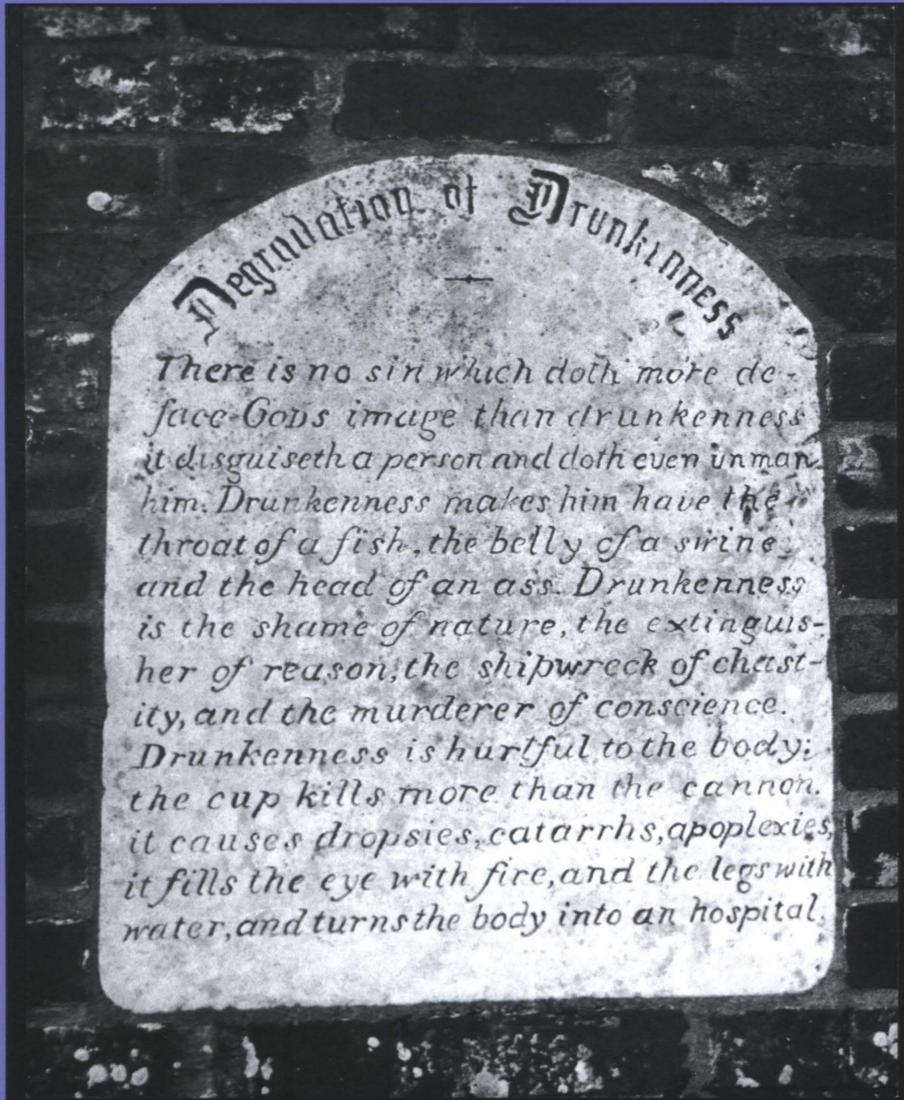


# The **Skeptic**



## **Exposing the Myth of Alcoholics Anonymous. Part 1**

*Also in this issue:*

**Interview with Mark Vernon  
Inside a Camphill Community**

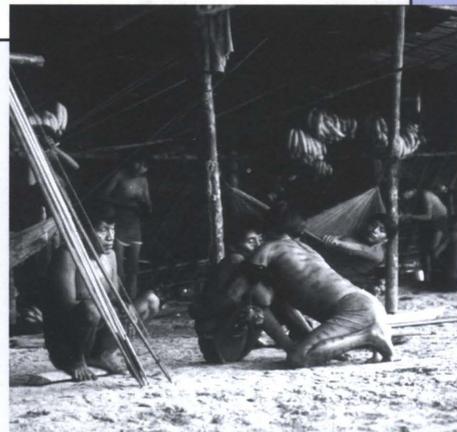
**Plus: News. Book Reviews. Comment. Humour**

## *Hilary Evans' Paranormal Picture Gallery*



### **SHAMAN OR SHOWMAN?**

For many peoples in indigenous cultures, medicine and religion come together in the person of the shaman (the one above is one from Siberia), usually but not exclusively male, who heals the sick with the help of powers bestowed on him by the spirit world. To acquire his skills, he must undertake a traumatic otherworldly journey, sometimes by changing shape to that of an animal, sometimes simply by disintegrating into fragments which subsequently reform. Clearly, to believe in the shaman's power, you have to believe in the world beyond to which he travels, so his role and functions are integral to the cosmology and theology of his particular people. But shamanism is no more incredible than any other religion, and individual shamans develop impressive skills. Our second picture (right), taken by Hubertus Kanus in 1989, shows a shaman at work among the Mavaca people of Venezuela.



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



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## Contents

### Editorial

Chris French 4

### Hits and Misses

5

### Skeptic at large . . .

Wendy M Grossman 7

### Exposing the Myth of Alcoholics Anonymous. Part 1: History and (Lack of) Effectiveness

Steven Mohr 8

### Skeptical Stats

15

### Believe it or Not

Sally Marlow 16

### A Daughter's Tribute to Barry Beyerstein

Lindsay Beyerstein 19

### Inside a Camphill Community

Matthew Provonsha 20

### Rhyme and Reason

Steve Donnelly 22

### Philosopher's Corner

Julian Baggini 23

### ASKE News

Micheal Heap 24

### Reviews

25

### Letters

27

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# Editorial

Chris French

IT IS WITH great sadness that we report the death of Dr Barry Beyerstein on 26 June 2007. Barry will be sorely missed by sceptics around the world. He was primarily a neuroscientist with particular interests in the brain mechanisms of perception and consciousness and the effects of drugs on the brain and mind. But his interests went way beyond those topics. He also published on such topics as near-death experiences, the neuropathology of possession, dowsing, and the psychology of belief, as well as critiques of alternative medicine and dubious psychological techniques such as graphology. On a personal note, Barry was also an extremely nice guy – one of those people you looked forward to seeing again. He was supposed to be presenting at the European Sceptics Congress in Dublin last September. His presence was greatly missed at this event. We extend our heartfelt commiserations to his wife and family.

We are also sad to report that this issue sees the final contribution of Steve Donnelly to the pages of *The Skeptic*. Steve has been involved with the magazine almost since its birth twenty years ago and for many years acted as co-editor with Toby Howard. Since 1999, he has educated, entertained and amused us with his regular *Rhyme and Reason* column. Sadly, his other commitments no longer allow him the time to continue in that role. We are sure we speak for all our readers when we thank Steve and wish him every success in the future.

In this issue, Steven Mohr presents the first part of his investigation of Alcoholics Anonymous. We suspect that, for many people who do not know the whole story, AA is perceived to be a Good Thing, helping

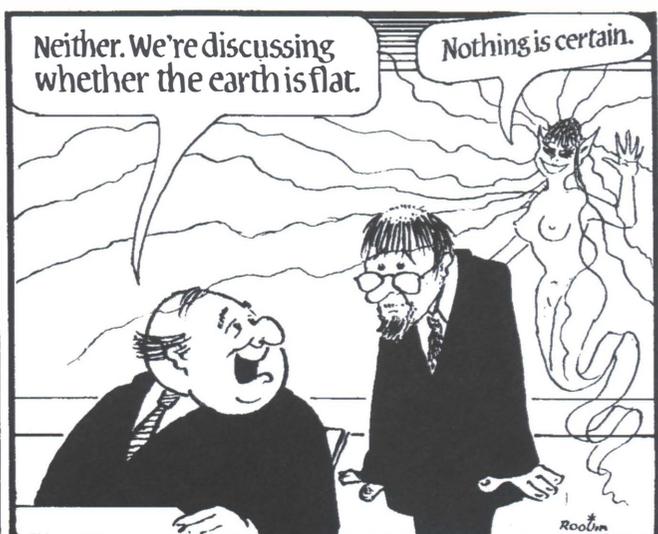
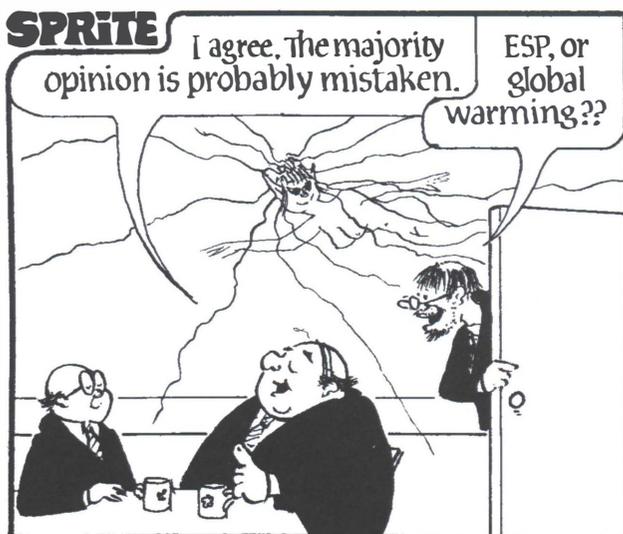
those who have been damaged by alcohol addiction to find a way to put the pieces of their lives back together with the support of others who have experienced the ravages of alcoholism at first hand. Steven Mohr's experience of AA, however, was such that it convinced him that the organization has more in common with a religious cult than an effective therapeutic approach. He presents a strong case that, not only is the AA programme ineffective in treating alcoholism, it can actually be dangerous to those who take part in it.

Sally Marlow invites us to "believe it or not", following her enjoyable interview with best-selling writer Mark Vernon. Mark's book, *Science, Religion and the Meaning of Life*, attracted much media attention, possibly as a result of the fact that Mark is an ex-vicar who made his philosophical journey to agnosticism via atheism. He argues that agnosticism should not be viewed as wishy-washy indecisiveness, but instead as a positive philosophy for life. See what you think!

Our final article offers Matthew Provonsha's reflections of his experiences as an atheist volunteer worker in a Christian community in the UK. Although Matthew had been assured that his atheism would not be a problem in terms of being accepted by the community, the reality turned out to be very different.

This is a rather special issue of *The Skeptic* – the magazine has now been running for twenty years! A special thank you to you, our loyal readers, for your interest and support in helping us to reach this milestone. Here's to the next twenty years!

With best wishes, Chris



## Hits and Misses



### Barry L. Beyerstein

19<sup>th</sup> May 1947 – 25<sup>th</sup> June 2007

Barry Lane Beyerstein was a sceptic. He held a Professorship in Psychology at Simon Fraser University, the chair position in the British Columbia Skeptics Society, and he was a co-founder of CSICOP. In addition to this, he was a husband and father. Whilst many tributes and accounts of Barry's life have focused on his achievements and extensive voluntary contributions to science and scepticism, the account on page 19 gives the heartfelt sentiments of Barry's daughter, Lindsay. Her words immortalise Barry's personality far more appropriately than mine ever could.

### It's life, Jim... but not as we know it

The famous *Star Trek* quotation may perhaps be a tired line, but this time it might have an element of truth. In August 2007, the *New Journal of Physics* published a paper by researchers working for the Russian Academy of Science, the Max-Planck Institute, and the University of Sydney explaining that, under a specific set of conditions in space, inorganic material may adopt the characteristics of living organisms. The group's findings add significantly to the debate surrounding the existence of inorganic and alien life, although they are, for now, purely theoretical.

The group took inorganic dust particles and used computer simulations to model their behaviour when immersed and held in a plasma (the fourth state of matter consisting of charged particles created when electrons are dissociated from the atomic nuclei of a superheated gas). The model demonstrated that the particles would absorb electrons from the plasma thus attracting positive ions, and that under zero gravity conditions the dust particles would sometimes form helical structures comparable to that of DNA. This dust-formed double helix has the potential to store and retain varying amounts of information through its two electrostatically stable states, while sections of the structure can be copied from one helix to another (bifurcation) and the chain can even in a sense metabolise, using new plasma to persist and grow.

In these respects, the structures possess some of the characteristics attributed to 'life', but that doesn't mean that if they were to exist in reality they would be 'living'. More correctly, these findings further blur the boundaries of 'life.' Previously, most scientists held that life could only occur in the presence of liquids such as water, but as Seth Shostak, a senior astronomer at the California-based SETI Institute said, "If you could have

life in the hot gases of a star, or in the hot, interstellar gas that suffuses the space between the stars, well, not only would that be 'life as we don't know it' but it might be the most common type of life." Shostak also noted that our existing ideas about what defines 'life' are already inadequate. The relevant principles the research paper considers are "autonomy, evolution, progeny and autopoiesis". But under these strict categories, as Shostak pointed out, mules (the sterile offspring of a male donkey and a female horse) could not be considered as living. That leaves us facing the potential absurdity that inorganic dust structures fulfill the academic criteria for life, but hybrid mammals do not. Perhaps it's science itself that now needs to evolve.



### Of shoes and ships and little ducks

According to various newspapers, including *The Times* and the *Daily Mail*, in late 2007, beachcombers in Southwest England may find themselves inundated with colourful plastic bath toys that will have floated over 17,000 miles of sea to reach the shore.

The story began on 10 January 1992, when a Pacific storm washed three 40-foot containers from a ship bound for America from Hong Kong. Inside the containers were packages containing 28,800 yellow ducks, green frogs, blue turtles, and red beavers, rubber bath toys produced by a Chinese manufacturer for the US

company The First Years and packaged in fours. Their journey has taken them halfway around the world through Alaskan, Japanese, Hawaiian, Arctic, Atlantic, Canadian, Scottish and Cornish waters.

The toys' progress has been meticulously charted by Seattle-based oceanographer Curtis Ebbesmeyer; supposedly they have traversed the North Pacific from Alaska to Japan and back to North America in around 3 years. Their progress was twice as fast as the surface water during this trip, earning them the title 'hyper-ducks', but the toys averaged one mile per day even when challenged by Arctic ice. Two thirds of the friendly flotilla have already made their way successfully to foreign beaches, but the remaining internationally noted yellow icons are expected to be carried by the Gulf Stream to Cornish beaches in late 2007. Although their journey might seem trivial, the toys' adventure may contribute largely to oceanographic studies of water currents. This is not the first instance in which an accidental spill has aided study, either – in 1990, 61,000 Nike running shoes were lost overboard from another ship before being discovered on further beaches worldwide. Assuming scientists' models of surface currents are correct, UK residents may well find up to 10,000 brightly coloured bath toys in the near future. Each is now worth a £50 bounty from the manufacturer as its contribution to science.

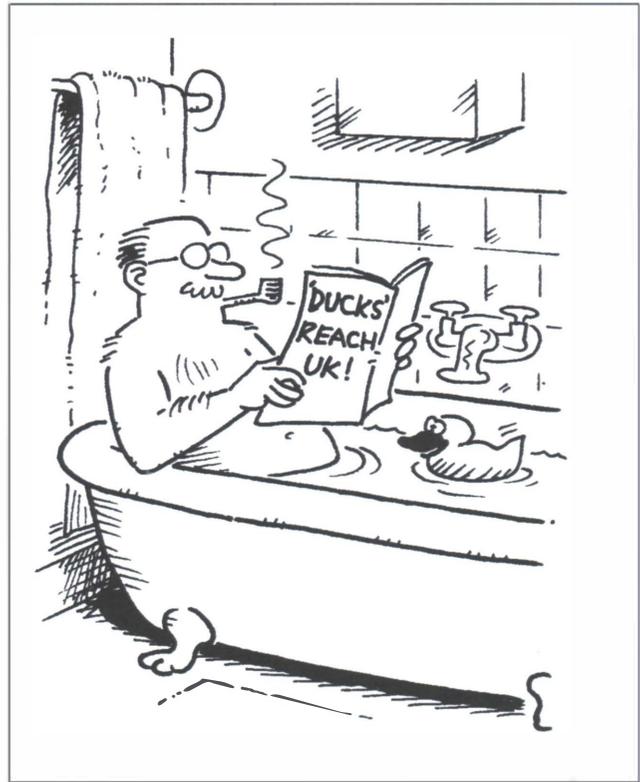
### Potent, painless and psychoactive

Spot the odd one out: acupuncture, saffron (the Middle Eastern spice), exercise, St. John's Wort, ketamine, electro-convulsive therapy and omega-3 fatty acids. Stop reading at the end of this sentence and really consider for a moment – which of the list has *not* been employed by health 'practitioners' to treat depression? The answer: all of them deserve to be listed, none are odd. While many treatments for depression historically vary on the (non-standardised) scale of barbaric to pseudoscientific, it seems one of the more unlikely weapons to be considered in the recent treatment arsenals is that of ketamine.

The journal *Biological Psychiatry* published findings from a preliminary study conducted by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), suggesting that the drug acts remarkably quickly as an antidepressant, relieving some patients' symptoms within two hours. The significance of these results is obvious given that the most common medications currently used to treat depression typically need four to six weeks to take effect. In fact, the small-scale research returned results

showing that 71% of participants experienced a halving in their measured depression after one day. In studies with established medication, it took eight weeks for 63% of participants to experience the same effects.

Unfortunately every silver lining has a cloud. Aside from apparently being a powerful, if short-lasting anti-



depressant, ketamine is also a psychedelic and a dissociative anaesthetic often used in veterinary medicine. The drug is popularly abused in clubbing, producing hallucinogenic effects and out of body experiences at higher concentrations.

Although only small (subanaesthetic) concentrations of ketamine were administered to research participants, the possibility of hallucinations remained. If participants did experience this, ketamine would be easily separated from the inert placebo, reducing the validity of results and making participants more likely to provide false positive reports of its efficacy. Either way, it would seem best to find a new but similarly acting medication. Ketamine was classified as a Class 'C' drug, effective in the UK from January 2006. Possession of the substance can now yield a two year jail term, while individuals caught supplying the drug can earn 14 years behind bars – certainly long enough to cause depression in itself.

Thanks to this issue's clippings contributors: **Mark Williams, Sid Rodrigues, the Wizard's Star List, and Skeptic News.** The *Skeptic* would like to remind clippings contributors to use the magazine's current address, listed on p. 3, rather than the old PO Box address, which has been phased out. 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



THOSE WHO DO not follow technology closely may be surprised to learn that one of the hottest things out there are so-called virtual worlds. These began as games, loosely based on the live role-playing game *Dungeons and Dragons*. There are, as always, arguments about who did what when, but the first modern such world whose influence can be directly traced in a continuous line through to today's worlds was written in 1979 at the University of Essex by a pair of programmers named Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle. It was all text, as the best adventures often are (try it for yourself at [www.mudii.co.uk](http://www.mudii.co.uk)).

Time and technology have moved on and the hot, new virtual worlds all have graphics. There is, of course, a real argument to be made that the pictures are better in the old text worlds, as they are on the radio, but let's not go there. Let us instead contemplate the notion of grown-ups interacting with each other online via cartoon figures known as avatars that move through an animated landscape and "talk" to each other by typing. Many of these graphical worlds are still game-based: World of Warcraft, Everquest, Eve Online. But the one that's hogging all the media attention is the non-game Second Life, the child of California-based Linden Labs; it has even spawned a parody site, [www.getafirstlife.com](http://www.getafirstlife.com).

Second Life's timing was impeccable: it arrived just when businesses began seeing virtual worlds as a marketing opportunity to gain access to a demographic segment that's exceptionally hard to reach. (Kids, today. They just don't watch TV like they're supposed to.) And so although you can fly in Second Life, people spend Linden dollars (pegged at 237 to one US dollar) on Honda automobiles, IBM has a bunch of islands for developer experiments, and Coke is sponsoring a competition to design an inworld Coke vending machine. They also spend real money on virtual land on which to build homes.

Of course, avatars do not actually need to eat or drink. Or sleep in sheltered accommodation, or in fact go anywhere or do much of anything. But what's the point of the freedom to do, by animated proxy, anything you want if you then just sit around all day talking to your friends with much less convenience than you could by phone? So Second Lifers travel their fantasy landscape, shop for clothing fashions, build and decorate buildings, put up art exhibits, and buy laptops on which they can view news stories and video streamed in from the Web.

Now, I know what you're not thinking. You're not thinking that virtual worlds might be a solution to the energy crisis. Unless you read the science fiction writer Philip K. Dick's *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, in which a bunch of Mars colonists had such hard lives of tedium and misery that they kept dollhouses. These they elaborately furnished with items bought at great expense from Earth catalogues. They then inserted themselves into the dolls that lived in these houses by taking hallucinogenic drugs.

Anyway, it seems certain that at some point some envi-

ronmentalist is going to say, hey, I know: instead of actually flying places all the time and burning up the atmosphere, why can't we build immersive but synthetic environments? You don't have to actually go to Singapore if you can log into something just like it. All we have to do is fool your brain. Quite apart from whether this is actually possible – technology folks are always predicting that we're only  $x$  distance away from virtual reality or artificial intelligence, and both always turn out to be much further away than anyone thought – it turns out it won't work after all. Because even one of today's skimpy cartoon Second Life avatars consumes as much power as the average Brazilian and emits as much carbon as an SUV driven for 2,300 miles.

These calculations come to us courtesy of author Nicholas Carr ([www.roughlytype.com](http://www.roughlytype.com)), who calculated them by comparing Linden Labs' public statements about the company's energy requirements with the number of Second Lifers active at any given time and the energy consumption of various groups of humans. Avatars, he mused in conclusion, "don't have bodies, but they do have footprints."

Power is a huge issue in the computer industry generally. Google, for example, is siting its latest giant data centre next to a big generator of cheap power, the dam in The Dalles, Oregon, just along the Columbia River from Yahoo! and Microsoft. Google is also one of a number of companies that are going green, reducing their power usage and carbon emissions as much as possible, a decision with direct financial benefits.

And yet it's not clear how deeply these and other technology companies really believe we have a problem. If they did, wouldn't they be turning their assembled, impressive brain power onto inventing clever energy technologies? Wouldn't every technical demonstration of a new product or technology-based medical treatment include some idea of how it was going to work if and when we run out of energy?

And yet they must know. One of Second Life's biggest problems is what's known as network lag – that is, the length of time it takes for the world on your screen to react to your input. Of course congestion on the wider Internet contributes, but the biggest source of network lag is simply that too many people are trying to use a particular area of the world, which in real life corresponds to a single processor on a server. Lag is exacerbated by the fact that people can fancy up their avatars with elaborate hairdos and fashions that are made up of many graphical elements known as "prims" (for primitives, basic shapes out of which objects can be built). A single virtual Reebok shoe, for example, may require 217 prims. All of these add to the server's burden, so that a virtual technology show faces the choice of slowing unacceptably when a moderate number of customers arrive – or demanding that those customers remove all their prim-heavy adornments while they're there. In other words: please take off your shoes. Don't we get enough of that kind of thing from the airlines?

Wendy M Grossman is founder and former editor of *The Skeptic*. Her web site is at [www.pelicancrossing.net](http://www.pelicancrossing.net).

# Exposing the Myth of Alcoholics Anonymous. Part 1: History and (Lack of) Effectiveness

Steven Mohr begins his two-part investigation by examining the origins of the movement and evidence that the famous 12-step programme simply does not work

IF YOU HAVE had a serious drinking problem in the United States of America you might have had serious troubles to go along with that problem. You might have a drunken driving conviction, or landed in a hospital or detoxification facility by court order. If any of these things have happened to you, it is almost a certainty that you have been introduced to the programme of Alcoholics Anonymous otherwise known simply as AA. If you have been fortunate enough to have avoided jail or hospitals but have, on your own, sought professional help to stop or to moderate your alcohol consumption, the odds are still very, very high that you have been advised to attend meetings of AA.

The programme of Alcoholic's Anonymous, known as a 12-Step Program, is the number one treatment for alcoholism in the US as imposed by the courts and supported by the medical community for the last forty years. Very few health insurance companies will cover alcohol or drug addiction treatment that is not 12-step based. It would be reasonable to assume therefore, as most do, that AA is not only a successful treatment for the alcoholic but is probably the best available today.

Both assumptions are completely unfounded and unsupported by scientific or historical evidence. The truth is that the available evidence strongly suggests that treatment under the AA programme provides very little or no long-term help at all for active alcoholics. Further, there is ample evidence that long term repeated exposure to this programme is actually dangerous to many alcoholics who would have fared better if left on their own.

This is a truly appalling and frightening state of affairs for millions of alcoholics and their loved ones. It means that the medical profession and the court system in the U.S. are directing thousands of sick people each year into a religious-based programme that has little or no merit as a treatment for their illness. It also implies that few serious alternatives are routinely brought to the attention of the troubled alcoholic.

What is Alcoholics Anonymous? Who are its adherents? What are its methods? How has AA become so deeply inculcated into public and professional thinking vis-à-vis the treatment of alcoholism? If it doesn't work, as I have suggested, why not? What in the world could actually make it dangerous? Is there medical, therapeutic,

or psychological treatment involved? Is it entirely based on religious beliefs? What makes it a *religious cult*?

Alcoholics Anonymous claims to be: "... a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking.... Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety." (*A Brief Guide to Alcoholics Anonymous*, 1972). These words sound positive and hopeful but they do not

**The truth is that the available evidence strongly suggests that treatment under the AA programme provides very little or no long-term help at all for active alcoholics**

describe the true workings or intent of AA.

To be plain, there is ample evidence that Alcoholics Anonymous is in reality a religious cult masquerading as a self-help group. Its adherents actively indoctrinate newcomers to their way of thinking using overt and subtle misinformation, intimidation and false promises. They routinely prey on a population subset of sick people at their weakest, namely, desperate alcoholics. Through ancillary groups like Al-Anon and Alateen, AA also attempts to bring the families of alcoholics into their cult. Unless AA has something tangible, verifiable, and repeatedly helpful to offer these people, this makes them not just deceitful but dangerous.

This might sound like an astounding accusation to anyone who has not been maltreated by AA or studied them carefully. Likewise, you may know seemingly happy recovering alcoholics who swear by the benign and benevolent nature of the AA program. You may be one yourself.

Those who believe they have remained sober solely by strict adherence to the programme of Alcoholics Anonymous, and there are thousands, will generally never have anything but praise for the program. But if thousands have recovered when millions have tried, then the best that can be said is that the success rate is low. The worst that can be said I have already written. For every happily recovering anonymous alcoholic there are hundreds who have found the programme at best worthless and at worst a curse or even a death sentence. Ironically, I have often heard it said in AA meetings that to be successful in one's recovery, one must "... step over the bodies".

founded in 1935 by Bill Wilson, an unsuccessful stock trader, and Doctor Bob Smith, a surgeon. Bill had suffered for years with ever-advancing and debilitating alcoholism, having lost all ability to earn a living and having been repeatedly institutionalized for detoxification to save his life. By his own account and that of his wife and others, he was a hopeless case destined for death by prolonged alcohol poisoning or commitment to an insane asylum for alcohol-induced dementia known medically as Korsakoff's syndrome or *wet brain*.

One day an old friend and self-admitted fellow drunk, Ebby Thatcher, called and came over to visit Bill at his house. Ebby was clean and sober and told Bill that



An illustration from 1905 of how alcohol abuse affects the appearance and liver of a man through different stages of his life.

The first thing one is asked when initiated into AA is to keep an open mind. I agree wholeheartedly. If you are currently trying to remain sober through AA or are of the opinion that it is a good and necessary support programme for alcoholics, I implore you to keep an open mind to the premises already mentioned and the following substantiated facts. They may save your life or that of someone you know. At the very least this knowledge may save you a lot of time and let you find real help sooner.

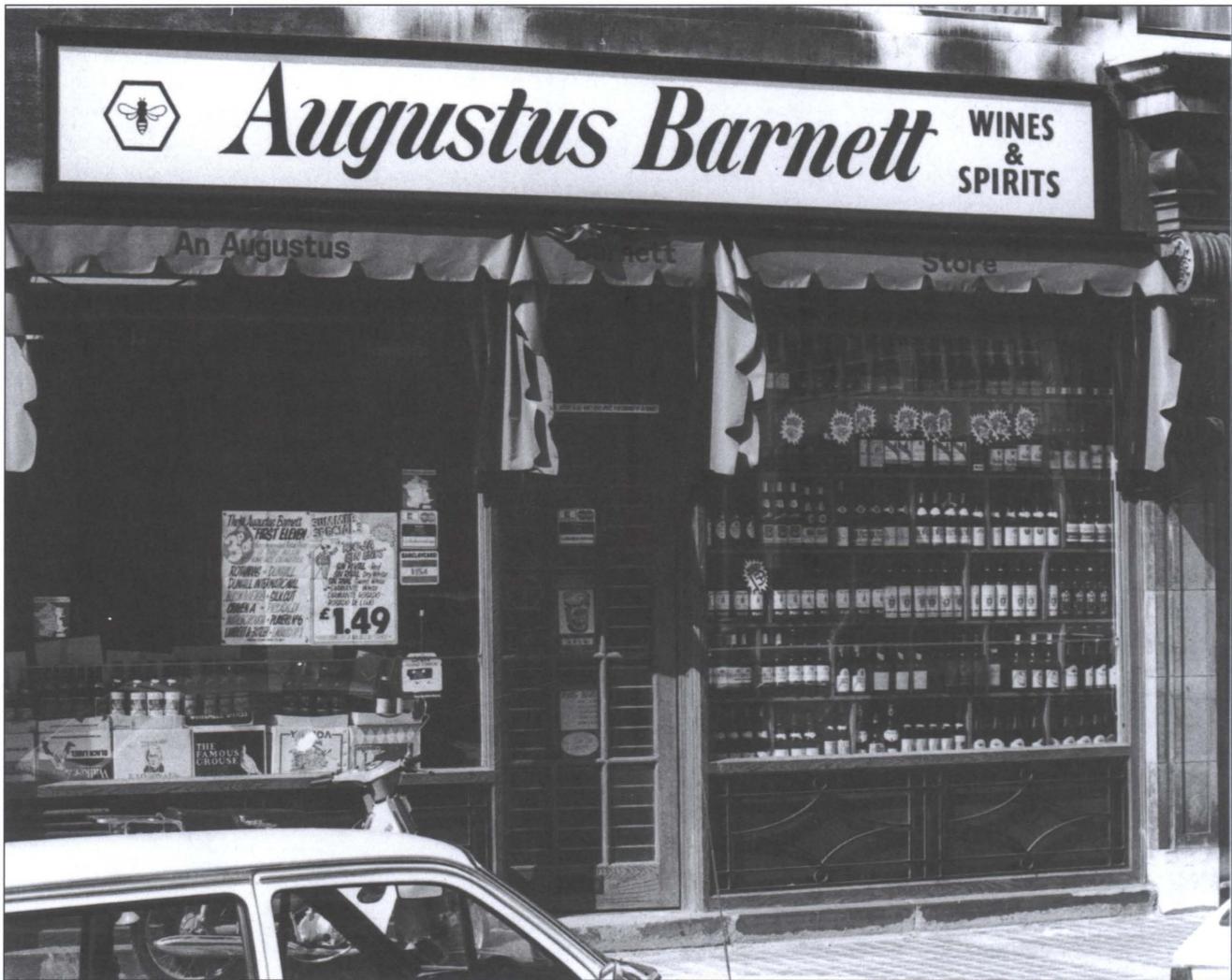
### A Brief History of AA

Alcoholics Anonymous is a largely decentralized organization – a random collection of smaller groups, co-

he had overcome his alcoholism by finding religion. Specifically, he had joined a small sect of evangelical Christians called the Oxford Group founded by Frank Buchman. Though sceptical, Bill attended some church meetings, but still lapsed back into destructive drinking.

During a last ditch effort to save him, his wife and his brother-in-law sent Bill once again to a medical sanitarium to dry out and receive a multiple drug treatment common in the day that involved administration of various sedatives along with the psychotropic, even hallucination-inducing, drug belladonna.

While under the influence of strong psychotropic drugs, Bill Wilson had a vision of a bright light and the



*The ready availability of alcohol in our society makes it difficult for alcoholics to resist temptation*

revelation that he could be saved only by giving his life completely and fully to God, and that an important part of his recovery would be to bring the news of his epiphany and recovery to other suffering alcoholics. By all accounts, he never drank alcohol again and spent the rest of his life building and advocating the organization of Alcoholics Anonymous. He is known to have suffered massive depressive episodes during his life but remained sober. He died in 1971 at the age of 75.

Bill Wilson is credited with authoring the eponymous fundamental text of Alcoholics Anonymous generally called *The Big Book* (Wilson, 1939/2001). In *The Big Book*, Bill tells his story of recovery and outlines twelve steps by which he believes any alcoholic can recover. In a second book, titled *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (Wilson, 2003), Bill elaborates greatly on the twelve steps and adds twelve principles for maintaining the organization of AA. The 12 steps and some of the 12 traditions will be presented here as we examine the methods of AA.

Bill Wilson met Dr. Bob Smith early in his recovery and Dr. Bob also successfully found sobriety by giving his life to God and particularly to Jesus Christ through

the Oxford Group. They were two men to whom their personal recoveries were nothing short of miraculous. They set out immediately and with great urgency to spread the word to other alcoholics. As they gathered recruits to their method of alcoholic salvation, regular attendance at highly ritualized meetings of their fellows became an essential aspect of the AA doctrine.

Their recruitment success rate was nearly zero at first. By the time of the writing of *The Big Book* around 1938-1939, they claimed an active membership of roughly 100. There is scant or little evidence for the general success of the early adherents other than that they regularly attended meetings and kept trying the programme when they relapsed. Still, it appears that there was a substantial dropout rate such that Bill and Dr. Bob had to constantly recruit new members.

By 1939 *The Big Book* had been published and both Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob were vigorously promoting their programme in other cities with the income from book sales. A glowing account of their efforts by Jack Alexander appeared in an article in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1941 after which they began to receive national attention. Around this time they also found

support in the person of John D. Rockefeller Jr. With his enormous resources and influence, Rockefeller did much to help keep the fledgling organization alive.

### Evidence and Propaganda

These historical facts are not in dispute. The same basic story is available from AA literature or their website <http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org>. What is not mentioned but noteworthy is that the medical community at large rejected the AA “cure” for alcoholism at the start. This is understandable because, as we will see, the supposed cure involved appeals to a supernatural agency and all reports of success are entirely anecdotal. Nonetheless, *The Big Book* opens with a ringing endorsement by one Dr. Robert Silkwood who had worked with alcoholics for years and knew Bill Wilson personally.

## Their own unfavorable statistics do not, however, dissuade AA from continuing to claim great success for their programme

Dr. Silkwood was duly impressed with Bill’s recovery and contributed the only medical opinion in the book. Dr. Silkwood also developed a personal theory that alcoholics had acquired an allergy to alcohol – something that is still offered as fact within AA, but has never been endorsed by the medical community. There seems to be no evidence at all to support the allergy theory of alcoholism. Alcoholism was not even medically recognized as a disease until the American Medical Association declared it so in 1956.

Today Alcoholics Anonymous boasts 2 million adherents in over 120 countries worldwide; this from the Fourth Edition, 16<sup>th</sup> printing in 2005 of *The Big Book* as well as their website. How they have arrived at this number is unclear, as is their reporting of their rates of success in getting and keeping alcoholics sober.

Reliable statistics are notoriously difficult to come by when dealing with drug addicts. Aside from being incarcerated, caught in the act of using, or from reports of associates, or forced chemical tests, one has only the word of the user as to whether or not he or she has remained sober. AA has the additional problem of not keeping track of those who come and go through its meeting doors. Still, in order to find support in the medical community AA has needed to compile some form of statistics on success rates.

Starting in 1964 the Alcoholics Anonymous General Service Organization (GSO) began conducting its Triennial Surveys of their current population and compiling the results. The 1983 report claimed to be the first to use scientific statistical sampling techniques. In that year AA finally employed a professional consultant who introduced them to the statistically valid *stratified sampling* technique. This indicates that any survey results prior to 1983 were unreliable. Though AA had never before 1983 used valid statistical methods they regularly reported success rates from 25% to 50% or even higher (*Comments on AA’s Triennial Surveys*, 1990). Thus, for the first 48 years of their existence AA members were simply inventing numbers and spreading them as propaganda throughout the American public consciousness. Ironically, AA is a self-described programme of “rigorous honesty” (Wilson, 1939/2001).

Still, the introduction of valid statistical methods if done properly could have yielded reliable data beginning in 1983. I have had no luck finding continued surveys after 1989, but in that year AA reported that on average, after 6 months, 93 percent of new attendees had left the programme and that after one year only five to seven percent remained (*Comments on AA’s Triennial Surveys*, 1990). It is unclear whether or not this takes into account those who leave and rejoin the programme repeatedly over years.

The five to seven percent reported for a steady year of sobriety is usually counted as the short-term success rate of the Alcoholics Anonymous program. Taken out to five years it is exceedingly difficult to estimate. Members with decades of sobriety are hard to find and greatly valued as speakers at meetings. Some travel extensively promoting the cause. Others become licensed addiction counselors and work in facilities that include 12-step initiation. In this way the intra-programme perception of having many *old timers* is perpetuated.

### Independent Investigation

Their own unfavorable statistics do not, however, dissuade AA from continuing to claim great success for their programme. Bill Wilson wrote in *The Big Book* that, “Rarely, have we seen anyone fail who has thoroughly followed our path. Those who do not recover are those who cannot or will not give themselves completely to this simple program, usually men and women who are constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves” (Wilson, 1939/2001) On his deathbed he is reported as saying he wished he had written *never* instead of only *rarely*. The argument is that many may come through the doors of AA and most may not come back, but those who truly practice the 12 steps always succeed. This is, of course, an argument that can be neither proved nor disproved. It is in no way scientific and, as we shall see, the methods of AA are non-rigorous and subjective because the “cure” involves appeals to supernatural agencies.



*A drunken driving conviction is one common route leading to contact with Alcoholics Anonymous.*

A brief history of AA now in place, we turn to the obvious question of independent attempts to validate the success of the treatment scientifically. There have been surprisingly few over 70 years. Still, more and more evidence has come to light that AA simply does not help alcoholics. The Harvard Medical School reported in 1995 evidence that a significant number of problem drinkers recover on their own. They wrote in the *Harvard Mental Health Letter* in October, 1995: "One recent study found that 80% of all alcoholics who recover for a year or more do so on their own, some after being unsuccessfully treated. When a group of these self-treated alcoholics was interviewed, 57% said they simply decided that alcohol was bad for them. Twenty-nine percent said health problems, frightening experiences, accidents, or blackouts persuaded them to quit. Others used such phrases as 'Things were building up' or 'I was sick and tired of it.' Support from a husband or wife was important in sustaining the resolution" (*Treatment of Drug Abuse and Addiction*, 1995).

It is most useful here to present evidence from one of the first large reliably validated scientific studies of its kind, which targeted the programme of Alcoholics Anonymous directly and exclusively. It was performed by Dr George Vaillant, MD, a Harvard psychiatrist and noted authority on the disease of alcoholism, and an open proponent of Alcoholics Anonymous. Dr Vaillant is the author of *The Natural History of Alcoholism*, a

seminal work in the field published in 1983.

Dr Vaillant conducted a study whereby he followed 100 alcoholics consecutively admitted for detoxification to an alcoholism clinic in Cambridge Mass, with which he was associated. The subjects were followed for a period of eight years with status obtained annually after discharge from the clinic.

Though he expected great success through the AA program, he was instead greatly disappointed. His honesty and candor, though, are commendable. Dr Vaillant wrote:

It seemed perfectly clear... by turning to recovering alcoholics [AA members] rather than to PhD's for lessons in breaking self-detrimental and more or less involuntary habits, and by inexorably moving patients... into the treatment system of AA, I was working for the most exciting alcohol program in the world.

But then came the rub. Fueled by our enthusiasm, I and the [clinic] director, tried to prove our efficacy. Our clinic followed up our first 100 detoxification patients... every year for the next 8 years. The clinic sample results [were] also contrasted with three studies of equal duration that purported to offer no formal treatment. After initial discharge, only 5 patients in the clinic sample never relapsed to alcoholic drinking, and there is compelling evidence that the results of our treatment were no better than the natural history of the disease. [...] Not only had we failed to alter the natural

history of alcoholism, but our death rate of three percent a year was appalling.

(in Orange, no date)

Note carefully that in this study of 100 subjects, 3% of these individuals *died* every year for eight years while actively participating in AA. This means that at the end of the 8th year only 76 of the original test sample remained alive – 24 had died. The random population sample used in the experiment should have been little different than that of the general US population of adults in which approximately 1% die a year from all combined causes (roughly 900 deaths per 100,000 people in 1985). Even taking into account that chronic alcoholics may be in poorer health than the average citizen, 24 dead in only eight years or over 3 times the national average, is an extremely depressing statistic.

**... the methods of AA are non-rigorous and subjective because the "cure" involves appeals to supernatural agencies**

Note also that when Dr. Vaillant refers to AA as being no better than the natural history of the disease he means that his studies and others have shown that chronic alcoholics left to their own devices *with no intervention at all* still recover at the rate of about five percent a year. Interestingly, and what I find confounding, Dr. Vaillant is a secular (non-alcoholic) member on the Board of Trustees of Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc. Despite his failure as a scientist to prove any efficacy whatsoever to the programme, he remains an ardent supporter of Alcoholics Anonymous.

**Misdirection, Mind Control and a Higher Power**

But the doctor's attitude is really quite typical of the AA supporter. There are undeniably thousands of individuals within AA at any given time that used to drink chronically but are at present clean and sober. We have seen, though, that many of these would probably have recovered with no help at all. AA members tend to give the credit for their success entirely to the programme. The recovering alcoholic is taught by AA to give all credit to God and AA. They generally oblige, regardless of any other external or internal factors that tend to

keep them sober such as an honest desire to be healthy again, or the love and support of their families. AA denies these influences and *The Big Book* even admonishes AA devotees to put family third after God and AA, and to put everything else in life last.

It is a flawed argument to use a snapshot of the reported success of a population sample to claim overall long-term success for the larger population. The more rigorous and statistically sound approach of Dr. Vaillant and others has repeatedly provided scientifically sound statistics that belie any claims made by those with a vested prejudice for the programme.

This brings us to the next set of fundamental questions. Whether or not AA has ever been shown to work reliably or repeatably, how is it even supposed to work? Is it really a religious cult instead of a cure for alcoholism?

Alcoholics Anonymous claims to be a spiritual, not a religious programme of alcoholic recovery. They claim that the disease of alcoholism is one of Body, Mind, and Spirit. But they focus entirely on the Spirit. Since the 12 steps are essential to understanding the AA philosophy, I present them here as taken directly from *The Big Book*.

The 12 Suggested Steps  
of Alcoholics Anonymous

We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.

Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our

conscious contact with God, as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

I will not attempt to analyze each of these steps in detail. Taken as a whole they are offered as a "suggested" programme of recovery. It is often said to newcomers in AA that they should take what they can use and leave the rest; at least they are told that at first. There is no doubt, however, that the teachings of the 12 steps are intended to be a complete and wholly necessary set of instructions (dare I say Commandments?) for the alcoholic to achieve a lasting sobriety. It is completely obvious by inspection that the steps are a recommended path to theological enlightenment not just sobriety.

These steps are a direct expansion of the principles taught by the Oxford Group founded by Frank Buchman, of which Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith were devoted members. The Oxford Group, incidentally, had no affiliation with the University of Oxford and later changed its name to Moral Re-Armament and later again to Initiatives of Change.

The Oxford Principles

- To seek Divine Guidance in all aspects of life
- To humble oneself to God and surrender completely to Him
- To acknowledge any offenses against others
- To make restitution to those sinned against
- To promote the group to the public in an evangelical manner

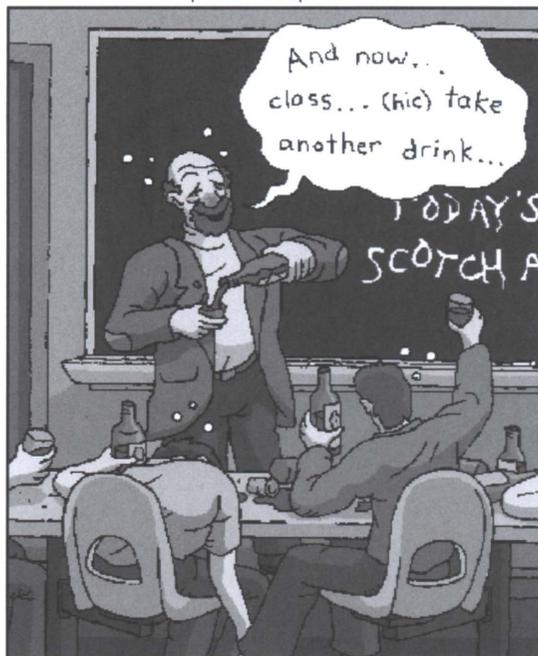
(from Wikipedia, no date)

By examination of the existing evidence, if not by their own admission (AA insists it is *not* a religious programme), AA seems to be a religious sect. They encourage their members to actively seek a personal relationship with God. They advocate intercessory prayer and the confession of sins, and they promote evangelicalism. I and others have gone further and called AA a dangerous religious cult. How do we justify this more pernicious interpretation? Find out in the second part of this article in the next issue of *The Skeptic*.

# THE PARKING LOT IS FULL

by Jack McLaren and Pat Spacek

<http://www.plif.com>



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Many leading universities offer post-graduate degrees in alcoholism. Regret not getting that PhD? You may be qualified to get one *already!*

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**Steven Mohr** is an Engineer and Technical Writer living in Melbourne, FL. His first encounter with AA came after he was admitted to a three-day detoxification program. He has attended hundreds of AA meetings.

# Skeptical Stats

1. Fastest zorb ride (a sport in which practitioners hurtle down a hill inside a giant, translucent, inflatable ball) as verified by police radar: **32mph over 820 metres**
2. Proportion of snakes to people, residing in the village of Choto Pashla, West Bengal, where most of the reptiles are poisonous monocled cobra: **1:2**
3. Number of people, spread over 70 different countries, said to be affected by high levels (above 10 parts per billion) of naturally occurring arsenic in drinking water: **140 million**
4. Number of children in Britain aged between 5 and 19, taking hyperactivity medication: **400,000**
5. Total value of two, 372-year-old, church bells, complete with inscription reading "Love God", stolen from a village church near Andover, Hampshire: **£30,000**
6. Value of a 40-million-year old Egyptian fossilised whale before it was allegedly destroyed by European diplomats who drove over it in two 4-wheel-drive cars: **\$10,000,000 (US)**
7. Total mass of a light green, coconut-sized gemstone, believed to be a diamond by its owner who claimed it didn't scratch when tested with a garage grinder: **8,000 carats**
8. Total fines issued to two 19-year-old Devonian boys, who tested deodorant and subsequently refused to pay for it as they didn't like the smell: **£163**
9. Fine issued by Chinese police to two lovers who hugged in public, on Qi Xi, the Chinese equivalent of Valentine's day: **nearly £330**
10. Number of people who were given a free outfit by a newly opened London clothing store, after responding to a company publicity stunt by queuing in the rain wearing nothing but underwear: **40**
11. Number of legal appeal proceedings recently brought to the Kenyan High Court, by the group 'Friends of Jesus', seeking to overturn Christ's conviction and subsequent execution on the basis of a human rights violation: **1**
  12. Yearly number of road accidents in Britain, attributable to insects: **650,000**
13. Average value of items carried in a typical school bag, by British children of secondary school age: **£265**
14. Number of people who signed an online petition requesting that the government did not slaughter 'Shambo', a black Friesian bull living in isolation at a Hindu temple in Wales, who tested positive for the bacteria which causes Bovine TB: **24,000**
15. Percentage of the British public responding in 2005, who supported some type of ban on experiments which cause suffering to animals: **80**
  16. Percentage of British animal studies conducted in 2005, in which an anaesthetic was used: **40**
  17. Percentage of British animal studies conducted in 2006, in which an anaesthetic was used: **38**
  18. Average price of an ecstasy tablet in Portsmouth, UK: **50 pence.**
  19. Total amount gambled on the result of the latest series of Big Brother: **£10 million**
20. Average speed of the two *Voyager* space probes, launched 30 years ago to explore Jupiter and Saturn: **more than 950 miles per minute**
  21. Number of languages in which a greeting was recorded, for inclusion with each probe: **54**
  22. Amount of power the *Voyager* craft need to function: **the equivalent of 3 standard light bulbs**
  23. Equivalent power of the impact of the 320 metre wide asteroid dubbed *99942 Apophis*, in the unlikely event that it collides with the Earth in 2036: **850 million tons of TNT.**
  24. Average number of handbags one woman is likely to own over her lifetime, according to research conducted by an Essex shopping centre: **111**
  25. Average total cost of these handbags: **£8,436**

## Sources

1,3 ABC News (Australia); 2 AFP; 4,5 BBC News; 6 AHN Media - FeedSyndicate; 7,9,11 Reuters; 8,10 *Metro*; 12,13 *Esure*; 14 <http://www.wevaluelifelife.org>; 15 Ipsos MORI; 16,17, Home Office Research Statistics 18 *Drugscope*; 19,24,25 *This is London*; 20 <http://www.spaceflightnow.com>; 21,22 <http://www.astronomy.com>; 23 NASA

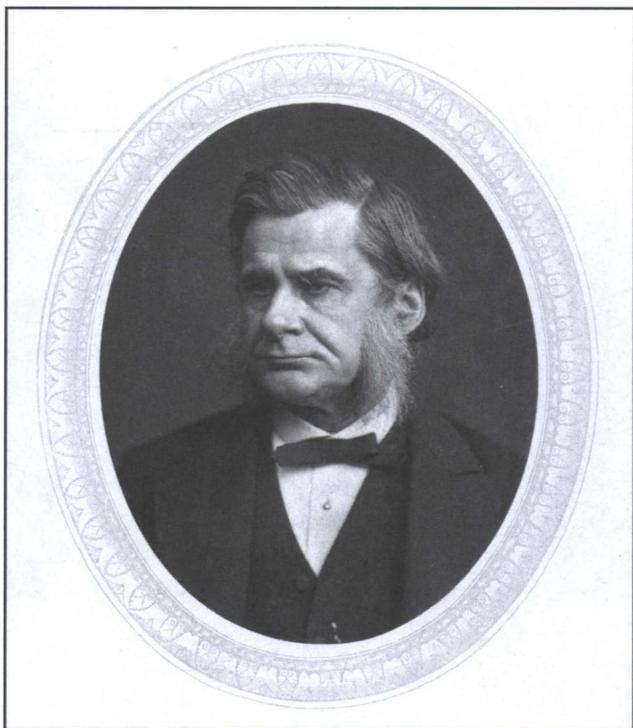
Skeptical Stats is compiled by **Mark Williams** with thanks to **Wendy M Grossman**. Both *Hits & Misses* and *Skeptical Stats* depend heavily on reader contributions of clippings, story leads, and odd statistics. Please do send any interesting articles or opinions to [mark.williams@gold.ac.uk](mailto:mark.williams@gold.ac.uk), post a comment in our blog at [ukskeptic.livejournal.com](http://ukskeptic.livejournal.com), or send in by post to the address on the masthead (p. 3). Contributions are gratefully received and cited with your names.

# Believe it or Not

Sally Marlow interviews Mark Vernon about life, the universe and everything – but mainly agnosticism

IT WAS A GOOD START when I contacted Mark Vernon to ask for an interview and he suggested we meet in a bookshop. Not a specialist or academic bookshop, but *Books etc* on Victoria Street. I had a feeling I would be dealing with someone fairly down to earth, and I was right. In the event the lunchtime meeting was rescheduled to a café, the nature of life being such that

The first thing that struck me about Mark Vernon in person was that he was much younger than I expected him to be, and somehow much hipper. His book had brought the image of a wise old man to mind. In truth, I was expecting a cross between Rowan Williams and Gandalf. Our expectations are often shaped by stereotypes, and the tag “ex-vicar” had led me to expect, well, I’m not sure exactly what, but not the man with the funky glasses and linen jacket who sat in front of me.



*TH Huxley (1825-1895) coined the term “agnosticism” in 1869*

sometimes you have to feed your face before you can feed your soul. We sat surrounded by civil servants and House of Fraser employees, and I tried to get a feeling for what Vernon means when he describes himself as an agnostic, and whether the headline-grabbing fact that he is an ex-vicar contributes to that meaning. Vernon is one of the breed of philosophers who claims that philosophy is to be lived, not merely thought about. How then can agnosticism, which seems to rely so heavily on the idea of “not”, be an active philosophy for life? Vernon attempts to put the case in his book, and he tried to explain it to me over coffee. I need to come clean here. I am not a philosopher, or a theologian. I am a psychology undergraduate having just completed my first year at Goldsmiths College. What this means is that he had to start at first principles and explain his ideas to an absolute beginner. In my defence, I had already read his book *Science, Religion and the Meaning of Life*, and had found it truly absorbing and possibly life-changing.

**Who could not be intrigued to read a celebration of agnosticism written by an ex-cleric, who reached his version of not knowing via a spell as an atheist?**

It is fair to say that his book on agnosticism has attracted a healthy amount of attention, possibly stemming from the same place as my own curiosity about Vernon’s previous life in the church. Who could not be intrigued to read a celebration of agnosticism written by an ex-cleric, who reached his version of not knowing via a spell as an atheist? Possibly much of the attention is to do with the fact that there have been no serious works on agnosticism since TH Huxley first coined the phrase – an obvious gap in the publishing market. Or possibly it is that sometimes the time is right for a book, and Vernon has hit on something which is fundamental to living through the ages, and particularly now. Religions of all types are centre stage at the moment, although our awareness seems to be mostly of their more fundamentalist aspects and leaders. In retaliation, scientists and atheism have taken an increasingly polarised stance. *The God Delusion* (Dawkins, 2006) has sold over 200,000 in hardback in the UK alone, and you can buy it at Tesco’s next to the Halal meat and the Matzo crackers. Some have coined the word Scientism to describe the use of science to explain how the world works, almost as though it has become a religion itself. Perhaps surrounded by all this dogma, and all these people who are so convinced that they are right, Vernon’s brand of uncertainty has tapped into something important and of the moment. BBC Online picked up his ideas immediately, and on the day they

featured an interview with him, that interview received 250,000 hits, more than any other subject.

The UK has a long tradition of agnosticism, but the use of the word agnostic to describe the UK experience implies a wishy-washiness, and a lack of willingness to engage with the bigger questions. Vernon's approach to the subject is anything but wishy-washy, possibly because of his claim not only to think about agnosticism, but to live it. If agnosticism is what gives his life meaning, then it must be an active, dynamic form of agnosticism. Does such a thing exist? Vernon thinks so.

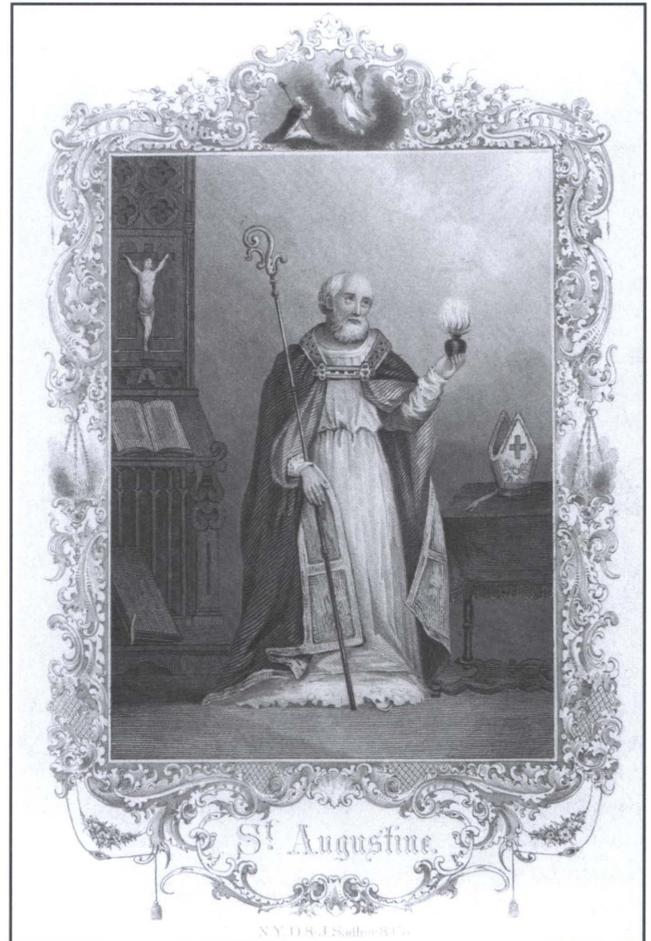
The statement "I am an agnostic" can be interpreted in many ways. It can simply mean "I don't know". It

**If agnosticism is what gives his life meaning, then it must be an active, dynamic form of agnosticism. Does such a thing exist?**

can mean "I don't know, but I will assume that no god exists, and live my life to that effect", or the opposite "I don't know but will lead my life assuming god does exist." One suspects that the Anglican church has more than its fair share of this type of agnostic, and possibly Roman Catholicism too. As Dermott says to Father Ted in the eponymous sitcom, "to be sure Ted, you don't believe in all that rubbish, do you?" Agnosticism can also mean "I can not give an opinion because there is not enough evidence one way or the other right now, although that might change", or, "I can not give an opinion because there is not enough evidence one way or the other right now, and that will never change". It can even mean that god does exist, but we do not know anything about god. It's a complicated business, describing yourself as an agnostic, and I wanted to know where on this spectrum Vernon fitted in. He is what he calls a Christian agnostic, a concept somewhat different to Graham Greene's description of himself as a Catholic Agnostic (which seems to me from Greene's writing to be very little to do with having a faith and rather a lot to do with guilt). Rather, Vernon's agnosticism comes from a place of not knowing, but from a place which is religiously inclined. The history of agnosticism is full of those who have felt the same way. Socrates' original quest began because of the Oracle at Delphi. St Augustine was just one of the many medieval Christians searching for comprehension. In contemporary times, despite the seeming increase in fundamentalism, for many, religion is not so clear cut. Thus, as Vernon himself points out, to be Jewish and an atheist is not necessarily a contradiction, and he describes

friends of his living in the East as Zen Agnostics (although expressing caution over the use of the word Zen, which has become a Westernised vox-pop).

Vernon's whole premise is that we can not know the meaning of life, but the enquiry may in itself be meaningful enough. Inevitably the popularity of Vernon's book draws comparisons with Dawkins, but there are few similarities in either subject matter or tone. Vernon's



*St Augustine was one of many medieval Christians seeking comprehension*

book, like Vernon the man, is more respectful, gentler, more preoccupied with asking questions than showing us that he has all the answers.

When a book describes a way of life, part of the way it informs is to tell you something of the life of the author, and Vernon's book weaves his personal story into his philosophical approach, describing what it was like to leave the church, and touching upon the death of his mother. Vernon himself pointed out to me that philosophy and biography are two sides of the same coin – both describe how to live. Over the past 100 years or so he believes that philosophy has moved away from the Kirkegaardian idea that what is true must be true for you. In a world where we are constantly looking for certainty, Vernon describes his own truth thus: "truth for me is a bad thing". But if you don't have truth, what do you replace it with? That is Vernon's

point exactly. You replace it with not knowing, and the not knowing becomes the truth.

As the conversation with Vernon progressed, he described a little of what it was that made him reject his religious calling. In the Bible, John tells us “and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free”. Clearly John et al’s version of the truth did not set Vernon free, and on leaving the church he became an atheist with the zeal of the newly-converted. After a short spell as a card-carrying sceptic, he rejected athe-

**To paraphrase a recent letter to the *Times*, whereas atheists are committed, Catholics and Muslims are devout, and Jews are orthodox, agnostics are passionate**

ism too, and began to explore the alternative of agnosticism. He has been an agnostic for many years now, although the tradition of Christianity continues to inform and shape his ideas. One of his favourite books is *The Name of the Rose*, and he says he would have liked to have been alive in those times. Had he been, he wonders if perhaps he would have stayed in the church, which then seemed to allow much more room for enquiry. The twenty-first century does not seem to provide an institution which allows for the same questioning. His turning point and embracing of agnosticism came with a revelation that the important thing is how you live, not what you believe. Having realised that religion could not provide him with a belief system, he rapidly worked out that science could not either. Science for him can not be the be-all-and-end-all, although he seems to feel at home with the cosmologists, because they too ask the big metaphysical and physical questions. We can describe stuff like light and gravity, but we can’t explain it, and that is what Vernon embraces. Whereas Dawkins would say we can’t yet explain it, Vernon questions whether science really can ever answer these questions, or whether we might have to consider something else. Science for Vernon reduces his sense of wonder, whereas cosmology allows him to keep it. He describes being in a thunderstorm – sure, you know what is happening and can explain it all on a physical level, so why do you still feel so in awe of nature, its power and enormity?

So if the big question is not what you believe but how you live, how is agnosticism a way of life? How does Vernon live? As I drink coffee and he eats lunch, he makes some bold statements, such as “we’re obsessed

with relativism”, and “it’s dehumanising to deny uncertainty”. If Vernon’s quest starts with Socrates’ quest, and he is advocating a Socratic way of life, how does that translate into how he lives today? Clearly, he is constantly looking for more enquiry, and his daily grapple with the unknown is what gives him meaning. He wants to popularise his thoughts, but more importantly, to popularise the questions behind them, raise the stakes, and put the issues centre stage. I asked what he wanted to achieve with *Science, Religion and The Meaning of Life*. He replied that he wants agnostics to stand up and be counted, and believes that to be an agnostic is just about as close as you can get to what it is to be human. He wants to show that agnosticism can be weighty, serious, and a choice in its own right, not just a flight from two evils. The book is aimed at agnostics, but also to provoke debate with scientists and religious leaders. Michael Shermer recommends “this work be read by sceptics and believers alike” – praise indeed. If his aim is to get us thinking, it seems that he is starting to do just that. A look at his website reveals questions, questions and more questions, forcing us to engage with his ideas, and, to some extent, with him the man. The site gets 1500 hits a day, a measure which he is rightly proud of. As well as his philosophy, his books and his teaching, he is a jobbing journalist, writing for the *Guardian*, the *FT*, and *Management Today*, amongst others. He is a man who wants his ideas to be listened to, and has found several forums for his voice.

We are ready for popular science, popular history. Are we ready for popular philosophy? Vernon certainly thinks so. Agnosticism is only one part of what Vernon “does”. His other books and [www.markvernon.com](http://www.markvernon.com) cover topics as diverse as friendship and business, but written from a philosophical perspective. His new book, *What Not to Say* (due out in October/November 2007 at the same time as the paperback of *Science, Religion, and the Meaning of Life*), applies philosophy to the situations we are all continually faced with when we just do not know what to say. The allusion on the title is intentional – Vernon told me that the publishers of this book, Orion, also publish *What Not To Wear*. Could Vernon be the Trinny and Susannah of popular philosophy? In his choice of subjects he could certainly lay claim to be more populist than other popular philosophers such as Alain de Botton. De Botton may choose more concrete subjects, but Vernon’s prose makes the abstract tangible. There is no dumbing down, just a love of reading and grasp of his subjects which shine out from his books, his website, his journalism and his conversation. Nowhere is this more evident than in his account of agnosticism.

Vernon wanted to call the book *Between Beasts and Angels*. His academic publisher wanted to call it *Science, Religion and the Meaning of Life*. Being a former vicar, maybe he turned the other cheek, or perhaps being a doctor of philosophy, he took a philosophical approach

and went with his publisher's suggestion. *Science, Religion and the Meaning of Life* hit the shelves with a bang, the title suggesting a certain amount of irony, and perhaps a (conscious or otherwise) reference to the late great Douglas Adams. Maybe *Science, Religion and the Meaning of Life* was a good title after all. There may be more meaning in Vernon's version of agnosticism than in either science or religion. To paraphrase a recent letter to the *Times*, whereas atheists are committed, Catholics and Muslims are devout, and Jews are orthodox, agnostics are passionate. Vernon is passionate about his agnosticism, and he is passionate about bringing the debate to centre stage. Whatever your own personal views, the questions Vernon asks are ones we should all be asking, even if the conclusions we draw are different. For myself, all I can say is how refreshing it is

to talk "religion" of sorts with someone so measured, so moderate and so engaging. Vernon is an ambassador for agnosticism at a time when perhaps we need one. I think. Although I may be wrong.

**STOP PRESS:** *The Skeptic* has just heard that discussions over the title of Mark Vernon's book continue. The paperback version is to be published under the banner *After Atheism: Science, Religion and the Meaning of Life*.

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**Sally Marlow** is a psychology undergraduate at Goldsmiths College, University of London.

### A Daughter's Tribute to Barry Beyerstein

My Dad was probably the most ethical person I've ever met. There was no gap between the values he espoused and the life he lived. He believed in reason, evidence, humility, compassion, commitment, hard work, and honesty.

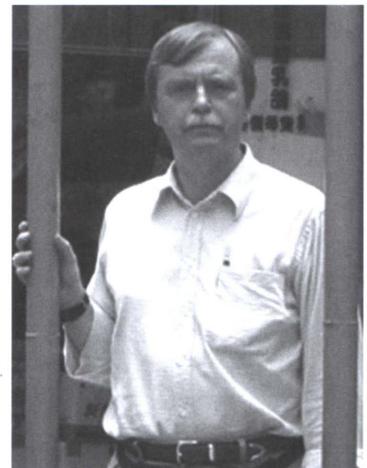
My parents acquired a reputation among my friends and my brothers' friends for being the warmest and most welcoming parents in our circle. Even before Dad died, more than one friend said that my parents made them feel like part of the family. He was a gracious host who delighted in entertaining and hosting guests. Throughout our childhood a fascinating array of people stayed with us, including an Australian AIDS researcher, an Indian magician, and countless others. My parents loved to entertain guests in the home they designed and built themselves. Children were always encouraged to participate in adult conversations at these events.

My Dad included me in his professional life from an early age. I remember many happy hours spent at Rat Park, observing the behaviour of the huge colony of white rats living in a room-sized box lined with sawdust. The Rat Park experiments were seminal studies in addiction research that challenged the conventional wisdom that opiates are naturally or inherently addictive.

Of course, I started attending Skeptics meetings when I was about five years old. I loved it when our newsletter, *The Rational Inquirer*, would come out – all the newsletters had to be stuffed by hand so we'd make it into a quarterly pizza party with the executive officers of the BC Skeptics and my brother and me stuffing envelopes.

Some of the most important lessons my Dad imparted to me were about a rewarding and ethical style of life: try to leave the world a little better than you found it – he believed you live on through the way that people remember you. Dad often recited a particular song lyric for me in an attempt to convey what really mattered in life. It's the second verse from *In a Windowpane* by Gordon Lightfoot. It spoke of value, humility, and kindness, ending with the words "in this place I've never walked alone".

There you have it: Barry never walked alone.



Lindsay Beyerstein

# Inside a Camphill Community

Matthew Provonsha reports on his disillusionment with life in a religious commune

LAST YEAR I spent two months inside a Camphill Community along with other volunteers of various ages from around the world, eager to help others and better myself. I was drawn to communal life, but more importantly I was put off by the society in which I grew up. As a teenage atheist and leftist in the United States I was appalled by the vast increase of religious fervor in public life and by our startling move to the Far Right even during my lifetime. Like so many Americans I was laden with a painful sense of hopelessness. I could only watch television, drink or get high to distract myself. Retreat in one form or another seemed to be the only suitable option.

I was quite enamored with British culture, as well, and wanted nothing more than to see the land which had produced so many of my favorite authors, comedians, rock stars and TV shows. The UK almost seemed (to my naïve self) to be a totally different, more civilized world. So it was that I decided to find someplace in Britain where I could work for food and lodging. In truth I only chose to ‘volunteer’ at the Mount Camphill Community, a school for young adults with special needs in the South-East of England, because it offered the best benefits. In addition to organic food and lovely surroundings it offers a weekly stipend of fifty pounds, weekend outings and ample time off.

When I arrived I was shocked at how religious the place was. Granted, this was partly my own fault for not looking into it well enough, but their website gives little indication of just how much their beliefs influence most everything they do. There are blessings before and after almost every meal, a strange service on Sundays, and songs and recitations almost every morning. I was berated for not participating in religious rituals and, from even the first meeting I had to sit through about it, the message was clearly join in or leave. In my last meeting I was apologized to for having been given a false impression, and offered airfare home. I declined at first, but subsequently accepted.

When I was encouraged to leave, I was told that even if I sang and recited and smiled during services, ostensibly participating to a full extent, it would still not work because I would be “disapproving on the inside,” whether I knew it or not. There is simply no place for an atheist there. This means that irreligious Brits are funding an institution which would discriminate against them. I was told by the head gardener, whom I worked under, that almost all of their money comes from the government. He also said that I was a cause of concern for some of the “senior co-workers.” The whole place was terribly gossipy and quite often I worried about my words being repeated.

For all these reasons and more I would never want to work at a Camphill Community ever again. The most important reason, however, is that there is no real escape from the alienation of modern life. We literally *cannot* retreat, and we divert our attention with drugs and other distractions at our peril. The things that give us solace now merely console us to our conditions. They cannot change the fact that, almost a century after Bertrand Russell penned the words, it is still true that “almost all who work have no say in the direction of their work; throughout the hours of labour they are mere machines carrying out the will of a master.” Since then global economic inequality has gotten hideously worse.

## ... irreligious Brits are funding an institution which would discriminate against them

Even the Nobel prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz, who served as the chief economist of the World Bank, writes that the “growing divide between the haves and the have-nots has left increasing numbers in the Third World in dire poverty, living on less than a dollar a day”. UNICEF has reported that over thirty thousand children die every day due to poverty. That is a Holocaust — almost eleven million children — every year. The only solution, in my view, is a world-wide revolution. It may not be likely but it is our only hope. In 1961, the Situationist International said that,

If it seems somewhat absurd to talk of revolution, this is obviously because the organized revolutionary movement has long since disappeared from the modern countries where the possibilities of a decisive social transformation are concentrated. But *all the alternatives* are even more absurd, since they imply accepting the existing order in one way or another.

Yet less than fifty years later there seem to be the beginnings of a new revolutionary movement in the most developed countries, including my own.

More than anywhere else, America is truly the place “where the possibilities of a decisive social transformation are concentrated.” That is why I am excited to be part of the new Students for a Democratic Society. We have thousands of members in hundreds of chapters,

and we are not alone. All over the world informed and committed individuals are seeking to achieve direct democracy through direct action. Laid-off workers in Argentina have occupied factories and restarted production, to take only a single instance. We in the wealthy countries bear a great deal of the responsibility for the problems that we see in the world. We must try and help solve them. The same impulse to lend a helping hand which led me to the Mount now leads me into activist organizations such as SDS, with the hope that it

is not already too late. The world is still a brutal place, torn apart by class oppression, racism, sexism, homophobia and horrific violence unleashed by countries such as ours. I believe it will take drastic social change to reverse the environmental degradation that we have caused the earth, and heal the wounds that we have caused each other. I also believe that we have to make it happen, and so I strongly encourage everybody to do what they can to make this a better world, where we and future generations would rather live.

▶ **Matthew Provonsha** is a young author and activist living in Toledo, Ohio (USA). He has been published in the American magazine *Skeptic*, in the student-run University of Toledo philosophy journal *Slash*, and on the website of the radical newsletter **CounterPunch**. He volunteers locally with poor and homeless people and has demonstrated against the invasion and ongoing occupation of Iraq.

## 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 Penderel's Oak pub in London, 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>

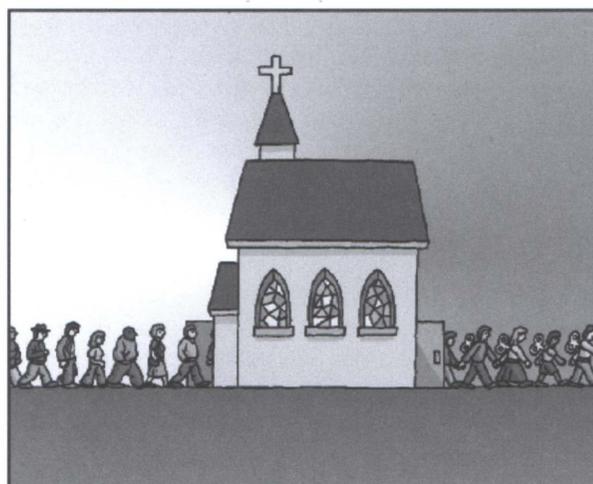


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### THE PARKING LOT IS FULL

by Jack McLaren and Pat Spacek

<http://www.plif.com>



Amen.

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## Rhyme and Reason

Steve Donnelly

### Keep up the good fight . . .

I WROTE MY first article for *The Skeptic* (then the *British & Irish Skeptic*) in 1988 (Vol 2, No. 3) and took over the *Hits & Misses* column as well as the co-editorship (with Toby Howard) later that year (Vol II, No. 6). I began writing this column (and gave up *Hits & Misses*) in 1999 (Vol 12, No. 1). The editorship passed back to the founding editor, Wendy Grossman in 1997 (Vol 11, No. 4) and was taken over by Chris French and his team at Goldsmiths in 2001 (Vol 14, No 4). I have given this little recap of the history of my involvement with *The Skeptic* because — at the end of this, its 20<sup>th</sup> year — this will be my last regular column for the magazine.

It is, therefore, perhaps a fitting occasion on which ask myself whether anything has changed for the better since 1988 and, particularly, whether the sceptical movement in the UK has made any real progress in the last 20 years.

Well, I guess (and with a heavy heart), I have to give the answer “no” to both questions. Now don’t get me wrong, I am not suggesting for a moment that the sceptical community should give up the good fight — but we do seem to be unusually apathetic in the UK compared to many other countries; the US and Australia in particular. On the other hand, the overall national apathy regarding things sceptical could be taken as a sign that we lack the extremes of irrational thought and behaviour that is rife in some other countries and thus do not need a highly active sceptical movement in the way that it is perhaps required in the southern states of the US. But I think that this view is at best only partially accurate as even creationism/intelligent design would seem to be making creeping progress into the UK.

Of course, the major societal change since 1988 has been the growth of the internet which has, over a very short period of time, led to an unprecedented increase in the quantity of information that we all have at our fingertips. Many of us will have almost forgotten the days (not so long ago) when the answer to almost any factual question (even trivia) involved a lengthy search in reference books — usually located in reference libraries and therefore not available at home. Nowadays almost any question can be “googled” and thus seemingly answered in seconds. And thereby lies the problem. The nutters, cranks, charlatans, con-merchants, conspiracy theorists and other assorted weirdos have been more active than most in making their information available to all of us. But, whilst the quantity of information immediately available to all of us has increased exponentially over the last decade, the same can certainly not be said about the quality. And this is leading to problems in all areas of human endeavour and not simply in connection with pseudoscience and the paranormal.

As an example, I am aware of cases where university students have submitted coursework for marking in which they have included the internet encyclopaedia “Wikipedia” as one of their referenced sources of information. As I am sure many readers will be aware, the articles in “Wikipedia” can be written and modified by anyone, with no editorial control over the accuracy of the entries (apart from the removal of potentially libellous material). Similarly, many university students assume that if they need to carry out detailed bibliographic research on anything, from the life of Marie Antoinette to the history of cake-making, a simple Google search will give them everything they need. This is posing major problems for universities where we are increasingly seeking means of providing tools and methodologies for students which will ensure that they access only high-quality, relevant information — or that they become expert in judging the likely accuracy of information coming from a variety of different sources.

For those of us with a sceptical disposition, it seems to me that things have become vastly more difficult with so much information, sometimes extremely well presented, available to anyone with a leaning towards the paranormal. Even a fence-sitter on matters such as UFOs, “free-energy” devices or angelic visitations is likely to be overwhelmed by the amount of (non-sceptical) information available via a simple internet search. It would not surprise me to learn that the level of paranormal belief in our society had significantly increased over the last decade or so — although I have not seen any research that confirms this.

So is there anything we can do in an attempt to improve things over the next decade or so? Well, I guess that we must keep fighting the good fight by ensuring that this and other similar magazines keep going with a healthy circulation and ensure that sceptical sources of information are prevalent on the web. For my part, I’d like to ensure that we continue to educate as many of our young people as possible in rational modes of thinking in general and the scientific method in particular; although the rise in the number of Bachelor of Science degrees which incorporate antiscientific aspects of complementary medicine is very worrying in this regard.

It is clear that academia is going to have to continue to develop tools that serve to filter web-based information and help students to separate the wheat from the chaff but perhaps what we sceptics need is for some computer experts amongst us to develop a search engine (“Google Skeptic?”) which will provide only rational, scientific information on any topic. It might even be a commercial proposition!

It is with this thought and my best wishes for a rational and sceptical future that I bid you farewell.

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



## Philosopher's Corner

Julian Baggini



I DO A fair amount of talking in public these days and inevitably I get the occasional bit of audience participation that doesn't go my way. In Derbyshire this summer, for example, I was told by a perfectly civil and friendly questioner that he had been following my work for some time, thought he knew what my strengths were, and didn't think my latest book played to them.

At Edinburgh a few months later, an indignant interlocutor informed the entire panel I was sitting on that we were not qualified to say anything on the subject of nature and nurture because we weren't able to instantly identify Hans Eysenck from his cryptic description. "Is this a crossword puzzle?" the philosopher Simon Blackburn asked him, before getting the right answer.

The crowd at a London Sceptics in the Pub meeting was not nearly so rude or eccentric, but the last question I faced there left me musing for some while. Apparently, in some kind of pre-talk web chat, someone had said that I would be "a good speaker but hard to pin down". What did I feel about that?

Obviously, I had no quarrel with the first part. But am I hard to pin down? And if so, is that a bad thing?

There are clearly bad ways of being hard to pin down. Being slippery as a means to disguise a deficit of precision or clarity in your own mind is an old trick. Even here, however, it can sometimes be excused. Politicians are masters of this particular game, and sometimes that is for the very good reason that it is too soon to commit either way and leaving options open is the best bet.

A different kind of unpindownability concerns commitment, whether it's to meet at a certain place or time, pledge yourself to your beloved or say exactly what it is you'll do if you get elected. People who are persistently elusive in this way are at the very best trying and at worst impossible.

However, sometimes it is good to avoid nailing your flag to a mast. The late Bernard Williams was perhaps the best example of a great thinker who hardly ever took a stance on anything. "There are two subjects on which I've had more or less positions, I guess," he told me when I interviewed him shortly before his death. The reason for this is that he thinks "philosophy starts from realising we don't understand our own activities and thoughts. I guess what I think most about is opening up ways of showing people that we don't understand our own thoughts, and then suggesting ways in which we might get a better hold of it."

That's the kind of unpindownability I like. It's not

because of any evasion, it's because what one is trying to do is get people to think better and more clearly about difficult issues, without pretending to resolve them and have a clear position yourself. I think that's an important philosophical task.

A properly sceptical outlook requires one to be fully aware of what we do not know and to be willing to live with that uncertainty, rather than reach for answers that are not substantiated.

Philosophy itself, however, has not always exhibited wisdom in this regard. In the twentieth century, for example, much British and American philosophy was concerned with replacing the messy vagueness of ordinary language with a purer, more exact language of logic.

The problem is that logic is only precise if it remains entirely a formal matter of syntax and symbols. But to give it content, you have to translate propositions into it from the language of real speech. So, for example, "All true sceptics are careful judgers" can be formalised as  $(\forall x)(Fx \supset Gx)$ , where  $F$  is the property of being a true sceptic and  $G$  is the property of being a careful judger. Apparently.

However, nice though it is to have neat symbols you can now get to work on, the fact remains that the properties of being a true sceptic and a good judger are just as imprecise as they were when we started.

No problem, you might think. Let's just get more precise about them. This philosophers try to do, by specifying the necessary and sufficient conditions of something being whatever it is. Hence we can say that " $x$  is a good judger if and only if ..." and then go on to specify what the conditions are.

Alas, this task is also doomed to failure. Sure, you can come up with some good criteria which help pin the concept of good judgement down a little, but it unrealistic to suppose you could ever define such a concept as precisely as, say, water can be defined as  $H_2O$ . In any case, since you're always using other words to clarify what you mean, imprecision can never be fully avoided.

So although the project of getting *more* precise and pinning down *as much as possible* is a worthwhile one, the fact that some things remain hard to pin down should not be a cause of surprise and alarm.

Incidentally, I was told by a rather drunk sceptic at the end of my talk that some people were muttering that the t-shirt I was wearing was not only an unflattering colour, it also drew attention to my 'man boobs'. It seems some of my failings are all too easy to pin down.

**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

AS I WRITE this column, the 13<sup>th</sup> European Skeptics Congress in Dublin, hosted by the Irish Skeptics, is still three weeks off. However, by the time this column appears in the *The Skeptic*, the congress will have taken place. I shall therefore refer to it in the past tense. (Incidentally, I shall probably do a write-up of the congress in a future ASKE newsletter.)

The subtitle of the congress was *The Assault on Science: Constructing a Response*. The defence of science has become a dominant theme in the sceptical literature and, gratifyingly, there is evidence of a greater willingness amongst journalists in general to challenge irrational, pseudoscientific and New Age beliefs that have grown in popularity over recent years. Most recently there has been Richard Dawkins' excellent two-part series on Channel 4, *The Enemies of Reason*, following his best-selling book, *The God Delusion*. More modestly, in the summer issue of the ASKE newsletter, members engaged in a spirited debate on the differences between science and religion. The focus of the discussion was a short letter from Max Blumberg who quoted 'a bible-bashing friend', in whose opinion sceptics are worse than the people they criticise ('believers') because they have as much faith in their tools of trade (rationality, induction, etc.) as 'believers' have in God.

One reason for the success of Professor Dawkins' programme was that, in his assault on 'the enemies of reason', by and large he avoided adopting a belittling attitude towards the millions of ordinary people who subscribe to the beliefs that he was attacking. I alluded to the potential dangers of this kind of attitude in a presentation I gave (all being well) at the Dublin Congress.

In our society, scientists are very powerful and in any society, power that is claimed by one faction will tend to be opposed by others. This is inevitable and it is a healthy society that is able to tolerate this.

In the past amongst the victims of persecution by those in the ascendancy have been scientists themselves. Metaphorically, George Orwell wrote 'Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four'. And now we *are* free to believe that two plus two make four. But what about those who say that two plus two make five? How far is a healthy society able to allow such people or groups of people the freedom to insist on such beliefs?

And how much power are they to be allowed?

Now and again in sceptical publications and at meetings of sceptics, alarm is expressed at the degree of public endorsement of irrational and discredited beliefs. For example, a survey may show that a sizable proportion of the population attach some significance to their daily horoscope.

We should be careful with our expressions of disapproval of this state of affairs. Firstly, it may be a cause for some celebration that people are free to subscribe to such a rich variety of ideas and beliefs. Secondly, purely from a public relations standpoint, scientists and sceptics don't do their causes any favours to be seen and heard tut-tutting about ideas and beliefs entertained by many people in ordinary walks of life. It smacks of snobbery, and it is liable to offend people's ideas about personal freedom. And thirdly, whether people believe in things such as the existence of God, ghosts and the after-life, or in astrology and so on, is a much more complex matter than can be revealed simply by asking them to say whether they do believe in them or not.

Notably, many beliefs are fluid. By this I mean that whether someone believes in something strange or irrational can depend on the context. For example, a person may decide not to place a bet on a horse one day because his horoscope tells him that it is not a day for taking risks. Would the same person, for the same reason, ask his surgeon to postpone an operation he is having that day? I doubt it, even though the risks to the man are more serious than his losing his bet.

And is it so irrational to retain a belief in something strange and questionable when one has no personal reason for abandoning it? A person, such as a committed scientist or a devout believer in a particular religion or philosophy, may consider it important to decide that ghosts do not exist. But for many people there is no pressing reason why they should close the door on the possibility that they do exist; there may come a time when they have to decide, but in the meantime, why close the door?

Of course, we must still continue our assault on the proliferation of irrational and unscientific ideas and practices. And we still have to consider the matter of how much power is allowed those who promote them.

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



## BALONEY DETECTIVES

### Paranormal Claims: A Critical Analysis

by Bryan Farha

University Press of America, £18.99, ISBN 0-7618-3772-8

An anthology of skeptical writings that includes contributions by James Randi, Michael Shermer and Carl Sagan is not likely to go far wrong, but that last name will alert skeptics to the fact that some of these texts are far from recent. In fact, nearly everything in the book is reprinted from *The Skeptical Inquirer*, or [the other] *Skeptic*. Some are taken from the excellent *quack-watch.org* website.

Among other chapters, Shermer asks “Why Smart People Believe Weird Things”, Ray Hyman explains cold reading, Susan Blackmore delves into near-death experiences, Randi recounts his experiences with his demolition of homeopathy on BBC TV’s *Horizon*, and Geoffrey Dean astutely reviews the sorry state of astrology. It is very pleasing to read a paper from the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, co-authored by Emily Rosa, who devised a test when she was only nine years old that ruined the case for “therapeutic touch”.

There are 18 articles altogether. Naturally, the more such analyses are disseminated and read, the better, and subscribers to the above journals will no doubt be glad to re-read these articles in book form.

Reluctantly, then, I venture a quibble or two. Professor Farha calls this a critical analysis, which is fair enough, as it instructively and often amusingly leads us around the usual fairground of irrationalities, but it doesn’t seem quite right for the publisher to call it an academic text: one of Farha’s own efforts is a jokey piece about numerology, and Randi’s account of his invaluable TV show is hardly the stuff of learned journals.

It may then be better targeted at what used to be called “the intelligent layman”, or, more urgently, at young people in need of a handy antidote to the effluents of New Age whimsy. If so, it’s a shame that this 167-page book is both far too big and far too expensive for the average pocket.

Paul Taylor

## MR POOTER MEETS THE MASONS

### How to Start Your Own Secret Society

by Nick Harding

Oldcastle, £6.99, ISBN 1-904048-84-6

The title is enough of a hint that this is hardly likely to be a serious academic study. Can it be a manual? Can there be a market out there of people desperate to know how to form secret societies? Is it a satirical work?

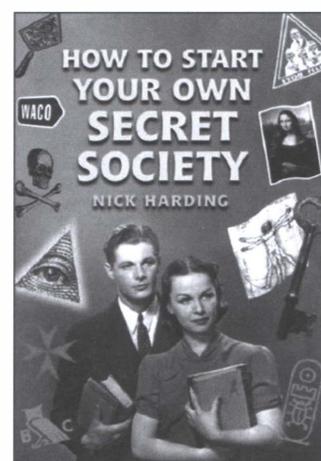
This is about as useless a book as can be imagined, and as if that were not bad enough, it is one of the worst-written texts outside of school classrooms. This has all the linguistic flair of Mrs Malaprop with the wit of Mr Pooter from *The Diary of a Nobody*.

The pages are littered with gems like these:

“Many are desperate to join but they have, perhaps in the past, somewhat sullied their reputations and copybooks or more likely, and this is often the case, their ‘faces do not fit’.” (p. 12) “It will be without question something of a new start, a resurrection, a turning point, and a breath of fresh air to an otherwise (possibly) stale and bland existence.” (p. 33) “Ruins and spurious points of interest on the landscape, if you are able, and this can often be seen as a real tour de force, can be linked up to form some meaningful pattern loaded with symbolism.” (p. 39) “It is worth noting that you must remember to avoid paranoia as this can lead to no end of problematic trouble.” (p. 59) “The Fuhrer was venerated with deference.” (p. 141) “To advertise your existence do not take the direct route, although you can do this of course.” (p. 175)

If only Harding had kept his book a secret from society.

Laury Plato



## WITCH GUIDE

### The History of Witchcraft

by Lois Martin

Pocket Essentials 2007, £9.99, ISBN 1-904048-77-3

There is no solid evidence that real organised witch cults ever existed. Martin shows how elements of pagan religions and folk beliefs lingered and were framed as witchcraft by the Church – a rival to be stamped out. She takes a chronological approach, showing how a new concept of the Devil emerged in the Middle Ages, along with the idea that magic could be performed only through demonic agency.

The idea of magic as a legitimate natural science was replaced by ideas of servile and heretical pacts with the Devil. Academic necromancers controlled demons while witches served them (conveniently, necromancers were mostly wealthy, well-connected men).

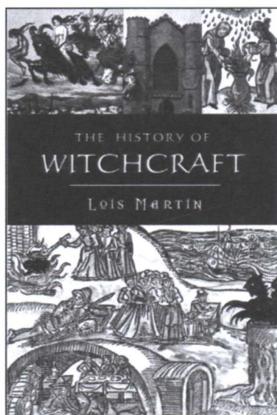
The idea of the coven didn't appear until the 17<sup>th</sup> century but the Sabbat's origins were in Roman accusations against Christians of cannibal orgies. The magical broomstick flight to the Sabbat emerged in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, from the night ride where women rode with the goddess, generally doing good deeds.

Trials also came out of the 11<sup>th</sup> century but took a while to develop into organized seek and destroy missions with an instruction manual. Different countries framed witchcraft differently, in some it was a secular matter while in others it was tried in religious courts and, from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, by the Inquisition – which, Martin shows, used torture far less than its secular counterparts. Scotland executed three times more witches than England, for example, preferring Continental-style burning to English hanging.

In more recent times, after Reason prevailed and witch hunting died out, the witch became a romanticized figure, a force of nature rebelling against the male establishment, adopted by some early feminists as an icon of female power and knowledge. Modern Wicca beliefs have little in common with Mediaeval witchcraft in which there was no white magic, only evil.

There is a lot packed into this short book. It is scholarly and readable, neatly summing up the main points without skimping on detail; some of the examples of trials, accusations and significant events almost defy belief.

Tessa Kendall



## BAD EGG SAMPLE

### Freemasonry

by Giles Morgan

Pocket Essentials, £9.99 (hb), ISBN 13: 978 1 904048 87 9

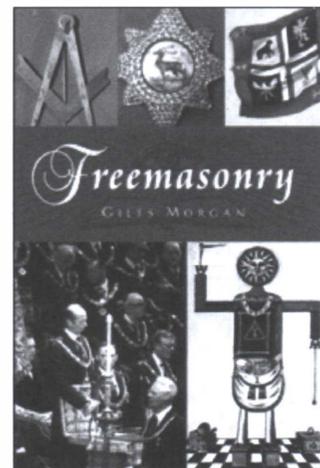
Freemasonry is often called a “secret society”, but this seems to be an example of a common confusion between a body, membership of which is kept secret, and one which possesses secrets. Freemasons would generally claim the latter status. This book offers a short (160 pp) survey of the subject. Frankly it is rather a poor one. The first two chapters give a reasonable outline of the organization and grades of membership within it. The next fifty pages discuss various supposed origins, which the author does not support or refute, but describes as “speculative”. A cynical reader might prefer the word “rubbish”. The usual suspects are paraded: the Temple of Solomon, Hermes Trismegistus, Pythagoras, the cult of Dionysus, the Eleusinian Mysteries, the Gnostic Gospels, Mithraism, Druids, the Essenes, the Knights Templar, the Rosicrucians, and the Priory of Sion (which the author accepts as a complete hoax, dating from 1956).

The next part is more factual on the development of Freemasonry, though we still wander off into the Invisible College, the French Revolution, the Bavarian Illuminati, the Boston Tea-Party, the death of Mozart and the Order of the Golden Dawn. Finally there is a bit about Freemasonry today,

but nothing about its size, or the nature of its membership, or its numerous non-ritual activities. The book is carelessly written, with information repeated unnecessarily and some awkward expressions.

A quick trawl of the internet, or the Encyclopaedia Britannica, would have yielded a more informative and factual account. One would like to say that it is good in parts. But the original Punch cartoon (Bishop, at breakfast, to young curate: “I am afraid you have a bad egg, Mr Jones”. Jones: “Oh no, my lord, I assure you! It is very good in parts”) rests on the fact that eggs cannot be partly good. When so much is (avowedly) speculative, can we rely on the remainder? Perhaps, but only by checking with other sources.

John Radford





# LETTERS

## Bumper Issue?

A bumper issue (*Skeptic*, 20.1) in the number of items to which I wish to respond. The severe limitation on the number of letters you print tends to stay my hand but the asininity of the first printed in that issue leads me to suppose that selection is not based on merit and so take what you will, if anything, from the following:

How urgent your item bemoaning the loss of skills in science and maths (*Hits and Misses*, 20.1) when on the next page you compute  $123,000 \times £19.51$  as £24 million! [Editors' note: Oooops! Quite right – that should have been  $123,000 \times £195.12$ !]

Your feature "The Great Masturbation Delusion" brought back a memory from the early 1960s of a housemaster solemnly warning assembled pupils that such self-indulgence would lead to poor performance on the rugby pitch and eventually result in blindness. Culprits could also be identified by hairy backs of hands. Cue some blanching from the more hirsute among us. His own excitement was perhaps sublimated with enthusiastic application of cream to the chapped thighs of younger boys – coarse wool short trousers being compulsory for those under 14 years old. Despite the strict repressive regime of that time we treated such news with the same respect that youngsters today accord government gothic exhortations on supposed destructive effects of 'recreational' drugs.

A year ago a review in the vein of Paul Taylor's on Adam Hart-Davis' recent book would have set me wondering: why be so cruel? However, early this year when I heard the great communicator on radio admit

to a belief in water divination my jaw dropped. He was kind enough to confirm this in a reply by e-mail to my letter though his disparaging comments on James Randi's \$1 million challenge drew an instant combative response from the latter after I forwarded these on to him. Silence ensued. Thus has turned to ashes the respect I had afforded to Mr Hart-Davis and his enthusiasm.

Sorry, Mark Schaefer (*Skeptic*, 20.1, *Letters* page), if, by your logic, description presupposes existence then you deny reality to an empty room as (you say) it defies description. Nevertheless, at least in my world, empty rooms, from the empiric to the platonic, may be envisaged and from time to time actually pop into existence albeit at some level of imperfection. Comprehension of nothingness (the absence even of emptiness) proves more difficult but not as much as its actual reality. Not that a literal nowhere in nowhen can be said to possess reality – whether or not it did indeed exist! Non-existence, especially my own, I can all too readily comprehend, unfortunately; my celestial A to Z shows no warehouse for souls on God's Industrial Estate. Thus you must allow me a capacity for atheism while I witness millions pay homage to nothing but deities of the mind.

What is the point of spending years learning information most to be forgotten once we leave school? So scoffs Michael Heap in *ASKE News* (*Skeptic*, 20.1). (I hope he reads your *Hits and Misses* section.) Dare I ask how else he expected to acquire the skills of reading, writing, enumerating, thinking (logically), and constructing surveys, reports, projects or the odd column? Much of life for many of us these days

seems to involve repackaging information be we at work, rest or play. Perhaps basic reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic could be taught completely devoid of real world content or context (as was the last 'r' for many of my generation) but how would Michael, with such shallow analysis of purpose, have reacted to the interminable sterile exercises?

A side benefit of becoming an informed literate, numerate and logical person is knowing how to learn and being able to do so (a *tabula rasa* being a definite disadvantage here) if an interesting or compulsory endeavour ever beckons us. A further crumb knowledge acquisition confers is the advantage given retentive minds in the popular quizzes now a mainstay of many a pub night, radio program or TV show. No matter how these challenges are titled, application of memory to learned information and not intelligence is at a premium. One of my favourites from a radio show:

Presenter: Where is the auditory canal?

Contestant: Is it in Manchester?

Finally, even if one aspired to nothing more than a blinkered, monotone life how is one to know in what direction circumstance may take us and thus what learning or higher skills might prove useful? Moreover, teachers struggle enough with an unceasing redressing of material (both intra- and inter-lesson) in order to stave off complaints of boredom from their pupils, and perhaps of tedium from themselves; their task would not be helped by any narrowing of curriculum range or limiting variety of subject and information content.

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

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