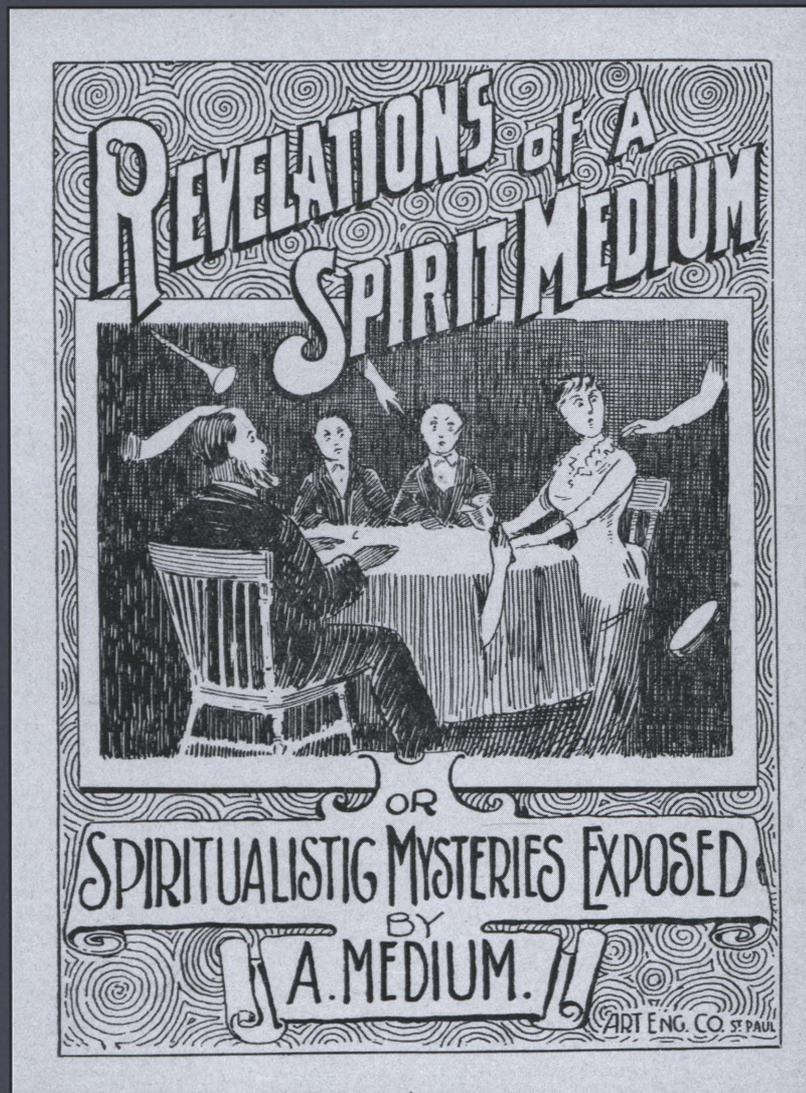


Volume 20 Number 1  
Winter 2006

# The **Skeptic**



## **From Psychic to Sceptic**

*Also in this issue:*

**The Great Masturbation Delusion  
Making up History  
Darwin Died an Agnostic**

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

## *Hilary Evans' Paranormal Picture Gallery*



### **THE FACE ON THE KITCHEN FLOOR**

Strange faces have been appearing on the stone kitchen floor of a house in Belmez, Spain, commencing in 1971 and continuing to the present day. The faces are alleged to appear and vanish miraculously, and to undergo changes even under sealed covers: they are accompanied by enigmatic messages. Excavation has revealed that the house was built over a graveyard, and human bones have been found underneath. Whenever anything approaching a lifelike image is discerned in the plaster of a wall, the surface of a bagel or among the clouds, it is generally supposed to be of divine origin, usually Christian. Portraits of Jesus and his mother have been identified in all kinds of weird contexts. So, is this the face of Jesus? In his splendid book, *Jesus goes to Hollywood*, William Bramley sets out the plausible arguments for thinking that Jesus was black-skinned, a redhead, close-shaven or even female (and much else besides). So this could be him. Or, of course, it could be a hoax, as many suspect. But if so, the explanation has yet to be found after 35 years.

**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 20.1 of *The Skeptic*. How much do we believe of what those of legitimate power and authority tell us? Are we any more sceptical in 2007 than we were a hundred, or two hundred years ago? Certainly, some of the things we learn about our ancestors must make us all wonder how they may have been so gullible, but no doubt future generations will wonder the same about our own credulity. We're sure many of us are already wondering. Hilary Evans' article, *The Great Masturbation Delusion*, is a vast exploration into the moral panic surrounding masturbation in the 1800s. Did the masses genuinely believe the medical and religious privileged few when they claimed masturbation could lead to insanity and even death? Or did they nod their heads, acknowledge it, and do it anyway? Are we all suspecting the latter? In various contexts, the voter must still make informed decisions as to what to believe, and hence, what will affect their behaviours. For example, we have controversy and conflicting information surrounding whether or not we should be at war, genetically modified food, whether our children should receive the MMR vaccination, and for an era, whether or not cigarettes were bad for our health. Interpreting the information disseminated by medical professionals, religious leaders, and politicians can certainly be tricky for the masses.

And what of believing what we read? If we are told that we're reading an historical novel, how much can we expect to be wholly accurate? Numerous similar issues surround autobiographies, with many writers exposed as having elaborated just a little bit too much to be considered an autobiography over a complete work of fiction. Then again, some readers don't mind, so long as they're entertained. Stuart Campbell, in *Making up History*, discusses a personal penchant for determining the truth in so-called historical novels. Campbell addresses some correspondence he had with Julian Barnes, the author of *Arthur & George*, a fictional book

that tweaks with some historical fact (or as Campbell questions, is it the other way around?).

We have a rarity in this issue: an article contributed to *The Skeptic* by a psychic who has come to accept that his abilities were not genuinely psychic. As a converted sceptic, James Byrne writes about his thirty-year stint as a psychic, a successful career which saw him selling his supernatural wares internationally, on television and radio, and at the London Palladium. Although there are bound to be other psychics out there who either don't believe in what they do, or begin to have serious doubts about their abilities, it's not often you get a renowned psychic so publicly denouncing the industry that provided him a long successful career. *From Psychic to Sceptic* charts Byrne's evolving scepticism about his craft, how one conducts a psychic reading, and some anecdotes from his days as a psychic.

We also include in this issue Donald Room's detailed examination of the claim that Darwin converted to Christianity on his deathbed, repeated by no less an authority than Professor Antony Flew in a recent letter to *The Skeptic* – and questioned by no less an authority than Martin Gardner in a subsequent letter. It appears that this in another of those great stories that appears to be without credible foundation.

Last, but certainly not least, we'd like to draw your attention to the fact that this year (2007) is *The Skeptic's* 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, founded by Wendy Grossman in 1987. We're all proud to be a part of the magazine, and of course, we hope that our readers get something out of it too. It's a comforting thought that a magazine without tabloids and gossip can have such longevity! Phew! (Although sourcing images for *The Skeptic* can be a lot of fun!)

And with little need to mention, we also have for your enjoyment all of our regular columns, letters pages, cartoons, and book reviews. With best wishes for a healthy, wealthy, and informed year ahead, Victoria and Chris.

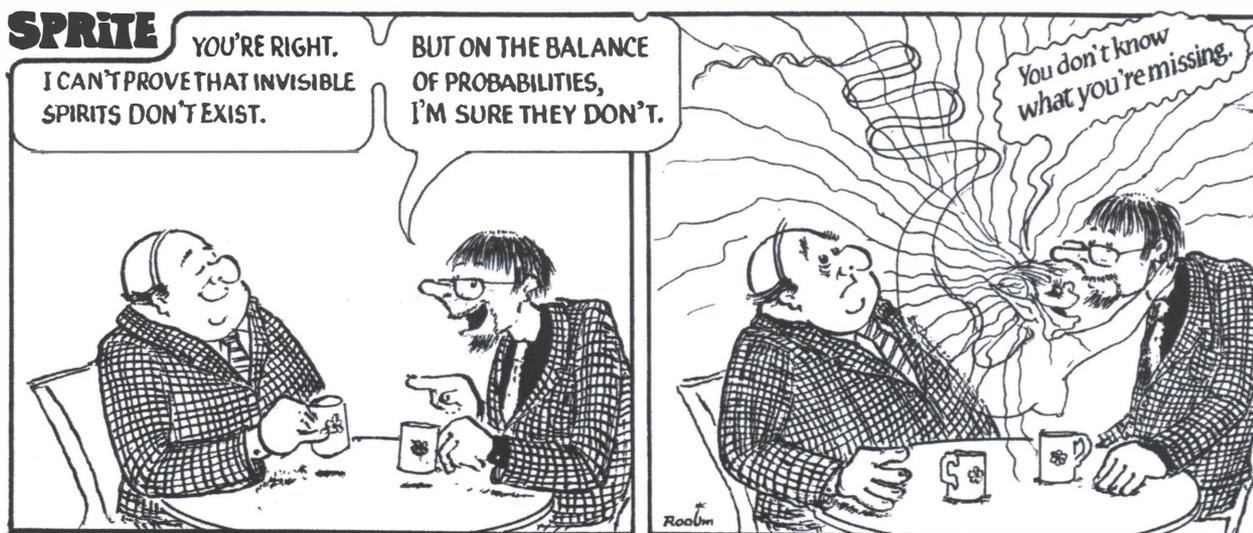
**SPRITE**

YOU'RE RIGHT.

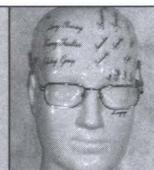
I CAN'T PROVE THAT INVISIBLE SPIRITS DON'T EXIST.

BUT ON THE BALANCE OF PROBABILITIES, I'M SURE THEY DON'T.

You don't know what you're missing.



# Hits and Misses



## Shoe fetish

Air travel these days increasingly requires the willing suspension of disbelief. At least, it does if you read security expert Bruce Schneier on the subject; he likes to call much of the harassment we go through “security theatre”. That is, much of the searching, groping, and monitoring is, like anyone with commonsense suspects, done more for show than for effect.

There is some justice for this scepticism: a Web site pilots and crew use to swap work gripes carried many stories of pilots and engineers being stopped by security from bringing through soup, toothpaste, and other substances during the worst of the scare. One rule for all, you say? Only fair? We have to ask: what’s the point of stopping a guy from carrying in a flask of soup when he is the one who can decide where to drive the plane? Or who can sabotage it merely by loosening a few bolts?



A particular annoyance for many people is the business of removing shoes so they can be put through the X-ray machines. The US Transport Safety Administration claims X-ray is “an effective method of identifying any type of anomaly, including explosives”, as TSA chief Kip Hawley told a press conference in August, 2006. Not so fast: the Associated Press got its hands on a study by the Homeland Security

Department that begged to differ, concluding that the X-ray images “do not provide the information necessary to effect detection of explosives”. CBS News consulted MIT scientist Richard Lanza, who said an experienced screener could look at the shoe image and tell if it’s been tampered with, but agreed it’s not foolproof.

This story ran about a month after the July incidents, in which British security services claimed to have foiled a plot in which terrorists planned to blow up planes using liquids brought with them onto aircraft. The snarky IT news site *The Register* ran a lengthy explanation of the unlikelihood of the liquid plot, which was believed to involve acetone peroxide triacetone triperoxide (TATP). *The Telegraph*, however, noted that other substances such as nitroglycerine or colourless liquid fuel might have been possibilities (the latter in conjunction with an oxidant carried separately).

We are inclined to agree with comedian George Carlin, who said years ago that passengers should stop being such wimps. Live a little. Risk being blown up.

## Future science

There just isn’t a lot of good news when it comes to science teaching in the UK. In mid-November, the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee issued a report on science teaching in schools indicating that:

- the quality of science teaching is dropping
- kids are consequently being deterred from studying science
- which in turn will lead to even fewer teachers being available
- students are being forced to specialise too young
- and the UK economy will suffer.

The STC made a number of recommendations. The testing regime should be altered so that teachers have greater flexibility. Improve pay for school science technicians. Improve school laboratory design. Look at practical ways of dealing with health and safety issues. Reduce the size of “golden hello” signing bonuses and instead offer to write off student debts in return for four or five years of service.

There’s a nice little table of numbers to show the extent of the problem. In the years from 1996 to 2005, the numbers doing A-level biology rose a bit; they fell in physics, chemistry, mathematics, and “other”. But this drop isn’t evenly distributed. The report quotes the Royal Society, whose testimony noted that half of all A-level entries in science come from just 18 percent of schools.

Sceptics don't all come from science backgrounds; but the more widely science education is diffused through the population the more sceptics there tends to be. The trends noted in this report are not a good sign for the future sanity of Britain any more than they are for the economy.

### Free Darwin

Read Darwin for free. Yes: his entire oeuvre is now online at [www.darwin-online.org](http://www.darwin-online.org). Everything – published, unpublished, 50,000 searchable text pages, 40,000 images. With much, much more to come; simply a fabulous resource. Anyone want to fund an AOL-sized DVD distribution?

### Scientology in London

Apparently personality tests at Tottenham Court Road were no longer enough. Around the time Tom Cruise was marrying Katie Holmes as ostentatiously as possible in Italy, Scientology opened a fancy, new £24 million centre in London (the group claims 123,000 members in the UK, which would put the cost at £19.51 each). Watched from the sidelines by a small group of protesters bearing “Stop Scientology” signs, the opening ceremony featured Scientology leader David Miscavige and City of London chief superintendent Kevin Hurley. According to a number of newspapers, freedom of information requests revealed that the police presence was fuelled by a series of gifts – tickets to film premieres, invitations to banquets, donations to a children's charity, and the use of a jazz band – to the police force over the previous 15 months.

We predict more controversy for the new centre.

### Not the bionetics news

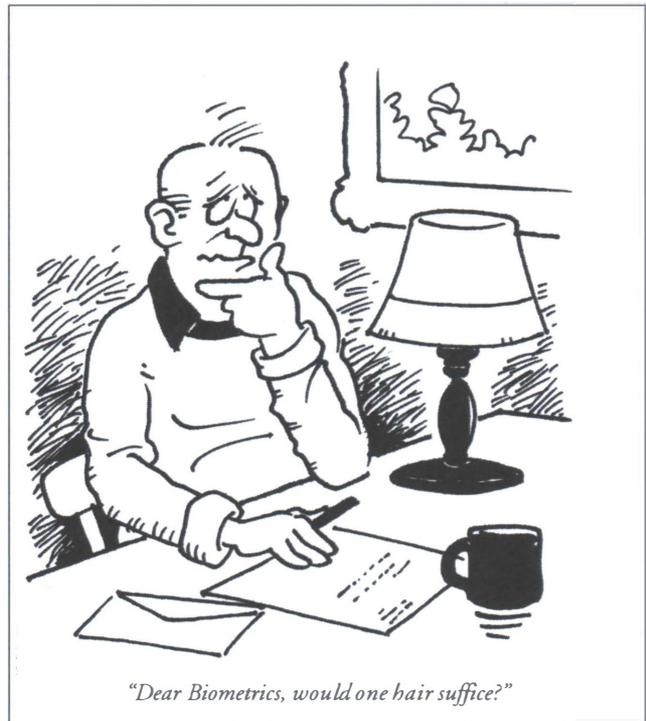
The Advertising Standards Authority has been displaying its sceptical colours again by upholding two complaints made to it over ads promoting bionetics, a food intolerance test that claims to be able to diagnose intolerance to 123 foods and ingredients from just a few strands of your hair. The technology, the bionetics people told the ASA, is well established, and is based on radionics and applied kinesiology. The ASA was not impressed by the longevity – thousands of years – claimed for these techniques in the absence of evidence supporting their efficacy, despite the submission of a number of testimonials from customers and the training bionetics claims to give its technicians. The agency has therefore ruled that the ad may not be repeated.

“We concluded that testimonials alone were not suf-

ficient to substantiate the efficacy of the testing methods”, the ruling concludes. That's as well said as if we could have said it ourselves.

### Who's the fool now?

Sceptics are fools, according to “Consultant palmist” Terry Stokes, writing in *News Blaze*, recently. Describing himself as “like a piano tuner”, Stokes claims to be able to see people's futures from their palms; he traces his abilities back to his childhood, and told *ESPress Magazine* that when he was a seven-year-old Catholic schoolboy children used to line up on the playground to get him to read their hands.



Most of his *News Blaze* piece discusses “Christian extremist” attacks on astrology. But our favourite bit complains that “the Denialism school of crackpot conjurer James Randi” attacks both the paranormal and alternative medicine. And he asks, “Which extremist group funds this man?”

### YouGeller

We note without comment that a user ID that matches the name of Uri Geller's brother-in-law, Shipi Shtrang, has been posting videos of Geller's commercials to YouTube. A search on Geller's name should pull them up nicely – along with other videos of Geller appearances bending spoons and keys (some with, um, interesting annotations).

Thanks to this issue's clippings contributors: **Rachel Carthy, Sid Rodrigues, Steuart Campbell, Tom Ruffles, Ernest Jackson**, the Wizard's Star List, *Skeptic News*, **David Langford**, and **Phil McKerracher**. *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



### Twenty

**WHAT A DIFFERENCE** twenty years makes. In 1987, when issue 1.1 of *The Skeptic* was published, there were no sceptics on talk shows. There was no Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit. Richard Wiseman was still doing street magic. Bob Morris hadn't quite taken up the Koestler Chair at Edinburgh University, and his parapsychology lab was not going yet. The Internet existed, but only in research labs. Richard Dawkins hadn't even started his campaign against God.

I may be exaggerating, but not by much.

The UK has a second sceptical group, the Association of Skeptical Enquiry (ASKE) – which was founded in our pages. London is the home, once a month, to a lively and engaging pub meet with invited guest, Skeptics in the Pub – which was founded by someone who came to help stuff magazines into envelopes one day.

Researching on the Web for this issue's news pages, it was heartening to see how many sceptical resources the UK now has. *Healthwatch* was, of course, founded only a couple of years after us. Then there's Ben Goldacre's Bad Science site (and his accompanying *Guardian* column). There's the Bad Psychics site. There's the Sense About Science project. All of these were set up independently, and (as far as I know) we can't take any credit for them – but gee, it's nice to know they're there. We are not alone.

On the other hand, there's plenty going on Out There to keep us from feeling that we are surplus to requirements. The shrinkage of science education (fewer teachers, fewer graduates, fewer kids in the pipeline) highlighted by the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee (see *Hits & Misses* in this issue) suggests that we can look forward to a future media filled with as much or more ignorance as we're seeing now. Worse than that, we will be seeing a Parliament and government filled with as much or more ignorance as we're seeing now, when efficacy testing is being removed for medicines with a long history behind them. They may have meant 'aspirin' when that law was drafted, but the consequences are that homoeopathy doesn't have to prove anything either.

There also seems to have been an explosion of TV programmes dedicated to the paranormal, mostly sourced from the US, from the fictional (*Medium*) to the recent rash of the other kind of fictional (*Crossing Over*, *Sixth Sense*). Let's face it: when you have a whole lot of new 24-hour TV channels you have to find something to show on them.

But even there, you have to like the producers of *Most Haunted*, who actually did get rid of Derek Acorah after the show's resident parapsychologist revealed that Acorah was cheating. (The show's presenter, Yvette Fielding, however, said his violent behaviour during his supposed possessions was also a factor.)

By the way: it has now dawned on me that we are celebrating all the wrong birthdays. We should have had a big blowout on our 13<sup>th</sup>. So: expect balloons in six years for our 26<sup>th</sup>.

So instead of trying to predict ten years out, I'll make a few now for the six years until 2013:

The Queen will continue in good health. Psychics will predict that she will be saved from dying of Ebola virus on the back of an alien transport by an angel who will simultaneously stop a comet from reaching the Earth. Mysteriously, despite the 25 million surveillance cameras analysts expect Britain to have by 2007 (despite research continuing to show that they do not stop crime), plus the many more millions of digital cameras in the hands of individuals (either standalone or embedded in mobile phones) none of this will be captured in any but the most blurry and disputable of photographs.

Parliament will narrowly defeat a measure proposing to add creationism to the national curriculum.

Observed closely by the media, who will fail to come up with an explanation, Richard Wiseman will mysteriously vanish in the middle of a major research project involving thousands of publicly recruited people. He will reappear ten days later in the safe in Chris French's office.

Scientific disputes will continue over the safety of: genetically modified foods, mobile phones, and wireless networks generally. Nonetheless, people will continue to eat hybrid or human-bred fruits (seedless grapes, tangelos, nectarines) and listen to radio.

Homoeopathy, acupuncture, spiritual healing, and other alternative remedies will continue to make inroads into the NHS.

Chris French will be surprised to discover that his office has a safe.

Despite a ban on public smoking throughout the British Isles, cigarettes will continue to sell.

James Randi, called in to investigate the appearance of a safe in Chris French's office with Richard Wiseman sitting in it will be forced to declare a paranormal event has taken place and award the \$1 million payout.

Happy Birthday, everyone!



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

# The Great Masturbation Delusion

A bout of moral alarm in the educated? Hilary Evans considers another example where the scientific evidence is absent

THE GREAT MASTURBATION delusion of the 19th century was exceptional in that it involved extraordinary behaviour not on the part of panicking mobs or obsessed fanatics, but of physicians and scientists of the highest repute, moral and religious leaders of unimpeachable standing. Weighted with their authority, the delusion infected countless lesser minds that accepted and repeated their dictates.

The delusion consisted of the belief that masturbation is uniquely harmful to those who practise it, leading inexorably to feebleness and debility through a wide assortment of ailments to madness, and ultimately death. The delusion was subscribed to, and often vehemently promoted by, men and women in the highest scientific positions throughout Western Europe and North America, as well as churchmen and others with the moral clout to ensure that they would be listened to with respect. Yet in support of these affirmations there was not a scrap of scientific evidence. Instead, scientific and medical findings were distorted and manipulated to give a wholly erroneous impression. As a result, millions of children were subjected to a reign of terror in which horrific mental suffering was often accompanied by physical torture.

Masturbation is practised throughout the world, in almost every known culture. “It is found among the people of nearly every race of which we have an intimate knowledge, however natural the conditions under which man and woman may live,” sexologist Havelock Ellis declared more than a century ago, and he provided examples showing that among Africans “no secret is made of it... it is treated as one of the most ordinary facts of life. Throughout the East masturbation is very prevalent, especially among young girls...” and so on (Ellis, 1924). Culturally, the area in which the delusion was promulgated was almost wholly Judeo-Christian, and the teachings of the Jewish and Christian religions formed its basis. In particular, they taught that any sexual activity outside marriage is sinful, particularly when – as with masturbation – it is non-procreative. The pleasure that accompanies sexual activity, being simply a biological device to provide an incentive, was not to be sought for its own sake. Consequently, masturbation always ranked high on the list of forbidden acts.

In practice, however, this was little more than a technicality. During the centuries previous to the 18th, the taboo on masturbation, insofar as any taboo existed, was wholly a theological one, stemming from what the Church believed were God’s wishes in the matter. Doctors saw no reason to stigmatise masturbation on medical grounds; at most they would discourage excess, as with any other form of sexual activity (Ellis, 1924). Indeed, the eminent 16th century anatomist Falloppio

encouraged parents to stimulate their son’s penis on the grounds that repeated erections would make it larger and thus capable of giving greater pleasure to a future wife (Ellis, 1924).

## Science considers masturbation

At the beginning of the 18th century, however, the taboo acquired a supposedly scientific dimension, with the publication of writings purporting to demonstrate the deleterious consequences of masturbation. The ball was set rolling by the 1710 publication, by an anonymous English author (plausibly identified by Laqueur, 2002, as hack writer John Marten) of *Onania, or the heinous sin of self-pollution*. Though, as its title suggests, it was the moral aspects of the matter which were the focus, his book echoed the spirit of the Age of Enlightenment in finding a ‘scientific’ dimension for the moral teaching: masturbation was identified and soundly denounced as a serious medical hazard.

**The delusion consisted of the belief that masturbation is uniquely harmful to those who practise it, leading inexorably to feebleness and debility, through a wide assortment of ailments to madness and ultimately death**

Though Marten had no professional standing, his book was immensely popular and led to more serious discussion. However, it is doubtful whether the delusion would have taken firm root without the authority of a recognised professional. One of those who had been profoundly influenced by the English book – which was widely translated – was a Swiss physician of high repute, Samuel-August Tissot, who in 1758 published (at first in Latin, later in French) *L’onanisme, ou dissertation physique sur les maladies produites par la masturbation*. (Incidentally, though both these authors employ the term ‘onanism’ as though it were synonymous with masturbation, it is nothing of the sort. The crime of Onan, a biblical figure, was to spill his seed upon the ground rather than impregnate his sister-in-law. Not only is masturbation not condemned in the Bible, it is not as much as mentioned.)

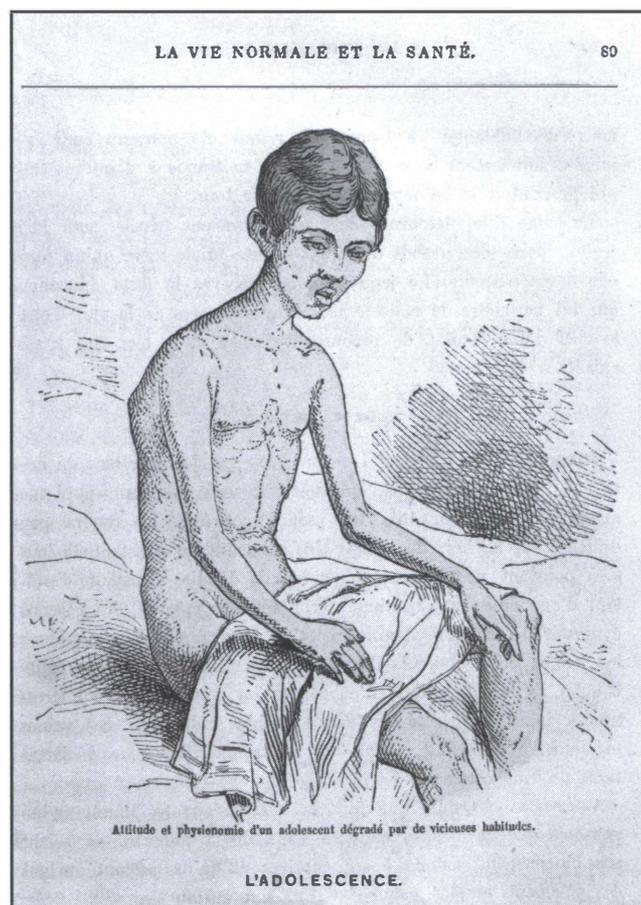
Following these two very influential books, the dangers of masturbation were supposed to be built upon an

ostensibly solid medical foundation. Masturbation was perceived as responsible for a wide range of ailments, ranging from digestive disorders to deteriorating eyesight, and leading to insanity. For Tissot, the masturbator was a criminal whose condition “more justly entitles him to the contempt than the pity of his fellow creatures” (Ellis, 1924). Moreover – and this was to be a key factor in the creation of the delusion – Tissot purported to show that masturbation was more harmful to the individual than ‘normal’ forms of sexual activity. His book sold in vast quantities and was widely translated. His great reputation ensured that his statements carried authority. Though his case histories were dubious and his reasoning faulty, he appeared to be providing abundant evidence that masturbation led to degeneration of the individual, culminating in madness and death.

From then on, the chorus of condemnation of masturbation increased in volume throughout the rest of the 18th century, reaching a crescendo in the 19th century. Attitudes were similar throughout Europe and North America: in 1780, the American doctor Johann Frank insisted that onanism had become so widespread in American schools that the authorities could not take too much care to stamp out this plague. The medical-scientific aspects of the subject were accepted without question, the only differences of opinion being as to how many maladies should be attributed to the practice.

By the early 19th century, virtually all authorities accepted the belief as fact. Benjamin Rush, the most respected physician in America, asserted in 1812 that masturbation led to a whole range of ailments including pulmonary consumption, dimness of sight, vertigo, epilepsy, loss of memory, and ultimately death. In France, the 1819 *Dictionnaire des sciences médicales* confidently claimed that “the continual excitement of the genital organs is liable to give rise to almost all the acute or chronic illnesses which can disturb the harmony of our functions”. Diagnosis became a self-fulfilling process. Since masturbation led to so many ailments, clearly anyone suffering from any of these ailments was probably guilty of masturbation: and since almost every patient admitted to masturbating at one time or another, the sequence of cause and effect was self-evident. The list of believers included many of the greatest names in medicine. In France, the eminent Jean-Etienne-Dominique Esquirol took it for granted that no respectable medical authority could doubt the harmfulness of the practice: “Masturbation is recognized in all countries as a common cause of insanity... by lowering the powers of resistance it reduces the patient to a state of stupidity, to phtisis, marasmus, and death”. The idea took root in England in the 1820s, and in Germany in the 1830s. Doctors everywhere echoed the view of French physician Reveille-Parise who in 1828 declared: “In my opinion, neither plague, nor war, nor smallpox, nor a crowd of similar evils, have resulted more disastrously for humanity than the habit of masturbation: it is the destroying element of civilized society” (cited in Laqueur, 2002).

However, as Lesley Hall has shown (2003), the matter was not quite so simple. She demonstrates that the delusion presented significant changes of emphasis. At first, following *Onania* and Tissot, the emphasis was on the physical consequences of masturbation. This emphasis gradually shifted to what it did to the mind, driving the patient insane. As the 19th century pro-

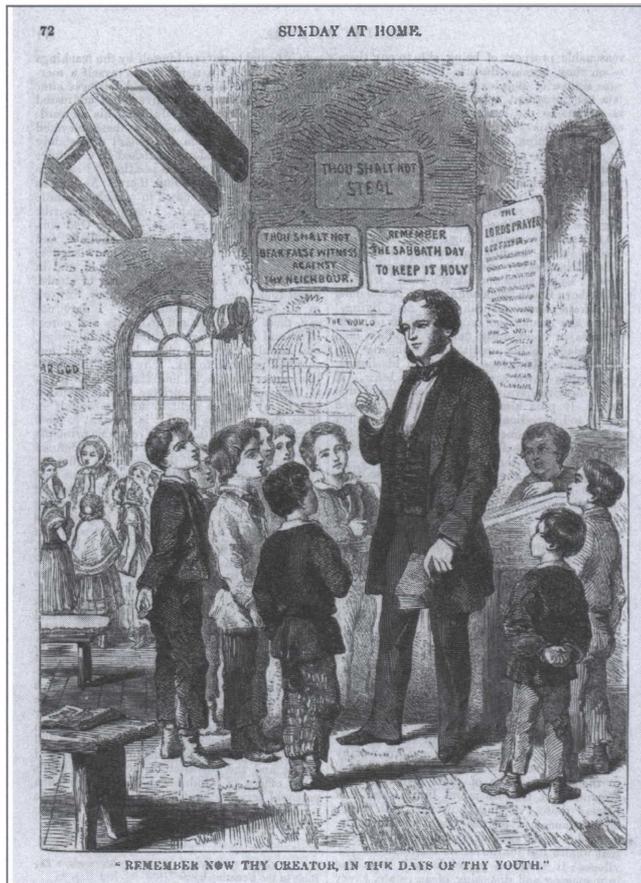


*The degeneration of a once healthy mind and body: The inevitable consequence of self-abuse?*

gressed, the masturbatory hypothesis became more specifically applied to madness. Some doctors, among them the distinguished Henry Maudsley, identified specific types of insanity, which could be linked to masturbation. To his credit, Maudsley subsequently withdrew his 1868 assertions, but for a while ‘masturbatory insanity’ was an essential element of diagnosis, explaining a wide range of psychiatric conditions.

Male voices outweighed female voices here as elsewhere, but masturbation was no less vilified by women: the eminent American doctor Elizabeth Blackwell saw masturbation as the precursor of “all other forms of unnatural vice”, and feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft considered “private vices” (she clearly intended masturbation) to be “a public pest”. Towards the end of the 19th century masturbation came to be associated with ‘neurasthenia’ rather than madness, and for those who continued to condemn it in the 20th century it was regarded rather as a psychological defect.

However, these were trends of emphasis rather than clear-cut distinctions: underlying them there persisted the almost unquestioned conviction that self-abuse (as it was now widely labelled) was one of humankind's most terrible scourges and must be eradicated by whatever means offered themselves.



*The interplay between religion and science: historical condemnation of masturbation was widespread both by the Church and many physicians, but does modern scientific evidence support their warnings?*

Sanctioned by the medical authorities, popular authors felt it their duty to echo their judgment in terms accessible to the general public. Thus the American self-appointed ‘Professor’ Fowler let loose in 1875 with a diatribe whose exaggerated terms bear witness to the well-nigh unbelievable extremes to which the masturbation delusion carried those who subscribed to it: “Neither Christendom nor heathendom suffers any evil at all to compare with this... Pile all other evils together – drunkenness upon all cheateries, swindlings, robberies and murders, and tobacco upon both, and all sickness, diseases and pestilence upon all, and war as the cap-sheaf of them all – and all combined cause not a tithe as much human deterioration and misery as does this secret sin”.

To stigmatise a schoolboy or girl enjoying a solitary orgasm as worse than the ravages of the Huns might seem extreme, but such expressions of horror were commonplace. The prolific Dr Rengade, author of many excellent books of popular information, can be taken as

representative of popular European authors. This is his take on masturbation – “the most shameful of all vices”, in his 1881 book *La vie normale*:

A frivolous conversation, the reading of a book, the sight of an attractive person, sometimes a single word, suffices to excite these burning souls, to inspire erotic dreams whose inevitable consequence can only be a spontaneous pollution or one brought on by masturbation. Defying all surveillance, the adolescents seek solitude: they hide, without waiting for nightfall which is most favourable to these vile manoeuvres, and may indeed succeed, simply by friction of the thighs, to satisfy their shameful passion even beneath the eyes of

**Since masturbation led to so many ailments, clearly anyone suffering from any of these ailments was probably guilty of masturbation**

parents or teachers. Miserable beings, of whatever sex, who, deficient in willpower, abandon themselves to these superficial joys, who cannot live without these sorry pleasures! Soon it becomes a veritable mania which drives them to devote themselves to it. The brain exhausts itself in unhealthy overexcitement which the organs, overtaxed, refuse to obey. Haggard, panting, the wretched creature struggles to provoke the voluptuous spasms which lead only to fatigue. Soon, the eyes grow ringed and lifeless in their sockets, the lips hang flabby, the nostrils become pinched, the features grow to resemble a monkey's rather than a human's, the head droops in shame, the shoulders are bowed, the limbs become emaciated: and these first signs are swiftly followed by more serious symptoms – phthisis, epilepsy, hysteria, imbecility, madness and consumption.

The remedies proposed by the good doctor were incessant surveillance; early rising; going to bed late when sleep will come swiftly; daily baths and cold showers; severe diet; gymnastic exercises, manual tasks, and exhausting country walks, all backed by remonstrance and reproaches from the parents.

As a physician, Rengade was concerned only with the physical consequences of the practice, but in Britain and America it was the interweaving of science with morals that gave the delusion a double force. The best-selling Sylvanus Stall can be taken as representative in this regard. His *What a young boy ought to know* sold in the hundreds of thousands and was widely translated:

If you were ever to fall a victim to this vice... you would begin to lose faith in all that is good, and as you

persisted in your sin, you would grow less and less like Jesus, and more and more like Satan.

But of course he also points out, at some length, the physical consequences: the masturbator:

...gradually drops back towards the foot of his class... he no longer has his accustomed pleasure in the vigorous romp, the hearty laugh, the good fellowship which characterizes a boy with a vigorous mind and a strong body... the health gradually declines. The eyes lose their lustre. The skin becomes sallow. The muscles become flabby. Every little effort is followed by weariness. Work becomes distasteful and irksome. He complains of pain in the back, of headache and dizziness. The hands become cold and clammy. The digestion becomes poor, the appetite fitful. He sits in a stooping position, becomes hollow-chested, and the entire body becomes wasted, and many signs give promise of early decline and death.

How the public responded to this teaching and preaching can only be surmised from scraps of information that slip past the taboo, which ensured that the subject was rarely mentioned except in the form of warnings. Many masturbators carried on covertly, no doubt. The historian of the MORZINE outbreak mentions, quite casually, that the country girls would meet for group masturbation. At more sophisticated social levels, diaries and autobiographical narratives bear witness to the torment of moral guilt and physical terror induced by the likes of Rengade and Stall.

### **Eradicating self-abuse**

Along with the identification of masturbation as the root cause of so many ailments, came discussion as to how it could be eradicated. Moral condemnation could go only so far with an impetuous youth: so more practical means had to be found. In simple cases, prevention was tried before cure. Little girls should be discouraged from riding hobbyhorses, boys from sliding down stair banisters. The bicycle and the treadle sewing machine were recognised as dangerous. Vigorous activity just before bedtime, leaving the child too fatigued to indulge his/her vice, was advised. Cold baths were prescribed. François Raspail, in his manual of health (1845) recommended that the child's genitals should be wrapped in a heavy layer of camphor powder, and it should be sprinkled on the bed sheets or between the mattress and the sheets before putting the child to bed. The child could even wear a bathing suit with a bag of camphor strategically placed. The hands could be tied to the bedpost. Ingenious devices were designed, such as enclosing a spiked cage to enclose the penis, which became uncomfortable if erection occurred. 'Chastity belts' of various types were available for boys and girls.

One rather surprising solution had been proposed early in the 18th century: Bernard de Mandeville, a Dutch physician practising in England, in *A modest*

*defence of public stews*, proposed the establishment of authorised brothels, providing a healthier outlet for young men than masturbation. Though moral objections prevented the idea from being accepted, other later opponents of masturbation would discreetly advocate this solution, though it failed to address the equally alarming propensity of females to the vice.

Surgery was also advocated. About 1858, Dr Isaac Baker Brown, a prominent London surgeon, proposed clitoridectomy – the surgical removal of the clitoris – for female masturbators, who would then have less incentive to indulge in a practice which otherwise would lead them to hysteria, epilepsy and convulsive attacks: the operation was still being advocated in the United States as late as 1894. Back in 1786 S G Vogel had suggested that infibulations – preventing full erection by fastening the foreskin to the penis with silver wire – might be an effective

### **The child was made to feel an outcast, a sinner, performing an unnatural act which was vile in the eyes of God and of all decent men and women**

preventative: comparable methods might be employed on girls. In 1864 the great French physician Broca told how he had performed an operation on a five-year old girl who had been masturbating repeatedly, despite surveillance and even the wearing of a chastity belt. By joining the labia, leaving only a small hole to pee through but covering the clitoris, he reduced the girl's access to her sensitive parts. He was, however, criticised – though not for performing the operation, rather as to whether this was the most effective method. A colleague wondered why he had not tried cauterization, which he himself had used effectively on a boy, making his genital area so painful as to effectively discourage masturbation (Laqueur, 2002).

In 1891, London surgeon James Hutchinson proposed that male circumcision would effectively reduce the "shameful habit", while his colleague, Spratling, went further, recommending "the complete section of the dorsal nerves of the penis", while for females, "nothing short of ovariectomy" was advocated. Alas, even surgery was not certain of success. A Dr Richet in 1864 told how he had performed a total amputation of the clitoris of a 27-year old woman, but within a year she had learnt to obtain relief by masturbating her vagina. A Dr Guérin concurred, describing his own attempt to cure a patient, "I totally destroyed the clitoris without managing to extinguish the desire to masturbate". But in 1894 Dr Eyer, of St John's Hospital in Ohio, reported greater success when his patient, a little girl

whose clitoris he had hacked away, reported “You know there is nothing there now, so I could do nothing” (cited in Ellis, 1924).

### Reasoning in circles

These surgeons describe their procedures in clinical terms, much as they would the removal of an appendix or any other operation. They make no reference to the psychological trauma involved, not only subjecting the young patients to terrifying surgery but involving them in a horrific experience of induced guilt. Dr Yellowlees, in England, told in 1876 how he had been struck by “the conscious-stricken way in which they submitted to the operation on their penises” (Laqueur, 2002). The child was made to feel an outcast, a sinner, performing an unnatural act, which was vile in the eyes of God and of all decent men and women. The result was that children were terrorised, and in extreme cases this could lead to suicide; in uncounted instances, it led to feelings of guilt and self-recrimination which recur not only in case histories but also the literature of the period, ranging from Dean Farrar’s story of school life, *Eric or little by little*, to Tolstoy’s *The Kreutzer sonata*. Yet, while some doctors deplored the psychological effects of inculcating guilt and remorse, others welcomed it as a means whereby the patient himself would be driven to voluntarily abandon the practice. French doctor Debreyne in 1844 declared that masturbators “must be threatened with dishonour, with ignominy, with all the horrors of the most painful, the most degrading and the most shameful maladies and finally with an early death to be followed by eternal punishment” (Laqueur, 2002). A colleague, Dr Devay, taught his young patients that their penis would become gangrenous as a result. Privately he admitted that there was no truth in this whatever, but insisted that the lie was justified if it served his purpose.

These examples illustrate the extraordinary circular arguments of the delusion. Doctors justified themselves in threatening consequences they knew to be false, in order to discourage practices which they believed to be harmful in other ways. They demonstrate that, while it was unquestionably the ostensibly scientific aspect of the delusion which enabled it to take such universal hold, it would hardly have done so without a strong moral basis, explicit or concealed. At this time, when almost everyone in advanced societies still, if only nominally, subscribed to Judeo-Christian beliefs, medical authorities did not hesitate to interweave science and religion. Thus Mary R Melendy, an American doctor and author of popular guides to sexual behaviour, wrote to mothers: “Go teach your boy... about these organs that make him specially a boy. Teach him that they are not impure, but... made by God for a definite purpose. Impress upon him that if these organs are... put to any use besides that for which God made

them – and He did not intend they should be used at all until man is fully grown – they will bring disease and ruin upon those who abuse and disobey those laws which God has made to govern them” (cited in Ellis, 1924). Needless to say, she does not indicate where God promulgated any such laws, which would – if they existed – hardly be compatible with medical reality.

Indeed, the strength of the moral aspect of the delusion is illustrated by the comment of one of the first medical men to declare that masturbation is no more harmful than sexual intercourse, Sir James Paget. Even while insisting that the practice is not the monster it had been made out to be, he concludes by saying, almost reluctantly, “I wish that I could say something worse of so nasty a practice: an uncleanness, a filthiness forbidden by God, an unmanliness despised by man” (cited in Szasz, 1971).

Because masturbation is by definition generally a solitary act, and because given the climate of opinion most people kept quiet about their activities, there are no figures to show how prevalent the practice was or how many children were affected. When in 1949 Alfred Kinsey, professor of zoology, and his colleagues at Indiana University, presented their report on the sexual habits of the American male (followed in 1953 by a sequel on the female) they disclosed that 93% of American males, and 62% of females, indulged in masturbation, despite the fact that the taboo was still very widely imposed (Ellis, 1924). Since there is no reason to think that human nature had changed dramatically in the previous 100 years, we can suppose that even at the height of the delusion, and in the face of such a barrage of denunciation, almost every child felt the urge to masturbate, and that a very high percentage yielded to that urge. That the practice was widespread was generally admitted, but authorities, with rare exception, did not ask the obvious question: why, in that case, were the numbers of mad people relatively few?

### Sceptical voices

Although, throughout the duration of the delusion, a few sceptical voices had been raised, this was only in medical circles and not in public. It was not until the very close of the 19th century that ideas began to change, and even then it was only slowly and reluctantly. A prominent influence was the English sociologist Havelock Ellis, whose writings were initially banned, but whose authority went a considerable way towards shaking the entrenched belief. Yet though in 1900 he was able to report that “recent authorities are almost unanimous in rejecting masturbation as a cause of insanity” (Szasz, 1971) the delusion was slow to die. Freud and his followers, even if they no longer held extreme views, did not question that masturbation was harmful (the importance Freud attributed to the subject is indicated by the fact that there are more than 100

references to masturbation in his collected works, as well as some fifty to auto-eroticism). Even though medical authorities generally came to concede that masturbation had few if any harmful effects, Kinsey, writing about male masturbation in 1949, noted that the consequences of the delusion were still much in evidence half a century later: "It must be realized that masturbation is taboo and even strongly condemned among certain groups; and while college men more often admit their experience, there are males in some other groups who would admit almost any other kind of sexual activity before they would give a record of masturbatory experiences... Millions of boys have lived in continual mental conflict over this problem. For that matter, many a boy still does. Many boys pass through a periodic succession of attempts to stop the habit, inevitable failures in those attempts, consequent periods of remorse, the making of new resolutions and a new start on the whole cycle. It is difficult to imagine anything better calculated to do permanent damage to the personality of an individual" (Szasz, 1971).

The situation was similar for the female. Four years later he reported:

In view of the more than two thousand years of religious condemnation of masturbation, fortified by the ostensibly scientific opinions of physicians and other professionally trained groups, it is not surprising that many individuals, both female and male, are considerably disturbed when they masturbate. Among the females in the sample who had ever masturbated, approximately half had experienced some psychological disturbance over their experience... This means that some millions of the females in the United States, and a larger number of the males, have had their self-assurance, their social efficiency, and sometimes their sexual adjustments in marriage needlessly damaged – not by their masturbations, but by the conflict between their practice and the moral codes.

"Masturbational insanity was real enough," declares Dr Alex Comfort, but it was not the ignorant masses who were insane, rather "it was affecting the medical profession," whom he stigmatises as 'anxiety makers' (Szasz, 1971). Thomas Szasz (1971) comments: "We may wonder how learned men and the public alike could believe such nonsense, flagrantly contradicted by observation easily made among both men and animals," and attributes it to the fact that man "is more interested in preserving popular explanations, which tend to consolidate the group, than in making accurate observa-

tions which tend to divide it".

Laqueur's 2002 thesis analyses the concept of masturbation as a cultural phenomenon rooted in time. The delusion was, paradoxically, a child of the Age of Enlightenment, when the status of the individual in relation to society was in the course of transformation. Masturbation, so essentially an individual practice, was felt to be anti-social, so when Marten and Tissot offered grounds, however dubious, for demonising the practice, their views were enthusiastically embraced (Szasz, 1971).

Thus the masturbation delusion served a stabilising purpose: it allowed people to continue to accept the Judeo-Christian moral code and perpetuate it into a scientific age. Fundamental to the delusion was the puritanical credo that any form of self-indulgence is inherently blameworthy, and non-procreative sexual activity especially so. Consequently, when ostensible scientific support for demonising masturbation was offered, moralists and scientists welcomed it alike. They accepted the false reasoning, which led to the belief in masturbatory insanity because it justified their subconscious conviction that masturbation was wrong. The moral judgment not only preceded, but also continued to underlie any supposed scientific evaluation.

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This article is adapted from an entry in the *Encyclopedia of Exceptional Social Behaviour*, which Robert Bartholomew and Hilary Evans have been working on together these past few years. Hilary is interested in strange things, but even more, in people who believe strange things. He has met people who have met the Virgin Mary or have been taken aboard flying saucers, and once met an extraterrestrial. If he believed in a God, he would suggest that these people were sent by him to test our faith. As it is, he simply tries to understand them.

# Skeptical Stats

1. Cost of a James Randi doll on which to perform voodoo experiments: **\$24**
2. Number of pins included with the 12-inch doll: **3**
3. Size of the McDonald's logo built out of tiles in the Nevada desert and visible from space: **8,120 square metres**
4. Proportion of British children bullied at school: **7 out of 10**
5. Cost of a 2007 "Skepchick" or "Skepdude" calendar: **\$20 (or both for \$35)**
6. Percentage of "high-risk" sexual offenders who do not reoffend: **90**
7. Percentage of other types of offenders who are convicted of another crime within two years: **57**
8. Age of Salem's official witch: **73**
9. Number of blessings of lesbian marriages retired Archbishop Terence Finlay performed before losing his licence to officiate at weddings: **1**
10. Cost of an Oakwood, Lanarkshire, home designed according to the principles of Feng Shui: **£1.1 million**
11. Number of drugs recommended by health food shops for depression that has scientific backing: **1 out of 13**
12. Price of a four-day Tarot beginners' course in Richmond, Surrey: **£360**
13. Number, on October 9, 2006, of UK Web pages using the word "spooktacular": **about 12,000**
14. Number, on November 20, 2006, of UK Web pages using the word "spooktacular": **18,700**
15. Amount a parapsychology study in Northampton offers (June 2006) to pay volunteers: **£250**
16. Number of angels spotted over the Thames near the London Eye: **1**
17. Proportion of people who normally hear voices in their heads: **1 in 25**
18. Estimated number of illegal immigrants in the US: **20 million**
19. Number of US jobs held by undocumented immigrants: **12 to 15 million**
20. Number of actions taken by the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency in 2005 against companies employing illegal workers: **3**
21. Percentage of UK students who say they believe in creationism and intelligent design: **30**
22. Percentage of UK students who say they believe evolutionary theory is true: **56**
23. Position of Derren Brown's book *Tricks of the Mind* on the Bad Psychics' site's list of top five Christmas presents: **1**
24. Position of the Nintendo Wii: **5**
25. Number of people who died of AIDS in 2006: **2.9 million**

## Sources

1,2 [www.randi.org](http://www.randi.org); 3 *Metro* 4 *Evening Standard*; 5 [www.skepchick.org](http://www.skepchick.org) (profits to fund scholarships); 6,7 Spiked Online (citing 2002 Home Office study); 8 *The Scotsman*; 9 *The Times*; 10 *Daily Record*; 11 *Daily Mail*; 12 [www.psychicevents.co.uk](http://www.psychicevents.co.uk); 13,14 [www.google.co.uk](http://www.google.co.uk); 15 <http://nli.northampton.ac.uk/ass/psych-staff/rsb/experiments/dmils.htm>; 16 *South London Press*; 17 BBC; 18,19 Bear Stearns study, January 2005; 20 *Business Week*; 21,22 *Guardian*; 23,24 [www.badpsychics.com](http://www.badpsychics.com); 25 *San Jose Mercury News*

Thanks for assistance to Rachel Carthy. 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**.

# From Psychic to Sceptic

James Byrne in retrospect on being a psychic

WE LIVE IN an age where many millions of people turn to psychics and mediums for help and guidance in so many aspects of their lives. You see the advertisements in nearly every magazine available on every newsagent's shelf, "call this number for accurate readings", "love, career, relationships". The number you dial will either be an 0906 premium rate number where clients are charged at the rate of £1.50 per minute or you can pay by credit card, but you will still pay anything from £30 to £40. Yet so many times what you are told by the psychic you will not be able to relate to, and their predictions in many cases will turn out to be complete nonsense.

This kind of disappointment is damaging and distressing to vulnerable individuals who are desperate for help. There may be psychics who genuinely have a desire to help those in need, but I believe they are in the minority.

Is it possible to give someone a psychic reading without having any psychic ability whatsoever? The answer of course is "yes". Anyone can learn to do psychic readings and earn a very good living in the process. I will show you how to conduct a successful psychic reading later in this article. The only ability you will need is observation.

**Another case I know of was a lady who, during her consultation, was told the child she was expecting would be born with considerable problems. "I can see blood all over the child," claimed the psychic. Three months later her child was born perfectly healthy**

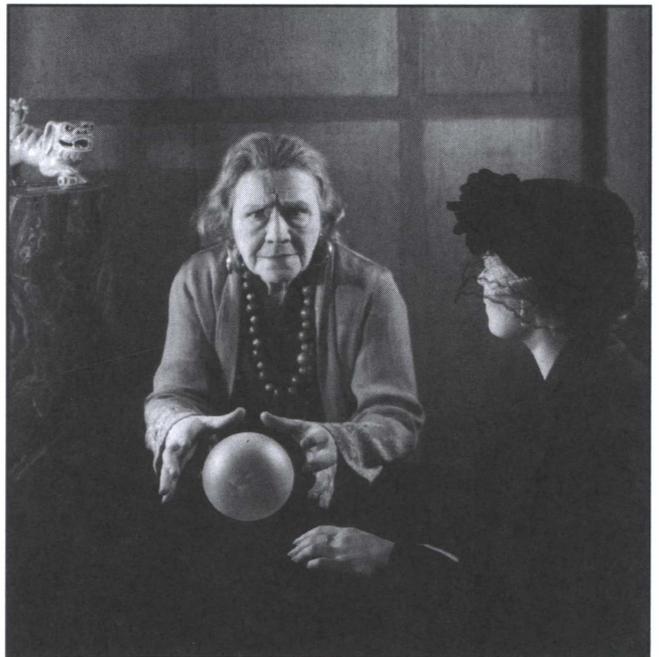
The psychic industry is now a multi-million pound industry all around the world and yet most magicians and mentalists are able to do what psychics do and, in many cases, do it better. Some people mistakenly consult psychics every time a problem crops up in their lives. If that psychic turns out to give wrong information, they will then consult another one in the hope that they will hear what they are looking for.

I know of a lady who consulted a psychic for a one-day reading and was told that her husband might not see his next birthday. This dreadful information turned out to be wholly inaccurate but the worry and fear that this instilled into this poor woman was inexcusable. Another case I know of was a lady who, during her consultation, was told the child she was expecting would be born with considerable problems. "I can see blood all

over the child," claimed the psychic. Three months later her child was born perfectly healthy. Again, the distress this caused was enormous.

It would be wrong to tar all psychics with the same brush. Some are very accurate in their utterances. Sadly, they are few and far between. On the whole, more people gain nothing by consulting psychics, than those who do gain.

An explanation of how a reading can be done without any psychic ability: It is always safe to assume that anyone who seeks out a psychic has a problem that they are in quest of an answer for. If it is a lady, it is often a safe bet she has a relationship problem. The golden rule is observation. For example, if you say to a client "You've been very upset recently", more often than not they will be helped because you are right. If you take note of their reaction, it will always give you the answer. Go on to say, "This is to do with a man, isn't it?" Nine



*An example of clairvoyance, using a crystal ball or 'shew stone' to apparently derive meaningful and personal information*

out of ten times you will be correct. By this time, your client is convinced you are psychic because you are spot on and all you've done is made a safe guess and observed their reaction. In other words, they have unknowingly given you information but they are convinced that you have given it to them.

A trick that seldom fails: You can then go on to say "Ah well, never mind, brighter times are on their way. This time next year, you will be wonderfully happy." Then you have created a happy optimism within the client. I am well aware that this practice of deceit is despicable and should not happen, but it does, and sadly many of the deceived will go back for more.

Then there are so-called psychics who really believe they have a gift but never really prove anything with it. Just before my wife and I met, she visited a medium who is now very well known throughout the United Kingdom. My wife had just lost her first husband in a road traffic accident and was hoping for proof that he was OK on the other side. The medium didn't even mention this, which at the time of her reading was a huge sadness in her life. When he reached the end of the reading, he invited her to ask him a question, "I've just lost my husband" she said. "Can you tell me if he

medium was saying things like, "I've got an Irish connection here and this man came from a big family". It was odd to me that the information being given, he gave to several other people in the same audience on the same evening. Other comments, such as, "I've got a man here that passed with a heart attack". Don't we all know someone, or know of someone, who died of a heart attack?

Many psychics are decent, giving people who would never intentionally hurt anyone. There is both self-delusion and deliberate fraud. I think most psychics fall into the former category and not the latter. It's time to challenge them and show to them it is just not real. Having worked as a psychic myself, I know how easy it is to fool yourself into believing you are possessed by wonderful powers and gifts. I realise after years of indecision that I had to move on and take a very different view of the whole psychic scene. For over five years, I felt ill at ease with the work I was doing. I remember some years ago being invited to appear on a television programme called *Head to Head*. I was on as a psychic, and sitting in the opposite chair was a well known magician and sceptic, Ian Rowland. The idea was that he would do a fake reading for someone in the studio audience and I would do a genuine reading, with the audience being led to believe we were both genuine psychics. The conclusion was that Ian's reading was better than mine. When the presenter told the audience that Ian was a magician,



*From their home is Hydesville, upstate New York, the Fox sisters started the Spiritualist movement by covertly creating seemingly supernatural 'rapping' responses by clicking their toes*

is OK on the other side?" "Oh yes, I feel a stabbing". Wrong. "I know he was with you when he died, wasn't he?" Wrong again. He went on to mention several more possibilities of how he may have died, none of which were true. It was plain that he was guessing in the hope that he would hit on the reason, but he didn't. "Oh, he's OK on the other side and sends you his love." My wife left the reading feeling worse than she did before going there.

The sad fact is that so many people look to psychics and depend on them to get out of bed in the morning. Well, perhaps that's a slight exaggeration, but very few of those who have regular psychic readings are aware of the tricks of the trade, so to speak. Many argue that great comfort is gained from readings and maybe that's no bad thing. It should also be made known to the sitter that 90% of the time the information they are given is not from the spirit world. I recently sat through a public demonstration of mediumship where the

they were gob-smacked, to say the least. On another occasion I was invited to be in the audience during a recording of *James Randi Investigates* at Granada Television. Each week he would look at various types of psychic practices and generally try to disprove them. At the time I thought that James was speaking from the wrong end of his person. With hindsight, I think the psychics taking part offered no real evidence whatsoever. What the majority of mediums put forward as evidence just doesn't stand up to scrutiny. Psychics must really start to be brutally honest with themselves. Although I found Mr Randi's approach rather harsh and hurtful, I do agree with his conclusions about psychics. I am confident that no-one will ever win the big cash challenge Mr Randi has on offer. Of all the television programmes I've ever been involved with or seen other psychics on, not yet has a psychic triumphed over a magician. It worries me that people are paying fortunes for what, in so many cases, turns out to be rubbish.

**James Byrne** worked as a psychic for thirty years before coming to the conclusion that it was all a sham. During his time as a psychic, he toured New Zealand twice, hosted radio shows in the United Kingdom, and performed at the London Palladium. He now earns his living as a writer and debunker of psychics. James has supplied his email address for readers of *The Skeptic* who may wish to contact him: [mediapublicity@mail.com](mailto:mediapublicity@mail.com)

# Making up History

Stuart Campbell questions how we are to know historical fact from fiction when delivered to us in novels

CAN PEOPLE TELL the difference between fact and fiction, truth and myth? Evidently many cannot. Children write to Santa Claus and adults still write to Sherlock Holmes at the fictional 221b Baker Street. Some take *The Archers* seriously and some are such dedicated watchers of TV soaps that they know more about the characters than their neighbours (in fact it has just been reported that few of us actually know our neighbours). Are these people living a dream? Is real life so

but then the author makes free with these characters and events and invents a new history for them, to such an extent that readers can come to believe the invention rather than the reality. The latest example is Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code*, taken so seriously that enthusiasts would break down Rosslyn Chapel to find a sacred relic that almost certainly does not exist.

I have a personal interest in this matter. In his recent novel *Arthur & George*, Julian Barnes describes events



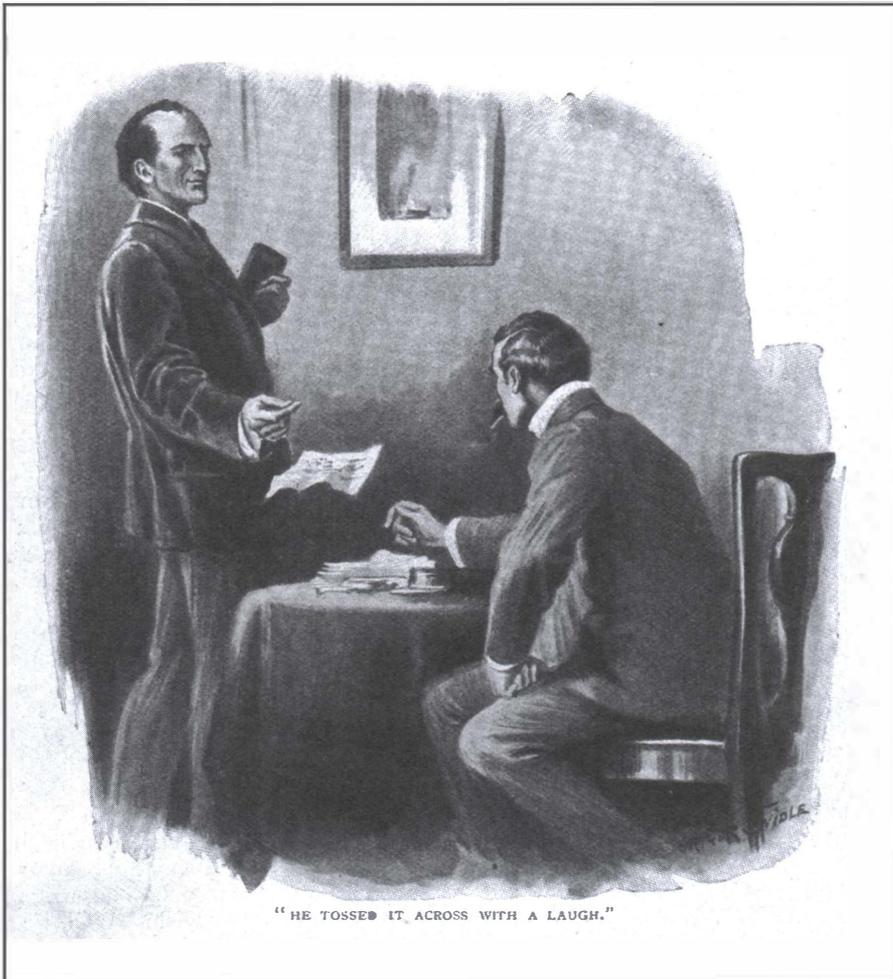
*The real Inspector Campbell.*

dull that we need to live imaginary lives?

Even history is contaminated by the imagination. Dramas from Shakespeare's plays to modern TV docudramas so mix fact and fiction that we cannot tell one from the other. Historians are clear that we can never be sure of the past. However, they go to a great deal of trouble to describe it as accurately as possible, to make the best guess as to how it was. Nevertheless, what are we to make of the historical novel? Chambers defines this as "a novel having as its setting a period in history and involving historical characters and events". Fine,

surrounding the arrest of lawyer George Edalji for alleged horse maiming just a century ago in Staffordshire. In doing so, he introduces a character called 'Inspector Campbell'. In fact he has this officer arrest Edalji at his Birmingham office.

My interest arises from the fact that my grandfather John Campbell was an inspector with the Staffordshire Police in Cannock at the time and was involved in the case, although to what extent is not clear. Barnes told me that he had a choice at a certain moment of whether to use real names ("in which case grandchildren were



*The fictional Sherlock Holmes is known by most, revered by many and believed in by some*

likely to correct me”) or invent new ones (“in which case historians and biographers would do the same”). He admits that, since his Edalji was almost completely

**Is it fiction based on a few basic facts or is it basically factual but with fictional overtones?**

fictional, he used the same procedure with named others. It would be inaccurate to claim that Barnes’s ‘Inspector Campbell’ is based on my grandfather. However, as I totted up the discrepancies between the character and the real person, it made strange reading. Will readers mistake the character for the real person? I

wondered what Barnes thought about making up history in this way. In fact he told an audience at the Edinburgh Book Festival last year that he disliked the term ‘historical novel’; he preferred to call the book “a contemporary novel set in the past”. If that is not a contradiction, it is at least confusing. The book reads as if it were history. To a large extent, it is historical. Much of what we see of the life of Arthur Conan Doyle, who was instrumental in getting Edalji pardoned, is true. The basic facts about George Edalji himself and his family are also true. However, the ‘Inspector Campbell’ in the novel is certainly not my grandfather. He did not have red hair and he did not once serve in the Birmingham Police Force (he had always declined to join it). Nor did he leave Birmingham because his wife grew ‘sick of the city’. The Inspector of the novel is an imaginary policeman who has borrowed my grandfather’s surname (no forename is used). At least Barnes did not pretend that my grandfather was Scottish, a mistake made

by the producers of a BBC radio play in 1987. How does a reader differentiate fact from fiction in this case? Dan Brown helpfully provides a ‘fact’ page. Perhaps the authors of all historical novels should do the same. Unless readers know a great deal about the historical circumstances, it is impossible for them to differentiate. In this case, those not in possession of the facts are likely to mistake fiction for fact and to believe that the story Barnes tells is true. A reviewer of the book noted that the “faithful reproduction of so much archive material raises the question of just how much of this novel is a product of imaginative invention”. That is the problem. Is it fiction based on a few basic facts or is it basically factual but with fictional overtones? Worse, is it a new history that could replace the real one? All historical novels are in effect unhistorical. To a historian, they are contaminants, preventing us seeing the past as it really was and leading people to believe in myths. If “fact is stranger than fiction”, fiction is stranger still.



# Darwin Died an Agnostic

**Donald Room** investigates the claim by one of the world's most distinguished philosophers that Darwin experienced a deathbed conversion

"THE FIRST THING which I should like to add is Darwin died a believing Christian." (Flew, 2006).

Darwin's own last account of his religious belief "written in 1879 – copied out Ap 22 1881" (Neve & Messenger, 2002, pp. 49-55; Darwin died on 19 April 1882) says he was an agnostic. So do his letters to enquirers (F. Darwin, 1905), and the recollections of those who witnessed his death (Desmond & Moore, 1992, pp. 659-663). There are tracts announcing that not only Darwin, but also Spinoza, Voltaire, Thomas Paine, Thomas Henry Huxley, Charles Bradlaugh, and Bertrand Russell were subject to deathbed conversions, and it seems safe to dismiss nearly all as preposterous. But Professor Antony Flew is a distinguished philosopher and student of Darwin's ideas (Flew, 1984), and when he writes that Darwin died a believing Christian, the statement deserves serious investigation. I wrote to Antony Flew asking for further information.

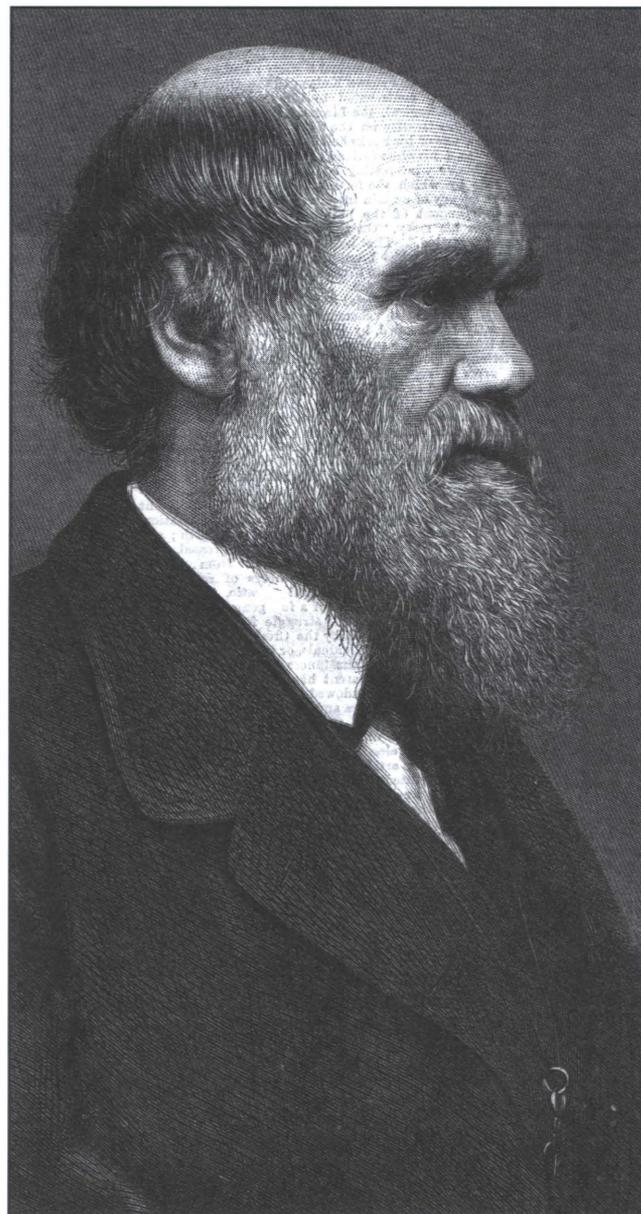
**There are tracts announcing that not only Darwin, but also Spinoza, Voltaire, Thomas Paine, Thomas Henry Huxley, Charles Bradlaugh, and Bertrand Russell were subject to deathbed conversions, and it seems safe to dismiss nearly all as preposterous**

Antony Flew courteously replied by return, enclosing a photocopy of his source, a letter to the *Daily Telegraph* (published 21 August 1999) from Prebendary Dr Victor Pearce, with the comment "I was myself astonished by Dr Pearce's letter when I first read it. But I can see no reason to doubt his authority" (Flew, personal communication, 24 August 2006). I wrote to Dr Pearce asking for further information.

Dr Pearce courteously replied enclosing photocopies of some pages in a book of his own (Pearce, 2003, pp. 152-157), marking for my attention some passages concerning Darwin's abhorrence of alcohol (Pearce, personal communication, 13 September 2006), which is

not in doubt. On the question of whether Darwin died a Christian, Dr Pearce's book cites Dr Croft of Salford University.

Dr Croft's book is called *The Life and Death of Charles Darwin* (Croft, 1989; see especially Chapter 8, *Eventide and Rebirth*). James Moore, one of the authors



*Charles Darwin, 1809-1882: Agnostic to the end*

of the definitive biography *Darwin* (Desmond & Moore, 1991), has also written about Darwin's reputed conversion, in a book called *The Darwin Legend* (Moore, 1994). Croft and Moore cite the same sources but differ in their conclusions.

The story was published in an American Baptist

periodical, the *Watchman-Examiner*, on 17 August 1915, as *Darwin and Christianity* by Lady Hope. Lady Hope was a real person, aged 72 when the *Watchman-Examiner* piece appeared. Born Elizabeth Cotton, the daughter of a general, she was an enthusiastic and able evangelist and temperance campaigner from her teens onwards. In 1877 she married 69-year-old admiral Sir John Hope, who died in 1881. In 1893 she married T. A. Denny, a millionaire aged 75, who died in 1909. She was declared bankrupt in 1911 with liabilities of £14,000, discharged from bankruptcy in 1912 when her stepsons paid £4,000, and moved to New York in 1913.

Dr Croft quotes the Reverend Ishmael Jones, who wrote in the *Christian Herald* for 21 December 1881: “I once attended a meeting at Dorking which was addressed by Miss Cotton (now Lady Hope) [...] She said that [she commenced her temperance work with] an old drunken shoemaker who had signed the pledge book twenty times and broken it on each occasion [...] Lady Hope visited him day after day to encourage him, and for years he has been a steadfast Christian in the town of Dorking.”

Dr Croft asks, “Who would dare question the word of such a woman?” Answer: many would, and without questioning her honesty of purpose. The meeting at which Reverend Jones heard Miss Cotton speak was probably a temperance meeting. No doubt she wanted to reassure any despairing alcoholics in the audience that there is always hope, and to this end she told the picturesque anecdote of the drunken shoemaker, which may or may not have been pedantically accurate.

Another of Dr Croft’s questions is, “Had not Darwin’s entire life been one long struggle to regain the faith of his youth?” Answer: certainly not. Dr Croft also seems to suppose that Darwin’s death-bed remark, “I am not in the least afraid to die”, indicates belief in eternal life.

Lady Hope’s account of her conversation with Darwin is quite implausible: “I have a summer house in the garden which holds about thirty people” (the summer house is still there and big enough for about three) “I want you very much to speak there.” “What shall I speak about?” “CHRIST JESUS!” (etc.).

But there is a certain plausibility in her description of the circumstances of their meeting. Darwin’s daughter Henrietta (Litchfield) wrote furiously that “Lady Hope was not present during his last illness, or any illness”, but that is not what Lady Hope claims. She says she met him some months before he died, gazing out over woods and cornfields glowing in the marvelous autumn sunset. Darwin was in the habit of being read to in bed

before his afternoon nap. His dressing gown was dark purple, his bedroom window looked out over woods and cornfields, and the autumn sunsets at Downe were marvelous.

Lady Hope knew James Fegan, a preacher and temperance campaigner who lived in Downe and enjoyed excellent relations with the Darwin family. When he preached in Downe the Darwins altered their meal-times so that their servants could attend his meetings, and when the weather was too cold for tent meetings, Darwin allowed him the use of an old schoolroom in the village (which Lady Hope may have confused with the summer house). Although the Darwins were vehement that she never visited Downe House, it is just possible that she went there, once, in the company of Mr Fegan or one of the servants.

In 1925, S. J. Pratt of the Protestant Truth Society wrote to ask Mr Fegan about Lady Hope’s story. Mr Fegan replied with a long letter, in which he said: “I have been appealed to over and over again as to the probability of this story, and have had no hesitation in pronouncing it to be a fabrication on the part of poor Lady Hope. You are quite right that Mr Darwin never poured scorn on the Christian faith. He was one of the last men in the world to stoop to pouring scorn upon anybody’s conscientious belief. He was an honourable, courteous, benevolent gentleman; but you may be sure that Sir Francis Darwin is right in saying that his father died as he had lived – an agnostic”.

### Acknowledgements

Thanks to the libraries of the Natural History Museum and South Place Ethical Society.

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Donald Room is an anarchist cartoonist. As well as drawing the *Sprite* comic strip for *The Skeptic*, he also produces the *Wildcat* strip for *Freedom* newspaper.



# Rhyme and Reason

Steve Donnelly



## Truth Will Out

THE IDEA OF 'truth' doesn't feature very centrally in the day-to-day lives of people in 21st century, Western society. What I mean by this is that, in most aspects of our lives, absolute values such as 'truth' are simply not applicable or are of negligible relevance. So for instance, when deciding the 'best' novel or film of the year for the award of the Mann-Booker prize or an Oscar, the concepts of true and false do not arise; the decisions are essentially subjective. Our lives are also heavily influenced by marketing, and although over the years we have introduced legislation to ban downright falsehoods from advertising, the effect of this has been to make the untruths more subtle and less direct. I doubt that anyone would feel that there was a close association between the words 'truth' and 'advertising'. And of course in politics, even in times gone by, the views of politicians on how to solve the country's economic or other problems were based on subjective opinion rather than on absolute facts. But in the last few decades, with the use of marketing techniques in politics and the increasing dominance of political 'spin', the concept of truth has become even less relevant in this domain.

There are, however, two areas of our lives in which the idea of truth occupies a central place: science and religion. Unfortunately, it is not clear that the word means the same thing in the two areas of human activity. For instance, according to the late Nobel laureate, Sir Neville Mott, "There is scientific truth, always provisional, never susceptible of proof (according to Karl Popper) but only to falsification, but none the less accepted from Washington to Moscow. There is ordinary everyday truth, as when we say there is a university in Cambridge or that Prince Charles is the son of Queen Elizabeth. And then there is religious truth which seems to me quite different – although I think that many believers identify it with everyday truth. Religious truths are certainly not believed from Washington to Moscow, neither would there be full agreement about them in any village in our own country" (Mott, 1991, p. 3). And for me this poses particular problems. For instance, the lack of separation of Church and State in this country means that small children are taught (in Mott's terms) scientific facts (the sun is very hot), everyday facts (Paris is the capital of France) and religious facts (Jesus is the son of God) by the same authoritative person (the teacher) – deluding them into regarding all three 'truths' as having the same value.

As a scientist, the important aspect of the search for truth is encapsulated in the falsifiability of science referred to in Mott's quotation. A truth holds until such

times that it is either simply shown to be false or, more usually in science, is superseded by a truth that encompasses and refines the original one. For instance when physicists moved from Newtonian to Einsteinian mechanics, the former was included in the latter, with special relativity only resulting in changes to the predictions of Newton's theories for special cases of very high velocities. How different this is to scripturally-based religious beliefs: polls in the US have repeatedly yielded the result that 40–50% of Americans accept the biblical account of creation, i.e. that God created the Earth and humans pretty well in their current form at some time in the last 10,000 years. Despite incontrovertible evidence that the Earth is massively older than this and that evolution operates in all parts of the natural world, the revealed 'truth' in the *Bible* is accepted by so many Americans, who thus must ignore what is almost the evidence of their senses; the methods of science arguably simply acting as an extension to those senses.

In my view, the type of Catholicism in which I was brought up and the type of Anglicanism that is most common today really just provide a 'God of the gaps' – where science has an explanation, this is just God's way of operating; where science has no explanation or no interest, God has a more directly interventionist role. (I am sure that neither Catholic nor Anglican theologians would express it in these terms.) And people holding this type of belief, misguided though they may be in my opinion, would seem to hold no threats for our society. But the same cannot be said of any group of people (Christian, Muslim or other) for whom scriptural truths are the only ones that matter and who wish to shape our society based on these truths.

We live in a politically-correct world in which it is increasingly difficult to question the religious belief systems of others. This is a route to a type of irrational society in which I would certainly choose not to live. To quote Richard Dawkins (2006): "Some of us feel that being truthful . . . that facing the world of reality fair and square and honestly is better than living a lie". We must endeavour, at all costs, to retain a society in which everyone's religious 'truths' are open to respectful inspection, debate and dispute in exactly the same way as their scientific counterparts.

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



## Philosopher's Corner

Julian Baggini

**THE TROUBLE WITH** Descartes is that he was too sure of himself. "I think therefore I am" is all very well, but aren't we human beings a little too proud of our ability to think? We're so pleased we can cogitate that we don't notice that, actually, we're not terribly good at it. We may beat all the other animals in the world but when the next brightest species hasn't even worked out how to make fire yet, it's hardly a great accolade.

At a recent literary festival I had a tough time persuading my audience that we're not as smart as we like to think we are. I tried to make my point using a variant of the well-known Wason selection tests, in which I asked them to perform two tasks which involved working out how to check whether a simple rule of the form "If X then Y" had been broken. In one such task, the context is quite abstract: "If a card has a circle on one side, it must have the colour yellow on the other". In the second version, the context is more familiar: "If a person has an alcoholic drink, they must be aged 18 or over". In both tasks, the logical calculation required to work out what to do is identical. But in the first case, 75% of people get it wrong, whereas in the second, the same proportion get it right. Why? The hypothesis is that we are ill-adapted to do abstract logical reasoning but we have evolved to be very good at spotting cheats. Indeed, the correct answer to the under-age drinking task often strikes people as obvious: it 'pops out' at them prior to any conscious calculation. In contrast, with the colours and shapes task, people need to concentrate on the logic and even then, they usually get it wrong. It's fun to show this to a group because, although they should be reassured that most people slip up, a very common reaction among people who get the abstract task wrong is to deny their reasoning was at all faulty. So it was that one insistent woman protested at great length that the first task was not logically equivalent to the second. She had only got it wrong because it was badly phrased, misleading or ambiguous.

But if that was the case, why is it very clear, if you go through the answers carefully, that there is in fact only one way to answer correctly and that any other answer is demonstrably wrong? This woman did not lack scepticism. In fact, she was full of it: sceptical of me and of those who had developed the tests. What she lacked was scepticism about herself. Instead of being humbled by the test, she remained sure that there was nothing

wrong with her powers of reasoning. The test was wrong, not her answers to it.

I'm sympathetic because when I first took the tests I suspected there had been some kind of sleight of hand too. But while I was merely doubtful, this woman's conviction was absolute, even after I explained that these tests had been replicated many times and with many variants and that if they did have flaws they couldn't be the allegedly obvious ones she was claiming.

It's not surprising that we are reluctant to admit our fallibility in such cases. It's hard enough to disbelieve the evidence of your own senses: if you start to doubt your own mind you could easily think yourself mad. If we can be so mistaken about a simple logical deduction that seems so clear, how can we trust the more complicated chains of reasoning that lead us to make self-defining choices about our lives and values?

The worry is profound because we do indeed define ourselves by such choices. A right-wing atheist man can find it harder to imagine being a left-wing Christian and remaining himself than he can imagine being a woman. Yet if his convictions about God and politics rest on such flimsy powers of reasoning, isn't his very self a construct that rests on the flimsiest of foundations?

Hard though it is to truly believe, I think the honest answer is probably yes. Because I have other reasons for doubting that the self is the unified, coherent entity we usually suppose it to be, I can at least entertain this thought without being overcome by dread. But it's still not a happy one. Personal integrity is one of my most important values and it's hard to see how such a thing is even possible if the self isn't strongly integrated in the first place.

I suspect that the main reasons why Descartes could not doubt his own existence were psychological, not logical. He failed to apply his 'method of doubt' rigorously to the one thing he could not afford to doubt. Much of what passes for scepticism is really credulity in disguise: it is a too-easy willingness to distrust the world and others because of an uncritical trust in our own powers to perceive reality and reason our way to the truth. We refuse to turn our scepticism inwards because we can't risk ceasing to believe in ourselves.

*Comments welcome to [julian@julianbaggini.com](mailto:julian@julianbaggini.com)*

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



THERE WAS A very thoughtful discussion on the ASKE email network recently about concerns over the decline in the number of schoolchildren opting for science subjects, the number of teachers available to teach science at school, and the decline in popularity of science subjects at university, along with the closure of some traditional science departments such as Chemistry. Along with this has come concern about the quality and suitability of some of the newer disciplines with accusations that they are lightweight in intellectual content and that students have a much easier time of it than those who opt for the more traditional disciplines.

One reason offered in the discussion for the apparent waning appeal of science to today's generation is that children are now provided with much more 'instant gratification' from stimulation by the multimedia, the internet, Play Stations, and so on. Perhaps this is more attractive than 'rational internal pondering' about why things are as they are. Another related reason discussed was that, to understand the world, science tends to operate with just one major paradigm that aims to establish universal laws and unified explanations, whereas there may be greater appeal these days for disciplines that embrace multiple ways of understanding the world such as romanticism, modernism and post-modernism and a greater use of qualitative rather than quantitative, positivistic approaches.

But should we be worrying about this? Most contributors felt that the more people (including children) who learn about science, including the scientific method, the better, but what actually happens cannot occur in isolation from economic influences. If there is a shortage of science graduates and a surfeit of non-science graduates, one solution will be that market forces will ensure that wages and salaries will automatically be adjusted to favour the former over the latter. What might distort this is the current tendency of the government to create public service jobs (or non-jobs as was originally stated) that require degrees in the soft social sciences. It was also thought that a more serious problem was in our high schools because science graduates now find teaching so unappealing.

One contributor noted that the University of Cambridge and the LSE have indicated that some A-levels such as film studies, travel and tourism might be taken less seriously than analytical subjects for univer-

sity entrance (see [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/education/5277556.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/education/5277556.stm)). It was also noted that there is also a Further Maths Network for introducing students to the joys of thinking mathematically (<http://www.fmnnetwork.org.uk/>).

I myself enjoyed science up to O level standard. I still enjoyed my Chemistry A-level. To me, Chemistry was a warm and colourful subject. A-level Maths (pure and applied) was colder and more austere but it had honesty and clarity and it didn't intimidate you so much if you looked it straight in the eye. But A-level Physics! Oh the dreariness of it all! Can anything be as tedious and mind numbing as optics? Or thermodynamics? In my case, the nadir came when our teacher presented us with an equation for calculating the work done blowing a bubble. One always felt compelled to ask the question "Why?"

Actually, since the time I did my A levels in the 60s I have always viewed modern mass education with some scepticism. "What is the point?" I would protest to my schoolmates (I didn't dare ask my teachers). "What is the point of spending years learning all of this information when we're going to forget most of it once we've left school?" The answer I came up with for myself was that it served the needs of those employed in the education industry. Now there's scepticism for you!

Nothing that has happened since then has changed my mind. Indeed, I am even more persuaded. You see, when I was a lad (*here we go again*) at Grammar School you only did eight O levels and if you left school at 16 with five of them you could start out on a promising career. Or you stayed on, did three A-levels and if you got two and left at 18 the world was your oyster. Even greater things awaited you if you went to university, although you had to wait a few years to reap the rewards. Still, in those days our fees and grants were funded by the county councils and I never understood why people were paid to do degrees that they never used: at one time the most common first degree of accountants was Chemistry (or the most common career of people with Chemistry degrees was accountancy, I can't remember which way round it was).

Now education has gone the way of all mass public industries – more people employed by it, more people consuming more of it, more demand for more of it, all riding on the unquestioned assumption that this is what we actually need.

**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)  
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# Reviews



## TOO MUCH BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT

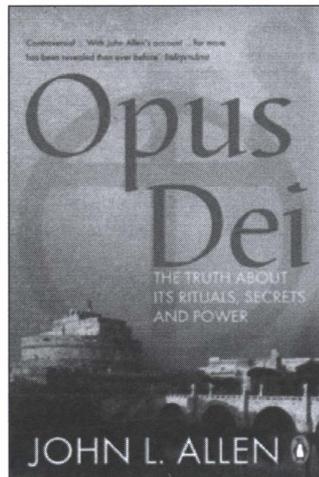
**Opus Dei: The Truth About its Rituals, Secrets and Power**

by John L Allen

Penguin Books, £8.99 (pb), ISBN 0141024658

Thanks to Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* (and also the news that Ruth Kelly is a member) popular interest in Opus Dei has never been higher. Journalist John L Allen has sought to present an objective account that dispels some of the myths and conspiracy theories that have accrued around the organisation founded by the recently canonised Spanish cleric Josemaría Escrivá.

Allen does indeed attempt to present a balanced account of Opus Dei. As part of this he has spent more than a year in the company of members and officials of the group. He gives voice to the many individuals that he has spent time with, letting them speak about their experiences, views and ideas. Allen tackles many of the controversial questions head on: the practices of 'mortification', secretiveness, political policies and influence, the life and times of Escrivá, sexism and so on.



In all instances Allen appears to give Opus Dei the benefit of the doubt. For example, on the vexed question of political influence, Allen repeatedly quotes the party line that Opus Dei allows its members freedom of conscience. With respect to the practices of the 'mortification of the flesh', a practice that excites feverish interest because of its sado-erotic nature, Allen is content to point out that other Catholic sects also engage in the practice. He does not entertain any questions as to the sexuality of such activities.

It should be noted that Allen is a Catholic himself, and therefore the kind of criticisms that an atheist or secularist would make of Opus Dei are not natural to him. The fact that other Catholic orders engage in similar activities to Opus Dei would not normally be considered a good defence.

Those looking for a counter-point to the salacious and conspiratorial view of Opus Dei will find that this book takes great pains to set the record straight. However, those looking for a more critical response will be disappointed. Allen has produced the sort of recruitment manual that the organisation itself could not have delivered.

Pan Pantziarka

## EGO FOR BREAKFAST

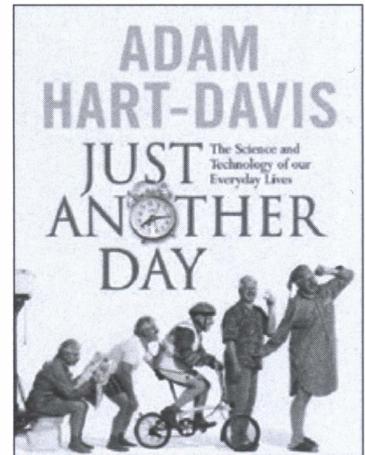
**Just Another Day: The Science and Technology of our Everyday Lives**

by Adam Hart-Davis

Orion Books, £18.99 (hb), ISBN 0752873342

Given the relentless tide of mind-shrinking nonsense that drenches popular culture thanks to credulous and/or cynical tabloid newspapers, television channels and other media, any attempt to lure people into taking some interest in the science behind our daily experiences is, on the face of it, very welcome.

Unfortunately, the face in question here is the grinning beard of Adam Hart-Davis, who seems to imagine that he is a fascinating eccentric, and that the minutiae of his daily life will be of huge interest. Every other page features yet another photograph of His Worship in eye-stinging "look at Adam Hart-Davis!" outfits. Photography is illustrated by a picture of Adam Hart-Davis taking a photograph.



Bicycles are explained via several pictures of Adam Hart-Davis riding bicycles, in case we have never encountered any.

The conceit of the book is that, by following the activities of an average day, we can be led to consider sleep, food, hygiene (the cover is graced with an image of Adam Hart-Davis on the toilet), travel, work, and so on. Why we have to know about what time Adam Hart-Davis makes morning tea for Sue Blackmore, or the fact that Adam Hart-Davis' work apparently involves speaking to "large audiences", is far from clear.

There have been other far more appealing books about the science of everyday life, by such authors as David Bodanis (*The Secret House*), John Emsley (*Molecules at an Exhibition*) and Len Fisher (*How to Dunk a Doughnut*). Books like Lawrence M. Krauss's *The Physics of Star Trek* can be another handy detergent for non-starter paranormalist fantasies. They are books that are actually about science.

Adam Hart-Davis is also the author of *Taking the Piss*.

Paul Taylor

## COBBLERS

### That's Bollocks: Urban Legends, Conspiracy Theories and Old Wives' Tales

by Albert Jack

Penguin Books, £12.99 (hb), ISBN 0 140 51574 7

...You said it, pal. You know Christmas is coming when sorry accumulations like this appear. Albert Jack has mostly cobbled together bits from Fortean Times and tabloid "it's a weird old world" columns. The rest of it has been culled from a few lazy sessions sticking terms like "urban legend", "conspiracy theory" and "old wives' tales" into Google and adding a smug tone to hold it together. The result is a rehash of generally familiar tales that he invariably fails to exploit fully, such as missing out the ending of the story about the man who blows himself up on the toilet then is dropped from the stretcher by laughing paramedics.

He doesn't even seem to understand what an urban legend is. A number of the items are tagged with "this is a true story". An example is the story of how Jack Nicholson's sister turned out to be his mother. Peculiar it may be, urban legend it isn't. Whether Mick Jagger and David Bowie went to bed together is just showbiz gossip.

Then we have the man tying helium balloons to his deckchair, which obviously isn't about Larry Walters who achieved precisely this feat in California in 1982

because Jack states that his version, about "Harry", is unlikely to be true (though strangely Harry paraphrases Walters' famous "a man can't just sit around" remark ; now that *is* weird).

When Jack gets on to the 'myth' of global warming, it becomes clear what he is – a pub bore with a word processor. Pitted against Gore, I know which AI I would put my money on.

The biggest mystery is why Penguin produced a good quality hardback when its contents were the equivalent of chicken nuggets. Despite the declaration that this is a study of urban legends, it is just an undemanding bog book. If you want a proper survey of urban legends read Jan Harold Brunvand (Jack clearly has). If *That's Bollocks* does well we are promised a follow-up. Please don't encourage him.

Tom Ruffles



examines the first of these. The direct evidence for the Jesus story comes in the New Testament, above all in the four Gospels. These were, of course, all composed some time after the events they describe, and are a selection from an unknown number of accounts, oral and written, that circulated in the early years of Christianity. The Gospel accounts are inconsistent with each other, and also internally. Only two, Luke and Matthew, deal with the birth of Jesus. They do so in quite different and contradictory ways. Internally, Luke provides an elaborate genealogy for Joseph, the husband of Mary, Jesus' mother, to show that he was descended from King David. Thus his son would be eligible to be the Royal Messiah. But he also makes it clear that Jesus was literally the son of God, not Joseph.

Vermes quietly and methodically teases out the various strands that make up the two accounts, drawing on obviously immense scholarship, but writing with elegant clarity. He shows what must have been added by the gospel writers, or later editors, and what may be based on historical fact. There are those who suggest that Jesus never lived at all, but a more balanced view is that he was a charismatic preacher who was born about 4 or 5 BCE and was executed some thirty-plus years later. Stories and legends accumulated around him for several centuries, and such were the two nativity accounts. Vermes concludes that the purpose was "the creation of a prologue, enveloping the newborn Jesus with an aura of marvel and enigma", and thus fitting him to be the divine Saviour of the new religion as it broke from its Jewish roots and sought to become universal.

John Radford

[www.wilnet.co.uk](http://www.wilnet.co.uk)



WELL, I'VE HAD ANOTHER WORD...  
AND BLOW ME IF IT DOESN'T TURN OUT  
GOD'S ON THEIR SIDE, AFTER ALL.

## GOSPEL TRUTH

### The Nativity: History and Legend

by Geza Vermes

Penguin Books, £7.99 (pb), ISBN 0-141-12446-1

Christian dogma rests on the life and teaching of Jesus Christ and in particular on his birth and death. Geza Vermes, one of the most distinguished of contemporary Biblical scholars, here



# LETTERS

## Superhuman

Do you believe in supernatural intelligence? Supernatural: outside of nature; above nature; superior to nature.

The intelligence of humans is superior to nature, it is supernatural, there is nothing in nature that comes close to it, nor its abilities. The intelligence of humans cannot be attributed to evolution, evolution is supposed to be a natural law, not a supernatural law. It is not possible for humans to comprehend nothingness, man can only comprehend existence, therefore humans are incapable of atheism, and how can a human describe non-existence?

Humans cannot, but we can describe existence. Try to describe an empty room; all you could say is that it is a room and that it is empty! You cannot describe emptiness.

**Mark Schaefer**  
Livejournal Comment

## Comments on *The Skeptic*

I have just received my first copy of *The Skeptic* (19.2). It is an enjoyable read and I was particularly entertained by the article pouring scorn on the nonsense promoted by Mia Dolan and others of her ilk. What disturbs me is the grow-

ing popularity of this rubbish and the credulity with which vast numbers of people accept it. Of course, Julian Baggini is correct when he points out that the cynical claim that humanity is dumbing down in general is patently absurd. Nevertheless, it is hard to understand why, in this age when more people have received at least high school educations than any other time in human history, there is a dramatic increase in 'faith' based nonsense. From useless medicines to alien visitations, the general public seem only too keen to embrace whatever rubbish is fed (or more particularly, sold) to them.

Perhaps the phenomenon is a consequence of instantaneous worldwide media coverage. Rubbish peddlers can spread their lies with ease. Surely though, this would be balanced by an equally free absorption of healthy scepticism. It is not as though the information to make informed evaluations of published claims is not readily available. Maybe it is simple laziness.

I did wonder at the extensive coverage the magazine extended to the spirit world. I had thought that most of that particular stupidity had been laid to rest some 100 years ago. Mind you, I did see an outra-

geous man on television (I have forgotten his name), who was claiming to be in touch with the shades of the dead relatives of his audience. This was so excruciatingly discomfiting that I had to abandon it.

I found the article on Ki Aikido a bit incoherent. My only experience with this phenomenon is when children do not want to be picked up: they then 'Get heavy'. If they want picking up they make themselves light. My observation has been that they 'Get heavy' by sagging into an excessively relaxed position; the exact opposite of what is claimed in the article.

Wendy Grossman makes some excellent points about 'miraculous escapes'. I get particularly irritated when people on actuality or game shows openly 'Pray to God' to help them win. The God of trivia, or what?

Of course William Crookes was by no means the only early scientist who also pursued what we would regard as crackpot phenomena – including spirits and alchemy. (Newton did so as well.) However, it should be remembered that they were men of their time and no doubt were convinced that the proofs of these beliefs would quickly yield to scientific study. It was

only as science developed that the obvious weaknesses and lack of reason in the so-called metaphysical world became apparent.

Well, enough from me. I look forward to the next issue

of *The Skeptic*.

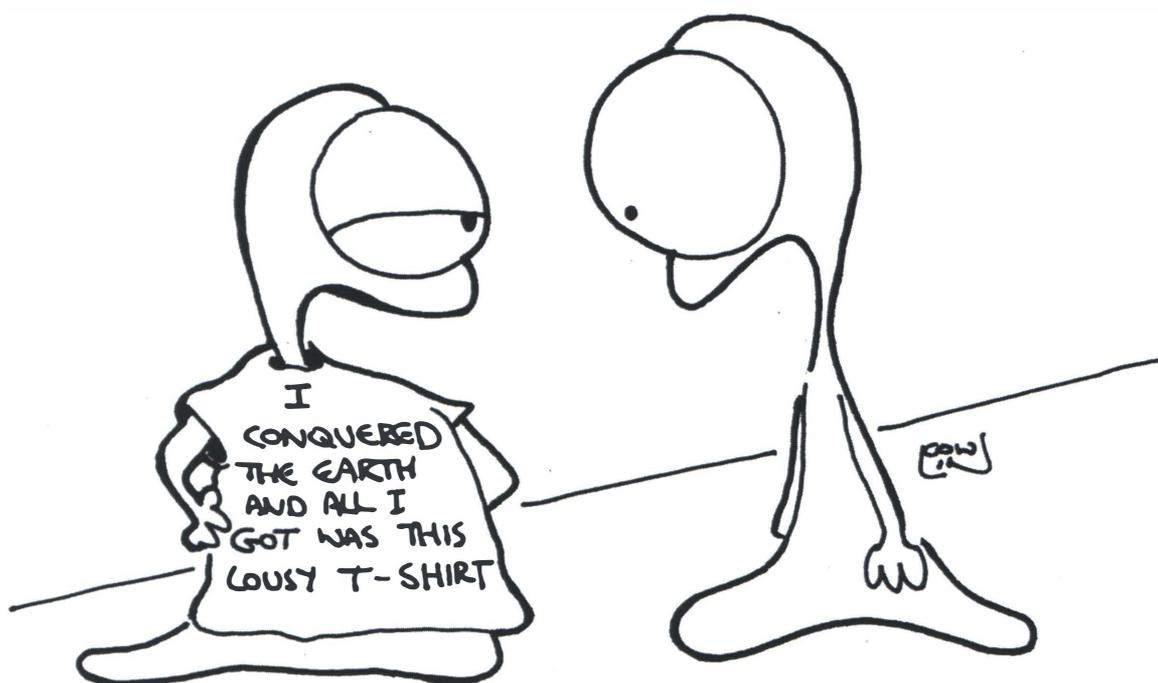
**Ian Fraser**  
Pretoria, South Africa

[*Editorial note:* a direct quotation from Martin Parkinson's article on Ki Aikido:

"Relaxation is important: tense

and resistant people are much easier to hoik around", suggesting that actually, relaxed people are more difficult to lift, corresponding with Ian's observation about children relaxing and 'getting heavy'.]

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



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