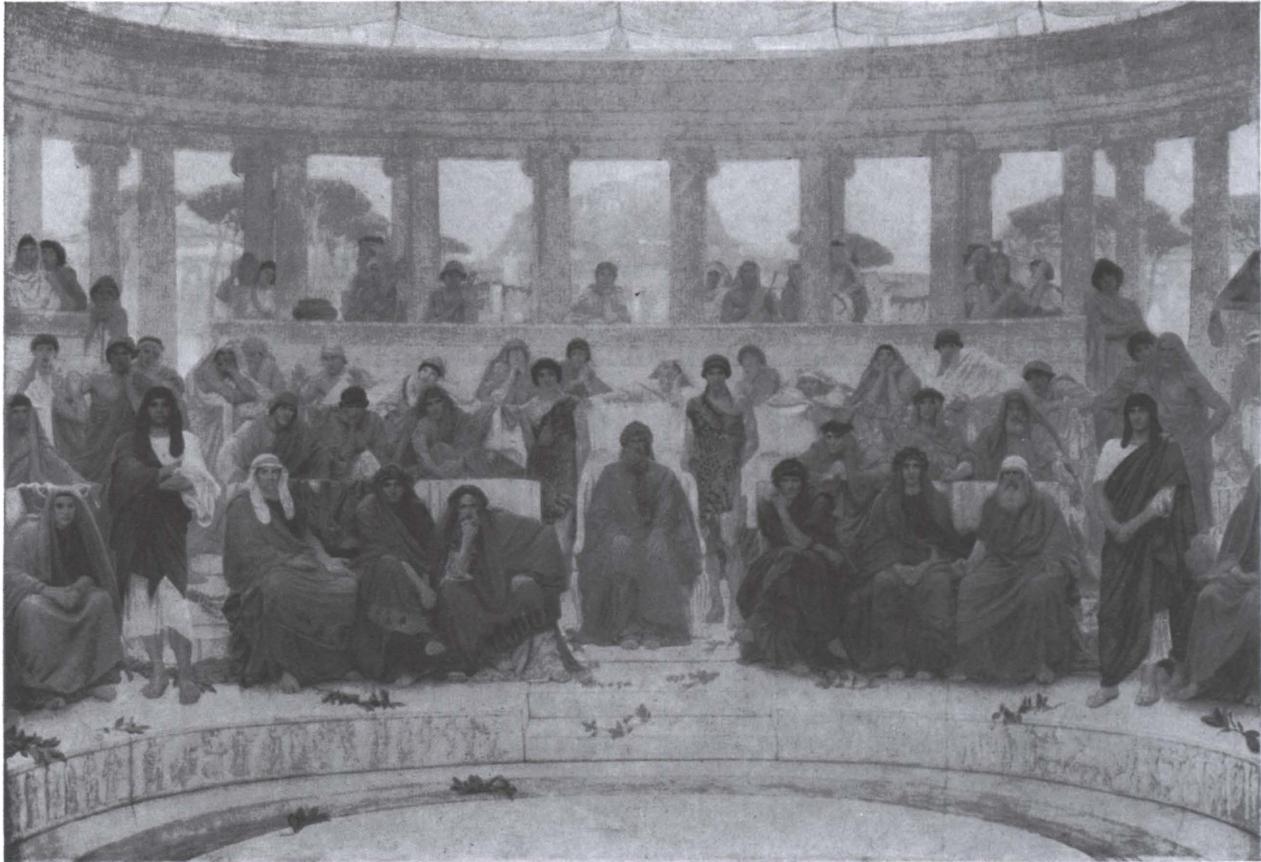
*Drama is valued for the emotional engagement it can generate, for its power in the emotional realm...*

## Consciousness issues

Good acting doesn't seem like acting at all: it feels in some sense genuine, for the practitioner as much as for the audience. The experience of acting makes me doubt the commonsense concept of a single unitary consciousness. Even a duffer like myself has experienced this: when a scene 'works' (the audience and performers find themselves emotionally engaged with it), as a performer you simultaneously *know* that you are, for example, in a specific field in Suffolk and simultaneously in a studio in central London: both awarenesses are 'real'. This resembles the 'double consciousness' found in hypnosis (discussed in any serious introduction to the subject, such as Bowers, 1983).

And what of the strange business of pretending to be a different person? What is 'personality' anyway?

I see the 'personality' as a public-relations department for the real mind, which remains unknown. My personality always seems to be functioning, at some level, in terms of what other people think. If



AN AUDIENCE IN ATHENS

SIR W. B. RICHMOND, R.A

*Good acting doesn't seem like acting at all: it feels in some sense genuine, for the practitioner as much as for the audience*

I am alone in a room and someone knocks on the door, then I 'come back to myself'. Normal consciousness is related to transactions, real or imagined, with other people. That's how I experience it...

(Johnstone, 1989, p. 153)

**It is indeed true that you can change your personality thoroughly and rapidly: the technical term for this is *acting* and the effects are fortunately only temporary**

There is an impro exercise called 'magic box' in which you remove mimed objects from a mimed box and describe them. The important part of this game is to 'take out' whatever pops into your head, no matter how silly or embarrassing. You might see a student feeling around in the 'box', then a small change in their demeanour tells you they've 'found' something. "What is it?" says the class tutor. The student pulls a face "eughh. It's a big white hanky made all stiff with dried up snot..." "There's lots of other stuff in there – take

something else out" prompts the tutor. The student scrabbles around and removes something an inch or two across "it's one of those super-bouncy rubber balls that I remember playing with as a kid...", "describe it", "it's a sort of orangey whitey reddish swirly pattern – like a picture of a planet in a junior science book" et cetera. Both the effortlessness and degree of detail of one's spontaneous imagery are notable. It would be difficult for anyone who has ever played this game to think that memories could be genuinely enhanced or 'recovered' by means of hypnosis or otherwise: convincing imagery is just so easy to generate, and a part of you does experience it as 'real'.

### **The pervasiveness of suggestibility**

In the game 'one word at a time', a story is collectively improvised by a group of people each taking it in turn to say just one word. One thing that struck me about the results of this game together with 'magic box' is that we hardly seem to have an original idea in our heads: the same item will keep coming out of the box; words that suggest themselves will clearly come from something quite unconnected that happened earlier in the class, or that is in the headlines or whatever. An embarrassingly high degree of suggestibility seems the norm.

It's a tautology to say that normal people are the most suggestible, since it's because they're the most suggestible that they're the most normal!  
(Johnstone, 1989, p. 157)

Should this disturb us – is suggestion a powerful tool which can be used to control people? Deliberate suggestion can be used to affect behaviour, in limited circumstances, but is on the whole not very reliable because targeted suggestions have to compete with ambient suggestions: the world is just too noisy. There is some further discussion of this in Part 2.

### Pseudo-psi effects

Johnstone's comments about 'one word at a time' are striking:

One version of the game...involved telling a story around a circle as quickly as possible. Sometimes we did it to a beat...You can make the game tougher by having each person who speaks point to the person who is to say the next word, there's no way to anticipate when your turn comes.

Anyone who tries to control the future of the story can only succeed in ruining it. Every time you add a word, you know what word you would like to follow. Unless you can continually wipe your ideas out of your mind you're paralysed. You can't adapt to the words said by other people.

[...] *Once you say whatever comes to mind, then it's as if the story is being told by some outside force.* I wouldn't be surprised to find that there are cultures which use the method as a form of divination.  
(Johnstone, 1989, p. 131. My italics)

The next step from improvising a story sequentially is to improvise dialogue in unison:

I explained that if they start by saying 'Errr', or by making the very first sound of a word, it ought to be possible to improvise dialogue *en masse*...The greater the number of players, the easier this game becomes (because the players who try to be original are drowned out by those who are being more obvious). At a conference in Svenborg, each 'character' was composed of two hundred and fifty people, and the game worked flawlessly.  
(Johnstone, 1999, pp. 171-172)

Here, a group of actors are improvising a 'date' with the audience:

...the 'blind date' mimed bringing a very large 'present'.

'Do you know what it is?' chorused the actors.

"It's aaaa biiccyyccleee!" screamed the audience, without hesitation, although how such agreement was achieved baffled us.  
(Johnstone, 1999, p.175)

No wonder telepathy seems so plausible. On a similar theme, here is the beginning of an interesting discussion by Johnstone about what he terms 'space':

When I was commissioned to write my first play I'd hardly been inside a theatre, so I watched rehearsals to get the feel of it. I was struck by the way space flowed around the actors like a fluid. As the actors moved I could feel imaginary iron filings marking out the force fields. [...] As one changed position so all the others altered their postures. Something seemed to flow between them. [...] The very best actors pump out space and suck it in, or at least that's what it feels like.  
(p. 57)

What is he talking about here? Can *you* sense 'something' flowing between people? What about when someone is approaching you along the street? What decides who gives way? Or observing colleagues in an office – could you tell who was the more senior just by watching them chat? I think I know exactly what Johnstone is talking about and that the sensations he is describing are real and near-universal but not remotely paranormal (Johnstone is not implying that they were). We are such an intensely social and hierarchical species that we need to be exquisitely responsive to others, we have to be able to 'read' peoples emotions rapidly, instinctively, and viscerally (its most powerful form, when it cannot be mistaken and feels dangerous to override, is known as *gut* feeling). This 'social sense' is so utterly pervasive in our being that its milder manifestations carry no name, and so when it is dragged up to the level of conscious awareness where it can be examined we are surprised and it feels like the discovery of something special. Hence, I am quite sure, some of the people who sincerely believe they have psychic powers.

This thought forms a nice segue into Part 2 of this article where I discuss the psychology behind one of the martial arts.

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**Martin Parkinson** is working toward becoming a science writer, his main interests being anomalistic psychology, the philosophy of science and environmental issues.



## Rhyme and Reason

Steve Donnelly

### Nothing but the Truth?

I RECENTLY LISTENED to an interesting programme on BBC Radio 4 on the topic of conjurors who reveal the secrets of their art. In *Trouble in the Magic Circle* Jeremy Vine talked to a number of magicians who have been unceremoniously ejected from the Magic Circle for talking in too great a level of detail on prime-time TV and elsewhere about the secrets behind their tricks. Predictably, Alan Shaxon, president of the Magic Circle, held the view that this breaching of the magicians' code was a mortal sin – but an interesting counter was that, if conjuring secrets were regularly revealed to the public, it would have the effect of forcing conjurors to be more inventive in developing new illusions. Another view was, of course, that revealing one way of performing a trick enhances the overall mystery when the magician then performs it by another means.

I am a very poor amateur conjuror and have to admit that on the rare occasion when I manage to perform a trick successfully and mystify my audience, I am generally very unwilling to explain how it was done. And I have to ask myself whether this can possibly be a reasonable stance for someone who generally tries to demystify apparently mysterious events rather than the opposite. This kind of issue has vaguely troubled me for some years: are there occasions when one should withhold the truth with the aim of creating an air of mystery? Am I the only sceptical parent to have had minor crises of conscience in the run-up to Christmas? When my (now adult) children were small I was always unhappy about the idea of looking them in the eye and lying to them about the existence of an unlikely burly, white-bearded figure; the speed and efficiency of whose parcel service could only be equalled by Parcelforce if they had access to faster-than-light delivery vehicles. This seemed to be a bad way to build up an honest and trusting relationship with my growing children and I was concerned that, when they finally rejected the whole business of chimney deliveries and flying quadrupeds, not only would they be intensely disappointed but they would also resent being deceived by their parents.

On the other hand (and this was ultimately the consideration that won the day), as a small child myself, I had been captivated by the whole Father Christmas (FC) myth. To be honest, when I finally ceased to believe in FC, rather than be traumatised or upset by

the discovery I was more concerned that my parents would be unhappy when they knew that I knew. So I then spend a year pretending that I still believed for the sake of my Mum and Dad. So my children were brought up as FC believers and I'm not sure that there were any lasting negative consequences. In fact, at one stage, when my eldest daughter fell under the influence of a strongly Christian primary school teacher, I remember asking her what she believed in. She replied: "Father Christmas, the Tooth Fairy, and the Baby Jesus". Appropriate bedfellows perhaps? As far as I am aware, all three beliefs were abandoned at approximately the same time a couple of years later.

I was once publicly reprimanded for my ambivalent approach to the FC myth. I was participating in a pre-Christmas edition of Esther Rantzen's 'Esther' show in which I was asked to play the FC sceptic in opposition to Professor Heinz Wolf who, as an FC believer, was explaining how flying reindeer and other aspects of the FC phenomenon were compatible with the laws of physics. The only problem for me was that, at the end of the show, for the sake of the watching children, I had agreed to betray my scepticism and pretend to have been convinced by the arguments of Heinz Wolf and others. At this stage of the (broadcast) proceedings, Barbara Smoker, President of the National Secular Society, let me know in no uncertain terms what she thought of people who chose to delude poor innocent children in this way.

So coming back to my original question: "are there occasions when one should withhold the truth with the aim of creating an air of mystery"? Barbara Smoker notwithstanding, I think I must answer "yes". In the case of both Father Christmas and the conjuring trick, no-one is really encouraged to have a permanent belief in paranormal phenomena. In the former case, the belief is always put aside with other childish things and in the latter, the audience know that trickery is involved – they just can't figure out how it was done. In both cases, I think that withholding the truth enhances the experiences of the participants and does no lasting harm. But I have to admit that this could be regarded as a rather flaky argument.

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*Trouble in the Magic Circle*, presented by Jeremy Vine, BBC Radio 4, Saturday 15 October 2005.

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



## Philosopher's Corner

Julian Baggini



THEY QUEUED FOR as long as ten days, camped on the concrete floor outside the Hallam FM Arena in Sheffield. In other cities like London, Cardiff, Birmingham and Manchester their friends did the same, so that they could get tickets to see their hero as many times as possible when he tours more than a year later.

Incredibly, the man inspiring this devotion has just collected his OAP's bus pass. And his queues are longer now than they've ever been. A few years back, you only needed to camp out a couple of nights to get yourself a top-Cliff view. But here they are, in the cold and grey of October, with tents, fold-up chairs, little cookers, the lot. They've put up Cliff Richard posters, which are sometimes from old Cliff calendars. There's one of him in his swimsuit, which isn't even that old. One just says "We ? Cliff".

My first impression is that these happy campers, who aren't exactly Young Ones, must be – how can I put this – a bit *touched*. But near the head of the queue, Dot and Wendy don't show any *other* obvious signs of mental illness. True, Dot does love *everything* Cliff has done, even the Millennium Prayer. She even claims to enjoy the queuing, saying the time just flies by. Her friend Wendy disagrees. She hates the queuing and doesn't even like all his songs. She's been a devoted Cliffette for thirty years mainly because he puts on such a fantastic show.

But with only a dozen or so tents in Camp Cliff, surely, I asked them, if you started queuing now, with two days to go, you'd still get top tickets? Yes, but not the front row, with nothing between you and Mr Harry Webb himself.

The sanity question has to be confronted directly. Don't your friends all think you're crazy? "No, because most of our friends are Cliff fans too," they reply. Touché. What about your relatives then? Can't they get you sectioned? "Some of my family think I'm a bit mad," says Dot, "But they support me."

Struggling to comprehend this later, I'm browsing Cliff's website and suddenly the screen lights up with the titles of the two songs on either side of a single he released in 1960: Please Don't Tease and Where Is My Heart? Surely this is a sign from the almighty that I must end my mockery of his worshippers and try to be more understanding.

So I think about those who pay over £100 to sit in muddy fields listening to people who others insist can't sing or play a decent tune; the millions who spend hundreds of pounds every year following their rubbish

sports teams in all weathers every week; those who collect the small gummed labels used to pay for sending letters; so-called intelligent people who every day like to fill in little boxes with words revealed by ridiculous clues that only fellow devotees can decode. And why was I at the arena at the first place? To get tickets to see grown men skate around chasing a lump of frozen rubber with big sticks.

Life is fuller and more intense if we have something to feel passionate about. And in a way, the more objectively absurd your passions are, the more fit they are for life's purpose. As Albert Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus* argued, from the outside, life is as meaningless as pushing a rock to the top of the hill only to have it roll back for you to start again. But this is the task Sisyphus has been set, and all he can do is to embrace it and enjoy it.

So too in the absurdity of our own lives, we all must find our rocks to push: activities that serve no ultimate goal but which give us something to do which we feel is worthwhile. The ones who rise to this challenge most authentically are surely those whose passions are evidently of no ultimate value. The people in denial are those who kid themselves that their hobbies put them in touch with the transcendent. Think of the opera buffs who are convinced that all that highly-skilled but over the top melodrama is some kind of higher pursuit that enables them to taste immortality. But that rock will roll back down the hill as surely as Cliff's rock and roll will.

And so, surely, it is the same with the intellectual pursuits we like to follow. From the outside, doesn't it seem a bit obsessional and irrational to be so concerned about scepticism or philosophy that we write and read about it so much of the time? Kant may seem more important than Cliff, but only from a particular point of view specific to our time and place on earth. Douglas Adams captured this perfectly in his imaginary Total Perspective Vortex, which made whoever entered it "get things in perspective". This resulted in a soul-crushing realisation of how utterly insignificant they were. In the grand cosmic scheme of things, we're no good at being noble, and it doesn't take much to see that neither the philosophical problems nor pop songs of little people amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world. Someday we'll understand that.

So I say Power To All Our Friends like Dot and Wendy in the Cliff queue. In the words of the pop messiah himself, it's not My Kinda Life, but if it suits Some People, We Say Yeah.



Julian Baggini is editor of *The Philosophers' Magazine* ([www.philosophers.co.uk](http://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](http://www.julianbaggini.com)



## ASKE News

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

I ATTENDED THE 12<sup>th</sup> European Skeptics Congress in Brussels from 13-16 October, 2005. Along with some resident Brits there was a small contingent of delegates from the UK, including Chris French and his PhD student Krissy Wilson, both of whom, like me, presented papers. Around 150 delegates were listed in a congress handout, but I believe there were others who also attended. The hosts were SKEPP, the Belgian sceptical society, to whom congratulations are in order (and notably to their chairman Tim Trachet) for a very successful congress.

At the time of writing, abstracts of the papers are still available online (<http://alpha.uhasselt.be/~gjb/esc2005/speakers.html>). I have written a report on the congress in ASKE's December 2005 Newsletter, augmenting the abstracts with additional material.

The title of the congress was 'Pseudoscience, Alternative Medicine and the Media'. Presentations on the first full day focused on the second of these themes. As reported in my previous contribution, ECSO has been alarmed by favourable developments for homeopathy in the European Union and the World Health Organisation. At the congress, Willem Betz, a family physician and Belgian sceptic, reported that "Organisations that sell or promote unscientific or anti-scientific medicine have infiltrated the decision making levels of the WHO". In particular he referred to "a dishonest....propaganda pamphlet" that presents homeopathy as a scientifically authenticated treatment.

In fact, since the ECSO Council's meeting last year, British newspapers, at least, have been carrying headlines to the effect that 'Homeopathy is just placebo', thanks to the meta-analysis by Shang et al. (2005). (Incidentally, for anyone wishing to work as a placebo therapist, I have a paper in the 2005 *Skeptical Intelligencer* on how to devise your own effective and ethical placebo treatment. The journal is available at £3.50, p&p included.)

Amongst the speakers were three journalists, including Luis Alfonso Gámez, a science journalist from Spain. He informed the audience how it is possible to present sceptical newspaper articles about the paranormal that appeal to 'millions of readers'. Mr. Gámez displayed slides of some of his own articles that have appeared in the Spanish press. Topics familiar to readers of sceptical journals and magazines were all featured, including homeopathy and Catherine Howard's ghost at Hampton Court. He insisted, "The scientific journalists can be the best allies of the sceptics". His website (in Spanish) is [www.circuloesceptico.org](http://www.circuloesceptico.org).

The congress ended with an invited presentation on telepathy by the British biologist Dr. Rupert Sheldrake, followed by a rejoinder by Dr. Jan Nienhuys, formerly a mathematician at the University of Eindhoven. Dr.

Sheldrake avers that telepathy mainly occurs between animals, including humans, that have a significant bond, and he considers that there are evolutionary advantages in this. He also mentioned his theory of 'morphic resonance'. Otherwise, he concentrated mainly on the evidence for telepathy. His approach is firstly to take note of the circumstances in which people habitually describe seemingly telepathic experiences in everyday life, and then to study these in a controlled way so that more likely explanations can be eliminated. Phenomena he has studied include the sense that one is being stared at from behind, the correct anticipation of the identity of the caller when the telephone rings (you can take part in an online experiment on this), and reports that pets appear to be aware of when their owners decide to return home (by, say, going to the door or a window).

Dr. Nienhuys, in his rejoinder, frankly declared that he does not accept a telepathic explanation for the evidence presented, because all other available evidence indicates that this is impossible; hence it is more likely that statistically significant results are due to errors in the design and execution of the experiments. The remainder of his discussion, and that of delegates from the floor, mainly concerned the theoretical implausibility of telepathy – for example, the fact that, unlike the five senses, there is no detectable mechanism in the nervous systems of animals for such a sophisticated ability as the detection and decoding of nervous activity in another animal.

Dr. Sheldrake was asked whether he has considered entering the \$1,000,000 Randi Challenge. It became clear that he has indeed had some exchanges with Randi but he was dissatisfied with the outcome of these. The local Belgian sceptical group then invited him to take part in their challenge.

Dr. Sheldrake expressed misgivings as to whether the pursuit of scientific truth should involve challenges and prizes of this sort. I think it needs to be remembered that it would not be he who would be awarded the prize, but the person or persons who demonstrate the paranormal ability. He informed us that in, for example, his experiments on predicting the identity of a telephone caller, some subjects had achieved a very high degree of accuracy. Such individuals are welcome to submit themselves to a sceptical challenge and ASKE itself offers an award to anyone who can demonstrate this ability.

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

ASKE website = <http://www.aske.org>

# Reviews



## SELECTIVE ATTENTION

### Darwin's Legacy: What evolution means today

by John Dupré

OUP, £7.99 (pbk), ISBN 0-19-928421-0

Dupré, a philosopher of biology, asks: "What does evolution tell us about ourselves and our world?". His answer is: nothing.

After several rather banal and unoriginal chapters on religion and basic evolutionary theory that Dupré patronisingly states will be 'the heaviest going for the lay reader', we learn that empiricism and Darwinian naturalism leave no room for 'superstitious mythologies' like religion. So far, so obvious. His main theory is that gene selection and evolutionary psychology are reductive and just plain wrong because, along with natural selection, they fail to explain human diversity.



His proposal is that cultural evolution happens faster than physical evolution; learning and environmental factors play significant roles in the development of the individual.

He says: it is hard to separate biological and social causes of IQ scores, that the behaviour of the sexes is culturally determined, that language makes us different from other animals because it allows the development of more complex cultures and that "no history of the giraffe's neck (...) is independent of the history of the giraffe". Then he says: "If it is part of our biology, the thought goes, we might as well just learn to live with it. No such implication is necessary, however".

These blindingly obvious statements and platitudes are offered up as a challenge to mainstream evolutionary thinking. They are in fact more indicative of Dupré's willfully narrow reading of current theory and his over-reaction to it.

While he is right to warn against convenient, over-simplified comparisons between human and animal behaviour, the comparison is not as inherently "flawed", "suspect" and useless as he claims. His big conclusion, that "development must somehow be put back into our view of evolution", ignores three things. Firstly, that to respond to learning and the environment we need evolved (genetic) capabilities; secondly, that natural selection is a response to the environment; and thirdly, that the majority of evolutionists are more than aware of the effect of both environment and learning on the individual. His targets, with almost no exceptions, do not exist.

Tessa Kendall

## FACTS AND FLAKES

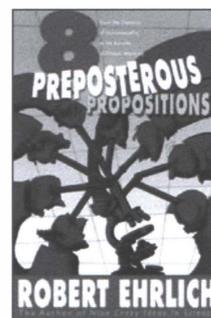
### Eight Preposterous Propositions

By Robert Ehrlich

Princeton University Press, £11.95 (pbk),

ISBN 0-691-12404-3

In his previous book, *Nine Crazy Ideas in Science*, Ehrlich discussed outlandish scientific ideas and gave them a "cuckoo" rating according to how crazy he reckoned they were. Having a high cuckoo rating didn't mean that there was no good evidence for a hypothesis, but reflected its sheer strangeness, as instanced by the disturbingly paradoxical ideas of quantum physics. In this new study, he replaces that grading system with degrees of flakiness, from zero to a maximum of four, to rate ideas that are not so much technical puzzles for scientists but issues that may concern the general public. His aim is to help the lay reader to assess the evidence and the reasoning behind the propositions in question.



These propositions are actually expressed as questions: Is homosexuality primarily innate?, Is Intelligent Design a scientific alternative to evolution?, Are people getting smarter or dumber?, Can we influence matter by thought alone?, Should you worry about global warming?, Is complex life in the universe very rare?, Can a sugar pill cure you?, and Should you worry about your cholesterol?

The chapter on that man-made plague, Intelligent Design, is suitably damning, yet, bizarrely, Ehrlich only bestows a 3-flake rating. The excuse for this is that human intervention in how organisms reproduce will increasingly outweigh natural selection, thus reflecting human design. Perhaps he has forgotten the detailed discussions of artificial selection in Darwin's work. At any rate, this is an odd lapse.

The chapter investigating the placebo effect is perhaps the most interesting part of the book. Ehrlich warns of the unblinding of double-blind tests using passive placebos (that don't mimic drug side-effects): "studies show that with passive placebos between 78 and 88 percent of patients and physicians in antidepressant trials can correctly identify whether the drug being administered is the placebo or the active drug, based on the presence or absence of side effects and other subtle cues." This unblinding would boost the apparent relative effect of the drug being tested.

Since useful and well-written books about complex issues seem to be quite rare in the universe, this one is warmly recommended.

Paul Taylor

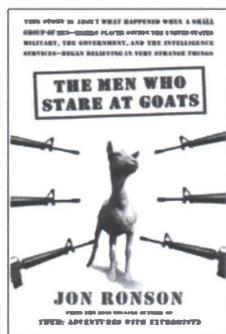
## ANIMAL MAGIC

### The Men Who Stare at Goats

by Jon Ronson

Picador, £7.99 (pbk), ISBN 0330375482

Jon Ronson brings his inimitable journalistic talent to bear on the subject of how some bizarre, even unhinged, thinking came to infect the world of US Military Intelligence over the last thirty years, up to and including the 'War on Terror'. The title refers to attempts by a group of 'Psychic Warriors', drawn from the Special Forces, to stop the hearts of tethered goats by simply staring at them. With dogged persistence and skilful tongue-in-cheek questioning, Ronson always seems able to get his interviewees to reveal more than they probably would have wished and this can make for some riveting reading.



Following an interview with Uri Geller in 2002, the trail leads to General Stubblebine, former Chief of Intelligence in the US Army, who became convinced that he could learn to pass through a solid wall by psychic means, and thence to Col. Jim Channon (Ret.). Channon, a disillusioned Vietnam veteran, became obsessed with the wilder ideas of the Californian New Age movement and then tried to sell them back to the Army with the promise that methods supposedly designed to 'heal' people could also be used to disorient and disarm them.

While Channon himself might have been motivated, at least in part, by purely humanitarian ideals when he suggested setting up a First Earth Battalion of Warrior Monks, the consequences, twenty years on, may be crazier and more horrible than anything he could have imagined. In May 2003 an American PsyOps unit imprisoned Iraqi detainees in a metal freight-container and bombarded them with music (including the *I Love You* song from the *Barney the Dinosaur* children's cartoon) for twelve hours at a time, and Ronson shows a clear link between this kind of treatment and Channon's original ideas.

As the book points out, it can be difficult for even the most agnostic and sceptical among us to accept that our military and political leaders might operate simultaneously in both normal and supernatural dimensions. Well, here is plenty of evidence that they can.

Mike Hutton

## GUIDE GUIDE

### The Science of the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

by Michael Hanlon

Palgrave Macmillan, £16.99, ISBN 1403945772

I approached this book with trepidation, not being a *Guide* fan. I heard none of the radio programmes, have read none of the books, and haven't seen the film, though I saw some of the television series. But the title is misleading: it isn't about the *Guide*, contains little about it, and you don't need to be a fan to understand it. It is an excellent discussion of many topics raised by the *Guide* by the Science Editor of the *Daily Mail*, previously noted for debunking 'alternative medicine'.

Hanlon leads us on a lively romp through aliens (where are they? - Roswell is "barely even worth a mention", but he gives the solution to Rendlesham, with apt comment on people's tendency to see what they expect to see); arguments for the existence of God; the end of the universe; the big bang; time travel; machine translation; teleportation; other worlds; and the interesting fact that if you Google 'answer to life, the universe and everything', you get 42 (I tried it and it's true).

The best parts are, first, Hanlon's withering scorn for the "drivel" (a good example of his robust style) that conscious machines are around the corner. When the film *2001: A Space Odyssey* was made in the mid-1960s, it was indeed seriously predicted that we would be talking to computers in a way almost indistinguishable from a conversation with a real person by, well, 2001. As you've probably noticed, it didn't happen, and still hasn't. (Another example of his style is the wonderful sentence: "Buses occupy a parallel universe that almost but never quite coincides with your own.")

Second, his discussion of people's misunderstanding of the laws of chance, with surveys showing that people think that vanishingly tiny risks like nuclear power and air and rail travel are more significant than truly risky activities like riding a bicycle, driving and smoking (driving to the airport is vastly more dangerous than the flight). Drive your children to school and you will protect them from assault, abduction etc. But the chances of a child dying in a motor accident are at least 100 times greater than of being murdered by a stranger, so in driving your children to school you are actually exposing them to far greater danger than if they walked.

This is an excellent book exploring fundamentally serious matters in a most entertaining way. Rather a shame that many people will ignore it because they think it's about the *Guide!*

Ray Ward





# LETTERS

## A rebuttal

Ray Ward's letter (*Skeptic* 18.3) concerning the Kennedy assassination, while interesting, raised several questionable points. Quite apart from overstating the flimsy evidence that Oswald had anything to do with the shooting of the policeman, and disregarding the overwhelming evidence of Jack Ruby's involvement with gangsters, there is the remark that 'all credible evidence indicates that only three shots were fired, all from behind'.

The number and direction of the shots is the nub of the case. The strongest, most credible category of relevant evidence is surely

the original, unforced testimony of the medical professionals who saw the body. Fifteen doctors and four nurses at Dallas, all of whom were familiar with gunshot wounds, reported a large exit wound in the right rear of President Kennedy's head, as did a dozen or so doctors and auxiliary medical personnel at the autopsy. The five doctors and one nurse who examined Kennedy before his emergency tracheotomy all reported an entrance wound, not an exit wound, in his throat. The pathologists at the autopsy reported two other entrance wounds, one low in the rear of the head very close to the large exit wound, and one in Kennedy's

back, well below the level of the throat wound.

So that's two shots from behind and two from in front, on almost unimpeachable evidence, leaving aside a minimum of one shot that hit Governor Connally and one that missed altogether and injured a spectator. Bertrand Russell, one of the earliest critics, wrote, 'how did Oswald manage to shoot the President in the front from behind?' ('16 Questions on the Assassination,' reprinted in James Fetzer, ed., *Murder in Dealey Plaza*).

Jeremy Bojczuk  
Sussex



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



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**10 Crescent View**  
**Loughton, Essex IG10 4PZ, United Kingdom**

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