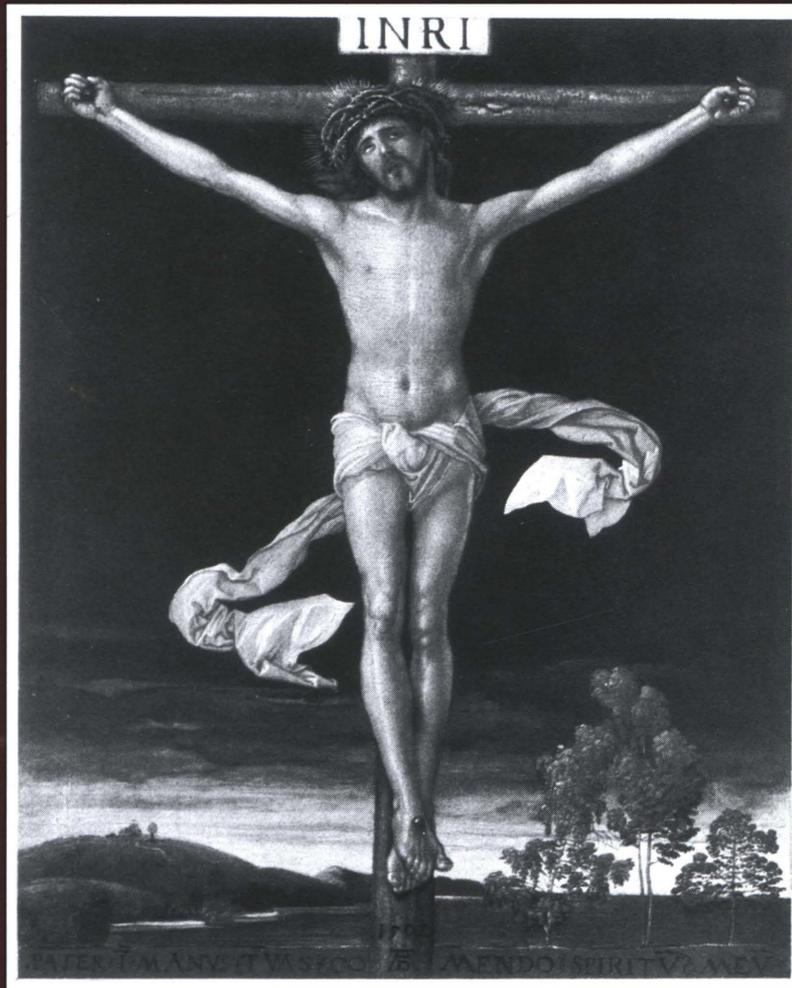


Volume 19 Number 4  
Winter 2006

# The **Skeptic**



## **Just Who Wrote the Passion of Christ by Emmerich?**

*Also in this issue:*

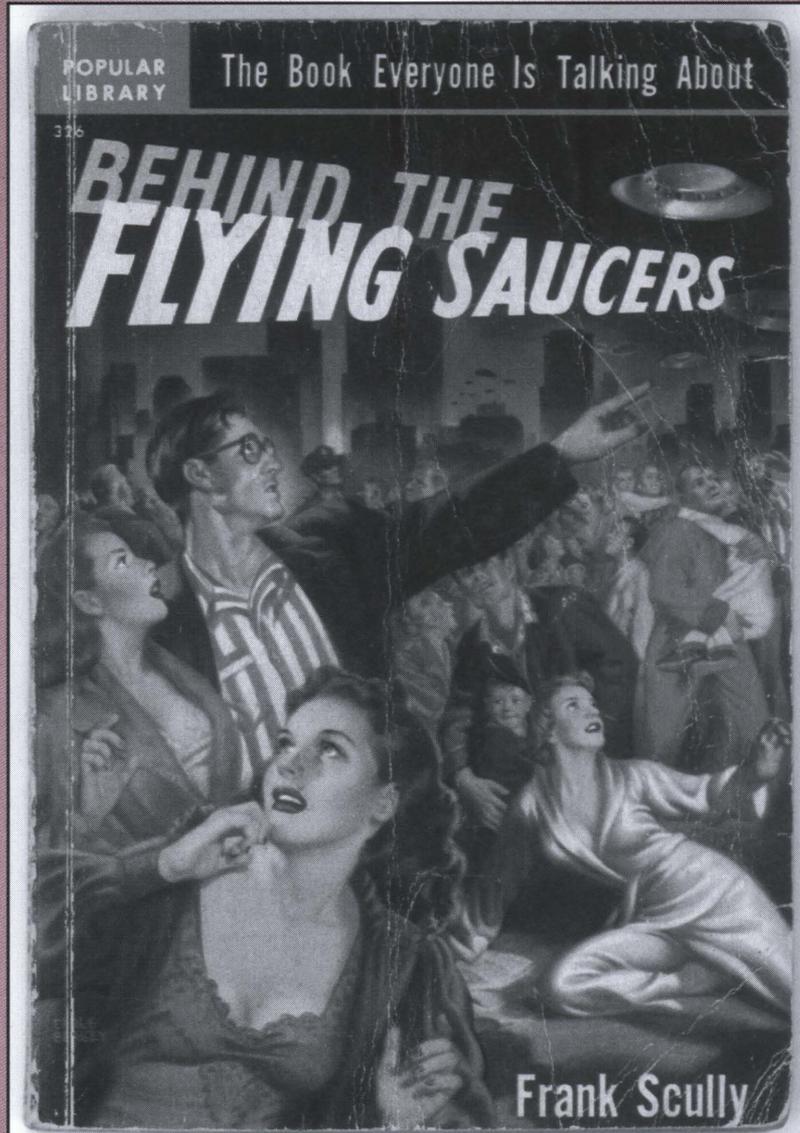
**What Colour is Four? The Perception  
of Synaesthesia in Art and Science**

**Alexander the Oracle-Monger**

**A Physiological Reason why Superman  
Behaves like a Boy scout**

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

## *Hilary Evans' Paranormal Picture Gallery*



### **TIME TO COME CLEAN**

Why doesn't the United States government reveal what it surely knows about flying saucers? Well, of course, if the American populace knew what horrors the aliens can unleash, they would surely erupt in panic, as depicted on the cover of Scully's 1950 book. But hey, that was half a century ago! Surely a post-9/11 public can be trusted to take UFOs in their stride? So how about it, Mr President: Why don't you tell us what we know you know?

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



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## Editorial

Victoria Hamilton and Chris French



**HELLO AND WELCOME** to issue 19.4 of *The Skeptic*. The film, *The Passion of Christ*, elicited much controversy upon release, and although not based entirely on Emmerich's *The Dolorous Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ*, it is claimed that Emmerich's 'writings' were a source of inspiration for the film. In *Just Who Wrote the Passion of Christ by Emmerich?*, Wolf Roder comments on how Emmerich's 'visions' were actually recorded, as the credited author was never schooled and could neither read nor write. Roder mentions a number of authors who are known to have contributed to the writing of *The Dolorous Passion*, a book supposed to be based fully on Emmerich's visions (her 'conversations with Jesus'), and discusses the vivid and colourful imagination of Clemens Brentano in relation to how closely the book was based on Emmerich's dictation. We hope you find this snippet of history interesting!

Synaesthesia is an psychological phenomenon not widely known outside of the neurosciences. Marc Tibber, in *What Colour is Four? The Perception of Synaesthesia in Art and Science*, provides some current perspectives of the condition, and considers its turbulent and confused progression to becoming recognised as a legitimate and genuine neuropsychological phenomenon with regards to the human senses. As a medical condition, Tibber dates it back to the 1600s and presents an intriguing foray into both science and art, with synaesthesia seemingly passed as a baton between the two communities over the centuries, until finally achieving a valid placement as it stands today. Most

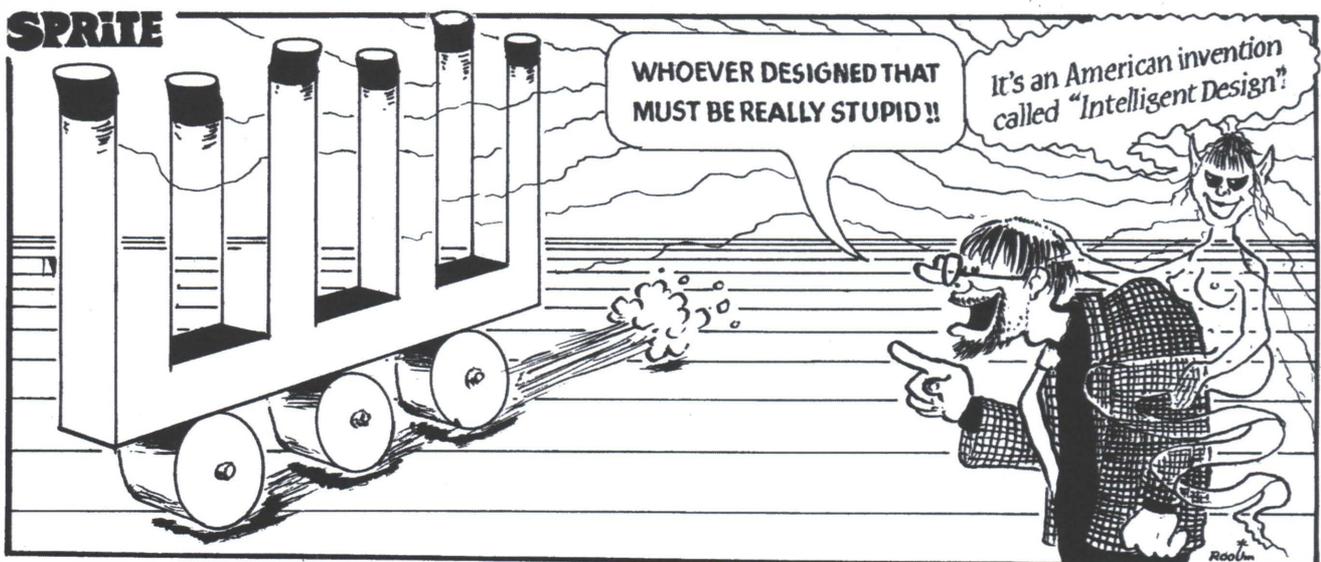
interesting to sceptics, and an important *aide memoire* to avoid dogmatism and retain open-minded investigations, is that synaesthesia was redundant as a research area in medicine largely because of the lack of adequate ways to test the condition. It's a credit to sceptical enquiry to be able to approach questionable topics with a tolerant attitude.

Another contribution by Adam Buick, *Alexander the Oracle-Monger*, delves into the rivalry between Alexander, an oracle-monger, and Lucian of Samosata, an Epicurean, and their respective supporters. In Roman times, Alexander represented a source of divinity that could provide people with the answers they so desired. Lucian's attempts at exposing his hoax were creative, but it appears the masses were hearing what they were paying for, and prepared to continue doing so despite claims of fraud by the Epicureans. Interestingly, 2000 years on, and humans are still susceptible to similarly simplistic and sometimes easily disclosed scams.

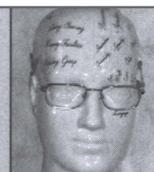
Robert Castro provides us with a short satirical article in *A Physiological Reason Why Superman Behaves like a Boy Scout*. Poking fun at Superman might be sacrilegious for some superhero fanatics, but we hope you find this gentle lampoon amusing.

Our usual letters page, book reviews, cartoons, and regular columns are also here to keep you occupied this winter. We hope you enjoy reading this issue of *The Skeptic*.

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



## Hits and Misses



### The missing G-spot

A study of Carmelite nuns conducted by Dr Mario Beauregard at the Department of Psychology at the Université de Montréal suggests that whatever causes belief in God it's not a specific physical structure in the brain. Fifteen nuns aged between 23 and 64 were asked to relive a mystical experience while undergoing a functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) scan, a technique that images brain activity by mapping changes in blood flow. Previous tests with actors had established that brain activity in a particular emotional state is the same whether the subject is actually living the emotions or entering the same emotional state voluntarily.

The upshot: Beauregard and his team found that a dozen different brain regions were activated during the mystical experience, but that there was no one "God spot" in which spirituality takes place. Writing angrily in the *Telegraph* the day after the news broke, Steve Jones, professor of genetics at University College London, demanded to know why anyone thought there should be and accused "the brain-scanning business" of losing its scientific basis. There's more to spirituality and consciousness, he argued, than simple biology.

We had expected a different sort of angry argument. Surely someone out there will postulate that the sort of person who becomes a cloistered nun has the sort of brain that responds differently and more powerfully to mystical experiences. You know, like the difference between a social drinker and an alcoholic.

### Tomb of Christ: next left

We were fascinated to learn – from a *Times* clipping sent by one of our contributors – that Christ is buried in Japan. His brother, Isukiri, is buried nearby. No, we didn't know there was a brother either. According to the farming village of Shingo, Jesus spent most of his life in Japan. According to local legend (as filtered through a Japan travel site), Jesus spent 11 years in Japan, starting when he was 21. He returned to Judea at 33, where his teachings about Japan were considered too radical. It was not Jesus but his brother Isukiri who was crucified. Christ himself escaped with his disciples (and some locks of the Virgin Mary's hair and his brother's ear,

it says here) and travelled across Siberia back to Japan. There, he made his way to Shingo, where he took the name Taro Jurai, got married, fathered three daughters, and lived to the age of 106. Our travel site describes Shingo as ultra-remote and consisting of just a grocery store and a "sprinkling" of farmhouses. If you'd rather make the somewhat easier trip to Jerusalem, we can't blame you. But hey – more trouble for the Shroud of Turin, dontcha think?



### Planetary realignment

After years of debate it's finally happened: Pluto isn't a planet any more. The reason is not that Pluto has fallen down on the job but that astronomers have agreed on a changed set of planetary criteria that Pluto just doesn't quite meet. Pluto now classifies as a "dwarf planet" or "trans-Neptunian object" and, to add insult to other insult, its former planetary status is being defended by some astrologers (others are writing it off as not terribly important in the first place). Russell Grant is, apparently, one such advocate, telling the press that he would "continue to use Pluto because he gives

me the ability to look into people's charts and see where they're coming from psychologically". Scorpios in particular are in big trouble: their sign is (was?) ruled by Pluto. Who wants to be born under the sign of UB313?

### What is science?

A certain notoriety was accorded this year's British Association for the Advancement of Science festival when the BA chose to include in the programme a panel featuring Rupert Sheldrake (presenting his phone telepathy research), Peter Fenwick (presenting his studies of deathbed experiences), and Deborah Delaney (reviewing studies in which volunteers were asked to try to arouse or calm down another person by thinking about them). The panel was organised by the Scientific and Medical Network, an organisation founded in 1973 that describes itself as "a trans-disciplinary forum for people exploring the interface of science, medicine, and spirituality".

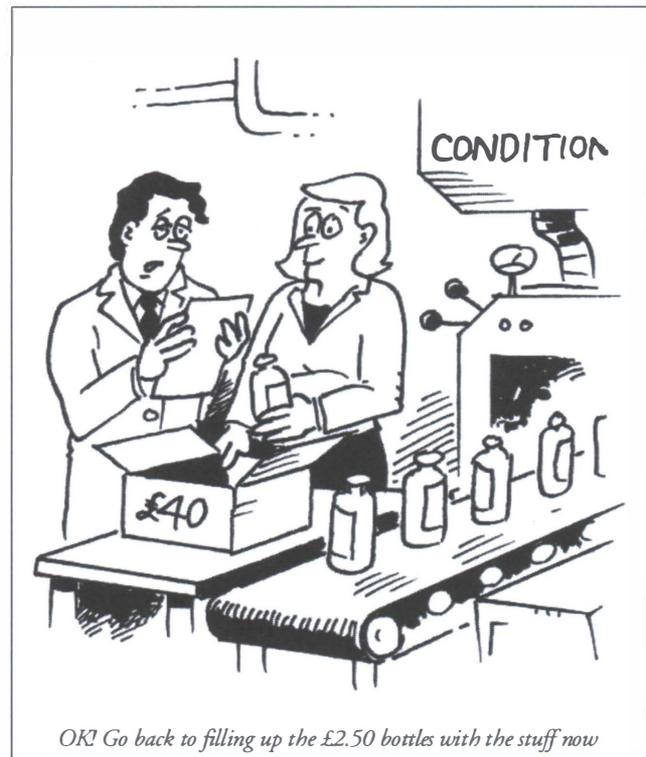
The controversy was amusing for a few reasons. First of all, if you object to the inclusion of such a panel in your science programme there's a simple solution: don't go to it and persuade other people to skip it, too. Second of all, the newspapers reporting on the incident on the science pages are, on other pages, perfectly happy to run uncritical articles featuring this type of research. Third of all... everyone wrote up the controversy over the panel, but so far as we can tell no one bothered to write up the panel's actual content. What happened there, guys?

### Shampoo

Some time back, we noted the curious case of the multi-faceted Matthew Parris, who in addition to being a *Times* columnist and former MP, likes to conduct scientific experiments on himself regarding the effect of cosmetics. At the time, Parris had conducted a controlled experiment in which he daubed the dry skin on one of his legs with, for a month each in succession, moisturiser, Vaseline, and engine oil. All had worked approximately the same. More recently, Parris was in the news for not washing his hair for ten years. At least, that's the way some of the disgusted commentators put it. In fact, what Parris does is rinse it daily in warm water while massaging his scalp, a very different kettle of leave-in conditioner. The story came out when he

challenged Andrew Marr to do the same.

The reaction to this revelation says a lot about the kind of paranoia hair care product vendors have managed to sell. One of the five women who accepted a *Daily Mail* challenge to use the Parris method for six weeks, for example, became utterly unhinged by her conviction that her hair looked horrible (in the after photo, it looked absolutely fine). She gave up makeup and wearing nice



clothes, and began going up to strangers on the street she thought were staring at her hair and telling them her hair didn't really look like that normally. The really startling bit was that these women averaged £40 a month on hair care products. They might do well to look at the Beauty Brains ([thebeautybrains.blogspot.com](http://thebeautybrains.blogspot.com)), where two industry scientists combine inside knowledge and scepticism to explain how products work and why the same ingredients mean the £40 bottle of conditioner is the same as the £2.50 bottle.

Since the hair fuss, Parris was in the news again for dismissing terrorism as nothing more than "a big, bloody nuisance". Not such a nuisance for him: other people may have to toss their shampoo at the security gate. Parris can find his anywhere he goes.

Thanks to this issue's clippings contributors: **Judith Wood, Steuart Campbell, Tom Ruffles, Ernest Jackson**, the Wizard's Star List, *Skeptic News*, **Phil McKerracher**. A special thank-you to Sid Rodrigues, who persistently and indefatigably keeps filling *The Skeptic's* blog ([ukskeptic.livejournal.com](http://ukskeptic.livejournal.com)) with news stories and pointers. *The Skeptic* would like to remind clippings contributors to use the magazine's current address, listed on p.2, rather than the old PO Box address, which has been phased out.

## Skeptic at large . . .

Wendy M Grossman



### Not the Placebo Effect

WE TALK A lot about the placebo effect. But of course you never think it really applies to you.

The nastiest thing about eczema isn't the (publicly visible) sores and rashes; it's the itching, which can be sufficient to drive you to consider pouring a kettle full of boiling water over yourself: acute pain seems preferable. Accordingly, anyone who can promise a stop to the itching – which will eventually let your skin clear up – is Mecca.

For many decades, until the early 1990s when he died at an age approaching 100, Dr Rudolf Baer, at University Hospital in New York, was able to make such a promise to a small but real percentage of eczema patients.

When I first arrived in his office, in 1976, Baer looked my skin over and then said, "First, we must stop the itching". Magic words. I had never heard them before. Before, all I'd heard was, "Stop scratching". His treatment, besides some standard things like not wearing wool next to your skin, using kinder soap substitutes and so on, involved a weak vasodilator called papaverine. It is, I now know, another of the derivatives of poppies, and it can interfere with liver function, but anyway. Baer prescribed 100mg taken four times a day. And bang. In a matter of a day or two, the itching stopped. In a few weeks, maybe a month or two, the steroids had been able to do their magic. The treatment wasn't permanent. I think I was on the stuff for nearly a couple of years, and then we slowly tapered it off. I had some more trouble-free years, and then eventually in the late 1980s I went back and we ran it again. It worked then, too.

By then, Baer had published a peer-reviewed paper on his treatment. He and his research department had found a mechanism they proposed: that papaverine somehow interfered with an enzyme that caused the trouble. And Baer had decades of clinical experience to cite that his treatment worked.

Not, however, reliably. A couple of weeks ago, I found online the results of a double-blind study

that failed to find success for papaverine in stopping itching. Conducted by a research team here in the UK, it said that papaverine was indistinguishable from placebo. I emailed the lead researcher and asked if he was likely to take it any further, and if he did, would he like to talk to a former Baer patient?

No, came the reply. A similar trial in the US (which I had also read about) had also found negative results. There is research underway into phosphodiesterase inhibitors that looks very promising (and sounds similar to the effect Baer attributed to Papaverine). But medically speaking, it sounds like papaverine is dead.

But it worked. Placebo? Spontaneous remission?

I tend to eliminate the latter idea, because two identical coincidences seem so unlikely. The former fills me with the kind of rage known to someone who has grown up with eczema and who had a range of patronizing doctors and parents suggest it's all psychological. As a sceptic, of course, I know that anger is not a sufficient reason for dismissing a reasonable explanation. And Baer was an extraordinarily kindly and courteous man willing to take endless (rather high-priced) time with his patients, and he exuded an understanding of dermatological problems that was truly exceptional. Plus, he was extremely skilled. Another of my friends went to him after years of suffering with a fungus between his toes that other doctors failed with. Baer knew exactly what to prescribe, and very quickly it was gone.

So: What's the answer? We will probably never know now, because the two failed tests combined with Baer's death mean that it's unlikely anyone except one of Baer's former students will use this treatment. If you ask me, I still don't believe it was placebo. Baer never claimed it worked for everyone; he had tried it on hundreds of patients and found, he believed, patterns that indicated whether a particular patient was a good candidate. But in any event, I got many years of relief out of seeing him. And for that I have to be grateful.



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

# What Colour is Four? The Perception of Synaesthesia in Art and Science

Marc Tibber traces the shifting position of an intriguing psychological phenomenon

“BLUE OF COURSE,” was the answer that ZS gave me without hesitation, i.e. the number four *is* blue in colour. Not in the sense that a particular number four on a particular page of a particular book has been printed in blue, but in the sense that when ZS hears, sees, or imagines the number four, a colour is simultaneously experienced. Similarly, the number one is white “...in a way that would suggest the tiniest, weeni-est speck of black paint has been stirred into a glass of milk”; two is a bright green, “...slightly bright in a glowing rather than glaring way”; and three is a grassy green, “...quite healthy, dark grass, like the shiny side of the blade, not the furry side”. What’s more is that were I to ask ZS the same series of questions ten years later, I would get a very similar pattern of answers.

ZS experiences synaesthesia: an intriguing condition in which multiple sensory modalities (e.g. sight and hearing, hearing and smell, or touch and taste) are interconnected. Thus, to a synaesthete, a simple melody may elicit sensations of a deep burgundy, a few words read from a newspaper might conjure the smell of rotten eggs, or perhaps, a discarded object seen on the pavement induce tingling sensations in the spine:

“When I taste something with an intense flavour, the feeling sweeps down my arm to my fingertips”

“I remember at age 2 my father was on a ladder painting the left side of the wall. The paint smelled blue, although he was painting it white.”

“When I listen to music, I see the shapes on an externalized area about 12 inches in front of my face and about one foot high.”

As can be seen from the examples given above (from Cytowic, 2002), the specific pattern of sensory cross-talk differs from individual to individual, reflecting the particular senses that are implicated and, most probably, the specific pattern of cross-wiring that characterises the structure of any individual synaesthete’s brain (Rich & Mattingley, 2002). In particular, ZS described the close association that words, numbers, and sounds have with colour: a rather common form of coloured-hearing / coloured-grapheme synaesthesia that was also experienced by Rimbaud (see his poem entitled ‘Vowels’). Thus, ZS’s

distaste for Bach (as I would later find out) was due to its “turgid brown colour”. Similarly, the number four was ZS’s favourite because of the ethereal blue hue with which it was associated.

Known to medicine for over three centuries, the history of synaesthesia is a fascinating one. In 1690 John Locke wrote in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*:

A studious blind man who had mightily beat his head about a visible object, and made use of the explications of his books and friends, to understand those names of light and colours, which often came his way, betrayed one day that he now understood what scarlet signified. Upon which, his friend demanded what scarlet was? The blind man answered, it was like the sound of a trumpet.

**[...] a simple melody may elicit  
sensations of a deep burgundy,  
a few words read from a newspaper  
might conjure the smell  
of rotten eggs**

Over the ensuing centuries synaesthesia drifted in and out of the scientific and medical communities’ attention. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was considerable interest in synaesthesia amongst neurologists and psychologists alike: some 74 articles had been published on the subject between 1881 and 1931. However, with the emergence of behaviorism and its subsequent domination of psychology in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, qualitative mental states were no longer deemed a suitable topic for empirical investigation. As a result, only 16 articles were published on synaesthesia between 1932 and 1974 (Baron-Cohen & Harrison, 1997). Behaviourism as a school of thought attempts to examine and describe mental states solely in terms of observable behaviour:

Psychology, as the behaviorist views it, is a purely objective, experimental branch of natural science which needs introspection as little as do the sciences of chemistry and physics. It is granted that the behaviour of animals can be investigated without appeal to consciousness. Watson (1913).

Consequently, the study of consciousness and introspective methods of investigation into the nature of personal experience were largely dropped. Indeed, for a while the scientific community grew relatively sceptical of synaesthesia as a true medical condition, many even doubting its existence beyond a more conceptual association between sounds and images, i.e. as metaphor or analogy.

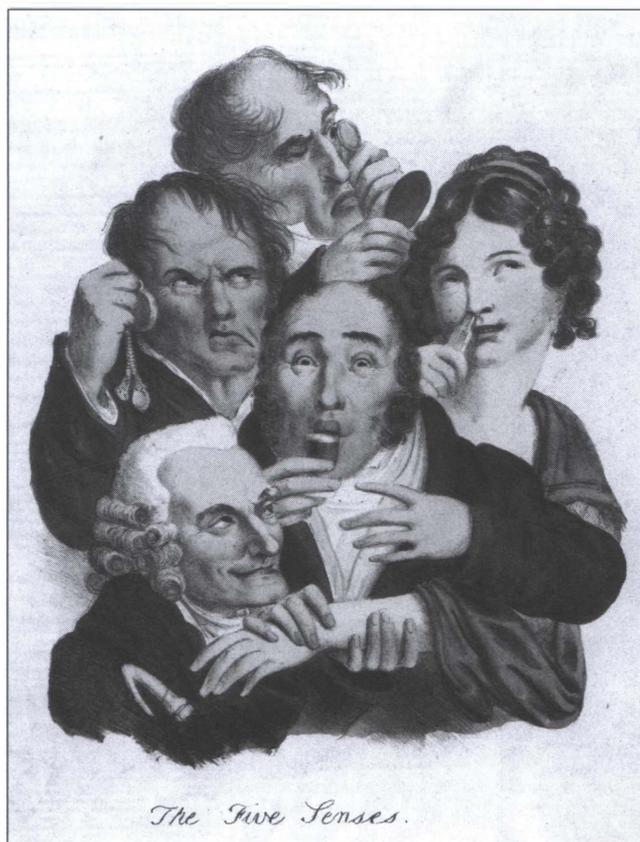
This perspective of synaesthesia merely as metaphor was reinforced by a general blurring of its definition as a result of the artistic community's fascination with the condition. Interest in synaesthesia and related phenomena of the mind can be pinned down, roughly speaking, to three main epochs of artistic development, although links connecting them can undeniably be traced.

(1) The late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century: during this period synaesthesia had become a highly fashionable topic to an art movement that idealised a fusion of the senses (see Campen, 1997, for a critical review of synaesthesia and artistic experimentation). Concerts that combined music, light (and occasionally even odour) abounded, and became typified by Vasily Kandinsky's opera *Der Gelbe Klang* ("The Yellow Sound") of 1912, which incorporated the use of colour, light, dance and sound. Kandinsky, himself a well-documented synaesthete, described his paintings using terminology borrowed from the world of music, referring to them as "compositions" and "improvisations" (Cytowic, 1995).

(2) The post-war period: in the early 20th century interest in consciousness and the individual's perspective flourished within the arts with the emergence of movements such as Dadaism and surrealism. Although the emphasis was not on synaesthesia *per se*, these groups turned away from classic reductionist views of the mind and adopted introspective methods of investigation that explored the unconscious mind and altered states of consciousness. This shift in perspective was largely a result of two major forces of this period: Sigmund Freud (and the psychoanalytical approach), and the First World War. With the publication of Freud's major works, it became apparent that the mind held a wealth of secrets that could not be explained or explored within the framework of previous psychological methods that had focused solely on externally directed observable behaviour. In parallel, many of the period felt that the horrors of the First World War were a reflection and consequence of a utilitarian way of thinking that had denied the spiritual, artistic life of man. Andre Breton, a founding member of surrealism who served during WWI in a neurological ward, wrote in his *Surrealist Manifesto* of 1924:

...a part of our mental world which we pretended not to be concerned with any longer [...] has been brought back to light [...] thanks to the discoveries of Sigmund Freud. On the basis of these discoveries a current of opinion is finally forming by means of which the human explorer will be able to carry his investigation much further, authorized as he will henceforth be not to confine himself solely to the most summary realities. (Breton, 1924).

(3) The 1960s: an explosion of interest in synaesthesia and related phenomena of the mind can be traced back to this decade, largely as a consequence of the increased use and availability of psychotropic substances, most notably LSD. Many of these chemicals have been reported to induce 'synaesthesia-like' states of sensory fusion. The resulting influence on the artwork



*In synaesthesia, multiple sensory modalities are interconnected*

of the period is undeniable, from the intricate interplay of light and music (as typified by the early performances of Pink Floyd) to the work of psychedelic pop artists like Martin Sharp (see Cream's *Disraeli Gears* album cover).

Terence McKenna, a philosopher and writer of the period, went so far as to hypothesise that a pharmacologically triggered experience of synaesthesia was the catalyst for the development of spoken language in humans. According to his 'Stoned Ape Theory', in

some age far back in man's ancestral past, the experience of synaesthesia induced by the ingestion of psilocybin ('magic mushrooms') provided a crucial link between vocalised sound and the formation of an abstract image in the mind that facilitated the emergence of language. Although this idea is appealing, no empirical evidence (to my knowledge) has been found to support the theory and, indeed, several reasonable objections have been put forward. Irrespective, an underlying neurochemical connection has been sought between the pharmacological effects of various psychotropic drugs, the associated experience of sensory fusion and true synaesthesia.

Artistic exploration of sensory fusion over the last

the field) remembers how synaesthesia was still not deemed a suitable field for empirical research:

...no one was studying synaesthesia and no one was interested in doing so [...] Synaesthesia just didn't fit their tidy worldview. "Stay away from it. It's too New Age," they advised. "It will ruin your career. (Cytowic, 2002).

Over the last few decades the scientific community's perception of synaesthesia has changed drastically and the field has rid itself of its 'new age' reputation. Consequently, research into synaesthesia has finally been absorbed into the scientific orthodoxy. This is due, at least in part, to the development of objective

methods of investigating psychological phenomena, particularly functional neuroimaging [e.g. functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) and positron emission tomography (PET)]. fMRI and PET track changes in cerebral blood flow to determine which regions of the brain are preferentially activated during a particular task or experience. The critical studies of synaesthesia have thus demonstrated that in a synaesthete, the experience of synaesthesia involves similar physiological processes and anatomical structures that underlie common sensory experience. Thus, fMRI studies of a coloured-hearing synaesthete have shown that spoken words elicit activity in areas of the brain normally associated with colour perception (Nunn et al., 2002). This pattern of activity is only found in a non-synaesthete when they are exposed to a coloured *visual* stimulus, and in both cases, it is an involuntary, automatic response. It is little wonder

therefore that to a synaesthete, the experience of synaesthesia tends to be as vivid as any other.

In the last 10-20 years research into synaesthesia has undergone an explosion of activity, with laboratories approaching the subject from a diversity of different directions and disciplines. Whilst psychologists attempt to unravel the precise nature of associations between the different implicated senses, the physiologists make headway in tracing potential pathways of communication between the associated brain regions. In parallel, geneticists have begun to determine the extent to which the condition is inherited. Indeed, a great deal more is now known about synaesthesia than ever before. However, irrespective of this significant advance in knowledge, we non-synaesthete's are still no closer to understanding what



André Breton, 1896-1966, author of the *Surrealist Manifesto*

150 or so years can thus be seen as both a catalyst and a hindrance to the study of synaesthesia as a neurological condition (though I do not question its merits on an aesthetic level). In one sense, scientific exploration of this condition has shamefully lagged behind the artistic community's initiative, which can be seen to have opened the way for empirical research in the field. However, in parallel, methods of sensory fusion in the world of art and popular culture, and its use of the term synaesthesia to describe such works, have undoubtedly blurred the definition of synaesthesia as a very real neurological condition. In parallel, the scientific community is often reluctant to address novel territory that lies outside the ambit of existing scientific orthodoxy. Thus, as late as the 1970s, Richard E. Cytowic (a leading researcher in

it actually feels like to see the colour of a vowel. To quote and further exploit an already much abused line: “a rose by any other name would smell as sweet”. We may know which areas of the brain are activated during the experience of synaesthesia, but the gulf between experience and knowledge stubbornly persists. This is where the arts step back in: to convey a dimension of reality that cannot be reduced to the level of the neurone, an aspect of reality that nonetheless dominates the vast majority of our experience.

### Postscript

Finally, I would like to suggest that the history of synaesthesia can provide a lesson for research in other fields that lie on the fringes of scientific investigation. Thus, in common with phenomena such as extra-sensory perception (ESP) or kinaesthesia, synaesthesia was

**In one sense, scientific exploration of this condition has shamefully lagged behind the artistic community's initiative, which can be seen to have opened the way for empirical research in the field**

exposed to a great deal of scepticism over the years, and perhaps consequently, research in this field has been slow in its progress. The validity of synaesthesia as an area of research is unquestionable, both in terms of its inherent interest *per se* as a neurological condition, but equally, because of what it might tell us about normal development and function in the adult brain. Likewise, if ESP were shown to exist, the value of this knowledge would be immense. However, the important point to bear in mind is that despite the scepticism initially accorded to synaesthesia, and in part directly as a result of it, synaesthesia eventually stood up to rigorous empirical investigation.

Thus, scepticism can be seen as both a necessary tool and a hindrance to the scientific researcher, indeed to the researcher within any discipline. Scepticism is a necessary tool as it enables the individual to question and examine existing paradigms and accepted systems of belief. Without scepticism we would still be living on a flat world, hemmed in

by our horizon for fear of falling off the edge of the earth. In parallel, scepticism can be a hindrance, as all too quickly it will drift into dogma. Once this occurs, ideas are rejected outright without further investigation and thought grinds to a halt. Healthy scepticism merely *questions* that which cannot be demonstrated within the context of existing knowledge. However, the key word is ‘questions’, as opposed to ‘denies’ or ‘rejects.’ Whilst a 17<sup>th</sup> century sceptic may have been justified in questioning whether sounds can trigger a sensation of colour, the evidence today is overwhelming. To paraphrase ZS’s words: “what do you mean you don’t see colour when you hear a number? So what’s actually there then? You must see something!” ZS was blind to the limitations of others’ everyday sensory experience. In the absence of further information, her model of their reality was shaped by projections of her own introspective experience.

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Visit the following website for a series of extracts relating to the ‘Stoned Ape Theory’: <http://users.lyca.eum.org/~sputnik/McKenna/Evolution/theory.html>



**Marc Tibber** is currently a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of London. His main professional interest lies in the field of human visual perception. His personal interests should not (and will not) be listed here.

# Skeptical Stats

1. Amount Professor Bruce Hood, professor of psychology at Bristol University, offers people to wear a used cardigan that has been thoroughly cleaned: **£10**
2. Number who agree to wear it when they find out it belonged to serial killer Fred West: **"few"**
3. Percentage of American atheists who are obese: **7**
4. Percentage of American Baptists who are: **27**
5. Number of practicing Scientologists according to the Scientology Web site: **millions**
6. Number of practicing Scientologists estimated by critics, based on surveys: **100,000 to 200,000**
7. Amount raised by a sponsored firewalk for St Vincent's Primary School, Hull: **£9,000**
8. Number of spiritual healers working in Britain: **15,000**
9. Amount paid in fees per week from publishers to booksellers to get new books promoted by retailers into the top ten: **£40,000**
10. Cost of getting your aura "imaged" by an aura reader at Liverpool Street Station, London: **£45**
11. Cost of the computer system she uses to read auras: **£5,000**
12. Proportion of patients surveyed at large London HIV clinics who are using complementary or alternative therapies: **almost two-thirds**
13. Percentage of those patients who were advised to stop because the remedies were compromising their HIV management: **11**
14. Cost on US Airways of checking as baggage a set of antlers : **\$80**
15. Proportion of the audience at James Randi's fourth Amazing Weekend who were women: **over a third**
16. Number of Americans injured annually by drug errors in hospitals, nursing homes, and doctors' offices: **over 1.5 million**
17. Amount New Jersey resident Jackie Haughn paid "psychic" con artist "Anne Marie" (Tammy Mitchell) over a period of months to remove a curse: **\$220,000**
18. Date on which it became legal in the UK for homoeopathic remedies to make medical claims with no supporting evidence: **September 1, 2006**
19. Number of people who drank from a heavily polluted Arabian Sea creek after claims that its water had miraculously turned sweet and could cure illness until police stopped the rush on the grounds that the water was too dangerously polluted to drink: **5,000**
20. Average number of minutes British men spend on foreplay: **17.44**
21. Average number of minutes British men last from foreplay to climax: **18.64**
22. Multiple by which the death rate among South African women aged 30 to 34 rose between 1997 and 2004, largely due to AIDS: **4.6**
23. Multiple by which the death rate among South African men aged 40 to 44 rose in those same years, ditto: **2**
24. Amount offered by filmmaker Adam Muskiewicz for proof that Elvis is alive: **\$3 million**
25. Percentage of UK population that does not want public money spent on building laboratories to carry out tests on animals for medical research: **57**
26. Number of animal experiments conducted in the UK in 2005: **2,896,000**

## Sources

1,2 BBC News; 3,4 <http://www.claudemariottini.com/blog/2006/09/obesity-religion-and-baptists.html>; 5 [http://www.scientology.org/en\\_US/news-media/index.html](http://www.scientology.org/en_US/news-media/index.html); 6 *The Observer*; 7 *Hull Daily Mail*; 8 Edzard Ernst, in *The Lady*; 9 *The Times*; 10, 11 *ThisislocalLondon.co.uk*; 12,13 *AidsMap.com*; 14 US Airways Web site; 15 *Skeptical Inquirer*; 16 Institute of Medicine via Associated Press; 17 ABC News (via [www.skepdic.com](http://www.skepdic.com)); 18 MHRA press release (via [badscience.net](http://badscience.net)); 19 *The Observer*; 20 21 *Men's Health Magazine* (via *Manchester Evening News*); 22,23 *New York Times*; 24 multiple sources; 25 *Newsnight* poll; 26 BBC

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

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

# Alexander the Oracle-Monger

Adam Buick takes us all the way back to the scandalous antics of Alexander and his snake-god, Glycon

THE STORY OF “Alexander the Oracle Monger” is one of superstition and anti-superstition in the Ancient World. Alexander was the founder, in the second century of our era (the years 100 to 200), of a cult of a snake-god, Glycon, centred on his home town of Abonutichus, a fishing village and port on the Black Sea coast of Asia minor (now the Turkish port of Inebolu). By all accounts – or rather by the only account we have of him by his contemporary, Lucian of Samosata – he was an impostor and a fraud.

Why should someone at a time when such cults were common enough, with new ones springing up from time to time, want to expose the founder of one of them? The answer is that Lucian, an orator and writer of essays and short stories who settled in Athens, was a follower of the philosophy of Epicurus, i.e. an Epicurean (with a capital E). Epicurus had lived and taught in Athens nearly five hundred years previously (he was born in 341BC and died in 270BC). His views have had a bad press throughout history, with the word “epicurean” (with a small e) having come to mean someone devoting themselves to a self-indulgent life of exquisite pleasure.

## [Epicurus] advocated rather a simple life of moderate pleasure

This wasn't what Epicurus taught or meant. He advocated rather a simple life of moderate pleasure. He did say that humans sought pleasure and wished to avoid pain, but that the way to achieve this was to avoid exaggerated hopes and fears; and that avoiding these would follow from an understanding that nature worked according to its own laws (which no intervention by any god could change) and that there was no afterlife (and so nothing to fear after death). The only surviving full-length exposition of Epicurean philosophy is a long poem in Latin by a Roman, Lucretius in the first century before our era. Entitled *De Natura Rerum* (“On the Nature of Things”), it is a classic text of materialism (that was naturally popular amongst the Enlightenment philosophers in 18<sup>th</sup> century France).

Epicureans were interested in “the nature of things” because they wanted to show that events that were generally explained at the time as being due to the intervention of gods (for instance, the movement of the Sun,

the Moon and the planets, but also thunder, earthquakes and epidemics) had a natural explanation, and that therefore there was no point in offering prayers and sacrifices to prevent or atone for them. Obviously, given the limited possibility for scientific research and verification at the time, their explanations – based on the inspired guess that everything in the universe was made up of atoms – were often wide of the mark, but that isn't the main point. What they were trying to do was to explain the universe and what happened in it in purely naturalistic terms.

Lucretius began his didactic poem by praising Epicurus for, at a time when humans were “crushed to the earth under the dead weight of superstition”, not being intimidated by the “fables of the gods” nor by “the lightning flash and the growling menace of the sky”, but for standing up to and crushing superstition “beneath his feet”. He went on to say that the “dread and darkness of the mind” could be dispelled “only by an understanding of the outward form and inner workings of nature”:

In tackling this theme, our starting-point will be this principle: Nothing can ever be created by divine power out of nothing. The reason why all mortals are so gripped by fear is that they see all sorts of things happening on the earth and in the sky with no discernable cause, and these they attribute to the will of a god. Accordingly, when we have seen that nothing can be created out of nothing, we shall then have a clearer picture of the path ahead, the problem of how things are created and occasioned without the aid of the gods. (Lucretius, *The Nature of the Universe*, trans. R.E. Latham, 1951, p. 31).

Actually, Lucretius and the other Epicureans didn't deny that the gods existed somewhere in some form but said that they played no part in the workings of nature or in the life of humans: “nature is free and uncontrolled by proud masters and runs the universe by herself without the aid of gods” (p. 92). Lucretius asked “why reverence for the gods is widespread among the nations. What has crowded their cities with altars and inaugurated those solemn rites that are in vogue today in powerful states and busy resorts? What has implanted in mortal hearts that chill of dread which even now rears new temples of the gods the wide world over and packs them on holy days with pious multitudes?” (pp. 206-7).

His answer was that it arose from visions and dreams of beings that seemed superior to humans who were then imagined to control celestial and earthly phenomena:

Poor humanity, to saddle the gods with such responsibilities and throw in a vindictive temper! What griefs they hatched then for themselves, what festering sores for us, what tears for our posterity! This is not piety, this oft-repeated show of bowing a veiled head before a graven image; this bustling to every altar; this kow-towing and prostration on the ground with palms outspread before the shrines of the gods; this deluging of altars with the blood of beasts; this heaping of vow upon vow. True piety lies rather in the power to contemplate the universe with a quiet mind. (pp. 207-8).

Lucretius explained the origin of superstition not just by people's ignorance of the workings of nature but also by a fear of what they imagined would or could happen to them after they died. For him as an Epicurean, this fear was groundless since nothing happened then: when you died that was the end. If people knew there was no afterlife, he argued, they would "find strength in some way to withstand the hocus-pocus and intimidations of the prophets" (prophets in its original sense of prophesiers of the future, the Latin word being *vates* meaning a soothsayer or seer).

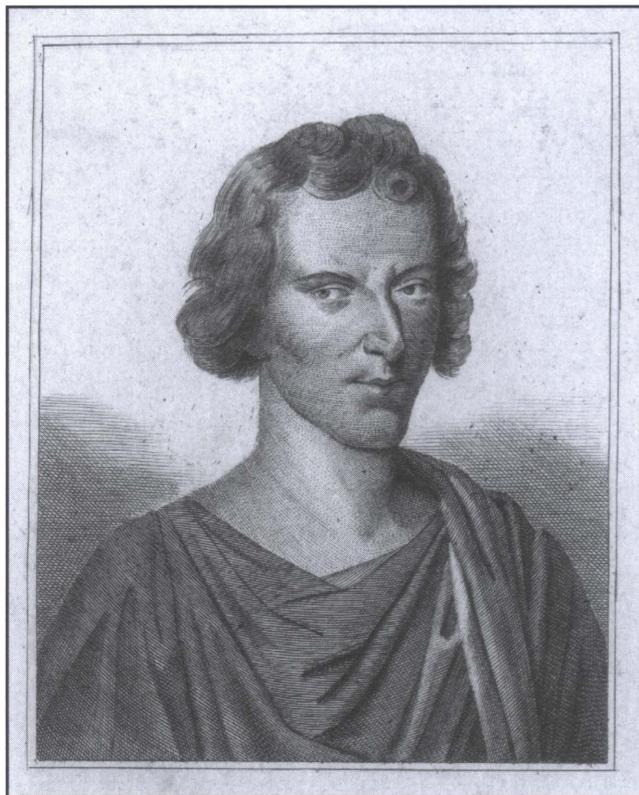
Lucian, too, in his essay against Alexander, expressed the Epicurean view that people are motivated by mistaken hopes and fears and that it is this that made them potential clients for people like Alexander who claimed to be able to predict the future. Those who practise the philosophy of Epicurus, he said, are protected "against terrors, phantoms and marvels".

The hostility between Epicureans and Oracle-mongers was mutual. Lucian records that Alexander once burned one of Epicurus's books in public and threw the ashes into the sea. He also forbade Epicureans (and Christians) from witnessing the mysteries associated with his cult, which began with those present shouting "Christians, Out", "Epicureans, Out". Lucian, incidentally, didn't think much of the Christians either, regarding them as yet another new superstitious cult. In another of his writings, *The Death of Peregrinus*, about a man who committed suicide by publicly burning himself and who had once been a Christian, Lucian says of them that "the poor wretches have convinced themselves, first and foremost, that they are going to be immortal and live for all time" and that they worshipped a "crucified sophist" who had been executed in Palestine "because he introduced this new cult into the world".

In his essay *Alexander the Oracle Monger* (as his 1905 English translators called his book – the Greek title was

*pseudomantis*, or false prophesier), he records how the cult of Glycon was a con from start to finish.

Alexander had learnt his trade of con-man as an apprentice to a seller of remedies for illnesses but who also dealt in "magic and mystic incantations" that "will smooth your course of love, confound your enemies, find you treasure, or secure you an inheritance". Later he teamed up with another conman and the two of them concocted the whole Glycon thing. They began by burying some bronze plates in the temple of Apollo in Chalcedon (now the Asian side of Istanbul) on which



According to Lucian of Samatosa (above), the founder of the cult of Glycon, Alexander, was a fraud and an imposter.

it was inscribed that Apollo's son, Asclepius (who was the Greek god of medicine and healing) would soon return and establish himself in Abonutichus (Alexander's home town). When the plates were discovered, the people of Abonutichus decided to build a temple to Asclepius.

The next part of the plan involved Alexander returning to Abonutichus (his partner had in the meantime died) and planting in the foundations of the temple in construction a goose's egg whose content had been emptied and replaced by a newly-hatched snake. The next day he rushed into the market-place shouting something about Apollo and Asclepius and got a crowd to follow him to the building site of the temple, where he duly found the egg, cracked it open to reveal the little snake and proclaimed that Asclepius had been reborn.

A few days later he called people to his house where

they found him seated with the bottom part of a large snake on his lap and a human-like snakehead protruding from underneath his arm. Lucian says that this head was made of cloth and that by means of horsehair attachments Alexander was able to make it open its mouth to reveal a forked tongue. A bit like Basil Brush. Alexander explained to those present that this was the same snake that had been found in the temple's foundations and that it had grown enormously and was in fact Apollo's son, Asclepius, who in this form was called Glycon.

Lucian says that, later on, after the temple had been completed and Alexander installed as its priest-guardian, Alexander devised a way of making Glycon talk – by means of a tube made of cranes' windpipes going through to a neighbouring room down which an accomplice spoke. In fact, Alexander and his temple eventually employed quite a number of people such as touts, oracle-writers, informants, interpreters.

**The hostility between Epicureans and Oracle-mongers was mutual. Lucian records that Alexander once burned one of Epicurus's books in public and threw the ashes into the sea**

Alexander made money by charging people for answers to written questions they deposited closed with a seal. The next day he would give them the god's answer. People were amazed by the accuracy and relevance of the answers. Lucian says that Alexander was able to do this simply by opening and reading the question and resealing it. Lucian explains two ways in which this was done. One was to use a heated needle to melt and then reseal the wax and the other was to make a mould of the seal to use to make another identical one. Such tricks were known at the time and the Celsus, for whom Lucian wrote his exposure of Alexander, was, he mentions, the author of a book describing the tricks of the Magians (magicians). Unfortunately, this text has not survived.

Lucian himself submitted a number of questions, though sealed in such a way that any tampering with the seal would be evident. As a result Alexander was only able to give meaningless or ambiguous answers (it was clear that he had not read the questions since one was "Is Alexander bald?" – he was but wore a wig – and another "When will Alexander's fraud be exposed?"). On one occasion he told his servant who delivered the

question to allow himself to be questioned by Alexander and to let slip that his master had a lung complaint. The answer was "take my goat-fat remedy" whereas the question had been "where was Homer born?" (a mystery to this day).

This leads to another way in which Alexander was able to give reasonably relevant answers: by obtaining prior information about the questioner. Lucian says that, when



*Epicurus advocated a simple life of moderate pleasure..*

Alexander's fame spread to Rome and he was consulted by messenger by the rich and powerful there, he employed a team of informants who sent back information about the lives (and loves) of those who might consult him; as a result, if he knew who was going to ask the question he could almost answer it before it was asked.

Like all oracle-givers, his answers were sometimes ambiguous, often on purpose so that the questioner would have to pay to consult someone else in the temple's employ to interpret the answer and who had to share the proceeds with Alexander.

Lucian gives some examples of ambiguous oracles. A Roman nobleman, Rutilianus, who he was to persuade to marry his daughter and who became his protector, asked Alexander about the future education of his young son by a previous marriage. Alexander told him



Alexander claimed that Asclepius (above), the Greek god of medicine and healing, had returned in the form of a snake with a human-like head

he would learn from Pythagoras and Homer. The boy died soon after. The explanation was that, as Pythagoras and Homer were dead, he had gone to study with them. On another occasion, Alexander gave an oracle to a Roman general who was about to cross the Danube to attack some barbarians; he told the general to do various things and spoke of victory. The general followed his advice but was defeated. The explanation was that the oracle had merely said there would be a victory, without specifying for which side. (This could be apocryphal since the oracle at Delphi was said to have given a similar explanation in a similar case where the wrong side won.)

Lucian and the other Epicureans of the time did not

succeed in getting anything done to stop Alexander (though they were happy to see him die of gangrene at the age of 70 instead of living, as he predicted, to the age of 150). Despite having the evidence that he was a fraud, they couldn't persuade the local authorities to take action against him. Lesser officials were afraid to antagonise Alexander's patron and protector, Rutilianus, who was their social and political superior.

The cult of Glycon at Abonutichus (renamed Ionopolis) continued for a century or so after the death of Alexander when it was eclipsed by another, hugely successful cult, that had originated in Palestine a century or so earlier. So was Epicureanism.

Adam Buick is retired in England but still a member of the Belgian Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Phenomena said to be Paranormal ("Comité Para").

# Just who wrote the Passion of Christ by Emmerich?

From tale to pen to paper to publication, **Wolf Roder** revisits the controversial *Passion of Christ*

**WHAT DOES IT** take to become a Saint in the Roman Catholic Church? John Paul II beatified the nun, Anna Katharina Emmerich, for her visions of Jesus' suffering and execution. Yet there is little doubt that 'her' books do not represent her visions, but are the literary inventions of a romantic poet.

*The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, a book first published in 1833, is credited to the visionary nun Anna Katharina Emmerich. This woman was born in September 1774 to a very poor but pious farming family in the village of Flamske in the Bishopric of Münster in western Germany. She grew up in this area; there is no record she ever went to school, nor learned to read and write. It is claimed that she never read the *Bible*, and that all her knowledge came from her visions. These visions started well before she entered the nunnery.

**Brentano himself always insisted that in composing the visionary religious works he hewed strictly to the words and visions of Emmerich as these were recorded in his notebooks**

Because of her extreme poverty, the sisters of the convent repeatedly refused to accept her into membership. A bride of Christ needed a dowry in those days. Thus she did not become a nun until 1802, i.e. at the relatively advanced age of 28, when she entered the Order of St. Augustine in the convent of Agnetenburg in the town of Dülmen in Westphalia. The stigmata of the Christ had already appeared before she entered the convent, she became known as mystic, prophet, and visionary. She was declared a 'venerable', the first step on the way to sainthood, on 24 April 2001.

There is no doubt that she had visions, and that she related these to the many visitors who flocked to her bedside. "She never considered her visions to have any

reference to her exterior Christian life, nor did she regard them as being of any historical value" (*Life*, p. 42). Late in her life she is described as tiring easily:

She had never read the Old or the New Testaments, and when she was tired of relating her visions, she would sometimes say: "Read that in the *Bible*", and then be astonished to learn that it was not there; "for" she would add, "people are constantly saying in these days that you need read nothing but the *Bible*"

Anna Katharina Emmerich died in 1824, after a long illness in the convent where she had lived. She left no written documents. So who wrote *Dolorous Passion* and several other books credited to the visions of the nun?

## Clemens Maria Brentano

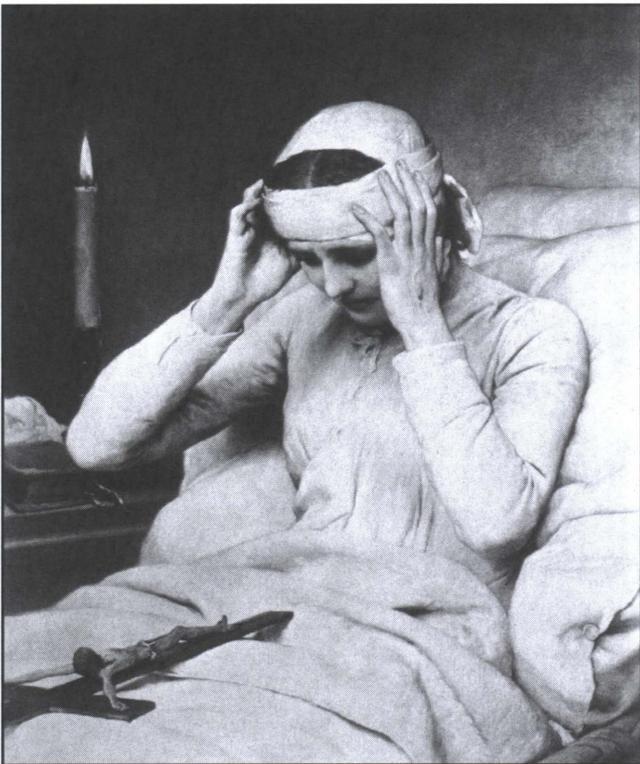
The author or the ghost writer of the *Passion*, and of several other books by Emmerich, was Clemens Brentano. In addition to the *Passion*, he wrote three volumes on the life of Jesus, each devoted to one year of his three-year ministry, and a life of the *Holy Virgin Mary*.

The novelist, poet and dramatist Brentano is a familiar name in German literary history. Born in 1778, he is part of the romantic period at the beginning of the nineteenth century, which is identified with Shelley and Keats in English, Heine and Hauff in German, and Pushkin in Russian. Together with Achim von Arnim, he edited and wrote poetry and folksongs for *The Boys Cornucopia* (1805), a collection still reprinted today. Brentano is probably best known today for his fairy tales. They are characterised by a rich and burgeoning phantasm, as is his poetry. Even his letters have been described as rich in the fantastic (*Brockhaus Encyclopaedia*). Among many other characters, he created a completely new fairy tale person, the Lorelei maiden. Heinrich Heine later wrote the poem.

Brentano lived a wandering life. He was born near Koblenz in Ehrenbreitstein, studied in Halle, Jena and Göttingen, moved to Berlin, moved to an estate in Bohemia, to Vienna, Berlin again, Frankfurt, and Munich. His first wife died in 1806, he divorced his second wife in 1811. Friendship and love with Luise Hensel led him to convert to Catholicism in 1817. Soon after, in 1819, he settled near Dülmen to become the recorder of visions of Anna Katharina Emmerich.

He stayed until her death in 1824. In all, his notes filled 24 notebooks.

After Emmerich's death, Brentano returned to his migratory ways. In addition to the works credited to the nun, he also composed novels, plays, and at least one major fairy tale. Some of the longer works remained unfinished. Brentano died in 1842 in Aschaffenburg. The bibliography lists some but by no means all of the works written by Brentano, and credited to Emmerich. There are many editions and reprints of each, as well as translations into English, French, and other languages. I tried to list the most recent English translation among the information available to me.



Anna Katharina Emmerich, visionary nun, 1774-1824.

### Visions or Fantasy?

Brentano himself always insisted that in composing the visionary religious works he hewed strictly to the words and visions of Emmerich as these were recorded in his notebooks. After Brentano passed from the scene, the Reverend Carl E. Schmöger re-edited various editions of the Brentano-Emmerich publications. He too reports to have hewed closely to the diaries of Brentano. The diaries themselves disappeared into the Vatican archives in conjunction with the beatification of the nun.

Doubts about the veracity of Brentano arose early as his friends continued to edit his unfinished materials. A recent literary assessment of Brentano's most famous fairy tale in comparison with his religious writings comments:

During the editing of Brentano's manuscripts by heirs and friends over the twenty years following his death, Luise (Hensel, Brentano's friend) had to conclude that in regard to the visions these really represented his own inventions (Benzi, 2002, p. 176)

Serious questions about the authorship of the Emmerich volumes were raised early in the twentieth century by the literary researcher Hermann Cardauns. He tried to sort out which of the books Brentano himself had edited, i.e. the *Dolorous Passion* and the *Life of Mary*, and which had been largely the work of Schmöger based on the notes of Brentano, i.e. the three volumes of the *Life of Jesus*. The *Life of Mary* was not published until 1851, that is, nine years after the death

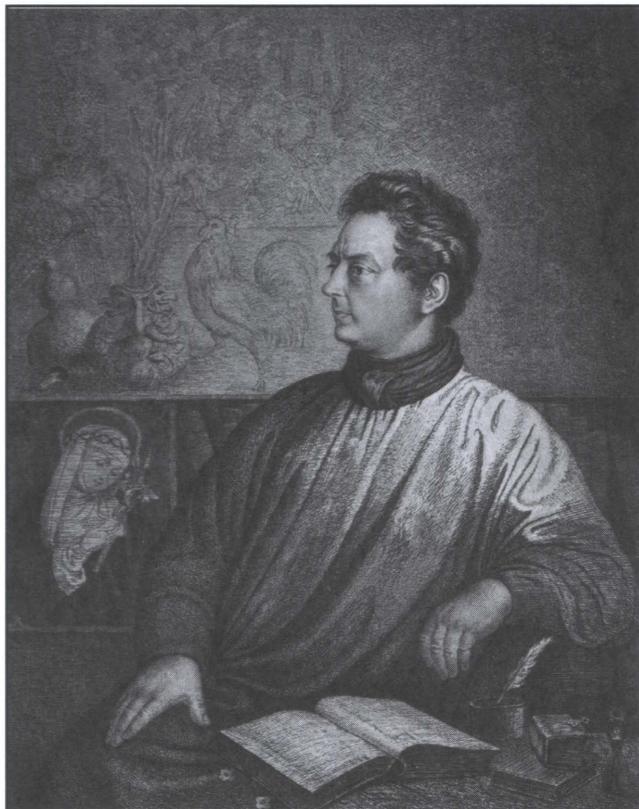
### Altogether three authors had a hand in the Passion, four, if we count the plagiarism from Martin von Cochem

of Brentano. The *Life of Jesus* volumes were published over the three year period 1858-1860, without originally mentioning the editorial hand of Schmöger (Cardauns, 1915, pp. 74-75). Cardauns concluded that Brentano had used material other than the visions of Emmerich, and that someone had copied ideas from the *Leben Christi* by Martin von Cochem. Cardauns was unwilling to blatantly accuse Brentano of plagiarism. He suggested that Emmerich herself might have known this material, and included from it, subconsciously, pictures and descriptions in her visions (Cardauns, 1915, p. 124).

The final conclusion did not come until 1923, when Winfried Hümpfer, a member of the same order as Emmerich, re-examined the believability of the Brentano question. This author for the first time since the 1950s, had access to Brentano's famous 24 notebooks. He concluded that "Brentano had deliberately woven into the diaries his own inventions and others' stories among Emmerich's visions ... in brief, it is undeniable that we have a deliberate scholarly mystification!" (Hümpfer, 1923, p. 569). He goes on to say it does not prove everything Brentano reported was mystification.

Altogether three authors had a hand in the *Passion*,

four, if we count the plagiarism from Martin von Cochem. No modern commentator doubts Emmerich had visions, and the editorial hand of the Reverend Schmöger is acknowledged. The commentators agree that many of the fantastic aspects of the *Passion* sprang



Clemens Maria Brentano, German writer of the Romantic era, 1778-1842.

from the fertile imagination of Brentano, but in what detail is not specified. Even if we had access to the famous 24 volumes of notes, we would have to question whether Brentano had been a faithful recorder of Emmerich's visions, or had already entered events from his imagination into his notes.

Clear is that Mel Gibson's movie does not represent historical biblical tales, nor does he depict the visions of a saint. Rather, the violence and imagery sprang from the fantasy of a German romantic poet.

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**Wolf Roder** is Professor of geography at the University of Cincinnati. He is author of papers and books on African subjects, including "Magic, Medicine and Metaphysics in Nigeria" in *The Skeptical Inquirer*.

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# A Physiological Reason Why Superman Behaves like a Boy Scout

Superman is often accused of seeing the world through rose-colored glasses, supporting his ‘boy-scout like’ naiveté. **Robert Castro** takes a satirical look at the physiology of Superman’s behaviour

**WHILE SUPERMAN LOOKS** human, he is from Krypton, and though a Kryptonian body raised on Krypton may very well mirror an earthborn human’s in every major aspect, it is evident that a Kryptonian body raised on Earth has instigated major physiological deviations from the home-world norm. The most striking evidence of this deviation is the superhuman strength and senses that Superman has. I contend that while his outside appearance does not indicate a marked variation from the norm, the physiology of his brain must have been modified to allow for the development of his super senses.

## Many observers of Superman’s behaviour have noticed that his socialization skills seem to lack certain nuances of normal behaviour

Many observers of Superman’s behaviour have noticed that his socialization skills seem to lack certain nuances of normal behaviour. They allude to his behavioural deficiencies as a sort of naiveté, which has led to his being referred to as ‘America’s Boy-Scout’. Since he was raised in Kansas with a relatively normal childhood free from undue trauma, his departure from the norm may very well be due to a difference in the way his brain formed. These differences most likely occurred due to some other area of the brain being over-stimulated and expanding into the realm normally reserved for other functions.

The cerebral cortex is made up of four main lobes: the frontal lobe, the parietal lobe, the temporal lobe and the occipital lobe. Each lobe controls a general area of behaviour and activity:

The temporal lobe controls an area where auditory signals are integrated into the brain – essentially the part of the brain involved in hearing.

The occipital lobe is involved in receiving and manipulating light signals from the eye’s retinas.

The parietal lobe plays important roles in integrating information from various senses, and the manipulation of objects.

The frontal lobe controls sexual behavior, judgment,

socialization and spontaneity.

Let’s investigate how the development of Superman’s superhuman powers may have impacted the various lobes. Superman has super hearing, which not only has extreme sensitivity, and range, but at least-as-good-as-human’s incremental definition. Assuming that the Kryptonian brain had evolved to have a similar amount of neuron connections per unit space, these abilities require a much larger volume within to develop. In a similar way, since Superman has supervision, his occipital lobe must have greatly expanded beyond its normal boundaries. This expansion must be greatly compounded by the development of X-ray vision and heat vision, which must have also developed in this lobe. It follows that a substantially larger parietal lobe must have been formed to integrate the substantial increase in sensory data. This also is compounded by the fact that Superman has demonstrated a superior level of object manipulation.

Since Superman’s brain case does not show evidence of deformation, it is reasonable to conclude that the volume of his brain case and his cerebral cortex is about the same as a normal man his age. It stands to reason that the size of the frontal lobe of his cerebral cortex has been correspondingly diminished by the same amount that the other lobes have expanded. The frontal lobe probably did not exert the same pressure to expand as did the other, more rapidly developing lobes of the brain. Since the frontal lobe controls such behaviors as sexual behaviour, judgment, socialization and spontaneity, Superman’s failure to meet normal levels of development in these areas must be due to the frontal lobes’ diminished size. Superman’s behavior may in fact be viewed as a type of autism, where he excels in some areas, but rates below normal in others.

It is interesting to note that had Superman emigrated from Krypton after the age of 15, when his brain was fully formed, these deviations would most likely have not developed. So while he would still have the superhuman strength endowed from living under a yellow sun, he would only have a normal range of sensory input/output. This is because the brain is fully formed by age 15, as are most of the neuron pathways therein, which makes major modifications of brain functions unlikely after that age.

**Robert Castro** is a Professor of Electrical Engineering at the University of Southern California. He has written numerous technical articles related to engineering, but this is his first venture into the realm of satire.



# Rhyme and Reason

Steve Donnelly



## Steorn in a teacup?

THE QUEST FOR new cheap, non-polluting sources of energy is an understandable one in these days of rising oil and gas prices and global warming. And what could be better than a completely free, unlimited supply of energy as promised recently by the Dublin-based company Steorn Ltd (<http://www.steorn.net>)? On their website they claim: “We have developed a technology that produces free, clean and constant energy. This means never having to recharge your phone, never having to refuel your car. A world with an infinite supply of clean energy for all. Our technology has been independently validated by engineers and scientists – always off the record, always proven to work”. In August, the company took out an advertisement in the *Economist* in which they issued a challenge to the scientific community to test their “free-energy” technology and to publish the findings. From the scientists who apply, they will select twelve to participate in “rigorous testing exercises” to prove that their system – which is based in some way on magnetic fields – will do as they claim and produce limitless supplies of non-polluting energy. I have signed up to receive the results and will let you know what I learn in due course but (if I had any) would I now be selling my shares in companies involved in conventional power generation? I don’t think so.

In fact, there *is* an energy generation system under development that uses intense magnetic fields, and that is the fusion reactor. There is now a major international project, known as ITER (<http://www.iter.org>) based in Cadarache in the south of France which will explore further the idea of nuclear fusion, the reaction that powers the sun, and develop the technology to beyond “break-even” – the point at which it generates more energy than it consumes. The magnetic fields in this case are used to compress and confine plasma (a mixture of electrons and ions of hydrogen isotopes) in a giant doughnut-shaped vessel known as a tokamak. The plasma is then heated to immense temperatures in order to replicate the conditions in the sun, under which the atoms of hydrogen fuse together to make helium, giving rise to excess energy in the process. Unfortunately, this is a very complex and difficult technology to master and the best (and some would say optimistic) estimates of when fusion may begin to contribute to the world’s energy needs place the date 25 years in the future.

How much more appealing then is some low-technology process that can be set up on a bench-top or in a garage and satisfy all our energy needs, cleanly and forever. One such possibility, already touched upon in

this column in *The Skeptic*, 18(2), was cold-fusion. To give it its due, this did not necessarily violate any major physical laws and some scientists did begin to develop tentative theories as to how it could work; however, it now looks as though there was actually no effect to explain. So what about the possibility that (when it is unveiled) the technology from Steorn Ltd will do as they claim? Well, it may seem closed-minded to be intensely sceptical of this technology before knowing anything of the details but I’ll be happy to wager a decent bottle of claret with any interested reader that you will not be powering your mobile phone, car or home with Steorn technology any time in the next decade.

Since the invention of the electric generator and electric motor (both based on magnetic fields), many inventors have been captivated by the idea of coupling the two together to make a perpetual motion machine and generating excess energy. For instance, you simply take a static bicycle and hook up its back wheel to an electrical generator, the output of which is connected to an electrical motor that then drives the bicycle wheel. A quick pedal, hop off and – lo and behold – the system keeps running, generating excess electrical power into the bargain. Purported free-energy machines are often just a somewhat more complex variant of this idea; with the “Newman energy machine” (<http://www.josephnewman.com>) probably being the best-known device of this type in recent times, prior to the claims of Steorn Ltd.

Unfortunately, the laws of thermodynamics – since their formulation by scientists such as Sadi Carnot, Rudolf Clausius and William Thomson in the 1800s (and with a modification of energy conservation, to include mass, by Einstein with his famous  $E=mc^2$ ) – have proved undefeatable in all circumstances until now and I predict will continue to do so. The first and second laws are sometimes paraphrased as: “you can’t win” and “you can’t even break even” respectively. Essentially, with the static bicycle system described above, both the laws of thermodynamics and common sense tell us that – however efficient the components may be – some energy will always be lost from the system due, for instance, to friction in the bearings. The energy being generated by the rotating wheel will thus always be insufficient to keep the wheel rotating (breaking-even), let alone providing a surplus to be used for other purposes (winning).

So rather than investing in Steorn when their shares become available, I’d suggest buying a warm jumper and a bicycle (devoid of motor and generators).

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



## Philosopher's Corner

Julian Baggini

I'M IN BUENOS AIRES and I'm uncomfortable in virtually every way. Most pressingly, my body just doesn't know what's happening to it. Either I haven't done enough of it yet or intercontinental air travel just doesn't agree with me. Twenty-four hours travelling, most of it in a plane, breathing recycled air and taking a series of catnaps in cramped seating has left my neck and shoulders feeling like they've been pummelled by a prize-fighter, while the rest of my body can't seem to decide if what it is feeling amounts to an illness or not. I feel I should try to get a massage, but as a single male on holiday, I'm not sure I can ask anyone where to get one without risking being sent to the wrong kind of parlour.

It may just be that all my other discomfort is just an extension of this corporeal unease: a soma psychotic condition, if you will. I'd rather think, however, that we can add to the many useful, but woefully inadequate, definitions of philosophy, "the seeking of discomfort". And so it is only natural that here, on a purported holiday, I'm not yet able to really relax.

It was so different this time last year when I took my holiday in the resort of Cala D'or in Mallorca. I was uncomfortable there too, but only because everyone else so obviously wasn't. It was research for a book I was working on, which was an attempt to understand the English mind from a philosophical perspective (*Welcome to Everytown*, out Spring 2007). What struck me so much was how everything about the resort was designed to make the Brits feel as at home as possible. What was the point of that, I asked, ignorantly? It should have been obvious: for most people holidays are a time to relax, they're not anthropological field trips. Keeping all hint of the foreign either away, or carefully tamed in special excursions, was all part of making the whole holiday experience as comfortable as possible. Feeling as I do right now, that approach to holiday-making seems more appealing than ever. For it's not just my body that's feeling out of sorts, my brain does too.

Five years ago, when I went on my only other extra-European holiday, I went to East Africa where the obvious contrast between my relative wealth and the basic level of existence scrambled out by those around me would make anyone with half a conscience feel just a little discomforted. But in Argentina, the more complicated situation only makes things more morally ambiguous, and hence for someone of a philosophical disposition, in a strange way even less comfortable.

Argentina is in the bottom fifth of countries for economic inequality, measured by the Gini coefficient.

Around a third of the country lives in poverty. Walking around Buenos Aires, with its plush new dockside development at Puerto Madero and its upmarket malls, it's easy to believe you're living in a rich, western European nation. But the signs that you're not are all too obvious for those who care to look. Coming into the city from the airport you pass what look like shanty towns, posh only by the standards of Nairobi. On the streets you see people rummaging through rubbish, not as part of some bourgeois, indulgent green activism, but because they salvage whatever they can to sell on. In San Telmo, the run-down bohemian charm is tarnished somewhat by the knowledge that for many the run-down is not charming, but home. A small boy seems to pop up everywhere I go, trying to sell pens.

All this, plus a recent crime wave in the city, fosters feelings of paranoia. The hidden money belt is worn, cameras are not openly displayed, anyone approaching you on the street is ignored rudely, lest they be one of the many scammers and tricksters. And this makes you feel some kind of guilt, as though they are right to hold no respect for your wealth and peace of mind, for you are one of the winners in life's lottery and they, through no fault of their own, are down, but not yet out.

Knowledge of the history of the country doesn't help alleviate the guilt. Argentina has the smallest indigenous population of any South American country – a mere 1% can trace their ancestors back beyond the European colonisation. That's because we did such a good job of either killing them or sending them into exile.

Of course, you can say that modern white Europeans should feel no shame for the crimes of their ancestors, but it's not quite as simple as that. Imagine you inherited a fortune and later discovered it has been made by bounty hunters killing innocent indigenous peoples on behalf of a mining company. You might well decide that, on reflection, you should keep all the money, but you would be some kind of moral monster if the knowledge of where your wealth came from didn't at least give you pause for thought.

That's what the discomfort of the philosophic life is often like: it doesn't necessarily make you change where you're sitting but it does at least make you wriggle in your chair. On balance, I still think western tourism to poorer countries is a good thing, for example. But if all this discomfort changes nothing, what's the point? Because you can be sure that the greatest errors we make are precisely those which occur when we are definitely in the wrong, but are just too cosy with how things are to notice.

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



ASKE'S TITLE WAS the subject of a lively discussion recently on our email network. Should we change our name? The concern, which I recall is shared by other sceptical organisations, is that whenever someone is introduced as a 'sceptic' it is immediately assumed that he or she does not accept, or has doubts about, whatever ideas are being discussed. Often this is indeed the case. "We have in the studio Susan Jones, who supports this idea, and John Smith, who is a sceptic". After such an announcement it would come as a surprise to the audience if John Smith then spoke in favour of the idea.

Of course in our discussion we had in mind the use of the term 'sceptic' as a more general description of a person's attitudes and beliefs and not simply one used with reference to a particular idea or claim. This use of 'sceptic' has a pejorative edge - someone with a closed mind on any new or exciting idea.

Compare this with the term 'critic'. "In the studio we have the critic Steven Williams who attended the performance". Common usage of the term 'critic' tends to promote the expectation that someone thus described will be critical in the sense of disapproving. Nevertheless we would not be too surprised if Steven Williams proceeded to give a glowing account of what was being performed: "The critics raved at the performance" is a not uncommon eulogy in the world of the performing arts.

On the other hand, the label 'sceptic' does not seem to have this flexibility. "In the studio we have the sceptic Steven Williams who attended the demonstration". As with John Smith above, we invariably expect that, whatever the merits of the demonstration of an unusual claim, the 'sceptic' is going to remain unconvinced, and doubt and disbelief will be the message that he or she puts across.

Alternative names suggested during our discussion (some of which were not meant too seriously) included 'positivist', 'claim analysts', 'Bright' (which is already in use by a particular group), and 'not as dim as you'. 'Rationalist' and its variants were a popular choice. 'Natural rationalists' was suggested (while 'rational naturists' was rejected on the grounds of its possible association with nudity). One member felt that 'debunking' carries the essence of what we do, but jibbed at the idea of changing our name to 'The Association for Debunking'. References to 'critical thinking' also entered the discussion.

Nobody suggested any reference to 'science', 'scien-

tific' and so on. I think this is as it should be. We support and promote the scientific way of thinking and the evidence of scientific enquiry, but that remit alone is well covered by large and worthy organisations such as the British Association for the Advancement of Science. Scientists investigate whatever there is in the world within the domain of their discipline (physics, biology, psychology, etc.). Their principle motivation and aim is, in simple terms, to discover and explain. The domain of scepticism is beliefs and practices that run counter to what rational thought and scientific evidence indicate. Of course, one branch of scepticism is to explain why people adhere to these, but we also are motivated to correct them or at least to stem their influence.

And so, the domain of scepticism is determined by whatever irrational or doubtful claims and activities happen to be the most influential. Thus it is pretty rich and varied. Take just five topics: Creationism, homeopathy, dowsing, 'alien abduction', and psychic mediums. 'The Compleat Sceptic', to do justice to these controversies, has not only to be acquainted with major scientific theories and discoveries such as evolution, relativity and 'the Big Bang', but also such phenomena as the placebo effect, Avogadro's number, ideomotor suggestion, sleep paralysis, cold reading and the Barnum effect. Perhaps it is correct to say that sceptics *rely* on science as much as they promote it.

To return to the debate on labels, here's my tuppenceworth. "There may be something to be said for the terms 'realism' and 'realist'. What appears to motivate sceptics has a lot to do with the principle that (a) there is such a thing as objective reality but (b) it is not easy to establish reliable knowledge and truths about that reality. The people we frequently find ourselves in conflict with are those who, often for reasons of self-interest or wish-fulfilment, are content with ideas and explanations that do not require the difficult and painstaking search for truth that is characteristic of good scholarship and science."

But in the end, whatever we call ourselves is defined by what we do and if what we do makes any impact on public awareness (and I think the activities of prominent sceptics and sceptical organisations have done so) then people's understanding of the word 'sceptic' and its derivatives can change and more fairly represent our message.

**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

## SABOTAGE

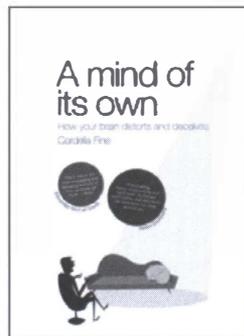
### A Mind of Its Own: How Your Brain Distorts and Deceives

by Cordelia Fine

Icon Books, £9.99, ISBN 1840466782

For those of us who like to put consciousness to the fore, and who take pride in rationality over mere emotion or prejudice, this slim little volume provides something of a challenge. There's no denying that it's entertaining, and it's written in an engaging and none too serious style, but it packs a punch all the same.

In six short chapters Cordelia Fine picks apart at the mighty edifice of the rational brain and, quoting extensively from the research literature, reveals a vain, egotistical, devious, untruthful and bigoted organ. The picture of the mind that emerges has more in common with an unscrupulous populist politician than a fair-minded seeker of truth. I'd find this incredibly depressing, but of course having read the book my mind is apt to put aside what it has just learned and is happier to offer me the comforting illusions of reason. Oh well, it's not my fault, for according to the research the mind plays this sort of trick more often than not.



Fine writes with a light touch: there's a gentle humour and a peppering of homely anecdotes throughout the book. But the research she draws on is serious enough, and for those who need convincing there are plenty of notes and references to follow up.

By the end of the book one could be forgiven for thinking that we are mere dupes of the brain – that consciousness itself is an illusion and that what we think of as reasoning is usually a post-hoc rationalisation of some far deeper process. However, if that is the case then how is it that we can read a book cover to cover? How is that anyone could write a book in the first place? Intention and concentration together are evidence of some process that we can label consciousness. Even if we're still not sure of what's going on deep under the surface, there's still something *there*.

So, despite the lying, the scheming, the clinging-on to prejudices and the other vices that our brains are prone to – and which this book does much to shed light on – we shouldn't resign ourselves to the idea that conscious reason itself is a complete illusion.

Pan Pantziarka

## MAGPIES AND MASCOTS

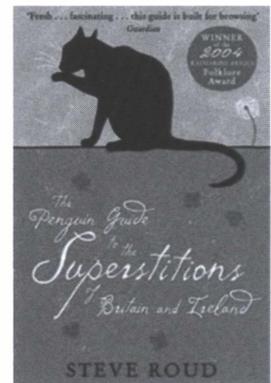
### The Penguin Guide to the Superstitions of Britain and Ireland

by Steve Roud

Penguin, £10.99, ISBN 0140515127

Why is it that, whenever I see a single magpie, I find myself murmuring, "Good morning, Mr. Magpie. I hope you and your family are quite well"? According to this entertaining and informative book, showing respect to this bird by raising your hat or speaking politely is a traditional (well, for the last hundred years or so, anyway) means of warding off misfortune — which seems to be the purpose of the majority of superstitions.

Steve Roud has been researching British folklore for thirty years and so as well as providing a comprehensive list of superstitions, his notes attempt to provide a genuine historical and geographical context for them all, including an earliest known occurrence. His working definition of "superstition" includes a belief in luck, omens, and occult powers, and that coincidences have a deeper meaning than random accident.



Given this, it is easy to see why superstition thrives in an atmosphere of fear, uncertainty and perceived lack of control over one's fate. The carrying of lucky charms and mascots increased dramatically during the First World War, suggesting that such beliefs are not fixed references to some ancient wisdom but can be adopted and then discarded again according to circumstances. The author explicitly rejects the "ancient origins" approach (many of them are probably pure invention anyway) and points out the many common motifs that superstitions share with each other and with folk tales.

Are we as superstitious as we used to be? From the evidence Roud has gathered, along with that from other sources, the answer seems to be "No". In a survey to find the top ten superstitions in 1998, "Unlucky to walk under a ladder" was mentioned most often — a bit feeble compared to, say, "If two men fight aboard a ship, it will sink within 24 hours."

The entries are arranged alphabetically, cross-referenced, and there is an extensive bibliography, so this is a useful reference book as well as an enjoyable read.

Mike Hutton

## TALK OF THE DEVIL

### Evil Incarnate: Rumors of Demonic Conspiracy & Satanic Abuse in History

by David Frankfurter

Princeton University Press, \$29.95, ISBN 0-691-11350-5

In the 1980s, American TV ‘revealed’ a nationwide network of Satanists committing atrocities, particularly against children in day-care. The panic generated by media coverage and professionals who should have known better soon spread to the UK.

Frankfurter’s book is a scholarly, readable and sometimes disturbing history of Satanic Ritual Abuse (SRA) allegations, that looks at *why* they happen in insecure times and shows that they are not safely confined to history or to ‘less enlightened’ parts of the world.

From earliest times, religious institutions extended their power by presenting evil as a real and potent threat that only they could combat. From an attempt to control a ‘chaotic world of misfortunes’, demonology soon became a ‘weapon of institutions’.

Centralization of Church power, professionalizing of witch-hunts and the spread of printing led to widespread witch-mania in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries and to a new phenomenon: Satanic witchcraft, with its child sacrifice, transgressive rituals, conspiracy theories – and a dose of voyeuristic eroticism.

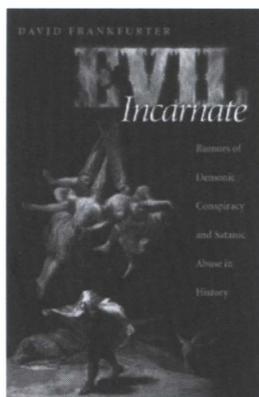
Heretics, Jews and native peoples were demonized as dangerous sub-human Others, along with established community members – the threat from within.

In the last century, ideas of demonic possession revived by Deliverance Ministries merged with concerns about child abuse to create the SRA panic. Externalizing the cause as something demonic was preferable to accepting child abuse as something wholly human. It also obscured the real issues of familial child abuse and extreme violence done to children during Christian exorcisms.

There has always been a strong theatrical element to the self-appointed ‘experts’, the perpetrators and the victims. They give the audience what they want, either willingly (exorcists and witch-hunters) or under coercion – tortured ‘witches’ or children providing over-eager therapists, social workers and congregations with appropriately lurid details, often in return for status or special attention.

Frankfurter concludes that no evidence, forensic or archeological, exists for SRA and that “historically verifiable atrocities take place not in the ceremonies of some evil realm but rather in the course of *purging* evil and its alleged devotees from the world”.

Tessa Kendall



## HISTORY LESSONS

### Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive

by Jared Diamond

Penguin, £9.99, ISBN 0-140-27951-2

“The monumental ruins left behind by [collapsed] societies hold a romantic fascination for all of us. We marvel at them when as children we first learn of them through pictures... We feel drawn to their often spectacular and haunting beauty, and also to the mysteries that they pose.”

We have all met people who are, one might say, over-fascinated by what we can’t know about Stonehenge, Easter Island, Chichen Itza or Brighton.

Beyond counting, even now, are the legions of followers of von Daniken or Tony Hancock’s rather less amusing cousin, Graham.

Here is one way of fighting back. Cajole, bully or trick them into reading this superb book by a writer equally at home in

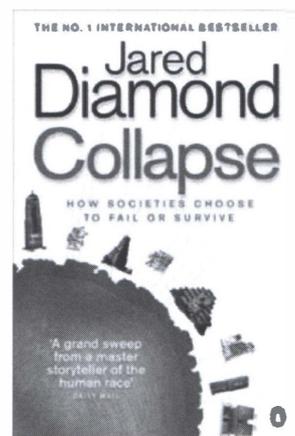
history and evolutionary biology. Let these bores and fantasists, perhaps for the first time, gain a shattering insight (or dim inkling) as to what intelligent reasoning about the past actually looks like.

Easter Islanders managed the twin feats of erecting 12-ton stone statues with ropes, “canoe ladders” and ramps, and then obliterating all species of trees on the island. This deforestation led to starvation and cannibalism. Extraterrestrial masons do not seem to have played a huge part in all this.

Diamond discusses the Mayans and the Vikings, Montana and Rwanda, among other communities and ecologies. In the horrendous case of Rwanda, he notes that, “any ‘explanation’ of why a genocide happened can be misconstrued as ‘excusing’ it”, and insists that, “it is important that we understand the origins of the Rwandan genocide – not so that we can exonerate the killers, but so that we can use that knowledge to decrease the risk of such things happening again.” One of the contributing factors was the Malthusian condition of population pressure exhausting resources, but Diamond is careful to avoid ecological determinism, applying his nuanced comparative method throughout.

The last hundred pages of the book are devoted to practical lessons, asking why some societies make disastrous decisions, outlining our most serious problems, and offering reasons for hope.

Paul Taylor





# LETTERS

## Gardner on Flew

Antony Flew's interesting letter in your Summer 2006 issue (*The Skeptic*, 19.2) has me puzzled. He tells us that Darwin died a believing Christian. Where on Earth did he get that claim? Darwin was indeed a devout Christian in his youth, but he slowly lost his faith and until his death remained an avowed agnostic.

Flew says he believes in "the God of Deism," a God unconcerned with "the beliefs or conduct of human beings." In fact, the leading deists held a variety of different opinions about God. Many believed in a creator capable of providing an afterlife. Thomas Paine, a quintessential deist and author of one of the strongest books ever written attacking Christianity and the *Bible*, was a firm believer in both a personal God and immortality. Flew's newly discovered deity more closely resembles the God of Spinoza – a deity Einstein liked to call "The Old One."

I would be honoured if Flew would respond.

**Martin Gardner**  
Norman, OK

## Plan B for Atheists

Anthony Flew states that Darwin died a believing Christian. This is surely not correct. Darwin wrote an autobiography, James Moore and others have written biographies, his family was present at his deathbed, and there has never been any record of him becoming a believer. In the later part of his life he was always unambiguous in his opposition to Christianity.

Darwin said, "I can hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for if so, the plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not believe, and this would include my father, brother, and almost all my best friends, will be everlastingly punished. And this is a damnable doctrine".

Rumoured deathbed conversions of famous people abound. It happened to emperor Constantine, Einstein, Pascal, and Carl Sagan. An appeal to authority is a valid logical argument to support a point of view, but creation scientists are desperate indeed if they need to claim that, only when faced with death, rational people resort to a belief in god. Likewise, we are told that there are no atheists in foxholes. All rather unlikely.

Taking note of Pascal's wager, I plan a deathbed conversion myself. Well, just in case. You never can be a hundred percent certain.

**John Woodhead**  
Norwich

*Editors' Note: Martin Gardner, John Woodhead and other readers can look forward to an article by Donald Room in the next issue of The Skeptic describing his attempt to uncover the truth regarding Professor Flew's surprising claim.*

## Another rebuttal for Bojczuk

It is hard to reply to Jeremy Bojczuk (*Skeptic*, 19.1) without going into great detail, but I'll try. The evidence linking Oswald with the shooting of Tippett is very strong. There was eyewitness and physical evidence, and cartridges

found at the scene and bullets removed from Tippett's body matched Oswald's gun.

I note that Bojczuk's assertion that Ruby was a Chicago gangster representing the Mob in Dallas has been downgraded to mere "involvement with gangsters". Of course he was involved with gangsters: his business and lifestyle made that almost inevitable, and the Warren report describes such low-grade involvement. But the evidence is overwhelming that he was a rather dim, sad, pushy, unstable type desperate for attention, respectability and "class". Organised crime would never have entrusted such a person with anything important, and I reiterate the point I made originally that vast amounts of surveillance of organised crime figures contain no mention of him.

Only five doctors saw the neck wound before it was obliterated by the tracheotomy. Four said it could have been an entrance or exit wound, but they were then unaware of where the bullets came from and of the back wound, which was indubitably an entrance wound and raised the possibility that the throat wound was one of exit. The one with the most experience of gunshot wounds, however, said that he thought from the start that the throat wound was an exit wound. Exit wounds are not always large and gaping; if the bullet isn't tumbling and only passes through soft tissue they can be quite small and resemble entrance wounds. Also, Kennedy's collar and tie pushed the neck muscles together at that very point, also contributing to a small wound.

The autopsy was done by hospital pathologists rather than forensic pathologists, the latter of whom are concerned not just with what caused the death but the circumstances surrounding it. There was little appreciation of the difference between the usual hospital autopsy, which Kennedy received, and a forensic one. Most people thought a pathologist was a pathologist. Hospital pathologists, like the hospital doctors at Dallas, had been known to confuse entrance and exit wounds and even bullet and stab wounds. The autopsy was also shorter and less thorough than it should have been. In particular, Kennedy's head should have been shaved, but the family vetoed this. His thick mop of hair and the vast amounts of blood and tissue confused matters. However, there is no doubt that the two entrance wounds mentioned by Bojczuk, both in the rear, were the only wounds.

Various people since then have claimed to have seen others, but they either played minor parts in the autopsy or there is no evidence they were present at all.

**Ray Ward**  
London

### The discreet charm of relics

Why are we drawn to objects whose only interest is that they have been used or touched by someone famous? The obvious answer is that many of us hold irrational beliefs about the magical or supernatural power of these objects.

But maybe the obvious answer isn't always true. Whilst magical beliefs are often *associated* with this phenomenon, notably in the case of the healing power of religious relics, such beliefs surely aren't necessary, in order for people to feel

the attraction of these objects. For example, the teenage girls who tore up the grass that Ringo had just walked on presumably didn't think the grass had special properties. When a young man was splashed by some of the water dripping off David Blaine after his week in the fish tank, the man was ecstatic, but not because he was going to be cured of the King's Evil by the touch of the water.

So there seems to be a more fundamental psychological force involved than magical beliefs. Maybe the belief in the magical powers of objects that have been associated with famous people comes as a consequence, not a cause, of the attraction these objects have in themselves. The Holy Grail myth, and the curative powers attributed to the grail, may have come after the impulse to reverence the object, and as a rationalisation of it. The girls who wanted the grass that a Beatle had walked on were not afraid of seeming ridiculous, so they did not need any such rationalisation; maybe their behaviour was the more honest for that.

My thoughts on this are prompted by the recollection of a ridiculous incident in my own past. Some years ago I was accompanying the then British Chancellor, Ken Clarke, to an EU meeting in a very minor capacity. I noticed that the end of one of the straps on his old-fashioned briefcase was nearly worn through, and I surreptitiously tore it off for a souvenir. Some time later, I came across it again among my possessions and threw it away, wondering at my own irrationality. Certainly I had no beliefs about the strap: I wanted it because it had been linked with somebody famous, and this wish temporarily overrode my usual mundane rationalism.

Looking at the phenomenon of relic-hunting in a more general light, it seems to be more widespread than might at first appear. Advertisers make use of it all the time, when they try to associate their products with famous people. Class snobbery is another manifestation of it. Normally these behaviours are not seen as connected with the reverence of relics, but surely they may be on a continuum with it.

I would be interested to know whether readers have any comments on this suggestion, and whether research has been done on what psychological movers lie behind this "glamour by association" phenomenon.

**Rory Allen**  
London

### An error spotted, and an apology from the Editors

I was a bit baffled to see the review of Arlene Russo's *Vampire Nation* (*The Skeptic*, 19.2) accompanied by a picture of a book whose author is clearly given as Thomas M. Sipos, especially since Russo's book is about the UK, while the one illustrated appears to be about Russia. Checking, I found someone had blundered: Sipos' book is a novel which simply happens to have the same title as Russo's book!

**Ray Ward**  
London

*Editors' Note: Our apologies for this error deftly spotted and reported by Ray Ward. It is not the fault of our Book Reviews Editor, who sent the correct copy through, but appears to be an error which occurred during the latter stages of publication.*



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