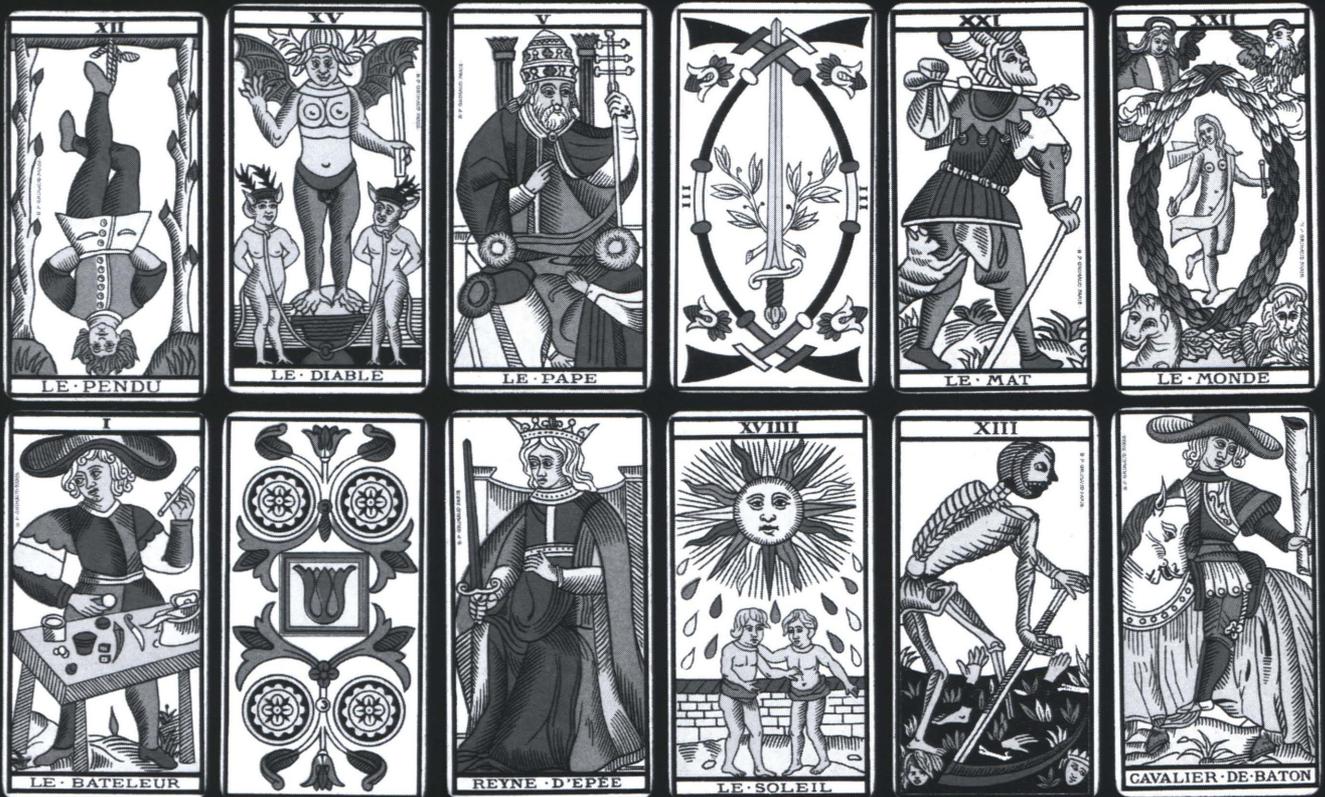


Volume 20 Number 3  
Autumn 2007

# The **Skeptic**



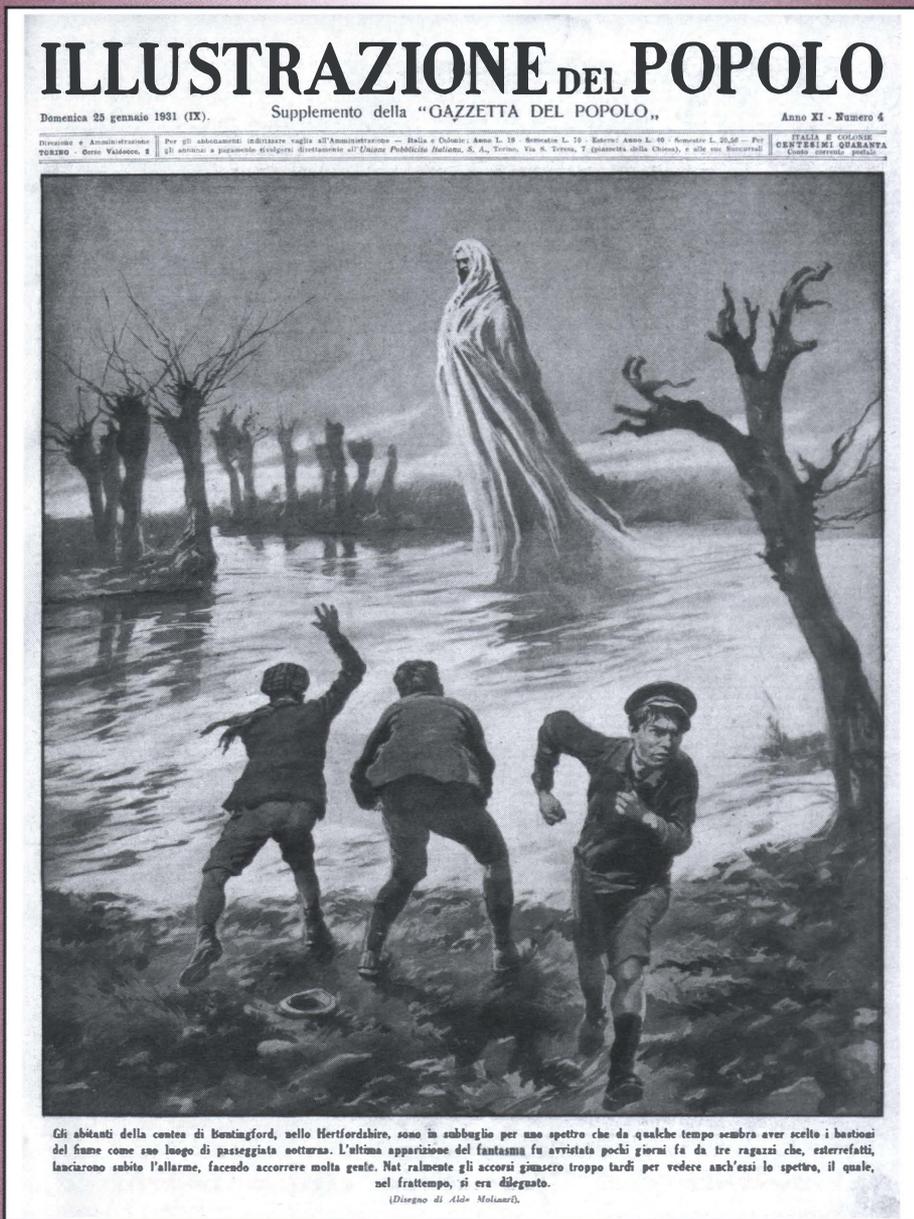
## Psychics on eBay

*Also in this issue:*

**Haunting the Bereaved**  
**R. E. Ality Check**

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

# Hilary Evans' Paranormal Picture Gallery



## COWLED FIGURE AT BUNTINGFORD

Cowled figures – usually interpreted as ‘monks’ – are a favoured species of apparition: presumably the garment represents the shroud in which the dead were formerly buried and the cowl itself serves the convenient purpose of concealing identity. This majestic figure, seen by several residents gliding over the flooded river at Buntingford, Hertfordshire, in January 1931, is true to type though seemingly of immense size. Three boys who see it run off in terror. The fact that an Italian magazine chose to illustrate it suggests that the case attracted considerable attention at the time, but although this is one of the finest apparition pictures in our files, I have been unable to find any further reference to the event.

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



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## Contents

### Editorial

Victoria Hamilton and Chris French 4

### Hits and Misses

5

### Skeptic at large . . .

Wendy M Grossman 7

### Haunting the Bereaved

Mark Williams 8

### Skeptical Stats

13

### Psychics on eBay

Emma-Louise Rhodes 14

### R.E.Ality Check: An Alternative Approach to Religious Education

Damien Morris 18

### Rhyme and Reason

Steve Donnelly 21

### Philosopher's Corner

Julian Baggini 22

### ASKE News

Micheal Heap 23

### Reviews

24

### Letters

26

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# Editorial

Victoria Hamilton and Chris French



**HELLO AND WELCOME** to issue 20.3 of *The Skeptic*. Let's get the apology out of the way first. In a recent editorial (*Skeptic*, 20.1), we referred to "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". As Donald has since gently pointed out to us, the actual claim was that Darwin converted to Christianity months *before* his death. It was an easy slip to make but we are more than happy to correct it. For thus are myths and misunderstandings promulgated. At least one of us has realised that he (so you can figure out which one!) has several times since referred to "Darwin's alleged deathbed conversion" – and, of course, we now realise that no deathbed conversion was ever alleged by anyone! This particular controversy is still rumbling on, as you will see from our *Letters* page.

We have three articles in this issue for your delectation and delight. Mark Williams (about whom, more below) admits to finding Colin Fry's *Sixth Sense* TV programme, in which Fry claims to contact the dead, at least entertaining – but perhaps not for the reasons intended by the producers! We hope you enjoy his musings on Fry's performance and its wider implications.

Emma-Louise Rhodes investigates the use of eBay by psychics. We would not wish to put unworthy ideas into the heads of our readers, but it does seem to be remarkably easy to set oneself up as, say, a Tarot reader

in this way – and it appears that it can be quite lucrative. We hasten to add that, to the best of our knowledge, Emma-Louise resisted the temptation to exploit the vulnerable in this way!

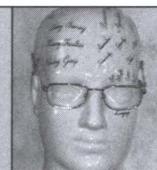
Our final article in this issue is from Damien Morris. It is all too easy to find fault with modern education but this is a piece that argues that it is possible to enthuse students and encourage critical thinking in the context of religious education simply by getting them to reflect upon and discuss their own beliefs in an organized way. The end result can be most gratifying. As Damien writes, "When uncanny phenomena are explored from a historical, anthropological, psychological or broadly scientific perspective, the 'super'-natural vanishes. The amazement, awe and wonder, however, usually remain."

It's all change here at *The Skeptic*. We welcome to our ranks Mark Williams who has been working with Wendy Grossman on our *Hits and Misses* and *Skeptical Stats* columns and will take over full responsibility for these columns with effect from the next issue. We're happy to have him on board. On a much sadder note, this is Victoria Hamilton's final issue as co-editor. She is returning to Australia to do a PhD and we wish her all happiness and success in the future. After three years of excellent work, she will be greatly missed.

We hope you enjoy all of our regular columns, letters pages, cartoons, and book reviews. With best wishes, Chris and (for the last time) Victoria.



## Hits and Misses



### Bent copyright

Uri Geller recently offered to save Carlisle from an ancient curse which causes floods, pestilence, and sporting humiliation (according to *Reuters*, he offered to repurpose the city's "cursing stone" as a garden ornament), but it seems he still had time for legal action against a sceptical video posted to YouTube. Recently acquired by the Web search engine company Google, YouTube is a site where anyone may post video clips of up to ten minutes long, and millions do, anything from highlights of 1970s tennis matches to self-filmed personal thoughts on life. As you might expect, much of the material uploaded to the site is copyright to someone other than the uploader, and since the Google acquisition the pace of legal complaints has stepped up.

Most of these complaints come from large media companies like Viacom, which not long ago followed up a failed licensing deal with a demand that all its copyrighted material be removed from the site.



However, according to *The Times*, the latest workout of Geller's toned legal biceps focuses on a short video featuring James Randi bending metal using sleight of hand techniques. Geller is claiming he owns the copyright in ten seconds of this video excerpt, taken from the 1993 TV programme *Secrets of the Psychics*.

Geller may have bitten off more than he realised. Suing individual sceptics is one thing, but in straying into the field of copyright claims he's taking on much bigger opponents. The *Electronic Frontier Foundation* (EFF), a lobbying group focused on defending civil lib-

erties online and a staunch opponent of over-reaching copyright claims, retaliated by filing suit against Geller for using "baseless copyright claims" to stifle free speech. The crux of the issue is the 'fair use' (in the UK known as 'fair dealing') clause in US copyright law which permits some limited use of copyright material for education, criticism, or parody without the permission of the rights-holders. In short, while it is questionable whether ten seconds of video footage falls within fair use, silencing sceptical review on this basis may similarly infringe the US First Amendment right to freedom of speech.

YouTube removed the video rather than risk prosecution under the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (1998). However, the EFF has posted all the relevant documents in the case, on its website (<http://www.eff.org>).

### Rumblings underground

It sounded like a glorified tour of Edinburgh's most 'paranormally active' (and media-friendly) areas, but the third annual *Mary King's Ghost Fest* (held 11-20 May, 2007) featured the world's first infrasound experiments in an allegedly haunted location. The research, led by Ciaran O'Keeffe of *Most Haunted* fame, complemented what the Ghost Fest website described as the "hugely popular overnight vigils in the shadowy Blair Street Vaults" and "Electronic Voice Phenomenon (EVP) Workshops". Aside from the curiosity with which one might approach an EVP workshop – perhaps they teach you how to create the phenomenon after you die? – this experiment appears to be the most interesting event.

O'Keeffe and Steve Parsons, an investigator from the research group Para.Science, were to play Pied Pipers, guiding the public through the notorious underground network beneath Edinburgh's Royal Mile. Along the way, Parsons would expose some of the visiting groups to an infrasound stimulus created by his custom-built generator. Because the generator operates at frequencies below 20Hz, the sound should be below the range the human ear can perceive. The idea is to establish whether, as O'Keeffe and Parsons' press release put it, "infrasound could be the cause of feelings associated with paranormal experiences or if such feelings truly are an inexplicable phenomena."

The release also claimed that this research is the first of its kind to examine this question. The basis comes from the late Engineering and Design graduate and 'ghost hunter' Vic Tandy, who in "Ghost in the Machine", a 1998 paper published in the *Journal of the*

*Society for Psychical Research*, hypothesised that infrasound of the order of 19Hz might be responsible for many ghost sightings, as it closely matches the natural resonant frequency of the human eye. Infrasound emitters such as traffic, trains, thunder, and wind are now common in everyday life, and infrasonic waves can carry over long distances with less susceptibility to interference or disturbance than higher frequencies. Testing Tandy's theory could, therefore, yield important and interesting results. We'll keep you posted.

### Why fie the wi-fi?

Geeks everywhere were groaning at the BBC's *Panorama* programme in May, when it ran "Wi-fi: a warning signal". In that story, *Panorama* claimed that wi-fi – also known as wireless networking – was potentially more dangerous than mobile phone masts. And it's in our schools! And children have skulls that are immature and unformed!

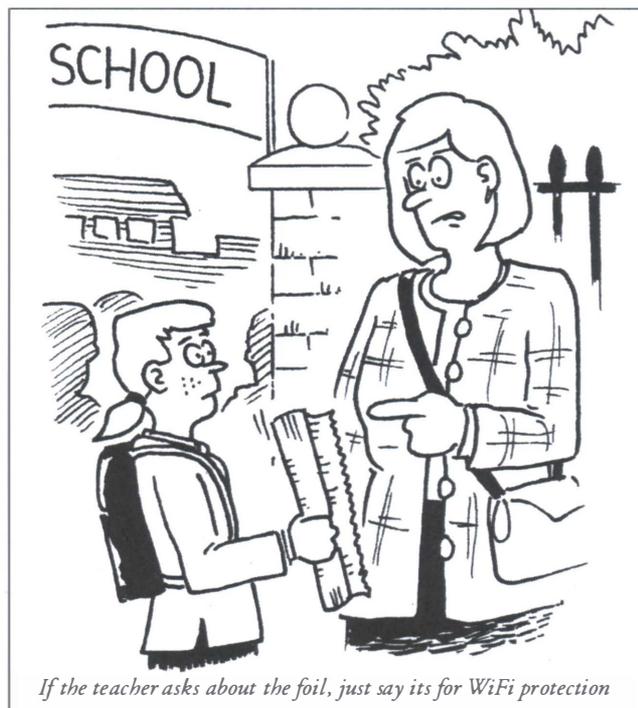
A decade after people started worrying about mobile phone masts – during which time all those same worried people bought themselves and their children mobile phones – it's clearly time for the next Great Technology Scare. The programme obliged with all the necessary elements: a few scientists to say "We just don't know – so we're worried"; an MP to accuse the government of complicity with industry in ignoring the issue; a guy with a measuring device; and a miserable victim (because apparently no one has told the producers of *Panorama* that the plural of anecdote is not data). The victim in the case was a woman who claims to be so sensitive to electromagnetic radiation that she must shield her house with metal foil (helpfully supplied by one of the programme's worry-mongers).

We would point out that at heart what wi-fi and mobile phones are is radios. The radiation they broadcast is radio waves. Yes, the right frequencies and intensities of radiation can be dangerous. But we've had radiation in the form of broadcast media for some decades now. It only matters that wi-fi gives off three times as much radiation as mobile phones (but much further from the head) if that radiation is dangerous in the first place.

Should we do research into the long-term effects of the various types of radiation we're surrounding ourselves with? Certainly. Should we panic on the basis of a few vaguely ill people and rip out a technology being embraced by millions because it's useful and functional? No. If we are so concerned about children, shouldn't we be banning automobiles (which kill 170 and seriously injure 4,000 every year), pollution (the WHO found in 2004 that exposure to pollution or unsafe living conditions kills 100,000 European children every year), or

poverty (another 1,000 a year in Britain alone)?

The BBC's own technology writers were disgusted enough to publish their own critique of the programme on the BBC website. We can only be grateful no one told the *Panorama* team that wi-fi broadcasts in the same frequency band as microwave ovens.



### In evidence we trust

If there's one thing that's more galling than another, it's seeing the limited public resources for health care spent on things like homoeopathy rather than treatments with a sound basis of evidence. The good news is that homoeopathy on the NHS is under increasing pressure. According to *The Times*, more than half of English Primary Care Trusts are now refusing to pay for homoeopathy or severely restricting access to it, in part due to last year's letter from 13 scientists that opposed NHS support of unproven or disproved treatments. Two homoeopathic hospitals – Tunbridge Wells and the Royal London – are being threatened with closure. An NHS report published at the end of May concluded that what evidence there is to support homoeopathy is "very weak" and "the evidence of cost-effectiveness is lacking". (Clearly the evidence needs further dilution.)

The report suggested that PCTs should reduce their coverage or eliminate it entirely. The biggest difficulty now may be convincing the public that this is a question of ensuring that funding goes to treatments that work, not of suppressing "consumer choice" or serving the interests of Big Pharma.

Thanks to this issue's clippings contributors: **Mark Williams, Sid Rodrigues, the Wizard's Star List, Skeptic News**. *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. If you would like to contribute links and updates directly to the *Skeptic's blog* ([ukskeptic.livejournal.com](http://ukskeptic.livejournal.com)), please email for information.

## Skeptic at large . . .

Wendy M Grossman



I THINK IT was last summer that a card-carrying sceptic turned to me at some shindig or other and said, more or less, “What difference does it make if creationism is taught in the schools?”

It was clear that “It offends me if we teach kids lies” wasn’t a sufficient response. Especially when Our Sceptic went on to say that “These people aren’t going to run the country anyway.”

I’m not sure which statement had me more stunned.

The rest of the conversation has faded by now, and it’s possible that I’ve lost track of whatever was said to flesh out the latter comment. In any case, here’s what I read this week that showed me the answer I could have made. It’s from the 2005 book *Half Gone: Oil, Gas, Hot Air, and the Global Energy Crisis*, by earth scientist and Greenpeace activist Jeremy Leggett.

I once spoke at length to the Ford Motor Company’s lobbyist at the international climate negotiations. He tried, with conviction, to persuade me that the world was not four and a half billion years old but a mere ten thousand years. He also told me that it didn’t matter what we put into the atmosphere in terms of heat-trapping gases, because the Antichrist was coming, and along with his disciples – of which he wanted me to know I was one – the forces of God would be defeated in the Battle of Armageddon. And that wouldn’t matter either, because the forces of God would then ascend to Heaven.

I’m reading Leggett’s book as part of an assignment to write about the future of energy, which involves both researching the current best theories about when we might run out of fossil fuels and the problem of climate change. Leggett, later in his book, is particularly concerned that the world may react to increasingly constrained supplies of oil and gas by reverting to coal – which would vastly worsen the climate change problem.

Leggett previously worked as a consultant in the oil industry, teaching them the geological underpinnings of earth science. They can’t, he says, disagree with those facts because that’s how they find oil. He can’t imagine how to bridge the gap between what geology and the fossil record tell us and what his Ford lobbyist believed. I don’t really know either, and my job is supposed to be explaining things to people who don’t understand them to begin with. If the planet really is in trouble – and the books I’m reading seem to leave little doubt – making changes is going to require the mutual cooperation of millions of people. What percentage of them can we afford to have believe there’s no problem that need concern them?

When *The Skeptic* began it was a carefully considered policy that the sceptics had no position on religion. We respond to things we can test, was the decision, not to matters of faith. We may not be able to see the little pink cloud you believe governs

the world’s affairs, but as long as you don’t claim it’s abducting people we won’t argue the point. Observing this demarcation had a practical point, which was that people with strong religious views would not be deterred from joining us in disputing psychics’ claims when scientific evidence was lacking.

But faith is one thing; anti-science is another. The Ford lobbyist falls into the category of anti-science, and the spread of such rigid beliefs into company boardrooms and the White House is I think the reason why so many American sceptics are beginning to abandon this firmly drawn line. It puts them closer to the humanists in one sense; but it seems to me the humanist arguments have always been more philosophical and social than scientific.

The (sadly) late columnist Molly Ivins, a journalist who managed to be progressive, feminist, funny, and Texan all at once, was fond of explaining that politics really does matter to people’s everyday lives. The decisions politicians make determine the quality of hospital care, whether we starve when we’re old, whether the airline industry gets subsidies allowing it to spend fuel without worrying about the consequences, and whether the country builds coal-powered electricity plants or invests in renewable energy. Let’s say the electorate doesn’t run the country and that voting is just a sop to make us believe we matter. Let’s say politicians don’t run the country, and that they are just put there to carry out the will of civil servants and corporations. Suddenly, how many Ford lobbyists we produce among the civil service (remember, Humphrey Appleby studied classics) and company directors (who are more likely to study law or business than science) starts to matter.

We already have (for another few weeks at least, as I write this) a prime minister who thinks faith-based schools would be a good thing. Where there are already creationists among university *science* lecturers. Where, according to the *THES* in 2006, creationism is making inroads into *university* science curricula. Where, if you read the right Web sites, you notice that getting hold of children young is considered a major goal because getting kids to believe the truth of Genesis requires absolute rejection of evolutionary theory in favour of creationism.

Really, of course, it still offends me if we teach kids lies in school. The fact that kids are already taught other lies – about history, or democracy, or what they can expect in life – is beside the point. I’ve seen the arguments here that creationism could be used as a way of teaching kids critical thinking. But I think that’s not what will get through. What that would do is turn schools into the equivalent of daytime talk shows, where nothing is solved by examining the evidence and every scientific dispute is turned into warring but equal points of view. This is hardly a valuable future for education. Though I should care: I’ve had mine.

And no, I’m not going to tell you who the sceptic was!

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>.

# Haunting the Bereaved

Mark Williams reflects on the 'psychic' offerings of Colin Fry as presented in his TV show, *Sixth Sense*

AS THE REGULAR reader and proud sceptical disciple (or the quietly and perhaps appropriately embarrassed believer) that you must necessarily be to clutch this fine journalistic artefact firmly alongside today's copy of the *Daily Mail*, I shall presume you are already aware of the existence of cold reading. For the keen but uninitiated few, cold reading can essentially be described as the art of attempting linguistically, behaviourally, and often rectally, to relay to people, personal information which is derived from observation, rationality and inductive reasoning. It is a technique by which an individual can appear to know more about another than they feasibly should. Formed from many psychologically allied fields, cold reading provides a highly sophisticated and informed analysis when performed well, but in consideration of its use by deliberately deceptive and fraudulent psychic or mediumistic performers, I make no apologies for sphincter level tenure in this article.

That stated, the particular episode of apparent cold reading which inspired this articulate rant was a comparatively innocuous, if blatant, affair on the behalf of Mr Colin Fry, resident psychic and lone presenter of FTN channel's *Sixth Sense* programme. I must admit to being newly initiated to this specific twice nightly, thirty-minute delight, but the seductive title sequence perhaps suggested that Mr Fry would gesture enthusiastically towards audience members, whilst simultaneously relaying important messages from the 'other world'. What actually resulted was a marvel seemingly best described as a Q&A session – our genial host asking direct questions of audience members and subsequently showing paranormal 'insight'.

Now I realise that, although the fundamentals of cold reading may come as no surprise to many readers, this claim may be more easily dismissed quickly by the perhaps more open-minded and less delightfully critical reader. With that in mind, I offer the following analysis based on the first reading of the programme broadcast on Tuesday 7<sup>th</sup> November 2006:

The reading itself lasted for a total of exactly three and a half minutes from introduction to closing. During this period, eight topics were mentioned by the host. Within these, four items were initial 'hits'. That is to say that four comments addressing those eight topics superficially made immediate sense to the participants. Conversely, only one item was a 'miss'. That is to say that only one comment was not verified as true by the participants.

Now the above might lend credence to Fry's abilities either as a master cold reader or as a genuine psychic.

That is, of course, presuming his other seven direct questions and two completely unverifiable predictions about the future are ignored. I intend to consider these future predictions first.

## Seeing into the future

To me, there lies an important distinction in apparent psychic readings, illustrated quite nicely by a sign currently advertising a shop in the centre of Ealing, London. The sign in question simply reads "Psychic, healer, palmist". If such abilities are presumed genuine, then it may be entirely plausible that the paranormally gifted individual working inside this shop can relay important information from your dearly departed

**What did seem rather difficult to psychically rationalise, however, were any reasons why around half of all the statements made by Fry were direct questions.**

grandmother, before transmitting palliative energies to cure your terribly sensitive, irritable bowel. However you regard these abilities, each can hypothetically exist within its own right. We are expected to believe that such abilities do not necessarily exist exclusively: one could potentially possess a single ability in mediumship or healing, but one could also be blessed with all of these extraordinary abilities.

The distinction, however, is that Seignior Fry not only seems blessed with the ability to deliver messages from the dead, but also to deliver messages about the future. For me, palmist abilities or messages from the dead require a certain stretch of the imagination, but specific predictions about the future require enlightenment on an entirely different level. The hypothetical psychically gifted healer who dabbles in palmistry may possess extrasensory channels of communication but she certainly cannot divine your future. She may make 'informed' guesses about major events in your life through the consideration of lines in your skin, but she does not talk about specifics. In this sense, the palmist cannot divine the future. Conversely, Fry, as a modest psychic medium speaking about the sizeable financial difficulties of one audience member, is able to state with absolute conviction that "You can sort it out by the six-

teenth of December". It is uncertain whether this is his own insight or that derived from the deceased grandfather of the audience member with whom he has contact, but at no point to my knowledge has Fry ever claimed to have personal insight into the future. As such, I am presuming that he must gain future insight as a sole result of his supposed communication with the dead. So, consider this: what aspect of death permits one's least favourite, late, great aunt to have personal insight into your future?

If the process of dying is not absolute and somehow empowers people with visionary qualities, it would have major scientific and philosophical implications. If the dead could accurately foretell our future, new consideration must be given to the debate about free will and determinism. Would our lives be determined? Would we be under the influence of a higher power? Or is it perhaps a little more logical to apply the principle of Occam's Razor to this scenario and conclude that Colin Fry, whilst conducting a psychic reading, might have been making statements for dramatic effect? Fry's participant simply heard what she wanted to, what she *expected* to hear.

### Direct questions

Having briefly considered visionary qualities, it is also important to consider the role of direct questioning in psychic readings. Fry claims possession of clairsentient abilities: a form of ESP which permits psychic insight primarily through personal 'feeling'. Given that clairsentience acts through emotional means rather than the relaying of directly verbalised messages, the psychic must bring their own interpretation to the ideas and feelings they experience. As such, some direct questions asking to clarify or confirm assertions might be justifiable. What did seem rather difficult to psychically rationalise, however, were any reasons why around half of all the statements made by Fry were direct questions.

A total of seven questions were asked of the audience members during the reading; five of these being in the first 40 seconds, and the final two following shortly after. Essentially, for the first 40 seconds of the reading, Fry did nothing but sensitively interrogate one lady about her family, potential bereavements and present company, at an impressive average rate of one question every eight seconds. After taking a moment to relax and breathe, he then focused attention on her friend.

Addressing this second volunteer, Fry first asked to see her hands. He specifically asked if the ring on the fourth finger of her middle-aged right hand, was her late mother's wedding ring. He continued by affirming quietly to himself that "Mum's in the spirit", quickly suffixed by the justification to his volunteer that "she said 'get her to show you.... hands'". Now these may indeed be the overly-analytical musings of a sceptic who should know better, but what intrigues me is why the exchange progressed in this form. Fry could have stated

from the outset that he believed the 'spirit contact' was possibly the late mother of this individual, and he felt that she was reporting her daughter was wearing her wedding ring. Instead, he decided to pose short questions to the lady, drawing conclusions and continuing only after affirmative responses had been given. Perhaps this is indicative of an attempt to make the reading more sensational by gaining more affirmative responses. Perhaps it could be indicative of mere fishing. Unfortunately, I cannot prove a negative in this – I cannot prove definitively that Fry was not using a form of mediumistic sense to derive information from the dead mother of a volunteer, following fairly specific questions. What I can state quite confidently is that his method of revealing this information appeared extremely suspicious to me, as a viewer who is expected to subscribe to the proceedings.



Apparatus by which the spirit hands are made to appear. The hands are merely gummies, either stuffed with sawdust, or, better still, inflated, and painted with luminous paint. Fixed on a framework they are passed to the medium by a confederate after he is bound.

*"Get her to show you hands": Now something like the above would have been more impressive...*

### General statements

By this stage, after the establishment of a series of affirmative responses, audience and volunteer alike are assumedly convinced of Fry's penchant for paranormal prophecy and are likely to no longer search for confirmatory evidence for this. As such, Fry is permitted to make greater numbers of general statements and entirely unfounded claims – something which is seem-

ingly exploited to maximum effect, considering the following:

I have to say I don't know what they're talking about here, but it's meant to be something that's like [sic] personal to you, that you're meant to understand. Sometimes you have to accept, you're flogging a dead horse. Sometimes you just have to accept 'back out and start again with something or somewhere else.' Do you understand? You can.

These three sentences are a very good illustration of standard 'Barnum statements'. Named after Phineas T Barnum, these statements are described in Ian Rowland's *The Full Facts Book of Cold Reading* as those which "a majority of people, if asked, will consider to be a reasonably accurate description of themselves". Although the most typical Barnum statements refer to personality or character traits, they can also easily address events or states of mind, as seen here.



*The Barnum Effect is named after Phineas T Barnum whose shows had "something for everyone" – just like a good psychic reading!*

First is a disclaimer that the medium cannot know the nature of this reference specifically. It provides a valid reason not to elaborate on the Barnum statements. In Fry's case, this is followed by a statement that, to be fair, most people who have experienced bereavement would be able to understand. Few individuals, I suspect, would progress with their life and not ruminate

over their deceased loved one or those things they personally regretted not doing or saying. "Flogging a dead horse" seems a very general description of these issues. In fact, upon watching the reading, one of the esteemed co-editors of this lovely magazine made some impromptu quip about *eBay*, and the unusual equine interests of the lady, if she was indeed literally 'flogging' a dead horse.

Joking aside, 'flogging a dead horse' and 'starting again' are perhaps two of the most generalised concepts which could be applied to someone in the grieving process. It says nothing of the individual, stating nothing specifically as fact. Similarly, 'Jacques statements' which Rowland describes as being "derived from common rites of passage, widely-recognised life patterns, and typical problems which we all encounter", also provide an explanation of the seemingly positive interpre-

**Fry could have stated from the outset that he believed the 'spirit contact' was possibly the late mother of this individual, and he felt that she was reporting her daughter was wearing her wedding ring. Instead, he decided to pose short questions to the lady, drawing conclusions and continuing only after affirmative responses had been given**

tation of such phrases. The power of these statements becomes obvious from the volunteer's post-reading interview in which she talks about the "bereavement problems" to which she believed she heard Fry refer. In reality, Fry made no such reference in the broadcast show. Instead, it is reasonable to assume the volunteer had placed her own significance and insight onto the very generic and non-specific statement made by Fry, and consequently remembered the exchange to be far more accurate than it truly was. Again, in short, I cannot disprove the use of any psychic sense in the reading, all I offer is a pattern which conforms to the models within cold reading. I echo the same question from above – was the participant only hearing what she expected to?

### Their own silly faults?

No venture into the possibilities of fraudulent mediumship and cold reading would be complete without mentioning a current contribution from Derren Brown, the “devil bearded mind fiddler” as dubbed by hedonistic *Zoo* magazine. He partly addresses the issues of expectation and the need for belief, writing in *Tricks of the Mind*, his latest entertaining excursion into psychic-bashing. Writing in his typically acerbic mode, he states “Most people don’t take psychics seriously, and may find all this self-evident. But some poor souls take psychics very seriously indeed, and many become reliant on them for advice or a sense of well-being. Perhaps that’s their own silly fault. Quite possibly.”

In many senses, Brown may be correct. Some individuals, I am sure, do tend to hold the psychic world in rather high regard and apply concerningly low critical analysis to its claims. Some individuals may become reliant on psychics in their personal quest to continue communication with loved ones. If it is genuinely possible to live in some form after corporeal death, and if it were genuinely possible to communicate with these entities, then advice or a sense of well-being from this, would be perfectly ‘normal’. In these statements, Brown is absolutely correct. The point I dispute, is that it is “their own silly fault”.

The fanatical faith many individuals unreservedly place in psychics and the associated industry undoubtedly aids the perpetuation of personal exploitation, but to a field which trades in belief, this is hardly surprising. In return for a suspension of disbelief, clients receive reassurance, comfort and guidance. This does not mean, however, that the client is at fault.

In bereavement, individuals have a need for positive belief. There is little point in visiting a psychic or a medium whom you personally believe to be fraudulent. It is the responsibility of the psychic or medium concerned to respond sensitively and appropriately to their client. If psychic abilities do exist then, morally, the practitioner should not use that ability for detriment or disproportionate personal gain. Importantly, if no psychic abilities exist in practice, this still remains true. Society has few moral issues with the use of placebo therapies when effective, and presuming they have a similar positive outcome, I see no reason why the same cannot hold true for psychic readings. Negative outcomes such as addiction can occur with medicinal treatments, talking therapies, and likewise with psychic readings. Controversy exists regarding the nature of action of many medicinal therapies, clinical hypnosis, and again, with psychic readings. These criticisms, therefore, are definitely not exclusive to psychics, though sceptics still tend to regard psychics with a special variety of loathing.

### Disclaimers

Aside from the provision of life guidance, my personal issue with the psychic industry lies within the exploita-

tion on which much of it would appear to be based. Fry, to use an apparently very pertinent example, owns a Swedish establishment named the “International College of Spiritual Science”. Marketed as “Colin’s College”, it claims to teach the techniques and methods needed to become a psychic practitioner. If Fry truly were psychically gifted, what practical aspect of their talent can actually be passed on to others? Magicians of all varieties have been sharing secrets and practical techniques for centuries. Psychics, by their very nature, simply cannot – there is nothing to pass on to the general public, there is only a personal ability! Instead, it would seem to me that the college provides an opportunity centred more in financial and media gain than that of any educational sense.

The most revealing factor in this, and perhaps largest proverbial nail in the coffin of psychic exhibitionism, is provided by the Fraudulent Mediums Act of 1951. Introduced to repeal previous legislation aptly entitled as the ‘Witchcraft Act’ of 1735, the Fraudulent Mediums Act is, in essence, the most potent legal position which counters the exhibition of fraudulent psychic ability for personal or institutional benefit. Aside from protecting individuals in an interpersonal context, the act also ensures that psychic displays, televised or otherwise, cannot deceive audiences. It stipulates that broadcast programmes must not make untruthful claims and, as such, cannot lead viewers to the belief that a performer is psychic, when in truth they are not. The most simple and effective method to ensure this does not occur, is to include a written or a verbal disclaimer to prefix or suffix the broadcast.

Conveniently, *Sixth Sense with Colin Fry* happens to do just that. Appearing for a total of eight seconds – which coincidentally is not long enough to read it in its entirety – at the end of the final credit sequence, this disclaimer states the following:

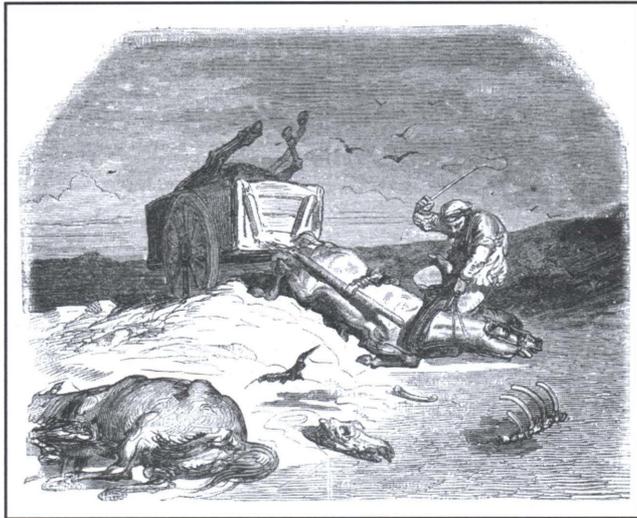
No information concerning any participant in the *Sixth Sense* was passed onto Colin Fry prior to filming. To this end, we have relied upon information provided by Colin Fry and third parties who have expressed their own personal opinions, which do not represent the views or responsibility of the producers. *Sixth Sense* is an entertainment programme and the content should not be construed as advice, counselling, suggestions or fact.

I am personally divided between which aspect of the very specific and considered phrasing appeals to me most, so I will address them briefly in order of statement.

Firstly, “No information concerning any participant in the *Sixth Sense* was passed onto Colin Fry prior to filming.” This means precisely what it says – no information was passed to Colin Fry prior to filming. This does not mean that Fry could not have conducted his own pre-show investigations. Similarly, information could have been provided to Fry during filming with-

out breaking this disclaimer. Presumably there are pauses in filming during which this could feasibly occur, however, there are also a multitude of very deceptive techniques which could covertly provide Fry with information in real-time.

Secondly, “we have relied upon information pro-



The phrase “flogging a dead horse” is indeed open to multiple possible interpretations...

vided by Colin Fry and third parties”. My interest here lies within “third parties”. This ambiguous term could either refer to the participants and interviewees in the show, or perhaps any confederates potentially working alongside our host. As I say: perhaps.

Thirdly and finally, “*Sixth Sense* is an entertainment programme and the content should not be construed as advice, counselling, suggestions or fact.” Very simply, Fry is neither offering counselling nor advice, nor should he. To my knowledge, Fry is not a qualified therapist, so this statement is very well informed. It would seem though, that Fry does not offer his insight as fact either. Admittedly the process of supposedly relaying messages from the dead is not a direct one, and consequently messages may not be entirely factual. However, this is inherently obvious. Critically though, there is no qualification as to what proportion of Fry’s messages

may be factual, simply meaning that none of what Fry claims has to actually be true.

To compound all of this, more recent programmes have been prefixed by a spoken disclaimer claiming that the origins and explanations of clairaudience and clairsentience are not agreed upon, and again claiming that the *Sixth Sense with Colin Fry* is an entertainment programme.

**I will tentatively admit to finding the programme entertaining, though perhaps for reasons other than those the producers intended**

So, whether Colin Fry accomplishes his televised readings through a psychic sense, cold reading, hot reading, creative editing, none of the above, or a combination of all of these techniques, I will tentatively admit to finding the programme entertaining, though perhaps for reasons other than those the producers intended. The views people express about these areas seem almost inconsequential against their overriding emotional expressions, and perhaps that is the point. The psychic industry thrives on emotion rather than cold rationality, and it probably will continue to do so. This is not to cast judgement on Fry or his abilities, but I hope that an increasing awareness of the *existence* of fraudulent techniques can foster greater critical analysis. Time will tell.

### References

- Brown, D. (2006). *Tricks of the Mind*. London: Transworld Publishers.
- Rowland, I. (2001). *Full Facts of Cold Reading*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Ian Rowland Limited.

**Mark Williams** is a member of the Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit at Goldsmiths College, University of London. No information concerning the nature of clairsentience or Colin Fry’s abilities was passed onto Mark Williams prior to writing. To this end, he has relied upon his own opinions and publicly available information. Third parties may have also expressed similar personal opinions in other articles, but they do not necessarily represent the views of this author. This article is an expression and exercise in critical analysis, and its content should not be construed as advice, libel, suggestions or fact. It may contain nuts, but is suitable for vegetarians.



# Skeptical Stats

1. Total increase, per minute, of personal debt in Britain: **£15 million**
2. Increase in sale of "No. 7 Preserve and Protect" serum in the 24 hours after a *Horizon* episode reported that research from Manchester University supported its claims to reduce wrinkles in aging skin: **2,000 percent**
3. Days a cat survived without food or water, trapped in a crate of motorcycle helmets travelling by sea from China to America: **35**
4. Percentage of websites a May, 2007, Google study showed can infect visitors' computers with malicious software: **.01**
5. Proportion of malicious websites press reports said that the Google study found: **1 in 10**
6. Number of children, many with no criminal record, whose DNA has been stored without permission on the police DNA database: **521,901**
7. Highest bid for 'Jon Malipien', an imaginary friend for sale on eBay, before the service deleted the listing: **\$3,062**
8. Number of years of no-claims bonus recently lost by Britain's oldest driver, 105-year-old Sheila Thompsons: **71**
9. Number of counts the Advertising Standards Authority upheld against the Reverend Peter Popoff over ads for "Miracle Spring Water" and "Miracle Olive Oil" on the shopping channel Soap on Deal TV: **11**
10. Percentage by which teens in a New York state study who watched more than three hours of TV per day were less likely to graduate high school: **82**
11. Number of previous driving licence suspensions or revocations Michael Wiley, a one-legged, armless man, had prior to evading Florida police in a 100 mph car chase in the spring of 2007: **18**
12. Height of the location of the world's highest swing, a viewing platform on a 1,100 foot TV broadcast tower in China: **700 feet**
13. Cost of a nine-inch origami Hanji-paper bull moose from the website of expert folder Robert J. Lang: **\$800**
14. Number of children of donors to the Nobel prize winners' sperm bank profiled in the 2005 book *Who's Your Daddy?*: **30**
15. Number of copies sold as of February 2007 of the *Left Behind* book series, which imagines a contemporary Rapture: **more than 43 million**
16. Number of litres of water Americans use per day: **400 to 600**
17. Number of litres of water most Europeans use per day, compared to Americans: **less than half**
18. Proportion of the world's people who do not have the level of clean water and sanitation services available 2,000 years ago in ancient Rome: **nearly half**
19. Amount by which world primary energy consumption increased in 2005: **2.7 percent**
20. Amount for which entrepreneur Gary Kremen sold the domain name "sex.com" in 2006, after a 10-year legal battle to win it back after it was stolen from him: **\$12 million**
21. Amount the court ordered the conman who stole sex.com, Stephen Michael Cohen, to pay Kremen: **\$65 million**
22. Amount Cohen has actually paid: **approximately \$3 million in seized real estate**
23. Proportion of drugs sold in developing countries that is fake: **25% to 50%**
24. Potency of the frequently abused prescription drug Fentanyl compared to heroin: **80:1**
25. Number of countries in which governments block access to Internet sites for political, social, or security reasons: **at least 25**

## Sources

1 Credit Action; 2 *Observer Woman*; 3 *Ananova.com*; 4 *Information Week*; 5 Google; 6 *The Register*; 7 *Metro*, [www.fastlanetransport.ca](http://www.fastlanetransport.ca); 8 *Ananova.com*; 9 Advertising Standards Authority; 10 *New Scientist*; 11 *New York Post*; 12 *Gading.com*; 13 [www.langorigami.com](http://www.langorigami.com); 14 *Business Week*; 15 *The New Yorker*; 16, 17, 18 *The New Yorker*; 19 BP Statistical Review 2006; 20, 21 *Guardian*; 21, 22, 23 *Sex.com*, by Kieren McCarthy; 24, 25 *The Guardian*

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** and **Mark Williams**.

# Psychics on eBay

Emma-Louise Rhodes purchases tarot readings, all in the name of journalism

YOU CAN BUY nearly anything on eBay. From tractors to tricycles, from lip-gloss to liposuction cream – if it's legally available, then you can purchase it on the world's favourite auction site.

Not only is eBay one of the best places to make the odd penny from your unwanted Christmas gifts or the antiques you've recently rediscovered in your attic, it is also a useful means of a steady tax-free income for thousands of people all over the UK. Artists whose work might never get further than the local gallery can now exhibit and sell nationally and authors whose self-published books were only ever available on a handful of bookshop shelves can now get worldwide distribution on eBay.

Amongst those who make a profit from auctioning their wares are the psychic community, who offer a whole range of spiritual delights, ranging from one-question readings, to in-depth past life dossiers, all done never having even met their 'clients' or touched or seen anything belonging to them or their dearly departed loved ones.

Of course telephone readings have been a source of income for lone spiritualists, along with those larger companies who specialise in making a profit from the pain of the bereaved, for quite some time now. At the back of most women's magazines the reader will always find, between the ads for plastic surgery and abortion, columns of psychic phone-lines offering their advice and assistance.

However, the beauty of eBay is that it is far cheaper and easier to control. An advertisement in the back of a top woman's magazine, for example, will cost in the hundreds, yet an online auction listing is less than fifty pence. Also, the seller can plan the exact time and date that their 'item' finishes on eBay, therefore knowing just when they will be asked for the reading (payment permitting).

Another aspect of eBay is the 'Buy It Now' feature, where sellers can place multiple items for purchase at a set price. On the basis of this, a small time publisher could market twenty copies of his book in one single advert at a relatively cheap listing fee, or an astute psychic sell as many readings or tarot spreads as they wish at a fixed price of their choosing.

Over the past few months I have personally purchased several readings from a range of different spiritualists on eBay, in order to compile a small amount of data on exactly what is on offer and, more importantly, precisely what it is that people are buying. Having collected a certain quantity of information, I then discovered, with great interest, that not only are psychic readings readily available on eBay, but so too are electronic ebooks with exact instructions on how to make a profit from tarot cards and other such spiritual money-makers.

## The Electronic Tarot

An extremely interesting eBay purchase of mine was a digital download bought from an American seller listed as "MAKE \$ DOING PSYCHIC TAROT CARD READINGS". The download (entitled *Psychic Reading Money Machine*) comes with a complete tarot reading programme and instructions as to how to design, list and sell the reading on eBay. Costing only 73p (a lot cheaper than £100 for a 'Mediumship Course', also offered on eBay), the blurb forthrightly informs its reader that:

After running the auction, you need to be prompt in dealing with each customer individually ... do your reading via the computer generated tarot and then write it in your own words. Don't copy the reading word for word as it needs to read like an authentic reading and not some generated one.

It continues by posing the question "How much money can you actually make?" and answers it with the following information:

A lot of people who sell this type of service on eBay usually charge \$15.00 per reading and sell 15 – 20 readings per week, which generates around \$300 a week.

The actual computer tarot consists of entering the virtual sitters name and date of birth. It will then give a ten-card spread, which features pictures of the cards and fairly detailed and informed descriptions, under the headings 'Your Power Cards', 'Your Desire Cards', 'Your Core Cards', 'Your Growth Cards' and 'Your Lucky Cards'.

The electronic programme goes on to inform its reader that, when listing such items on eBay, it is:

... best to offer a selection. Services such as Numerology, Natal reports, Biorhythms and Compatibility readings, all of which are unique, would be excellent sellers.

After which it offers such complementary programmes at a reasonable cost. The final words of advice from the *Psychic Reading Money Machine* are:

Mispelled (sic) words are ok while doing a reading. A real reading is not of perfection but a reading of personal guidance. If it is to (sic) textbook, it will not seem authentic.

Of course, the computer-generated cards are very similar to buying a set of tarot cards and an instruction book and producing a spread, then looking the meanings up in the book, typing them into a credible format and emailing this to the buyer. Nevertheless, by using

the computer it is incredibly quick and easy and, by asking for a name and date of birth, it seems more authentic. However, whatever name (male or female) is typed into the computer-generated tarot, if the date of birth is the same, it will always produce identical cards and explanations.

### The World's Psychic Marketplace

There are a variety of readings available on offer on eBay (around five hundred at any given time) and, in sifting through them and making my selection for purchase, I tried to be as diverse as possible in what I chose. The price scale of readings ranges from very inexpensive (around two pounds) to the more extravagant (£150 for a comprehensive yearly psychic forecast).

My first buy was from a spiritualist who had only just started to sell his goods on the Internet and was, due to that, very cheap. I paid 99p for a very detailed reading, from his 'Ancient form of Irish Celtic Reading' assisted by his 'spiritual guide'.

**Not only is eBay one of the best places to make the odd penny from your unwanted Christmas gifts or the antiques you've recently rediscovered in your attic, it is also a useful means of a steady tax-free income for thousands of people all over the UK**

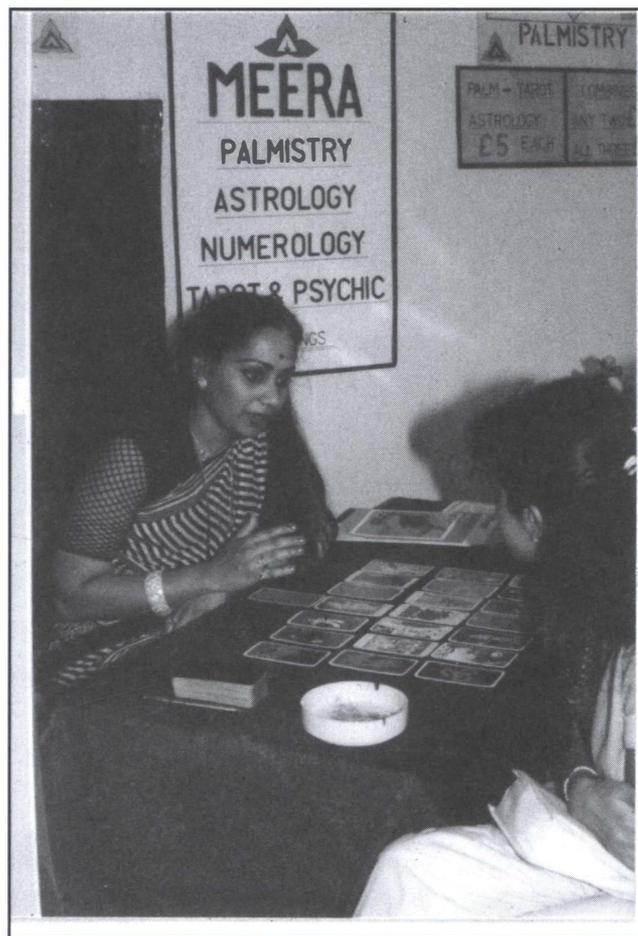
The content of the reading dealt with the usual – money, health, relationships and emotions. The use of cold reading was extremely evident and everything addressed could have been applied to anyone ('you need to stop people putting you down – be more sure and assert yourself in a nice way'). The names presented in the reading were very obvious ones, such as John, Anne, Paul, Joanne and Clair.

The reading ended with 'Many blessing, all my love' followed by the offer of answering any more questions that I might have via postal reading, telephone or email, along with promoting candles 'that are made and blessed by the spirits'.

Another eBay reading I chose was 'One Question Only – Thoth Reading'. Here I was able to ask the spirit world any question in exchange for the winning price of the auction, along with supplying my full name and date of birth. The question I posed was 'Is anyone in the spirit world trying to contact me?' An hour later I received an email regretfully telling me that the

medium was unable to answer this question (although for more money she would be very happy to do so) and that I could either ask the spirits another question or get a refund.

It is interesting to view what else the psychics are selling on eBay whilst simultaneously offering the readings. A tarot reading purchased on a 'Buy it Now' auction was from an 'in house psychic' of a company who specialised in detox pads. Here a five-card spread was used in answer to a question, and written in six precise paragraphs. A week later I purchased another tarot reading from the same seller and received (although a different



*Tarot reading has come a long way thanks to the internet*

spread of cards) exactly the same formatted and paragraphed structure of equal length. Both readings, neatly presented and well written, strikingly resembled the composition of the computer-generated tarot readings.

eBay uses a 'feedback' system in order for users to assess whether or not they want to purchase an item from a seller. For example, if a member has had a bad experience with a purchase, they can leave negative feedback and this information can be accessed by other users. In browsing through the list of psychics selling tarot spreads, healing and past life readings, it is insightful to peruse what others who have bought from them have had to say.

A certain lady psychic who refers to herself as a 'Famous TV Medium' on eBay, was selling readings at £15.00 a time ('Buy It Now'), until she received nega-

tive feedback from her clients. Within the space of a month, comments were appearing on her feedback page such as 'Sorry but the reading was unclear and not useful at all for me', 'Not brilliant, expected more ...' and 'DO NOT BID!! Total rubbish plagiarised from AOL's horoscope – didn't even change words.'

After these unconstructive observations, the medium in question was forced to lower her price to £5.00, before gaining enough positive feedback to enable her

Native American Indians, wolves, angels and rainbows. Some sellers go further in their personal descriptions, as the following illustrates.

I am a practising Witch, mother and grandmother, attuned to Nature and the power of the elements and a professional Psychic and am well skilled with several forms of divination techniques.

### **The price scale of readings ranges from very inexpensive (around two pounds) to the more extravagant (£150 for a comprehensive yearly psychic forecast)**

Another description of a psychic reading included the statement:

Just to be clear on what to expect ... don't expect, just be willing to accept help from your silent witness with the view that this is purely and simply a prediction and foresight as what your guides have seen as the most probable outcomes.

The use of the word 'counselling' is also an effective means of selling. Tarots, rune castings and spiritual readings focussing specifically on love are also seen to be good sellers, with mediums asking for pictures of both their buyer and the loved one in question, along with some background information on the situation.

Information on the particular psychic is also sometimes available on the auction description but, interestingly those who call themselves a 'TV medium' rarely state the programmes they have featured in. However, one particular eBay clairvoyant is all too happy to inform his readers that he is a 'famous Polish TV celebrity and fortune teller' whose TV career started with the Polish edition of *Big Brother*. His eBay bio continues by telling his readers that he:

... predicted the outcome of the last presidential election in Poland and was hired by politicians to help them predict what would happen to them in that time ...

The astounding life story doesn't stop there as his spiel continues, telling his readers that he has:

... read tarot cards to many TV, theatre and show business celebrities around the world (as an example Steven Segal, the Polish premiere and others).

However, amazingly there is absolutely no mention of this 'famous fortune teller' when his name is typed into a search engine such as Google, apart from his eBay list-



*There's money to be made with psychic readings – and eBay can help to put the cost back up again in time for Christmas.*

### **Image is Everything**

Description, layout and image are extremely important when marketing a product on eBay and, when there are four hundred and ninety-nine other sellers all trading the same sort of product, it is crucial that yours stands apart from the rest.

eBay psychics tend to utilise a range of images to promote themselves and their goods. Some will use their own photographs, others pictures of beautiful blond women and others still illustrations of tarot cards. Descriptions are varied, as are the titles, but generally always include the words such as 'authentic', 'genuine', 'honest', 'spirit guide' and 'destiny'.

With such tough competition, sellers rely heavily on feedback and sometimes use their positive comments in their item description. However, as with the marketing of specific products, there are certain colours and images associated with spiritualism and these are sometimes also employed by the psychic sellers. The popular spiritualist colour blue features on quite a few of the auction adverts, along with images of crystal balls,

ings and a snippet of a book review that he has written, where he proudly calls himself 'The Only Polish Famous Ventriloquist and Mindbender'(sic).

**Virtual Belief**

Readings via email are not incredibly recent and some prolific mediums have been using this form of communication with clients for quite some time. Craig Hamilton-Parker, for example, began offering a similar service from his website some years ago, although he now only gives one-to-one consultations, but still recommends a link to a very similar site (endorsed by him) where online psychics proffer readings via email or telephone.

In today's society, where nearly everything can be accessed through a PC and where we find ourselves increasingly isolated from the outside world because of

this, what better way than to connect with the spirits than via the Internet? Instead of having to turn out to visit the spiritualist church on a rainy Sunday evening, or attend a psychic meeting at the local community centre on a blustery winter's afternoon, eBay provides a whole range of mediums offering a varying selection of spiritual amusements for the susceptible masses.

However much humankind relies on computers and technology and, due to this, inadvertently find themselves distanced from true personal contact, one thing is clear – the need to be loved and receive love in return, along with the desire to believe in the life hereafter burns as strongly as ever and, depending on just how much money you have to squander, anyone can be spiritually reassured, comforted and counselled by the simple click of a mouse.



**Emma-Louise Rhodes** is a researcher of psychic phenomena and the spiritualist faith. She runs the investigative website *A Matter of Life and Death* ([www.emmalouiserhodes.com](http://www.emmalouiserhodes.com)), which examines issues such as fraudulent mediums, alleged spirit contact and the exploitation of the bereaved.

**SKEPTICS IN THE PUB**

Skeptics in the Pub is an evening held once a month (in a pub, strangely enough) for anybody who has an interest in, or is sceptical about, the paranormal. Each month an invited speaker gives a talk on their chosen specialisation. The talk is followed by an informal discussion in a relaxed and friendly pub atmosphere. You can find out more about the meetings on *The Skeptic* website: <http://www.skeptic.org.uk/pub>. This includes directions and maps to the Old Kings Head pub in Borough, where we meet. Alternatively, please contact Sid Rodrigues: 07818 443 735, [pub@skeptic.org.uk](mailto:pub@skeptic.org.uk). The meeting begins at 7:30 pm and there is a suggested donation of £2.00.

**THE PARKING LOT IS FULL**

by Jack McLaren and Pat Spacek

<http://www.plif.com>



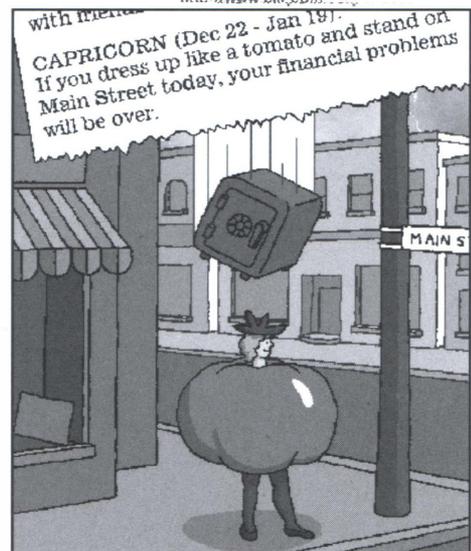
copyright © 2001 The Parking Lot is Full

"To settle an argument about Nature vs. Nurture, we went back in time, kidnapped Mother Theresa as an infant from her crib, and sold her into white slavery. Now she's a whore. Guess I win. You owe me fifty bucks."

**THE PARKING LOT IS FULL**

by Jack McLaren and Pat Spacek

<http://www.plif.com>



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Astrology is accurate only in that fate delights in punishing the stupid. Wanna know your future?

# R.E. Ality Check: An Alternative Approach to Religious Education

Damien Morris shows us one way to encourage enthusiasm and critical thought in classrooms

IT IS EASY to be alarmist about education. Education, after all, bears directly on something in which everyone is strongly invested: the shape of things to come, the future of society and all that.

We have all, at some time, heard anecdotes about what students are learning or failing to learn in contemporary educational institutions which have made us gasp, chuckle or shake our heads. For teachers, though,

My complaint was not the traditional one that might be expected within this subject. The issue was not with a lack of student familiarity with the Christian or Western tradition, still less was it a problem with overwhelming faithlessness. Quite the contrary: my fears were aroused by the breadth and inconsistency of what my students believed or half-believed in, and in the seemingly accidental character of their beliefs.



*As Voltaire said, "Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities".*

some of their most powerful and satisfying teaching emerges when they encounter and redress exactly such outrageous gaps or errors in their students' knowledge.

My alarm was aroused on many occasions as a secondary teacher, and in every subject I taught, from history through to literature, but nowhere was it as profoundly felt as in the Religious Education classes I was allotted in an Anglican Boys School in Melbourne.

Beneath their adolescent front of weary scepticism, my students subscribed to an eclectic belief in: ghosts, demons, exorcism, astrology, witchcraft, alien abduction, telekinesis, telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition... the list goes on. What is more, classes between the ages of 14 and 18 showed little variation in the degree, quantity or sophistication of their supernatural beliefs and showed a similar cluster of historical and sci-

entific naiveties. In other words, little development along these lines seemed to be taking place either privately or through the normal process of schooling.

What became rapidly clear to me was that most students had not personally reflected on their beliefs at length or discussed them in an organized way. In fact, they did not feel their beliefs worthy of such analysis. It also became clear that in the absence of any rigorous critical filter teenagers were prone to tepidly accept whatever portraits of reality were presented to them, be they even the most fantasy-infiltrated films or television serials.

Science-fiction and fantasy, once fringe genres, have now become, for whatever reasons, dominant and central entertainment fare, especially for children and teenagers; as a consequence, the same combinations of half-belief and half-wanting-to-believe that afflicted many of the former subscribers seem to have become endemic. As a mass phenomenon, however, these tendencies seem to be less explicit and less sophisticated than before. The rich allegorical dimension of sci-fi and fantasy is being persistently downgraded or ignored by a public overwhelmingly drawn to the sensational aspects of these genres.

In response to these issues, I embarked with my classes on a sustained and evolving discussion of the limits of 'the possible'. We examined scientifically chartered domains of uncanny psychosomatic phenomena: hypnotism, placebo, and Harvard studies of Yogic and Sufi mediation. We explored some of the spectacular supernatural effects achievable by illusionists and their dubious application by charlatans in parts of India. We discussed the multiple interpretations of contentious religious terms such as 'miracle'. We investigated the diversity of explanations for the miraculous events in the Christian tradition. Lastly, we explored the witch-trials of Salem and Loudon. Here we observed the very real and terrible dangers which can arise when the political and legal mechanisms of society are infected with superstitious prejudices and how readily the unscrupulous can exploit such prejudices to their profit.

It is these latter issues which most closely touch upon the sources of my alarm and concern. Irrational and dangerous superstitious fervor is not a thing of the past, nor is it exclusive to less developed countries; far from it. As a democratic citizen I feel threatened by the political implications of unchecked credulity and superstition in the public I share, or will soon share, my vote with, suspecting, as Voltaire said, "those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities." It is inevitable that supernatural and religious beliefs will affect the democratic process. What we must ensure is that citizens have scrutinized or are capable of scrutinizing those beliefs.

As a teacher it was immediately gratifying to watch groups which were for the most part hostile, inert and poorly motivated, become engaged, open and dynamic. Clearly there was a latent hunger to discuss this material.

It was amazing to find that students who had started the course believing that Indian fakirs could levitate, some weeks later were hovering anywhere from a few inches to a few feet off the classroom carpet; laughing as they competed to outdo their classmates in illusionist tricks they had independently

**my fears were aroused by  
the breadth and inconsistency  
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seemingly accidental character  
of their beliefs**

researched and mastered. A few students had even naively believed that certain *stage magicians'* feats of levitation were paranormal, which shows just how difficult the distinction between suspended disbelief and actual belief can be for some youngsters.

The questioning and discussion our topics generated would often spill out into the playground at break times. I sometimes overheard philosophical discussions about whether, say, unconscious pain was possible, being carried over from classes weeks beforehand.

My greatest satisfaction in all of this, though, was the evidence I consistently gleaned that whatever beliefs the students subscribed to, they were leaving each class a little better equipped not only to assess the fantastic components of the entertainment they consumed, but to encounter and resist the predations of cults, charlatans and demagogues claiming to have supernatural powers or authority.

Compulsory education is the principal domain within which we combat the coercive threats democracy is subject to, and thus fostering an astute and informed public. A reliable and responsible media is equally necessary. We must do our best to ensure that these two institutions collaborate to guarantee our citizens a common, rational understanding of the world, an understanding unthreatened by conditioned gullibility or superstitious atavism.

The shapers of contemporary youth culture (and, by



*It is immensely gratifying for teachers when students become engaged, open and dynamic.*

default, the future of culture) seem to suggest that the antidote to disenchantment is some kind of mythological regression. They present angels, witchcraft and aliens as the solution to confusion, anomie and alien-

**When uncanny phenomena  
are explored from a historical,  
anthropological, psychological  
or broadly scientific perspective  
the 'super'-natural vanishes**

ation. They have a good reason for making this sales-pitch, though: we buy it. The engineers of youth culture are, in the end, corporations relentlessly seeking the teenage dollar. In their fierce competition for adolescent attention, they know that the spectacular or mysterious will nearly always triumph over the mun-

dane. Furthermore, the massive resources at their disposal make their messages infinitely more seductive than those that parents or teachers promulgate.

With this in mind we must question how freely we can allow the purely mercenary logic of the entertainment and advertising industries to dictate how children see the world, especially when manufacturing a malleable public serves the immediate interests of corporations hoping to make us buy things we don't need.

Beyond this, at every stage and in every discipline within compulsory and even tertiary education I feel we are called to alert students to the vast civilized and scholarly apparatus which encounters and accounts for uncanny phenomena, providing natural rather than supernatural explanations and causes. It is the half-cherished belief that there is some unexplored dark-side to culture where civilization fears to tread which nourishes contemporary superstition. When uncanny phenomena are explored from a historical, anthropological, psychological or broadly scientific perspective the 'super'-natural vanishes. The amazement, awe and wonder, however, usually remain.

**Damien Morris** continues to work in education as a programme manager for an environmental behaviour change charity. He also writes on secular ethics, climate change and sustainable development.

# Rhyme and Reason

Steve Donnelly



## LEVITY ON THE WEB

Some recent dialogue with a hard-line fellow sceptical physicist has started me thinking about the pros and cons of the internet for people peddling paranormal and pseudoscientific theories. Specifically, many years ago I appeared on the BBC TV programme, *Pebble Mill at One* to counter the claims of one John Searl that he had invented and constructed an anti-gravity, perpetual-motion flying machine. If I remember correctly, an unfortunate fire at his premises meant that he could not actu-

(incorrectly titled “a physicist from Manchester University”) in the “media” section of one of the websites, presumably trying to give the impression that I am one of his supporters (see illustration).

Having taken a look at Searl’s websites, it is certainly true that his activities, and those of similar ‘inventors’ as well as purveyors of pseudoscientific theories and paranormal belief systems in general, have a global reach via the web that they definitely didn’t have back in the days of self-published pamphlets. But does the tremendous



John Searl (left) and Steve Donnelly (middle) on *Pebble Mill at One* and (right) Searl in military and doctoral uniform in a clip from YouTube.

ally demonstrate a functioning vehicle to the cameras; however, he described how his machine (based on rotating magnets) was self-powering and, in a shower of electrical sparks, had been observed by witnesses to levitate and take off into the distance. He also had photographs of mock-ups of his vehicles. According to Searl, it would only require a little refinement to the technology to enable us to journey to the moon and beyond in a vehicle that today would have the advantage of contributing nothing to global carbon emissions.

I took a sceptical but fairly soft line with the self-styled Professor Searl and did not cast any aspersions on either his integrity or his sanity. Afterwards, my physicist colleague took me strongly to task for my soft line, reckoning that I had “let him off the hook” by using analogies with children’s toys and a Wimshurst machine in an attempt to explain Searl’s purported observations regarding his ‘flying’ machines.

The same colleague has recently been back in touch to tell me that John Searl has gone from strength to strength over the years and now has three websites (*searleffect.com*, *searlsolution.com*, *swallowcommand.com*) dedicated to his electromagnetic Searl Effect Generator (S.E.G.) as well as many clips on the video-hosting website *YouTube*. To add insult to injury, Searl includes images taken from the *Pebble Mill* programme — including one or two of me

opportunity for self-promotion that the web offers necessarily imply that inventors like Searl will be taken more seriously by the general public? There are undoubtedly contexts where this is the case. A professionally-produced website can certainly serve to lend credibility to many dubious activities. But, by the same token, the detailed exposure of ‘unconventional’ theories using amateur film footage that allows the inventor to explain in his own words the novelty and originality of his ideas can also serve to diminish the credibility of the invention. Some of the clips on Searl’s website have him dressed in a doctoral gown over what I am informed is an Air Vice Marshall’s uniform explaining the theory behind his rotating magnets. I am not convinced that exposure to this information will have BAE Systems, NASA, or Electricité de France queuing up to invest in the S.E.G.

In short, by allowing ‘unconventional’ inventors to demonstrate their wares at great length, the internet may well be providing a service to scepticism rather than the opposite. My colleague strongly exhorts me to threaten the publishers of the website with litigation in order to get them to remove images of me from their site — but for the moment this ‘physicist from Manchester University’ feels he has more useful things to do with his time.

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



## Philosopher's Corner

Julian Baggini

**SEXUAL ETHICS** seems such a quaint old subject. Such has been the success of the almost complete purge of sex from the arena of serious, secular ethical debate that when someone does raise the topic, we immediately suspect (usually correctly) that that person has some conservative or religious axe to grind.

Though the details may be subject to debate, the story of how sexual ethics has been marginalised has been well-rehearsed. Sex has been frowned upon outside of the family in so many cultures for so many years for several reasons. Unwanted pregnancy and the spread of venereal disease are the two most obvious. Societies have a habit of erecting taboos around behaviour which harms the group and it is remarkable how many cultures have seen the establishing of long-term pair bonds as a force for social cohesion. There are also theological reasons. Religions differ, but all the major ones agree that sex is a gift from god for use only within specially sanctioned relationships. Even if these religious reasons are no more than ritualised formalisations of the more fundamental social reasons, they have come to have a force all of their own.

If you had asked anyone one hundred years ago why they should not have sex with whomsoever they wanted, these reasons would have seemed to be ample. No longer. The religious reasons no longer hold for most people, simply because most people have ceased to believe the traditional tenets of the major faiths. Pregnancy and disease have both become less of a threat with the use of contraceptives, abortion and condoms, even if these risks are higher than many seem to allow for.

There is still the question of whether the family is vital to society or not, but this only touches on sexual ethics tangentially. An extended pre-marital life still gives people many years to indulge in free love without harming the as yet non-existent family unit.

Hence many believe we now appear to have no good reason not to indulge our lusts as much as opportunity and desire allow. And there's also a positive incentive to do so. It has entered folk psychology that 'repression' is a bad thing. The accusation of repression has become one of the easiest ways of dismissing an argument without recourse to rational debate. So if repression is bad and unhealthy, expression of our sexuality becomes vitally important.

But does this mean sex is no longer an important ethical issue? I don't think so. We have become used to

thinking about ethics in general, and sexual activity in particular, in terms of a particular form of morality, namely a code of conduct setting our behaviour which is or is not acceptable, desirable or required. There are rules which we ought to live by and breaking the rules is, well, immoral.

The problem here is that for such a moral system to have any force, there must be both a respected source for the code and a set of sanctions to ensure it is followed. In the language of the law, that means we need a legislator and an empowered judiciary. When religion was seen as the source of morality, this was no problem. God was both law-giver and law-enforcer (even though he usually postponed punishment until the afterlife). Now when we are at the stage when even many of those who believe in a god do not see either the church or any of the sacred texts as reliable sources, there is no longer any acknowledged moral legislature. Hence, in Sartre's terminology, we have been "abandoned".

So have we reached the end of morality? If by morality we mean that kind of authority-rooted, rule system described above, then we quite possibly have. But that doesn't mean we've reached the end of ethics. Ethics-as-morality is almost certainly the most commonly held view of ethics in society in general, but it is not the only one, as any philosophy undergraduate will tell you. In fact, the major alternative is older than even morality. Pick up a treatise on ethics by one of the great Ancient Greeks and you'll be struck by how little "morality" in the above sense they contain. What they are repeatedly concerned with is what is required to live the good life, a life that goes well. Friends, health, honour and integrity all go up to make a life go well and so are good. Poverty, isolation and disenfranchisement all help a life go badly and so are bad. The poor person is not bad in the moral sense of the word, but it is almost always the case that the poor person is living a life which is going significantly less well than it could be.

In this context it should be obvious that sex is a deeply ethical issue, for how we conduct our private lives has a great bearing not only on how well our lives go, but sometimes how well the lives of our partners do too. But in this kind of sexual ethics, rather than draw up a list of permitted and prohibited practices and positions, we need to think about how we treat other people and our own desires. Sexual ethics has not gone away, it's just become more complicated and nuanced. It is not so much about what we do, but how we do it.

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). Julian's latest book is *Welcome to Everytown: A Journey into the English Mind* (Granta). See [www.julianbaggini.com](http://www.julianbaggini.com). Comments welcome to [julian@julianbaggini.com](mailto:julian@julianbaggini.com)

## ASKE News

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



IN 2006 ASKE managed to raise its membership to over 80 and I am hoping that 2007 will see it in treble figures for the first time for several years. Examination of the current members' list confirms yet again something that I have noticed ever since I attended my first sceptics' meeting in June 1985. This was a CSICOP conference at University College, London. What I observed there has been readily apparent at every similar meeting I have attended since, and in every sceptical journal I have read. It's beginning to bother me; I think it's a problem for us sceptics, but I don't know quite what to do about it.

You may well have guessed what I am referring to but in case you haven't I'll leave this topic for a moment and return to it further down. Don't let your eyes wander there to find the answer. Instead, take a few moments out and run through the names of the people contributing to this issue. I'm taking a chance, as I haven't of course yet seen it, but I'm pretty confident about what you'll notice.

We now have a short intromission while I inform you that the ASKE Challenge is alive and well (£12,000 if you can demonstrate paranormal abilities under controlled conditions). It's apposite to remind you of this, as there has been a change in the rules for the Randi Challenge. According to ASKE member Tony Youens, this now requires that potential applicants have some kind of media presence and have been tested by a credible academic willing to confirm that they do in fact have the claimed powers (see <http://www.randi.org/>).

Incidentally, ASKE recently heard from Nicholas Vivant of the Observatoire Zététique, an organisation of French sceptics, about a randomized double-blind experiment on dowsing. This was carried out in Argenton from 17-18 3.07. A PDF account is available on <http://zetetique.fr/page/doc.php?publication=1&ecritId=39>.

So, back to the main topic. In the current ASKE members' list, less than 10% are female. No females participate in our ASKE email discussion network. But it's not just ASKE. Looking at the latest 5 issues of the *Skeptic* (UK), I see that of 20 original articles, only 2 were written by women and only men penned any letters (over 20 in all). It would be interesting to know the ratio of male to female subscribers. In the last issue of

the US *Skeptic* for 2006, there were 20 letters, none written by a female; 12 men and 4 women wrote main articles. The *Skeptical Inquirer* has a male editor and an all-male editorial board of 10. In the latest issue, there were 15 main articles but only one female author, and there were 6 book reviewers, all male. In the last 5 issues of *Skeptical Briefs* there were just 2 female contributors. The New Zealand *Skeptic* fares somewhat better in terms of balance, although of 7 features in the Autumn 2007 edition, only 1 had a female author.

The same male bias is evident at meetings of sceptics. At the last European Sceptics Congress, which was held in 2005 in Brussels, only 2 of the 20 speakers were female. I recall a similar distribution at Padua in 2004 at the World Congress, where I think there was only 1 female speaker, Caroline Watt, who spoke in place of her colleague, the late Robert Morris, and presented a *defence* of parapsychology.

Audiences at sceptical meetings also tend to be predominantly male (though my impression is that the balance is less skewed than for contributors). This was the case at the Sceptics in the Pub meeting at which I spoke in May of this year. A good time was had by all but the atmosphere was, shall we say, a bit laddish.

Why, then, the manifestly greater appeal of scepticism to men than to women? I do not think it is a simple matter of men being more sceptical than women (if it's possible to measure this in a way that is relevant to the question). Joining societies, subscribing to journals, writing articles and letters, attending meetings, and speaking at them require motivation and the motivation of sceptics is the belief that some things are wrong and need to be challenged and disputed, and that these activities are an effective means of doing so whilst being, in themselves, interesting and rewarding. Clearly, for all sorts of reasons, this only appeals to a minority of the population but it seems that it is a predominantly males who have the motivation to engage thus.

Is there anything we can do about this? Perhaps it is inevitable but I do not believe it is healthy for the voice of scepticism to be a predominantly male one. Any thoughts from readers, particularly our female colleagues?

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

# Reviews



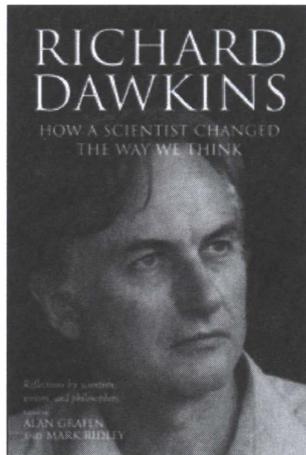
## GENE FEAST

**Richard Dawkins: How a Scientist Changed the Way we Think**

edited by Alan Grafen and Mark Ridley  
Oxford University Press, £12.99 (hb), ISBN 0-19-929116-0

This sparkling collection of essays is published to mark the 30th anniversary of Dawkins' first, and most famous book, *The Selfish Gene*. The 25 contributions are parcelled into sections entitled, *Biology, The Selfish Gene, Logic, Antiphonal Voices, Humans, Controversy, and Writing*. Daniel Dennett lauds that book as a philosophical essay, and Seth Bullock explains the invention of algorithmic biology, showing the broader intellectual significance of Dawkins' work. Sceptics will be well aware of his outstanding efforts on behalf of rationalism, and Michael Shermer praises his contribution, along with A.C. Grayling, writing of "the virus of faith".

Unappetizingly sandwiched between their texts, however, is an essay called *A Fellow Humanist* by Richard Harries, who turns out to be the Bishop of Oxford, but suspiciously resembles the Reverend J.C. Flannel of *Private Eye* fame, deploring creationism while clinging to "the divine rationality and ordering of all things", not quite getting how deadly Universal Darwinism is for cosmic purposive design.



Robert Aunger wonders *What's the Matter with Memes?*, and psychologist David Barash makes an unexpected connection with Albert Camus: "the greatest triumphs of human existence arise from human beings struggling to make sense of what is, biologically, a purposeless world". Consonant, at least, with this overture to existentialism, is Dennett's reminder that, "one of the central lessons of Darwinian thinking is that essentialism must be abandoned".

From a literary angle, Philip Pullman celebrates Dawkins as "a storyteller whose tale is true", and Matt Ridley relates that "an unexpected effect of the success of *The Selfish Gene* was to revive the central role of the book as a scientific art form".

For philosopher Helena Cronin, that book and its brilliant successor, *The Extended Phenotype*, "taught me how, holding steadily to a gene-centred view, I could find the way through muddle." She aptly likens this gene's-eye view to "Einstein's imagined ride on a beam of light", as "an invitation to journey into unreachable worlds for a clearer understanding of reality".

Overall, this is an illuminating, even encouraging, guide to the invaluable work of a champion sceptic.

Paul Taylor

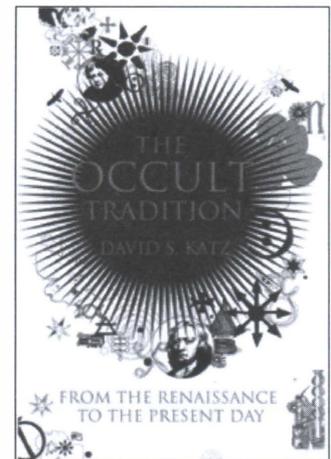
## STRANGE TO RELATE

**The Occult Tradition: From the Renaissance to the Present Day**

by David S. Katz  
Pimlico, £8.99 (pb), ISBN 9780712667869

The main aim of occult practices is "to bring together widely disparate aspects of God's Creation within a complex structure of connections, sympathies and affinities". In other words, a supernatural Unified Theory. As Katz points out, this does tend to result in "the readiness to relate the unrelated", a tendency seen in believers in general.

This is a thorough, highly detailed history of the occult, starting with the ancient Greeks, tracing its development through the Renaissance Neoplatonists, Hermeticists and Kabbalists to the Rosicrucians, Freemasons and Swedenborgians. He also notes the Hermetic roots of Mormonism, which were conveniently forgotten about.



In among the believers there were always sceptics; Hermeticism was debunked by Casaubon in the early 17th century, while the poet Blake challenged Swedenborg. But as ever, they were lone voices in the face of popular belief.

The Victorian era was a fertile time, with a revived interest in all things supernatural, the start of psychology, psycho-analysis and anthropology feeding occult interest and Indian 'mysticism' thrown into the mix. Jung in particular tried to amalgamate psychoanalysis and the occult.

Meanwhile in America, fundamentalism was born. Perhaps the most speculative part of the book is Katz's description of it as occult because, he says, fundamentalists believe "firmly in the supernatural world, its influences and manifestations". Focussing on Revelations and Daniel, they "predict the future through deciphering a document whose meaning is occult, hidden".

Although this element of fundamentalism is occult in that sense, whether the whole of it can be so described is not entirely proven here, as distinct from a more general (and perhaps more lurid) belief in supernatural forces or predicted events common to many religions, myths and superstitions. Belief in the rapture, speaking in tongues, public faith healing and fundamentalism's grass-roots appeal rather than shrouds of mystery are perhaps a little too overt to qualify as occult.

That said, this is a useful resource, illustrating both the influences of different people and groups on the occult and the occult's own influence on society, science and modern beliefs, from the born-again to New Agers.

Tessa Kendall

## MAGNUS' OPUS

### Fakers, Forgers & Phoneys: Famous Scams and Scamps

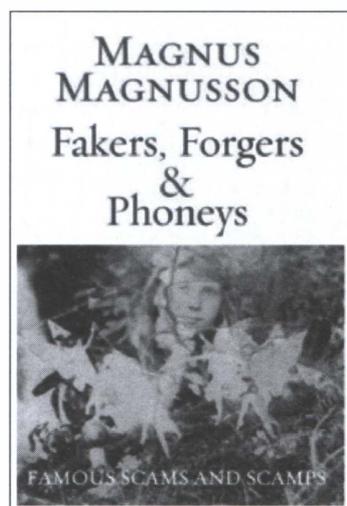
by Magnus Magnusson

Mainstream, £9.99, ISBN 978-1-84596-210-4

I must begin by admitting that the author of this book, who died in January 2007, was a friend of mine. However, if he weren't I would still say it's an excellent and fascinating work.

There are four sections, on art forgeries (Keating, van Meegeren, the Cottingley fairies); archaeological frauds (Pitdown Man, the Vinland Map); impostors and hoaxers (the Tichborne claimant, George Psalmanazar); and literary forgeries (Thomas Chatterton, William Henry Ireland).

A constant theme is how easy it is to fool people, even experts: Magnus begins, somewhat inevitably perhaps, with the story of The Emperor's New Clothes. Van Meegeren, facing imprisonment or even death for selling a 'Vermeer' to Goering, said he had painted it himself and was, of course, disbelieved by the experts who had authenticated it until he painted another before their very eyes. The Cottingley fairies were a joke by two girls that got out of hand: after Conan Doyle fell for it, the perpetrators felt they had to carry on rather than reveal that such a famous and distinguished man had been fooled.



Some of the most interesting stories are those told more briefly than as the subjects of complete chapters, such as: the woman who claimed to be Anastasia; the Hitler diaries; Dr James Barry, the woman who masqueraded as a man and had a successful career as a naval doctor, which might be understandable if she had been big with a deep voice, but she was small and slight with a high voice; the Kensington Stone, allegedly found in Minnesota (the most Nordic state in the USA) and apparently showing that Vikings penetrated that far, but in fact an obvious fake, its 'runic' inscriptions being a bizarre mix of modern Swedish, Norwegian, Danish and English; and Nat Tate, a non-existent artist about whom a book was published with great fanfare, no-one daring to admit never having heard of him. As Magnus says: "The fact is that credulous people can be persuaded to believe anything; there seems no end to people's gullibility, no matter how crude the forgeries might be." A good read, and a fitting epitaph to a splendid man.

Ray Ward

## CREDO

### Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast: The Evolutionary Origins of Beliefs

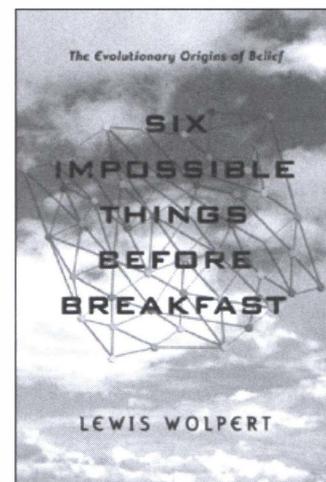
by Lewis Wolpert

Faber and Faber, £8.99 (pb), ISBN 978-0-571-23166-3

In some ways I feel these 243 pages are too few. There are so many interesting leads that cannot be followed up (there are references, of course). Occasionally the ideas tumble out so quickly as to muddle the words. "According to the ancient Greeks and their humours, mental illness came from the gods". The theory of humours was essentially a naturalistic explanation: two ideas seem to have got jumbled. Again, in some places the author is so keen to tell us more, that (it seems to me) the balance of the book is upset. Many false beliefs are listed, particularly in health and religion. Interesting, but perhaps not really advancing the argument.

The essence of the argument is that a "belief engine" has evolved in humans because it was useful, but it may also be inappropriate. The origin, in Wolpert's view, lies in tool-using. Early hominids used found objects as proto-tools, e.g. stones to break open bones or shellfish. Unlike other species, they took the next step of modifying their instruments, for example to produce sharp edges, and then the further jump of combining two disparate elements to make a completely new tool, such as a spear from a stick and a sharp-edged flint. This involved a new mental process, the realization of what leads to what, that is causality. Envisaging a new product was the origin of belief.

Thus we have a strong tendency to seek causes, even when there are none or they are unknown. Illness is attributed to witchcraft or some incorrect natural cause, and so on. Scientific thinking, which is the only reliable way to discover true causes, is not evolutionarily based, but was invented by the Greeks. Some might think that causality is also the foundation of science. Some may query Wolpert's view of what a 'belief' is, or think it a long way from flint-knapping to beliefs that daily produce martyrs and murderers. But overall, this is a fascinating and rewarding book.



John Radford



# LETTERS

## Making up History

In my article *Making up history* (*Skeptic*, 20.1), I implied that Julian Barnes had invented the idea that my grandfather arrested George Edalji in the latter's office in Birmingham. Because my grandfather did not serve in the Birmingham Police Force, I was sceptical of this. However, Mr Barnes tells me that this is what the press reported at the time and I willingly accept that.

Steuart Campbell  
Edinburgh

## De Pauw on Flew...

A while ago I wrote to Antony Flew asking for the source for the claim in his letter to *The Skeptic* (19.2, p. 26) that "Darwin [had] died as a believing Christian". In response, Flew sent me a cutting from *The Daily Telegraph* (see below).

So much for the scholarship of the author of *Darwinian Evolution!* I had several fruitless exchanges with him in the 1980s about the factual errors this book contained, particularly about the views of Richard Dawkins and the late George Gaylord Simpson as well as the mechanism of natural selection. I gather a second edition of the book appeared a few years ago but somehow doubt that he bothered to address any of these issues.

Incidentally, although Flew thanked me for sending him several articles refuting the claim that Darwin had converted to Christianity, he did not acknowledge any error on his part.

Somewhere, perhaps in *Darwinian Evolution*, Flew castigated Marx for poor, if not downright dishonest, scholarship. As I recall, he concluded his attack with a sarcastic quote from the grave-

side speech by Engels: "So war der Mann der Wissenschaft!" Alas...

Karel de Pauw  
Leeds

*Editors' note: "So war der Mann der Wissenschaft!" translates as "Thus was this man of science!"*

### The Daily Telegraph 23 August 1999

**SIR** — Charles Darwin was converted to Christ during the last year of his life. This occurred after the parents of a well-known evangelist and temperance official, James Feagan, moved to Darwin's village of Downe, Kent, in 1880. Darwin was a supporter of temperance and so asked him to conduct meetings. Feagan attributed his successes to the nature of his meetings in which he preached the Gospel.

Darwin wrote to him: "Your services have done far more for the village in a few months than all our efforts for many years. We have never been able to reclaim a drunkard."

The present curator of the Darwin museum confirms the accuracy of this letter. Darwin came to a personal faith in Christ when Lady Hope, head of the Temperance Society, visited him six months before his death. She found him reading the New Testament, and he asked her to speak at his meeting on "Christ Jesus and his Salvation — the best theme of all".

Many of his household servants

attended and came to faith. Darwin asked the Sunday school to sing on his lawn, "There is a green hill far away".

These events were reported in the *Bromley and Kentish Times* of 1881, and there are 11 other sources of information. These include the letters of Darwin's wife, reports by Darwin's butler, the *Christian Herald*, Gen Sir Arthur Cotton, Adml Sir James Hope and Adml Sullivan.

Preb Dr VICTOR PEARCE  
Kidsgrove, Staffs

## ... and Flew on Dawkins

Readers of Richard Dawkins' record-breaking bestseller *The God Delusion* may have been misled by his claim, in a note to his page 82 [see below], that "We might be seeing something similar today in the over-publicised tergiversation of the philosopher Anthony Flew who announced in his old age that he had been converted to belief in some sort of deity".

Had Dawkins bothered to consult the Anthony Flew entry in *Whose Who*, he would have discovered that I had given Gifford Lectures in 1986-7, which were published in 1987 under the title *The Logic of Mortality*. Had he done so, then a moment's thought would surely have been sufficient to reveal to him the absurdity of an attempt to explain my conversion to Deism as due to my fear of now-incipient death.

A more substantial fault in what I suggest should in future be called *The Book of Dawkins* is his failure, in his various remarks about Einstein, to mention the occasion on which Einstein, as the only two-time winner of the Nobel Prize, reported that he felt aware of an Intelligence behind the integrated complexity of the physical world.

Einstein was followed in having this feeling, first as it were by physicists who had only one Nobel Prize, then by other physicists, and after that by many people like me who greatly respect the opinions in this matter of physicists.

Finally, I think I am entitled to point out that Dawkins, who was once an academic, is now so little interested in truth that, instead of writing to ask me to tell him why I was converted to Deism, instead goes into print with his own contemptuous and completely false explanation.

Antony Flew  
Reading

*Editors' note: We reproduce here in full the footnote (p. 82 of The God Delusion) to which Flew is referring. Dawkins is drawing a parallel between Flew's conversion to a belief in a deity and Bertrand Russell's temporary acceptance of the ontological argument for the existence of God:*

*We might be seeing something similar today in the over-publicised ter-*

giversation of the philosopher Anthony Flew, who announced in his old age that he had been converted to belief in some sort of deity (triggering a frenzy of eager repetition all around the Internet). On the other hand, Russell was a great philosopher. Russell won the Nobel Prize. Maybe Flew's alleged conversion will be rewarded with the Templeton Prize. A first step in that direction is his ignominious decision to accept, in 2006, the 'Phillip E. Johnson Award for Liberty and Truth'. The first holder of the Philip E. Johnson Award was Philip E. Johnson, the lawyer credited with founding the Intelligent Design 'wedge strategy'. Flew will be the second holder. The awarding university is BIOLA, the Bible Institute of Los Angeles. One can't help wondering whether Flew realizes that he is being used. See Victor Stenger, 'Flew's flawed science', *Free Inquiry* 25: 2, 2005, 17-18; [www.secularhumanism.org/index.php?section=library&page=stenger\\_25\\_2](http://www.secularhumanism.org/index.php?section=library&page=stenger_25_2).

#### More on the Kennedy Assassination

Ray Ward's letter about the Kennedy assassination (*Skeptic*, 19.4) deserves a few comments. The eyewitness and physical evidence for the shooting of Officer Tippit were inconclusive. Only one witness to the shooting identified Oswald. She was hysterical at the scene of the shooting, she contradicted most of the other witnesses on several important points, and her account of the killer's appearance did not describe Oswald. The counsel who examined her for the Warren Commission was reported as admitting that she was "an utter screwball" and "utterly unreliable", and that her testimony was "full of mistakes". One other witness to the shooting refused to identify Oswald for three years, before

changing his mind during a TV interview. The only identifications of Oswald as the man running from the scene were made either at incompetently conducted identification parades or from photographs after he had been proclaimed guilty.

One ballistics expert claimed that, of the four bullets recovered from Tippit's body, one was from Oswald's gun, but he could provide no evidence to support his claim. In contrast, the FBI's expert witness testified that "it was not possible from an examination and comparison of these bullets to determine whether or not they had been fired – these bullets themselves – had been fired from one weapon, or whether or not they had been fired from Oswald's revolver." Not only that, but the FBI pointed out that Oswald's revolver was in fact defective. Their lab tested the gun and found that "the firing pin would not strike one or more of the cartridges with sufficient force to fire them." The FBI also tested the bullets, and stated that "no conclusion could be reached as to whether or not they could be fired from Oswald's revolver." Even in Texas in 1963, the case would have been thrown out of court (well, OK, maybe not in Texas).

As for Jack Ruby's underworld connections, one would expect the average strip-club owner to mix with unsavoury types in the course of his business. But the crescendo of telephone calls from Ruby to mobsters as the assassination approached show that his underworld connections went beyond this. The House Select Committee on Assassinations, whose conclusions about Ruby were supported by more than a thousand pages of evidence, reported that Ruby "had a significant number of associations and direct and indirect contacts with

underworld figures, a number of whom were connected to the most powerful La Cosa Nostra leaders. Additionally, Ruby had numerous associations with the Dallas criminal element." (*HSCA report*, p. 149) and that the FBI "was seriously delinquent in investigating the Ruby-underworld connections." (*ibid.*, p. 243).

Some, though far from all, of the medical personnel who saw President Kennedy's body did indeed change their minds about the direction of the shots once the party line of only three shots, all from the rear, became established. Greater weight should of course be given to their earliest, unforced comments, which overwhelmingly support shots from the front to the throat and head.

Jeremy Bojczuk  
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#### Tape that!

In *Hits and Misses* (*Skeptic*, 20.2), we find:

There's an American saying that goes like this: if it doesn't move and it should, spray it with WD-40; if it moves and it shouldn't, use duct tape. Duct tape (also known, in the film industry, as 'gaffer's tape') is the cure-all for everything from rattling cars to terrorist activity.

Please note that duct tape and gaffer's tape are two entirely different kinds of tape that appear similar but have distinct differences, not the least of which is the adhesive. This might help explain why the wart cure failed – someone may have used gaffer's tape rather than the recommended duct tape.

It seems highly unlikely, though.

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