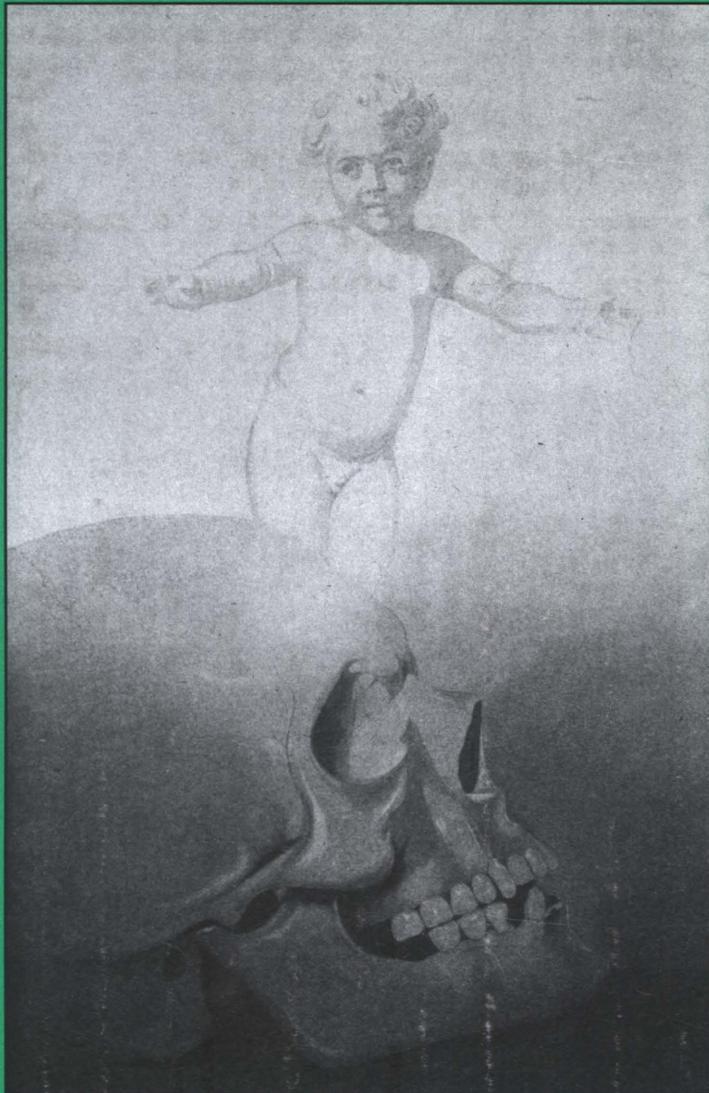


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The **Skeptic**



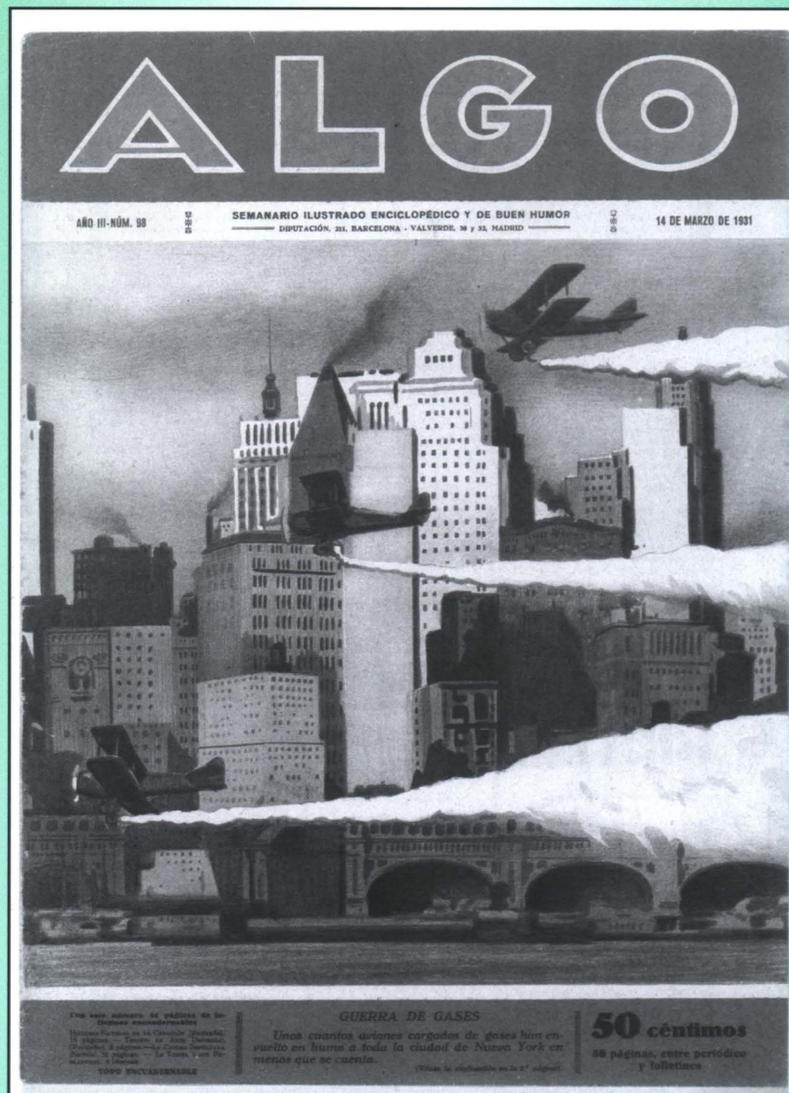
**Reincarnation: Overview of the
work of Ian Stevenson (1918-2007)**

Also in this issue:

**Exposing the Myth of Alcoholics Anonymous. Part 2
Amazon's Amazing Admission**

Plus: News. Book Reviews. Comment. Humour

Hilary Evans' Paranormal Picture Gallery



DESTROYING NEW YORK

There's something about New York City which inspires the Inner Terrorist within certain types of people to dream up ways of destroying it. But really, it's no problem. As long ago as 1931, as an imaginative contributor to the Spanish magazine *Algo* pointed out, all you need do is get hold of three aeroplanes, equip them to discharge poison gas – and lo! The mighty metropolis is coughing its heart out...

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

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

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

Email: edit@skeptic.org.uk
Web: www.skeptic.org.uk
AOL Keyword: **skeptic**
Tel.: 07020 935 370
Fax: 020 7919 7873 FAO Chris French

Editors
Chris French
Lindsay Kallis

Book Reviews Editor
Paul Taylor

Editorial Assistance
Wendy M Grossman
Mark Williams

Founding editor
Wendy M Grossman

Webmaster
Phil McKerracher

AOL Area
Liam Proven

Finance Manager
Mike Hutchinson

Skeptics in the Pub
Sid Rodrigues

Cartoons
Donald Rooum
Tim Pearce
The Parking Lot is Full

Special Consultant
Cyril Howard

Graphic Design
C. Fix / Lisa A Hutter

Illustrations
Mary Evans Picture Library

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Editorial

Chris French and Lindsay Kallis



LET'S START WITH the good news! Your favourite 20-year-old British sceptical magazine has appointed a new co-editor. Her name is Lindsay Kallis. She's a quirky Sagittarius who likes long walks in haunted cemeteries, and in her down time can often be found channelling 70's rock legends. Only kidding! In fact, Lindsay moved to London a year ago from Vancouver Island on the Westcoast of British Columbia, Canada. She is currently working towards an MSc in Cognitive and Clinical Neuroscience at Goldsmiths, University of London. She is full of ideas and enthusiasm and will play a major role in the future development of *The Skeptic* (about which, more below).

Our previous issue, as you may recall, included the last ever column from Steve Donnelly after 20 years of supporting the magazine and British scepticism in general. As usual, it was late arriving and, as usual, it was worth the wait. In his final column, Steve bemoaned the fact that, from his perspective, the sceptical movement in the UK had not made any real progress over the last 20 years and that the sceptical community in the UK seemed to be "unusually apathetic". This is obviously a sad note for Steve to end on – but sceptics have always been more interested in telling people the truth, no matter how uncomfortable it makes them feel, rather than just telling them what they want to hear (this is why sceptics rarely get invited to parties...).

Upon reading Steve's column, however, we both felt that this simply did not reflect our own (admittedly London-based) view of the situation. The sceptical community in London is very active. For example, *Skeptics in the Pub* has recently had to move to a more spacious venue to accommodate the large audiences it regularly attracts for its monthly meetings (see <http://www.skeptic.org.uk/pub> for full details). On 19 January 2008, the Centre for Inquiry held a meeting to mark the Grand Opening of CFI London, based in the Conway Hall building. The attendance at the meeting was so much higher than expected that the meeting had to be switched into the large hall at the last minute to

accommodate all those that turned up – at 11 am on a Friday morning! This does not seem to us to reflect apathy on the part of British sceptics.

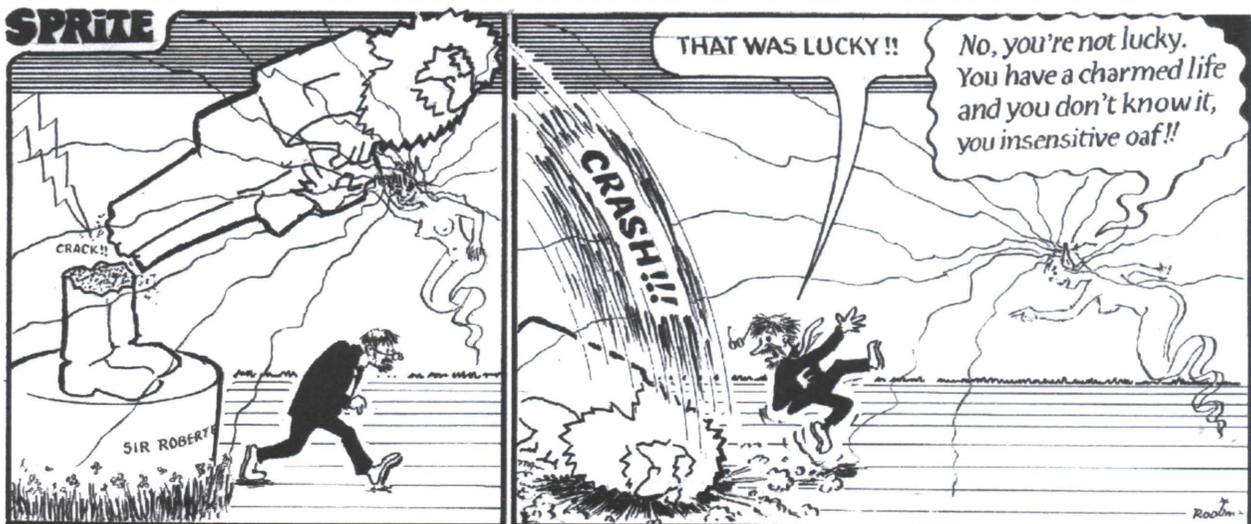
Of course, it may well be that this optimistic view is indicative of the situation in London only and that Steve's pessimism is justified in terms of what is (or is not) happening elsewhere in the UK. We think that even this assertion is up for debate but we do accept that it is important to take whatever steps we can to support sceptics throughout the UK and, indeed, throughout Europe. It seems appropriate, therefore, to inform you, dear reader, that we are developing plans to expand and improve this magazine over the next year or so with a view to attracting a wider readership and making the voice of scepticism heard on a wide range of important issues facing society today. Our plans are at an early stage of development but we would greatly welcome your input in terms of what you would (and would not) like to see in a revamped magazine. Let us know!

For now, we have a varied menu on offer in this issue. Leonard Angel presents a thought-provoking critical overview of the work of the undisputed master of academic research into reincarnation, the late Ian Stevenson. There is no doubt at all that the collected works of this man together constitute the strongest argument ever put forward to support the case for the reality of reincarnation. But, as Angel's dreamy encounter with Stevenson makes clear, it is a case which may not be as strong as it initially looks. Also in this issue, Steven Mohr concludes his hard-hitting two-part critique of Alcoholics Anonymous, arguing that AA is most definitely a religious cult rather than a provider of effective treatment programmes, and Mark Newbrook expresses his justifiable exasperation with Amazon's policy on book reviews.

We hope you enjoy these articles as well as our regular features. Don't forget to send us your ideas for improving the magazine!

With best wishes,

Chris and (for the first time) Lindsay



Hits and Misses



Chilling thoughts

There seems to be an ever-increasing list of things which have been identified as detrimental to the health of the human body: saturated fat, drinking alcohol, not drinking alcohol, not sleeping enough, sleeping too much, masturbation, Cliff Richard and smoking, to name but a few. Interestingly though, Korean nationals can add another item to that list, specifically the humble fan. Writing in 2004 for the popular conservative Korean newspaper *JoongAng Ilbo*, writer Grant Surridge noted that there were generally in Korean newspapers “each summer from 1990 to 2004, about 10 stories related to someone dying in the presence of an electric fan”. Although I would perhaps expect greater mortality rates among enthusiastic listeners of Richard’s *Mistletoe and Wine* (I am assured there are such people) than among responsible users of electric fans, Korean society has seemingly genuinely assimilated the legend that, in some cases, fans can cause death.

It is alleged that specific conditions are necessary for fans to cause these deaths. Doors and windows must be sealed creating a closed, and possibly airtight, room. The demise of the victim is supposedly caused either through hypothermic effects, asphyxiation due to the creation of an airless vortex (sometimes surrounding the victim’s face), asphyxiation due to ever-depleting levels of oxygen (and/or increasing levels of carbon dioxide), or some bizarre combination of all of those.

Belief in the phenomenon is not confined to specific circles either. Fan death has been ‘endorsed’ by some high-profile and well educated figureheads, while reports in the news and media are certainly not a rarity. So, why has fan death become such an entrenched belief? As Seo Min, a professor at Dankook University Medical School, wrote in a column on the topic, “It’s not like Korea’s air is any less oxygen rich”. His personal theory is that in a country which already holds a belief in killer fans, making such conclusions is perhaps easier than examining the evidence for other causes of death. I also wonder though if fan death could be used as an explanation of certain types of suicide, in order to spare the emotions or social stigma for family members and to avoid wider disclosure of a clearly sensitive issue?

Upon a star, and tree

Astrology offers many things, but never has the course of true love been more directed by the stars than in the case of P. Selvakumar, a 33-year-old Indian farm labourer who recently married a dog.

Of course, when I said “true love” I actually meant nothing of the sort. Selvakumar actually approached his astrologer with a tale of cruelty and karma. As a teenager he found two dogs mating, so in an episode he

has yet to explain, he decided to suspend their bodies from a tree, and stone and beat them to death. He stated, as reported by the *Telegraph*, that promptly afterwards “my legs and hands got paralysed and I lost hearing in one ear”. His wise astrologer obviously interpreted this as Karmic consequence, advising Selvakumar that he would need to atone for his actions in order to avoid future adverse health and alleviate his disability.

The issue here extends far beyond the role of astrology and life decisions, though. The penance Selvakumar was directed to suffer in order to atone for his sins and improve his karma, was that of marrying and maintaining his marriage to a further dog. Exactly how such an action is even remotely supposed to



impact upon poor health is immediately questionable, but the penance is also fundamentally selfish, designed solely to negate the supposed moral consequences of Selvakumar’s past behaviour.

As any good offender rehabilitation scheme establishes, one important method of reducing recidivism lies within the acceptance that a particular act is legally or morally wrong. An inter-species arranged marriage simply does no such thing; it neither establishes responsibility nor does it instil any sense that stoning and beating two dogs to death (a method often used to kill dogs when they are to be eaten, due to the belief that the stress hormones released during the process will make the meat taste nicer) is actually wrong.

What motivated the teenage Selvakumar to commit the actions he did is a question which remains open for explanation, but aside from the rather slim possibility of a rather substantial placebo effect, I sincerely doubt his new bride 'Selvi' will be the talisman to good health for which he had hoped. Either way, I pity Selvi and her future prospects.

In the dark

It always happens. Your least favourite child bought you a pair of novelty socks for Christmas when in fact you really wanted a pendant, an electronic gadget or a secret elixir to prolong and preserve your health. Your disappointment on squeezing those socks through the wrapping was almost visible to the little one.

Thankfully Q-Link, a Bristol based company, has the product for you. It's a pendant, an electronic gadget and a secret elixir to prolong and preserve your health. Q-Link, who obviously take great pride in their highly scientific approach to their products which work "at the deepest or quantum level", produce a range of pendants which protect the wearer from terrifyingly harmful electromagnetic radiation.

Endorsed by, among others, the *Times*, the *Mail* and television's *London Today* programme, few could fail to be convinced by the sculpted casing which hides a shiny, symmetrical circuit board. The manufacturer claims that "The Q-Link acts as a tuning fork that resonates with the ideal frequency at which the body's own energy system should vibrate."

To me, the method through which this is achieved still seems a little fuzzy, however. The Q-Link Classic, for instance, contains a circuit board with etched pads as expected, in addition to a single component: a zero-ohm resistor. In essence, the pendant contains some metal and a bit of wire, all of which doesn't actually connect to anything. The product requires no batteries, has a lifetime guarantee, and for up to £119.95, promises to literally do *something*.

Thankfully, with an order for the Q-Link Polished Silver Pendant, we will never again have to be concerned about the horrific nature of EMF radiation (such as light?). You're protected. That said, the possibilities to play practical jokes on radiographers who to fail take one visible x-ray while you're wearing the pendant are limitless.

Science debate

With George Bush's final presidential term coming to an end on the 20th January 2009, focus is inevitably being given to the policies and politics of his potential successors. Yet, to date, no Science and Technology policy debate has ever been held with hopeful candidates.

With that in mind, now is the perfect time for the emergence of *Sciencedebate*. Billed as a "grassroots initiative spearheaded by a growing number of scientists and other concerned citizens", *Sciencedebate 2008* aims to bring together the presidential candidates for the largest debate into what the organisers believe is possibly "the most important social issue of our time".



Although none of the candidates address all of the eight primary areas of science and technology in their proposals, the topics of energy, the environment and digital technology are among the most contested, while Clinton is notably the only candidate to address the topic of space.

Sciencedebate has attracted high-level support from Nobel Laureates, scientists, business leaders, university deans, writers and many other signatories, though no formal arrangements have been made for the debate. In the current climate, a mass-scale debate on science is essential. It would reveal which candidates are best suited to and most capable of addressing the urgent and contentious issues facing society, while raising scientific awareness especially within the American public. The organisers and signatories are requesting support from any suitable sources and it is possible to do exactly that by visiting www.sciencedebate2008.com.

Sincere thanks to **Wendy Grossman** for her help. Any new stories and newspaper clippings are gladly received and read, as are your opinions. *The Skeptic* would like to remind clippings contributors to use the magazine's current address, listed on p. 3. If you would like to contribute links and updates directly to the Skeptic's blog (ukskeptic.livejournal.com), please email for information.

Skeptic at large . . .

Wendy M Grossman



Hair

THE AUSTRALIAN radio broadcaster and columnist Derryn Hinch once observed (in his excellent book on how to play Scrabble) that, “Anything worth having is worth cheating for.” There seems to be a corollary to this principle that Hinch didn’t document: “Anything worth having is worth believing something silly for.”

I offer as Exhibit A the many Web forums dedicated to long hair.

You would think that if there’s one thing you couldn’t argue over, it’s how fast hair grows. There are, of course, hair myths you can argue about, but that’s a different story. The forums are full of debunking: no, Virginia, hair does not continue to grow after you’re dead; yes, Virginia, brushing it while wet really is bad for it.

First of all, let’s get past the idea that discussing long hair on the Web is weird. Like many other pursuits, growing very long, healthy hair takes a lot of time, patience, and discipline. It’s only logical that people trying to do this successfully, meet to swap ideas, tips, and encouragement. I guess it can be pretty lonely sometimes as your hair approaches butt-length at the average crawl of half an inch a month if everyone you know has ear-length hair and is bugging you about why you don’t get it cut short, layered, dyed, and fried like everyone else. Sceptics should be able to relate to that sense of isolation.

The point where I decided it had to be written about came this week, when someone started a thread about positive thinking. She’d read a book called *The Secret*, and talked about manifesting her hair goals.

“I do talk to my hair sometimes,” wrote one poster in response. “We can manifest our desires.”

Argh.

This is the thing about a forum full of impatient people. Some of them are genuinely driven to desperation over problems like thinning hair, troublesome scalp conditions, or extensive damage. More of them are just impatient to see dyed layers grow out or reach targets like waist, hip, knee... Measuring length is a very big activity for them. Most display pictures of their hair, taken from the back, which unfortunately reminds me of a plain-brown-wrapper magazine I saw once called *More Than Seven Inches*.

I can only guess that men going bald are twice as obsessive.

And they try the most extraordinary things. Vitamin and mineral supplements – most notably biotin (try Googling on “hair vitamin”), MSM, and basic multi-vitamins. What’s a little scary are the dosages some of them report taking. A little research suggests that a 5 mg daily dose of biotin, which is water-soluble, is basically harmless,

but it’s still more than 15 times the recommended daily allowance. Reading the lengthy lists of supplements some of these people are taking is enough to make you side with the folks that want to require a prescription for potent supplements. (Not that this would do anything much; someone intent on taking 5 mg of biotin a day will be just as willing to take 15 300 mcg pills.)

It is safe to say that if there is a food or cosmetic substance in the world, someone has tried it on their hair: lemon juice, apple cider vinegar, eggs, milk, honey, olive oil (extra virgin – no cheap substitutes, please), coconut oil, yogurt, mayonnaise...

One of the amusements is watching people chatter on enthusiastically about the wonders of the stuff they’re taking. Many of these postings conclude, “...and I managed a solid half-inch of growth last month.”

In other words, they spent a lot of money and downed a lot of self-prescribed substances and remained precisely in line with the average. They know, in other topics, that a half-inch a month is the average, and yet they seem to manage to convince themselves that their efforts have achieved something. (Of course, length isn’t everything, and they know this, too; health and condition also win points.)

Most recently, there’s been a bizarre fad for using Monistat, an over-the-counter remedy for vaginal yeast infections. The reasoning behind this is fuzzy, but it seems to revolve around that idea that Monistat (or, more precisely, its active ingredient, miconazole) is anti-fungal, and there’s a fungus that lives harmlessly on your scalp that maybe interferes a little bit with follicular action. Almost everyone trying this is reporting near-instant, high-speed growth.

I’m guessing measuring variations account for a lot of this. It isn’t, after all, the easiest thing to measure your own hair accurately and consistently. Obviously, in a long hair forum, you go for the longest measurement you can get, even if that means stretching out two hairs to get it. And if you’ve been spending money on some new substance, you’re likely to look even more eagerly for signs of growth than you did before, just as having invested the money to consult a professional psychic makes you more likely to believe they have special insight.

The discussion and experiments had been proceeding for a few weeks when a sane person stepped in and observed something similar: in all the many miracle growth remedies she’d seen, she said, she’d noticed that long-term, persistent growth didn’t seem to happen. There’d be a burst of excitement for a month or so, but long-term this year’s Monistat experimenters will find their hair growing at...a half-inch per month. Patience, folks.

Reincarnation: Overview of the work of Ian Stevenson (1918-2007)

Leonard Angel recounts his experience of a possible post-mortem encounter with the world's most famous investigator of reincarnation claims

I HAD A DREAM last night. In the dream, a man in a suit with short hair, an intense look, and glasses, was floating in the air near my desk. He was transparent, but, judging from a photograph I had seen, the figure looked like Ian Stevenson. (Ian Stevenson has been called the “top rebirth scientist,” for example, in the magazine *Reincarnation International*, November 1995: 34. He died at the age of eighty-eight in February 2007). Here are some fragments of the dream conversation, reconstructed, of course, in my waking life:

LA: Oh! Is that Ian Stevenson?

IS: Your guess is correct.

LA: And your life work is completed...

IS: Eighty-eight years caught up with me. I would like to have continued with more research, but was unable to do so.

LA: Yet you're satisfied with what you accomplished.

IS: Oh yes. Many of the cases I presented call for *some* paranormal interpretation of the data.

LA: And you investigated thousands of cases. Many of them are in print. But what I am interested in is, did you present scientifically proper investigations?

IS: Of course my investigations were scientific, and proper! (*counts on his fingers*) I investigated many spontaneously generated past-life memories of children. I investigated the abilities of children to use a language that they couldn't have naturally acquired. I investigated the correspondences between birthmarks of children and wound sites and similar sites on previous people. I recorded the remarkable correspondences. I did mathematical calculations of the probability of finding such correspondences. And I published the results. The results show that something very unusual, something paranormal, is required to explain the best of these correspondences.

LA: So you think that a succession of case investigations such as you conducted for about forty years is sufficiently scientific?

IS: Yes. That is what I just said.

LA: True, that is what you said. But it seems to me that what you did may only *look as though* it is scientific. Perhaps you didn't follow the most basic rule for scientific investigation.

IS: Please! To suggest that I failed to do the most basic thing is absurd... This is nonsense. I think I'll retreat to another place. I'll be gone. Then you won't be able to talk to me any longer.

LA: Go ahead, go...

(*Ian Stevenson's image turns, floats, then turns back.*)

LA: Ah, so you haven't gone anywhere.

IS: Why should I go anywhere! I have nothing to be afraid of!

LA: I'm glad you have no fear. What I'm suggesting is that the most basic method of scientific work is to develop an experimental test to see whether the data goes against the null hypothesis before suggesting special hypotheses, like “The data are best explained by paranormal means”.

IS: Oh, no! Don't tell me you're going to start talking about special hypotheses and null hypotheses.

LA: You don't know what these terms mean?

IS: Of course I know what they mean. But if you have some hidden plan, I'm suspicious.

LA: What hidden plan might I have?

IS: I don't know. Perhaps you're going to write down this conversation and present it to other people. If that's the case, I'm worried. The minds of many will go blank if we talk about things like ‘the null hypothesis’.

Ian Stevenson has been called the “top rebirth scientist”

LA: You're probably right. The minds of many people do go blank when ‘the null hypothesis’ is mentioned. But that's too bad, and not necessary. The null hypothesis just hypothesizes that results are according to chance, that's all. Perhaps the terminology is difficult, but the terminology is just third or fourth year university work in a typical social science course about the sorts of connections you were thinking about for decades. In any case, I'll avoid using the term ‘null hypothesis’. Let me put it this way: you didn't consider the most plausible hypothesis to account for the sort of data that was gathered. Nor did you test that most plausible hypothesis.

IS: Which was—?

LA: That you showed no unusual correspondences between living people and supposed past lives. The apparent correspondences were to be statistically expected.

IS: No, no, that's *obviously* not right. It's *obvious* from my published work that there are very striking correspondences.

LA: Sorry to disagree. Let me explain.

IS: (*with a scornful look on his face*) Please do.

LA: In dealing with data about human beings, there are so many bits of information that could be selected that anyone can take any group of persons and, by information about the members of the group, select two to show what seem – to some – to be remarkable correspondences between them. The main task is to find out whether or not random batches of material about people will generate as many correspondences with possible past lives as actual supposed memories of past lives that have been considered. This could be the subject for a scientific test of the standard sort. There would be a control group and an experimental group. Blind ordinary subjects, or blind scientist subjects, would guess as to which correspondences needed special explanation. Then it would be found out if their guesses were chance-distributed between the control group and the experimental group.

IS: Could such a test be set up? I don't think so!

LA: Of course it could.

IS: How?

LA: It would take a moment or two to describe. May I?

IS: I'm not in any rush!

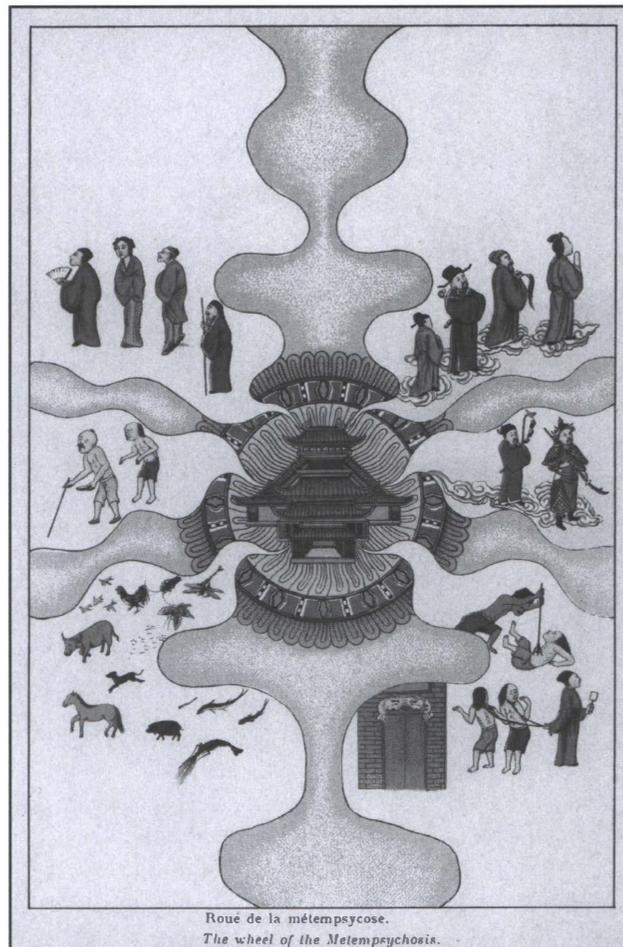
LA: Good. Let me start with an example. In fact, in the example, we don't even start with a group of people. We start with correspondences between me and you.

IS: "Me and you"? Do you think that there are remarkable correspondences between you and me?

LA: No. Not "remarkable". But, correspondences, yes. And we want to find out if subjects – ordinary people, or scientists – might think the correspondences are remarkable. I found the correspondences between you and me from your obituary that I read the other day in the *NY Times*. I was struck with what could be called, by some people, improperly though, "remarkable" correspondences. So I compiled a list of them, and then re-wrote it as a list of memories of a past life of A, that are true of another person B, someone of a previous generation. You were old enough to be my father, so you were of a previous generation. And the remarks are true; the past life that I – A in the list – remember is my own life. Here's the rewritten list. I am A. You are B. You can see at a glance that there are twenty one features (*I showed the list to Ian Stevenson. Here is what, in the dream, Ian Stevenson looked at*):

(1) A remembers his past life as having being born in Montreal, Canada. B was born in Montreal, Canada. (2) A remembers his past life as having received the Bachelor's degree from McGill University. B received the Bachelor's Degree from McGill University. (3) A remembers his past life as having received the Degree of Doctor some time after completing the Bachelor's Degree. B received the Degree of Doctor some time after completing his Bachelor's Degree. (4) A remembers his past life as having been married twice. B was married twice. (5) A remembers his

past life's mother as having been interested in spirituality. B's mother was interested in spirituality. (6) A remembers his past life as having had a home during his childhood and youth that had a big library. B's home during B's childhood and youth had a big library. (7) A remembers of his past life that his big library in his youth stimu-



The Buddhist wheel of rebirth of the soul.

lated his past life's interest in many matters of importance in understanding human nature. B's big library in his youth stimulated his interest in many matters of importance in understanding human nature. (8) A remembers his past life as having been a member of a family in which he not only had a sister, but also, a brother. B was a member of a family in which he had not only a sister, but also a brother. (9) A remembers his past life as having endorsed scientific method. B endorsed scientific method. (10) A remembers his past life as having gone through a phase of being positively impressed with the work of Sigmund Freud, and then moving in another direction, thinking that Freud's work was too unscientific. B went through a phase of being positively impressed with the work of Sigmund Freud. Then he moved in another direction, thinking that



Artistic representation of reincarnation: the old folk plunge into the Pool of Life – and re-emerge as babies.

Freud's work was too unscientific. (11) A remembers his past life as having spent some years as the Head/Chair of his academic Department. B spent some years as the Head/Chair of his academic Department. (12) A remembers his past life as having investigated specific claims about memories. B investigated specific claims about memories. (13) A remembers his past life as having been cautious in public if asked for comments. If asked for a comment in public, B would be cautious about what he'd say. (14) A remembers his past life as having been primarily interested in human nature. The primary interest in B's thinking was human nature. (15) A remembers his past life as having developed some unusual views, given the range of views found expressed in the refereed literature. B developed some unusual views, given the range of views found expressed in the refereed literature. (16) A remembers his past life as having expressed some views that were quickly dismissed in what the past life thought was a 'knee-jerk' sort of way. B took it that some of his views had been quickly dismissed in what he thought was a 'knee-jerk' sort of way. (17) A remembers of his past life that despite having expressed views that he thought were 'knee-jerk' rejected, he persisted in publishing the results of his thinking in journals and books. Despite having expressed views that he thought were 'knee-jerk' rejected, B persisted in publishing the results of his thinking in journals and books. (18) A remembers his past life as having published a book in a particular year, and that his past life had worked on that book for many

years previously. B published a book in that year, and had worked on that book for many years previously. (19) A remembers of his past life that the book (that he had published that year) was a compendium. The book that B published that year was a compendium. (20) A remembers of his past life that he published four books, some of them with technical details for technically minded readers. B published four books, some of them with technical details for technically minded readers. (21) A remembers of his past life that he coded some information in a way that he alone knew about. B coded some information in a way that he alone knew about.

Presumably a full list of correspondences between you and me would include many more items. Of all the cars that I drove and that you drove, perhaps one of mine and one of yours were made by the same company. Of the homes we lived in perhaps one of mine and one of yours had the same number of bedrooms or bathrooms. There was no information given on the number of children you had, and so on. Also, I wear glasses and you wore glasses. You're even wearing glasses now, in my image of you in this dream. So, there you have it: we already have a twenty-second correspondence!

In any case, for a scientific experiment, there would be about twenty or thirty groups of correspondences gathered from about twenty or thirty people and their twenty or thirty respective previous generation lives. Then twenty or thirty of the correspondences that you gathered would be slightly abstracted, so there wouldn't be names. There would just be letters instead of names,

as there were in the above group. And the information for any such group would be presented in the same manner as the information in any other group. That would make a total of forty to sixty groups.

Suppose, for convenience, that there would be forty such groups. They would be randomly given numbers from 1 through 40. Then blind recorders and blind subjects would be found. This means they wouldn't know which of the groups from 1 to 40 were cases of correspondences that could not plausibly be thought to be paranormally generated (the control group), and which were cases of correspondences thought by some – you, for instance – to have been paranormally generated (the experimental group).

The subjects would then make their guesses as to which were from the control group, which from the experimental group. Recorders would record and then gather the guesses. And an analysis would be done to see if there was any statistically significant correlation between the cases *guessed as* coming from the experimental group and the cases that *came from* the experimental group. If there was no statistically significant correlation, then the natural hypothesis – the guesses are no better than chance guesses – (or, to be pedantic, the null hypothesis) would be satisfied; the special hypothesis (“many of the cases... call for *some* paranormal interpretation of the data”) would be rejected.

Obviously, though, you didn't do any such test. This means that the basic method of science was not followed in your investigations. You didn't eliminate the chance or null hypothesis.

IS: I'm going! I don't need to hear such comments.

LA: Again, please go. I have no objections to your sudden departure.

(*Ian Stevenson, in the dream, again, turns, floats, then turns back.*)

LA: Ah, you remain. Perhaps you want to hear more.

IS: I don't want to hear more. I just want to say that it would take too much work to generate such a control group. It couldn't be done!

LA: Yes, it would take a fair bit of work. And perhaps it *won't* be done. But you said “It *couldn't* be done.” It *could* be done. It would take time to generate the twenty or so control correspondences, and spending as much time as is required might not be worth it for anyone interested in the experiment. And those who don't like control versus experimental group experiments wouldn't do it either. So perhaps it won't be done.

IS: Then if it won't be done, why mention it?

LA: I didn't say, “it won't be done.” I said, “*perhaps* it won't be done.” In any case, this sort of experiment is worth mentioning. The paranormal hypothesis goes against so much ordinary science that it is necessary to eliminate the null hypothesis before taking the paranormal suggestion seriously. Ordinary science says, for example, that biological changes are all chemical changes, and that chemical changes are all changes of subatomic physical things in accordance with the abstract forces of physics. Then there aren't unusual,

some would say, bizarre, connections between someone's birthmarks and the wound marks, for example, of a previously deceased person. Even if the properly scientific test is difficult to set up, still, if one wants to examine the merit of the paranormal claim, one should first eliminate the chance hypothesis.

IS: Nonsense.

LA: (*shakes his head*) You were a sincere, persistent, dedicated, stalwart, strong-minded researcher. But, I don't think you did the basic scientific test for your sort of case.

The paranormal hypothesis goes against so much ordinary science that it is necessary to eliminate the null hypothesis before taking the paranormal suggestion seriously

IS: You know what? I'd bet that if such a test were done, it would refute the chance hypothesis. There would be a statistically significant correlation between the guesses of cases from the experimental group and the cases that were in the experimental group.

LA: Yes...

IS: Ah! You agree with me!

LA: But only if the generator of the control group used the sorts of methods I used in noticing the correspondences between your life and mine. If that were the case, then there might be a statistically significant correlation. But if a full preparation of the control group were done, then, I venture, there wouldn't be a statistically significant correlation.

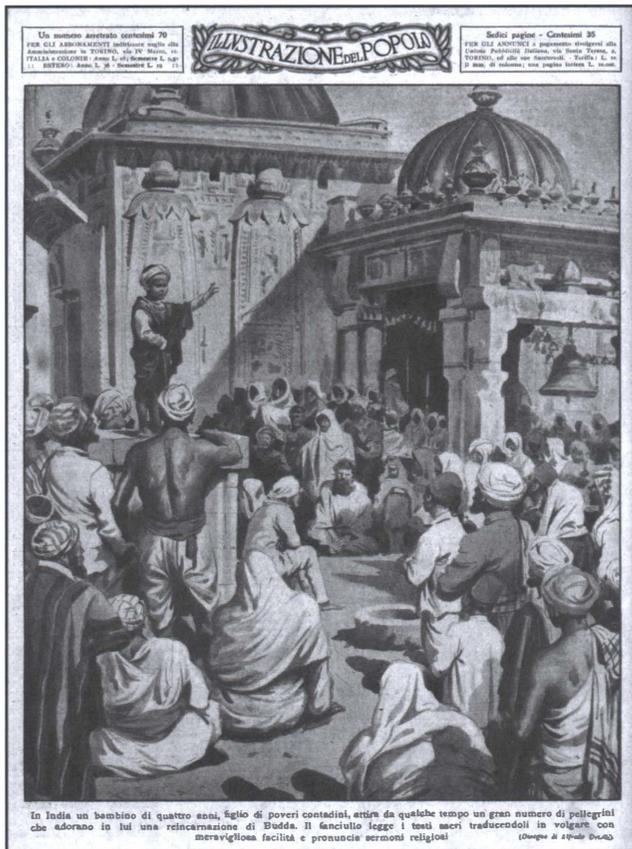
IS: Oh, and for a full preparation, the information would have to be more than, for instance, the obituary column information?

LA: I'd say, it's not *just* the amount of information that counts. It's the laxity, some would say the sloppiness, in the methods you used, that count. But don't turn around, threatening to go away. I won't say 'sloppiness' any more. The point is that the correspondences in the control group would have to be created in the same way that the correspondences exhibited in your work were created.

(*pause*)

LA (*continuing*): But it would take months, and it might take years, to create the control group that way, and that's what might never be done. In the example I gave, there are twenty one correspondences between me and you, confirmed, one way or another, in one short piece of information, the NY times obituary on your

life, and one more from the photograph I saw of you. I'm sure there would be many more if I spent a week or two finding out further information about you. But in the correspondences you found between present and supposed past lives, there was a great deal of laxity about how to get such correspondences. You started with one person, the child with spontaneous past life memories, say, and a very large group of people, say, all the people in nearby villages and towns. Then you tried to find correspondences without necessarily fixing in



Buddha reborn? A 4-year old Indian peasant boy, perceived to be the reincarnation of Buddha, is adored by pilgrims who come to hear him preach and interpret Buddha's teachings

advance what the name of the person to be found was, and so on. So it is only that degree of laxity that would be required in setting up a comparable control group.

IS: I'm not sure I quite see what you mean.

LA: A person preparing the control group would have to list all the degrees of laxity found in your sort of work, and the proportion of each kind of laxity, and then allow himself or herself the same kinds and degrees of laxity in creating the control group correspondences.

IS: From what material? Mine or mine plus the many others who have reached similar conclusions?

LA: Your work alone would do. A while back, James Matlock said that "the case for reincarnation rests largely upon" your research (Edwards, 1996: 253). So getting the methods, which is to say both kinds of laxity and proportions of those kinds of laxity, from your work alone, should be good enough.

IS: What you're talking about won't happen.

LA: "Won't"? Or "might not..."? Anyhow, to get the precise balances would be difficult. Not impossible, but difficult. For that reason, we could take a different approach. In one way of taking the different approach, we wouldn't allow low standards for both the experimental group and the control group, nor would we allow different standards between the experimental group and the control group. We would only allow tough standards for both groups. But that means anyone interested in doing a proper test for the chance hypothesis might have to employ an *experimental* group that does not at the moment exist. Also, to take into account coincidental correspondences, one could work hard enough to find a very large group of people – a good bit larger than thirty pairs of people – and then select from the larger group. That would parallel your selection from a very large research group as well.

(The image of Ian Stevenson turns.)

LA: Are you going away again?

IS: No, of course not. (He turns back.) Your attitude is shoddy, that's all.

LA: (sighs) All right. It seems to me that you never followed the basic rule of scientific investigation, to eliminate the chance hypothesis, or putting it another way, to nullify the null hypothesis, before presenting a special hypothesis, in this case the paranormal hypothesis. You are not interested in that kind of science. Let's suppose I accept your lack of interest in doing ordinary science. Still, the problems in your research are so many that one doesn't even need to see whether you followed the basic method of scientific research to discredit the results of your work.

IS: Too bad. It seems you haven't changed your mind about my research. That's too bad.

LA: True, I haven't changed my mind at all. Your life is now complete, though, and so, a summary of the specific details is appropriate. Shall we have a look at that?

IS: I really don't know why I'm staying here. I should have gone, long ago.

LA: – Because this is a dream of mine! That's the reason you're staying. I'm just dreaming about you.

IS: Oh.

LA: So I can go through the problems in your work, ignoring the most basic one, that the null hypothesis was never eliminated. Oops, I shouldn't have put it that way. Never mind. Let's look at what just seems to be improper work.

IS: I'm not listening.

LA: Don't listen, doesn't matter. This is just a dream. (pause)

LA: How's about if I *make up* a connection between me and you? Say, I remember of my past life that he lived in a house that was painted blue-gray on the outside, and refurbished from a much earlier cedar-sided home. That information is true of me. Then I say that you lived in such a house, and that's how I tabulate it in the tabulated data.

IS: But you'd be just making that up.

LA: True. But that's what you did, for example, in the Maung Tin Win case in *Reincarnation and Biology*. And you did that in several other cases, too, however shocking it was that you did it in even one case. How about if I distort the probabilities? Suppose I say that we were both born in Montreal, and that there is only a 1 in 12,000 likelihood that for any given person another given person was born in such a town. But actually the likelihood is closer to 1 in 2,000.

IS: So?

LA: Well, that's roughly what you did in reasoning about likelihoods of correspondences of birthmarks and previous wound or similar marks. What if I said, I lived in Calgary, which I did, by the way, and that you lived in Charlottesville, and then you confirmed that we both lived in cities whose names begin with the letter 'C'?

IS: That's just silly. I don't think I ever did anything like that!

LA: No? You often abstracted from information, and

These aren't mere bugs. These are fatal flaws

then took the more abstracted information to be the information that needed to be confirmed. For instance, from the original informants you thought that Imad Elawar took his past life to have been named 'Mohammed'. Then you found someone who had an uncle named 'Mohammed'. Then you listed the name 'Mohammed' as having been uttered by Imad Elawar; and you took it to have been confirmed that there was someone named 'Mohammed' with some relation to the identified past life. Don't you see the multiple end point problem?

(Ian Stevenson says nothing.)

LA: How about if I set out to find someone who, like me, moved from Montreal to Vancouver; then I decide, instead, to focus on someone who moved from Montreal to Virginia, because Vancouver and Virginia both begin in the letter 'V'?

IS: Please!

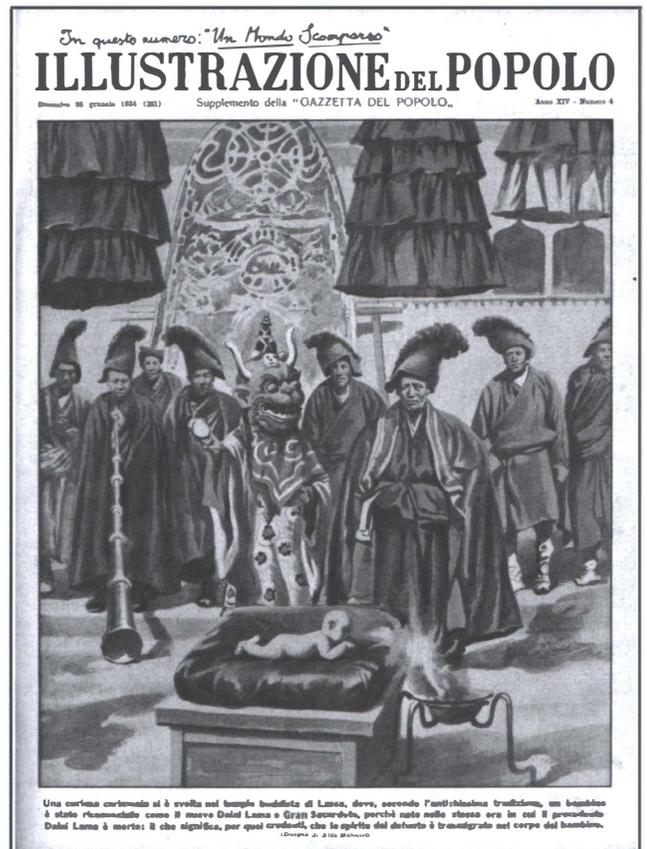
LA: But you did something like that. It was a bit different, but I'd say it was equally weird. You set out to find a man named Mahmoud Bouhamzy in Khriby, who had a beautiful wife, five children, and who died as a result of a car accident. Then, instead, you found a man named Ibrahim Bouhamzy, unmarried, with probably no children, and whose cause of death was tuberculosis. You only switched because of *other* correspondences with information bits of Imad Elawar's reported claims. How different is that from Vancouver and Virginia both beginning in the letter 'V'? Not very, I'd

say.

(Ian Stevenson shakes his head.)

LA: How about if I asked whether on someone's front porch there were two tables, and then I concluded that that was true because on that person's front porch there were two benches, each with a flat surface, and the flat surfaces were sometimes used to hold objects?

IS: I give up! What are you going to make of that?



Dalai Lama reborn? When the Dalai Lama dies, a baby boy born at precisely the same moment is recognised by church leaders at Lhasa, Tibet, as his reincarnation.

LA: That you did something similar, of course. You said Imad Elawar had said that there were two wells near his past life's house, one full, one empty. Then you took that to be confirmed since Ibrahim Bouhamzy had two grape vats, one higher than the other. "During the rainy season one of these vats became filled with water, but the other, shallower vat did not, because the water evaporated from it. Thus one would be empty while the other was full." That's what you said in your *Twenty Cases*. What if I claimed to remember a past life having had a tie exactly of the sort that you were wearing, and I only claimed that after I saw you wearing that tie?

IS: Enough! Enough, that's enough!

LA: You often started an item as having only been mentioned after the verification process. How about if I never specified in advance how an item was to be confirmed as applying both to me and to you? Perhaps I used arbitrary or unreliable methods of such confirmation – just as you, apparently, did, many times. How

about if I –

IS: Stop it, please, stop it!

LA (*continuing*): – made general statements that were simply false? For example, what if I said, “I only count two people as being of the same height if they’re within three inches of each other in height” –

(*Ian Stevenson looks frustrated*)

LA: – and then I count many people as being of the same height, though the height of one is never specified, or, from all available information, might be a foot or more different from another whose height is specified? Well, that’s what you did about the 10 cm² requirement for matching birthmarks with sites on an identified past life, and for the 5 cm² correspondence. What if I –

IS: However many of these so-called problems you have found –

LA: I can’t continue?

IS: – you’re just uncovering bugs in the excellent scientific work I did. I think you should know, and if you don’t, I’m now telling you, that in every scientific discipline, if you run deep enough into the material, you will find many bugs.

LA: Sorry. I don’t think so. These aren’t mere bugs. These are fatal flaws. To illustrate this, let’s look at the way you put all the information together. In your double-match table, 15-1 in *Reincarnation and Biology* – I have a scrap of paper here that says this is on pp. 1132-4 – you listed 33 double-match cases. But in not one of these 33 cases was there common-sensically good evidence for what you tabulate as having been established by good evidence. You reported that 26 of these were cases in which the family of the birthmarked one (the child typically) was acquainted with the facts about the identified past life. So there was no separation of the sources of evidence. Common sense would require that there be such separation of sources of evidence for a good case. Of the remaining seven, #18 had only a preliminary investigation; there are no reports of memory claim investigations. #26 and #22 had no detailed information given, and were not your cases. #27, #31, and #33 are mentioned in tables, but no original texts describing how the information in the tables was reached is given at all. The final case is Necip Unlutaskiran, found on page 430. There are many problems with this case. One of them is that Necip Unlutaskiran’s identity card listed him as being born in 1947. The identified past life died on 7 May 1951. No information was supplied to allow anyone to conclude that the actual birthdate of Necip Unlutaskiran was after 7 May 1951. So, I’d say, using your methods of reasoning, that the best explanation of the correspondences between you and me is that you are my past life!

The fact that we were both alive during the same years seems not to be a problem.

IS: I have a hunch that you only speak this way because you think, “Well, he’s dead, so he can’t reply.”

LA: Not at all. You started a large movement in which many researchers do similar work to yours. One of the very many followers of your work could look at my claims and respond to them. I invite them to do that. I’m claiming that no one has done the basic scientific research at all, which is to nullify the mere chance hypothesis. Second, I’m suggesting that if anyone got many groups of correspondences between one life and another earlier life, and abstracted them a bit so that they looked like claims of past life memories, and then randomly mixed them in with evidence about past life memories, similarly abstracted, and then had subjects—ordinary people, or scientists—make guesses as to which need special explanation—then there would be a mere chance distribution. If there was, on the other hand, a statistically significant correlation between cases guessed as needing special explanation and cases in the experimental group, it would be because of different degrees and proportions of laxness in generating correspondences between the two groups. Thirdly, I’m suggesting that the laxness of standards for generating apparent correspondences was shockingly large in your work – I could quote Chari’s research, and Thomason’s, too – and that the laxness undoes any common sense claims about the correspondences you supposedly found.

The image of Ian Stevenson then disappeared, and I woke up.

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Leonard Angel teaches philosophy at Douglas College in New Westminster, BC, Canada. His main interests are in the theory of knowledge and in the nature and size of fundamental entities.

Skeptical Stats

1. Number of people who became ill, suffering from headaches, nausea and respiratory problems after inhaling fumes from a 65 ft wide crater made in Peruvian soil by a meteorite: **over 200**
2. Size of the family home currently being constructed for Arnold Chase, an American businessman, whose property is set to contain a 103-seat cinema: **50,853 square feet, approximately equivalent to 2.2 Wembley football pitches**
3. Number of couples who simultaneously participated in a ten-second kiss on September 1st 2007, in an attempt to establish a new *Guinness* World Record: **6,980**
4. Average length of a giraffe's tongue: **19 inches**
5. Fastest recorded running speed of a giraffe: **34.7 mph**
6. Lowest rate of success in correctly identifying the presence of cancer using mammograms, as found by a longitudinal study of 72 US health facilities: **27%**
7. Date upon which the BBC declared in their radio bulletin "There is no news", promptly deciding to play piano music instead: **April 18th 1930, Good Friday**
8. Number of complaints received by police during a 20-mile naked walk in Dorset, raising money for the *Marine Conservation Society*: **18**
9. Charge for attendance at a two-hour 'psychic training workshop' run by the *Psychic Sisters Consultation Service* in Selfridges, Oxford Street: **£30 per person**
10. Maximum number of people permitted to attend each training session: **8**
11. Length of the adult education course entitled "An In-Depth Study of Psychological Research" run by Prof. Archie Roy at Glasgow University, advertised with the tagline "Paranormal phenomena do occur": **20 weeks**
12. Cost for the course, in which Roy addresses topics such as hauntings, apparitions, mediumship, and reincarnation: **£120**
13. Number of toilets contained within the new Wembley Stadium: **2,618**
14. Combined size of the two giant screens in the new Wembley Stadium: **equivalent to 1200 television sets**
15. Length of the average blink: **0.3 seconds**
16. Cost to provide a cow to a Malawian dairy farmer through *Oxfam*: **£250 per month**
17. Total amount of water used in the production of 1kg of beef: **between 13,000 and 100,000 litres, depending on production techniques**
18. Total amount of water used in the production of 1kg of wheat: **between 1,000 and 2,000 litres, depending on production techniques**
19. Mass of grain fed to a cow in order to produce 1kg of beef: **7kg**
20. Number of bottles of probiotic drinks sold annually in the UK: **830 million**
21. Proportion of probiotic drinks which do not contain sufficiently 'robust' bacteria to even survive the digestive process, according to the Food Standards Agency: **one half**
22. Percentage of medical practitioners registered in the Chicago district who, in a survey by peers, admitted to having placebo treatments: **45**
23. Most money ever spent on the internet in one minute, the "Mega Minute", as recorded by *Retail Decisions*, an internet monitoring company: **£767,500**
24. Longest episode of hiccups, recorded in Charles Osborn from Iowa: **68 years**
25. Half-life of human taste buds: **10 – 14 days**

Sources:

1 Yahoo; 2 ABC News; 3 *Telegraph*; 4, 5 San Diego Zoo; 6 *Chicago Tribune*; 7 BBC News Newswatch; 8 BBC News; 9 Channel 4 News - Online; 10 AOL; 11 *Scotsman.com*; 12 Glasgow University; 13, 14 WNSL; 15 Bristol Neuroscience; 16 Oxfam; 17, 18, 19 Vegetarian Society; 20, 23 *The Times*; 21 *The Guardian*; 22 Reuters; 24 *Guinness World Records*; 25 Petersen, O.H. (2006). *Human Physiology*, p. 160.

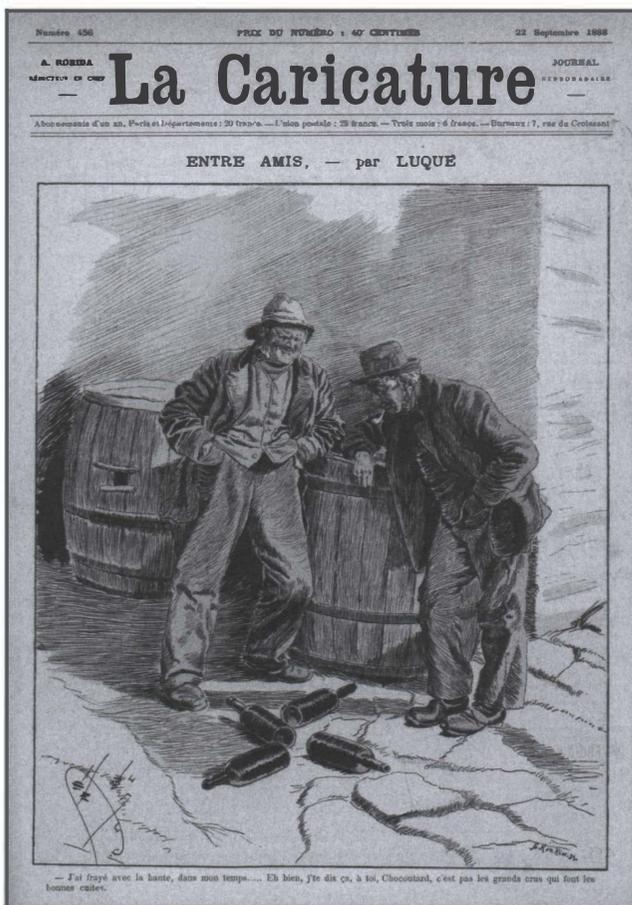
► *Skeptical Stats* is compiled by **Mark Williams**, with suggestions for this copy from **John Roberts**. Both *Hits & Misses* and *Skeptical Stats* depend heavily on reader contributions of clippings, story leads, and odd statistics. Please do send any interesting articles or opinions to mark.williams@gold.ac.uk, post a comment in our blog at 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.

Exposing the Myth of Alcoholics Anonymous. Part 2: Cult not Cure

Steven Mohr concludes his two-part investigation of Alcoholics Anonymous

A Doctrine of Hopelessness

REMEMBER THAT those who come to AA are in trouble. Those in the worst shape have become physically and emotionally debilitated. Some are on the verge of literally drinking themselves to death or going insane. Others have been court ordered to attend because they committed a crime under the influence. In between are those who are just sick of the life of alcohol



Newcomers to AA are told that their only hope of survival is to accept complete defeat and powerlessness over alcohol. They are told that if they will only open their minds to the concept of a Higher Power, they have a chance.

addiction. They have tried to stop on their own and failed. They have been told there is hope in the fellowship of AA. And, very importantly, they have found that society offers little else by way of help for them. They seem to have few options left.

People in this state are depressed and desperate. They are ready to be given hope, and AA claims to offer that hope if they will “just follow a few simple rules”. But the hope offered by AA begins and ends with indoctrination to a set of religious beliefs. Much time could be

spent examining the details of the indoctrination as there are many subtleties. The methods are typical of other mind control cults, so it is useful here to summarize.

The newcomer (tellingly referred to as a *pigeon* in the programme) is told that his only hope of survival is to accept complete defeat and powerlessness over alcohol. He is told initially that if he will only open his mind to the concept of a Power-Greater-Than-Himself he has a chance. He is told that the Power can be any of which he can personally conceive. In a ridiculous example, I have heard of a man who chose a door knob as his Higher Power and stayed sober by praying to the door knob until his death. All-Powerful pieces of hardware notwithstanding, the usual progression is that under the guidance of the AA fellowship, whatever power the pigeon may have conceived, shortly becomes a traditional Judeo/Christian/Muslim God – a God of prayer, intercession, and ultimate salvation.

... the hope offered by AA begins and ends with indoctrination to a set of religious beliefs

Notice in the 12 steps how being powerless over the disease of alcoholism quickly becomes a non-descript form of insanity? Then the pigeon must take Moral Inventory before he can continue on the road to recovery (how the insane can be expected to take moral inventory is never addressed). Next, the pigeon is told he has not just an illness, but profound Defects of Character (Sins?). He must confess his sins. He must plead with God to remove his character defects. He must surrender his Will to that of God. He must pray to God ceaselessly. Finally, he must realize that he will never be entirely free of this horrible deadly illness. He can only keep it at bay by involving himself with other alcoholics – bringing more pigeons into the programme. He is encouraged to attend AA meetings as often as possible for the rest of his life.

The message is very clear. The alcoholic has one

chance and one chance only – personal knowledge of God through the programme of AA. But what happens if he relapses? Relapse is very common in and out of AA although exact figures are, again, elusive. The point here is that the alcoholic has been told repeatedly and quite forcefully that he can never drink alcohol again. If he does he will be worse than he was when he last stopped. He is forcefully told that his disease grows whether or not he is actively drinking. There is a mantra repeated at most AA meetings, “Without AA the alcoholic is doomed to one of three fates: Incarceration, Insanity, or Death.” There is a deep nihilism to such a doctrine, but AA thrives on such nihilism and its members suffer the hopelessness implicit therein.

When the *recovering* alcoholic does relapse, as most do, there is a tendency toward fatalism. “I am powerless. I can’t stop and God has not answered my prayers, therefore I am inferior – even worthless.” If a person is truly powerless over alcohol and if he has failed even with the help of God; why not just keep drinking?

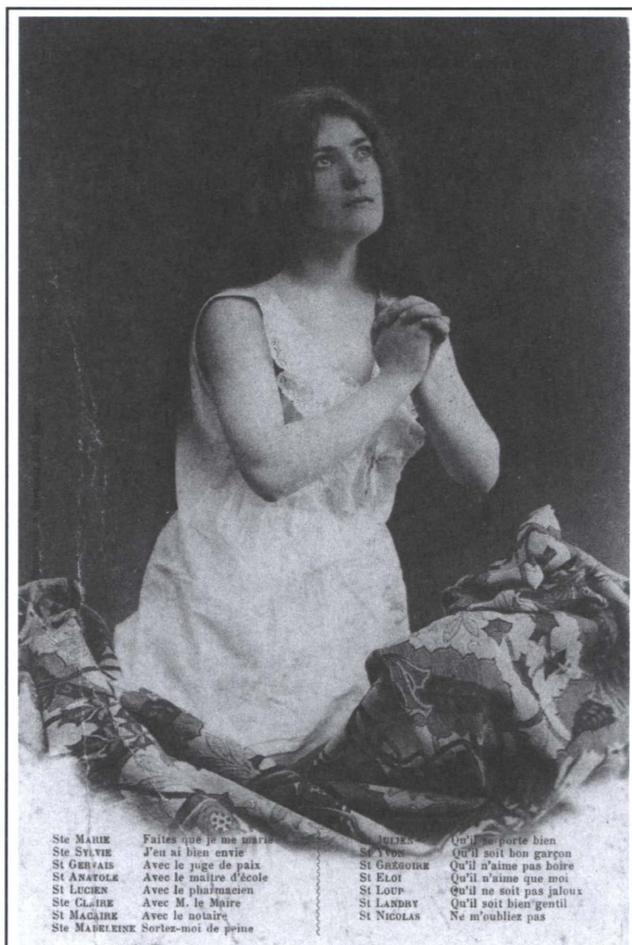
Having spent time in the AA programme myself, I found the most difficult stories to understand were those of, say, someone with twenty years sobriety relapsing and shortly drinking themselves to death. What kind of programme could only offer one day or even one moment of recovery at a time and call itself successful? How could someone still be an alcoholic after twenty sober years? The answer I invariably received was that they let their guard down and their “baffling”, incurable disease got them. It sounded too much to me like a Christian who must be forever on guard against Satan, not a man or woman with a medical condition undergoing treatment.

Infiltration

The next crucial questions from societal, legal and health care points of view are how has Alcoholics Anonymous managed to inculcate itself into the addiction treatment industry and court system so thoroughly? And how do they get away with it? I have not even mentioned yet the many 12-step spin-offs of AA such as Narcotics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous... the list goes on. They all follow mostly the same steps and doctrine of AA and they all work equally poorly. Apparently, many sick people are not getting better and some are suffering terribly under the present 12-step-based system of addiction recovery.

As I have already mentioned the great majority of alcohol and drug rehabilitation facilities (up to ninety percent) in this country use 12-step indoctrination, and the US court system regularly requires AA meeting attendance for those convicted of alcohol- or drug-related crimes. Many are forced to attend AA or NA (Narcotics Anonymous) meetings while in prison, as if being in jail weren’t punishment enough. In tracing the circumstances by which AA has risen to become the major treatment of choice in the US for alcoholism we must recognize that the devout AA members are ardent crusaders for their cause.

U.S. medical insurance companies regularly refuse to cover any treatment that is not 12-step based. This is the beginning of an answer. Alcohol and drug treatment has grown into a multi-billion dollar per year industry. The cost of a 28-day inpatient rehab stay typically ranges from \$10,000 to \$35,000. Inpatient treatment for the severe case is considered essential by many professionals in the field, although such treatments generally have little better long-term success than AA alone.



The usual progression is that under the guidance of the AA fellowship, whatever Higher Power the initiate may have conceived shortly becomes a traditional God of prayer, intercession, and ultimate salvation.

The business is self-perpetuating in this way. We have all heard of celebrities who have relapsed again and again after inpatient treatment even at the most prestigious clinics. Robert Downey Jr comes to mind. Since relapse is common and alcoholism is medically considered a disease, a continued supply of sick people is assured. The members of Alcoholics Anonymous are surely getting a share of this money.

But wait. Isn't AA a non-profit organization? Along with Twelve Steps, AA as an organization has Twelve Traditions. Don't these include refusing outside contributions? The answer to both questions is ostensibly “yes” though in reality dubious. Consider three of the Traditions (Wilson, 2003):

Tradition 6: An A.A. group ought never endorse,

finance, or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.

Tradition 6 is violated every day. Consider an excerpt from the advertising literature of a very successful South Florida Rehab Center (I spent 28 days as a voluntary patient there myself). "The Beachcomber is geared towards the principles of Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, and Al-Anon, with meetings on the premises. An A.A./N.A. contact is made for each client before leaving as well as a schedule of A.A. and N.A. meetings." (Beachcomber Family Center for Addiction Recovery, no date). I should add that even when not attending AA/NA meetings the 12 steps were pervasive and a large part of my treatment.

Tradition 7: Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.

It is very common for members of substantial resource to donate property and services to AA.

Tradition 12: Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

Anonymity is a powerful tool by which AA promotes itself to the public. Many AA members occupy positions in government and the health care industry. Even if we assume that their motives are pure, failure to identify themselves as adherents to a God-based organization that requires proselytization by its membership is strictly unethical.

AA has no proscription against its members starting independent companies and using them to promote the AA agenda. Again, such members have the distinct advantage of remaining anonymous in their business dealings. AA members do not, except on rare occasions, use their full name. Even the AA cofounders are still referred to often as Bill W and Doctor Bob. AA members on the Board of Trustees and the General Services Organization of AA are required by law to have their full names recorded but it stops there.

Let us say, for instance, that the president of insurance company XYZ Corporation, Steve Alkie has been an AA member for years. He accepts and practices the 12 steps. In all direct associations with AA, he is known simply as Steve A. The fact that he is an admitted alcoholic and active member of AA may never be known in his role as president of XYZ. This is correct in the sense of his personal privacy under law. But remember that Steve is a member of a religious cult. He has been indoctrinated into the belief system that AA is the only path to alcoholic recovery and that path requires devotion to God. Steve further believes, as I have often heard even from medical professionals, that the 12 steps are a wonderful way to live one's life – alcoholic or not. (With the 12-step nihilistic vision of human nature, I

would certainly beg to differ.)

Being in the insurance business, Steve's fundamental belief that AA is good for alcoholics and that he is compelled by God to promote the AA doctrine would surely influence his decisions about which types of rehabilitation clinics his company supports. Because AA is recognized by the US government as a nonprofit self-help group there is no conflict. The truth as we have seen though is that AA is a religious cult. Insurance companies are not supposed to pay for religious treatment, but they routinely do. The results are that AA continues to flourish and its members continue to make a lot of money, while few alcoholics get the long-term help they need. Remember they might even have a higher mortality rate than the general population.

AA has lied to the American public for 70 years

The other big problem is in the legal system of the United States. While it would be perfectly legitimate for courts to routinely sentence alcoholic offenders to a medical and proven programme of rehabilitation, it is flatly illegal and, in fact, unconstitutional for them to sentence said offenders to a religious programme. Yet they do. The benefit of the doubt would be given if one concluded that the courts have been duped by the AA cult. And probably this is true to some extent. The more exacting arguments would be that legislators have been extensively lobbied by AA proponents, and that AA members hold important positions throughout government and the court system. They have included senators, congressmen and judges.

The evangelical cult of Alcoholics Anonymous has deliberately sought proliferation of its religious conversion agenda by infiltration of the medical community and legal system of the United States of America. They have used their Principle of Anonymity to disguise themselves in these efforts. Though admittedly many AA members are well intentioned, believing deeply in their cause, AA has lied to the American public for 70 years. AA has no cure or even hope to offer suffering alcoholics. Americans need to recognize the true nature of AA, its abysmal failure, and inherent dangers.

The Greater Seattle Intergroup of Alcoholics Anonymous features an online collection of brief histories called "High and Dry, Oldtimers' Stories Online". One of these oldtimers, Lloyd B, an AA member of forty years writes, "In about 1964 an article came out in *Harper's Magazine* titled 'AA: Cure or Cult?' There was a big controversy about it. Should we string this guy up

or what? As it turned out he had gone through treatment and AA meetings and was not happy with the Higher Power end of things. We found out at that time the best thing to do was let it be. And of course, it went away.” (see <http://www.seattleaa.org>)

The February 1963 *Harper's Magazine* article Lloyd refers to was indeed titled, *AA: Cure or Cult?* by Dr Arthur H. Cain, PhD. Dr Cain was then a practicing psychologist and graduate of Columbia University and of the Yale School of Alcohol Studies. The article's clear conclusion was Cult not Cure. Lloyd B. writes it off to Dr Cain being “not happy with the Higher Power end of things.” as though the Higher Power belief was a minor aspect of AA when, in fact, it is the primary point as we have seen. Lloyd's attitude is telling in that he dismisses as trivial the central tenet of the AA pro-

gramme as almost incidental while wishing that the controversy stirred against his favorite cult would just go away. Well, I'm sorry Lloyd. Though you and others of your fellowship may choose denial and ignorance of the facts, the truth has a funny way of hanging around. It won't just “go away”.

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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.

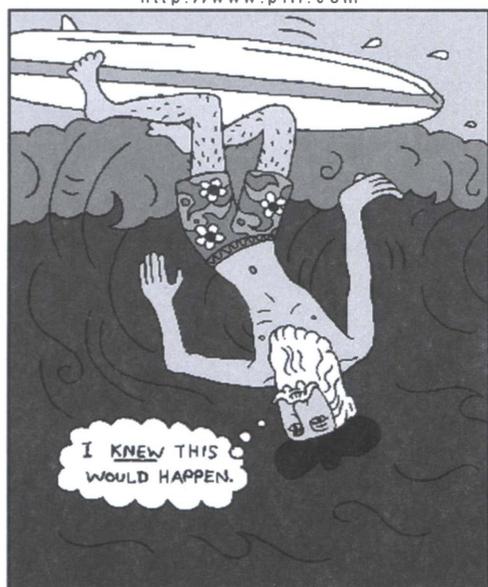
SKEPTICS IN THE PUB

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. The meeting begins at 7:00 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>



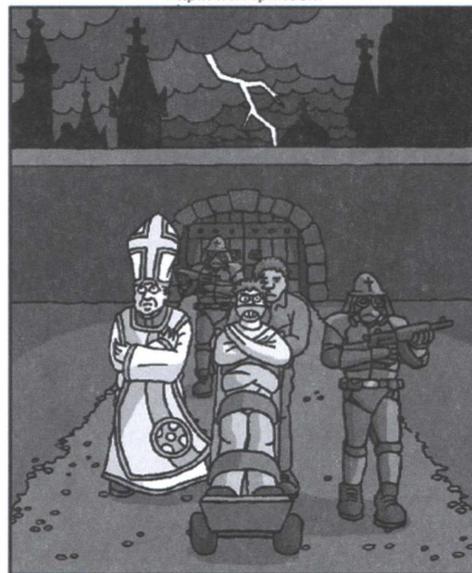
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Nostradamus goes surfing.

THE PARKING LOT IS FULL

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The Anti-Christ arrived and nearly ended everything in 1999 before being imprisoned by the Vatican. The Pope thought this would avert the apocalypse. He was wrong. It just slowed the process down. Get ready to watch the world crumble in slow-motion.

Amazon's Amazing Admission

Mark Newbrook gives his reasons for being less than satisfied with Amazon's policy on book reviews

IN 1998, ROBERT TEMPLE published an updated version of his 1976 book *The Sirius Mystery*, about his claims that the Dogon (Mali) possess traditional knowledge of the white dwarf star Sirius B (invisible to the naked eye) and that this ultimately derives from extra-terrestrial visitation in ancient times. The following year, the anthropologist Colin Groves and I reviewed this book in *The "[Australian] Skeptic*, and in 2000 I posted a potted version of the review on *Amazon.co.uk*, where I had previously reviewed other fortaean books. After a short while, the review suddenly disappeared (without any notice). I asked the editor the reason, and was told that Temple had complained that I had misrepresented his views. I responded to the effect that as far as I could see I had not misrepresented what he had said in the book, but was willing to correct any genuine error that might be pointed out (if he had in fact expressed his views badly, that was his problem). I also pointed out that the editor had mishandled the case by not asking me to comment first and then again by not notifying me of his decision. He apologised but stated that his hands were tied because of the danger of legal action by Temple. I declared that in that case I would no longer review on *Amazon.co.uk* and on my request he deleted all my reviews (he appeared embarrassed).

I continued, however, to review on the USA-based *Amazon.com*. There was no difficulty here until a few months ago, when I was modifying my existing review of the linguistic aspects of Stephen Knapp's (2000) book *Proof of Vedic Culture's Global Existence* (a full version again appears in *The [Australian] Skeptic*). I had previously posted supplementary reviews in order to respond to critiques of my review by other (pro-Knapp) reviewers (and similar supplementary reviews in respect of other such books). However, *Amazon.com* had now outlawed this practice (one review only per book per reviewer), so instead I had been modifying my main review for the same purpose. (My existing supplementary reviews had *not* been deleted as this new policy would require.) Suddenly, a further revision was rejected (without comment; the review was simply not re-posted). When I enquired, I was told that *Amazon.com* had a policy excluding comments by one reviewer on other reviewers' comments, even within the reviewer's main review. I pointed out that I was commenting on the reviews in question exactly because they had commented on mine, and that I had no objection to this but wished to respond because as a professional linguist I was sure that the comments were misguided and needed to be corrected. I also asked when this additional restriction had been introduced, as it had never applied before to my knowledge.

Amazon.com stated that they would delete any review that commented on other reviewers' comments and was brought to their attention. Although, as I had made clear, I did not agree with this policy, by way of a test I brought one such review (a trivial review of another book) to their attention, and they deleted that. They invited me to identify more such reviews, but because of my own views I declined to do so. They repeatedly refused to state when their additional restriction had been introduced, instead answering other questions which I had not asked (and wrongly claiming that they were answering my actual questions). At times they seemed to imply that the restriction was *not* new; but basically their statements were unclear.

**Surely reviews, to be useful,
must include (constructive) critical
comments as well as (or instead of)
positive ones if the reviewer believes
that criticisms are justified
and can support them**

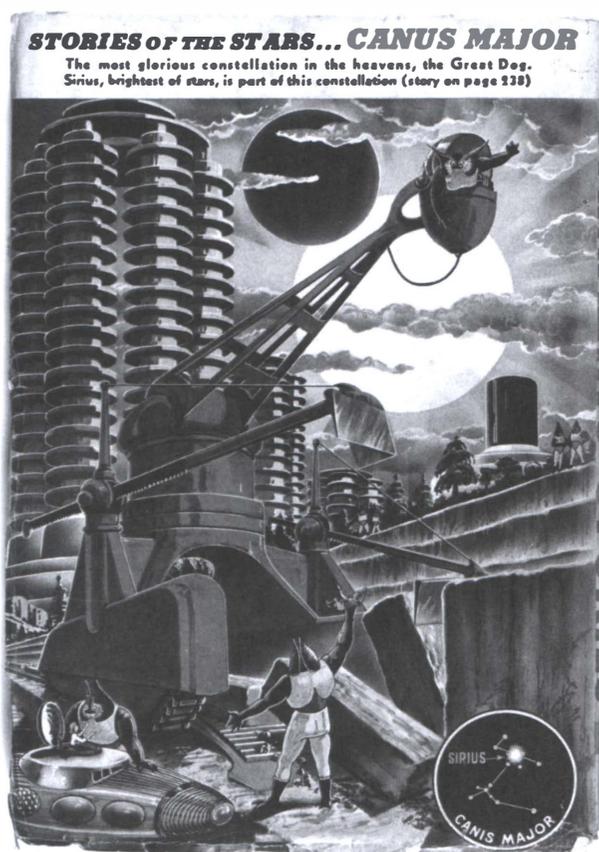
I also asked *Amazon.com* several times if it was permitted to post comments on others' reviews as the first entries in discussion forums on the page for the book in question, instead of in a review; but they repeatedly refused to answer this question as well.

Eventually I modified my main review of Knapp so as to avoid reference to others' reviews (even if the latter commented on mine). (To see what would happen, I also re-posted my comments on others' reviews as the first entries in discussion forums; these remain posted, albeit with no responses.) However, *Amazon.com* still refused to re-post my main review, now because, as they claimed, my negative comments on Knapp's grasp of linguistics (which had been on the site for several years) were 'spiteful'. Amazingly, they stated: '*Amazon.com's* review forum is not the place to open or invite discussion as to the validity of this book[']s subject matter'. I pointed out that my comments were *not* 'spiteful'; they were measured and fully justified (or justifiable if greater length were permitted), and would be accepted as correct by any qualified linguist. I also asked them when this latest policy had been introduced, and how they could possibly justify a policy by which a reviewer

was barred from opening or inviting discussion as to the validity of a book's subject matter. Surely reviews, to be useful, *must* include (constructive) critical comments as well as (or instead of) positive ones if the reviewer believes that criticisms are justified and can support them.

Amazon.com now declared that they would not engage in any further discussion with me at all, and that if I did not modify my review of Knapp as they instructed it would not be re-posted. I naturally refused to modify my review, so it has disappeared. I re-posted it as the first entry in a new discussion forum, and it remains posted in that form. But I ask: how can any review programme operate usefully under such a con-

the site seriously as a forum. Their present policy, even if motivated chiefly by fear of legal action, is ridiculous. In scholarly discussion, threats of legal action should be reserved for truly extreme cases. If an author believes that another has misrepresented her, whether through misunderstanding or because of bias or the like (and the latter should not be treated as present unless there is good evidence), she should engage him in discussion, in a public forum if and when this is appropriate. And if she believes that her ideas, though perhaps understood, are being unfairly criticised, she can, again, respond in print or in any other suitable forum. The tendency



Robert Temple was not the first person to speculate that an advanced alien civilisation might be associated with Sirius, as shown by the 1943 illustration above.

straint (if it were consistently applied, which of course it is not)?

I reported these exchanges to *Amazon.co.uk* but received only a token reply. Because of all this, I have now given up reviewing on Amazon (all branches), though my existing reviews remain on *Amazon.com*.

Amazon should obviously reconsider their position if they want scholarly, critical or sceptical readers to take

The tendency towards quick recourse to litigation cheapens the scholarly enterprise; worse yet, it obviously discourages legitimate scholarly comment and criticism

towards quick recourse to litigation cheapens the scholarly enterprise; worse yet, it obviously discourages legitimate scholarly comment and criticism. Editors should not strengthen this tendency by backing down in the face of inadequately supported threats. And in any case organisations like Amazon should not treat the books they sell as immune from criticism.

In addition, in my experience as related here, Amazon's statements about their policies, given in response to queries, are often utterly unhelpful.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Joanne Keenan and Chris French for their helpful comments on a draft of this paper.

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Mark Newbrook is from near Liverpool and obtained his PhD in linguistics at Reading University before lecturing and conducting research in linguistics in Singapore, Hong Kong, Australia and now the UK. While in Australia, he was the linguistics consultant to the Australian Skeptics.



Philosopher's Corner

Julian Baggini

IT IS AN uncontroversial truth that sex is for procreation. But it is to slip from the obvious to the preposterous to claim that sex is therefore *only* for procreation.

A similar slip, however, is made by many who set out to answer the question of what universities are for. The question has become more pressing since rapid expansion of higher education has drawn many more people into it, and not everyone can see the benefits this has to the students or society. But there is no single answer, so anyone who attempts to give one is making a big mistake.

The novelist Ben Okri, for example, has written about the need for universities to “teach the art of self-discovery”, lamenting the fact that students “leave universities with skills for the workplace but no knowledge of how to live, or what living is for.” But someone going to university to study food science is not looking for self-discovery, at least not in the lecture theatre or laboratory. Self-discovery is but one desideratum of a university education, and not one that applies equally to all courses.

The question of what universities are for is thus like the question of what a Swiss army knife is for. The knife can be used for many things, cutting being one of the more important and cracking nuts one of the more peripheral. Similarly, universities are for many things, some of which are more important than others without negating the legitimacy of those other uses altogether.

One role universities have is enabling social mobility. As a 2001 Institute for Employment Studies survey concluded, “The main motivating factor, which encourages potential students from lower social class backgrounds to enter HE, is a belief that a higher qualification will bring improved job and career prospects, and also improved earnings and job security.”

Universities also play a role in financial advancement. One Mori survey showed that 87% of students believe the money they are spending is a good investment for their future.

Talk of social advancement and improved financial prospects as a purpose for higher education strikes many as irredeemably philistine. But it does not follow from the fact that these are some of the things universities are for that we should therefore make the fulfilment of these functions the universities' primary goal. At the very least they are like the corkscrew and toothpick on a Swiss army knife: they may not be the tool's primary functions, but seeing as they are often put to good use, why would anyone want to remove them?

Matters become more contentious when it comes to the main blades. The problem here is that people are too quick to assume that the functions they themselves use most, or would like to use most, are the ones which really do define what universities are primarily for.

For instance, the only real justification for what many of those working in the humanities do must involve the lofty ideas of learning for learning's sake, with perhaps a nod to the value of a broad, humanistic education in producing well-rounded citizens. Hence they are hostile to any suggestion that universities serve utilitarian functions and are apt to champion the value of pure enquiry.

This general line of argument has been defended by Gordon Graham in *What Are Universities For?* He argued that universities are essential to maintaining the intellectual vibrancy of our culture and should not serve mere instrumental functions for economic benefit.

But Graham is a philosopher. Were he to stroll across the University of Aberdeen to the medical school at Foresterhill, he might discover that the rationale for study there involves precisely the kind of talk of skills and utility which is anathema to humanities scholars. These faculties are there to produce medics and researchers. Their role is not primarily to push back the boundaries of knowledge for its own sake but to save lives and improve health.

If universities have a range of different functions, you might wonder why they should be combined in the one institution. Why have one multi-purpose tool rather than a variety of more specialised ones?

The short answer is that the functions cannot and should not be so neatly separated. Consider the case of philosophy. Most of the time, the value of philosophy is simply that it helps us to tackle philosophical problems, and since these problems arise inevitably from the human desire to understand the world, it is part of our ongoing quest for greater understanding.

But from time to time we discover that other needs arise and philosophy is in a position to help meet them. Computer scientists start to work on artificial intelligence and philosophers contribute to their understanding of what intelligence is and the ethical implications of AI. Cognitive scientists increase our understanding of how the human mind works, but the problem of consciousness has a philosophical as well as neurological dimension. Biologists work with human DNA and embryos, and bioethicists are required to help clear the moral ground. Educationalists realise that children need help to develop their critical thinking skills, so philosophers and psychologists are enlisted to help meet that need.

All of this is made much easier by the fact that philosophers, educationalists, psychologists, cognitive scientists, computer scientists and biologists are part of the same institution: the university. And this is no happy accident. It reflects a deeper philosophical truth: that all human knowledge is interconnected.

Julian Baggini is editor of *The Philosophers' Magazine* (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.

Comments welcome to julian@julianbaggini.com

From Michael Heap

Chairman of the Association for Skeptical Enquiry



THE 13th EUROPEAN Skeptics Congress, hosted by the Irish Skeptical Society, took place in Dublin from 7th to 9th September 2007. The subtitle of the congress was "The Assault on Science: Constructing a Response". More than 140 delegates from 13 countries attended. I think those readers who were present will echo my congratulations to our Irish colleagues, especially Paul O'Donoghue and Nóirin Buckley, for organising such a stimulating and informative event. In my last column I said that I would probably do a write-up of this in a forthcoming ASKE newsletter, but I understand that eventually it will be possible to view videos of the talks on the Irish Skeptics' website (<http://www.irishskeptics.net>). Titles and abstracts of talks are already available on the site.

The academic and technical content of the papers was of a very high standard but as always at sceptical meetings, whilst the message is, as ever, a deadly serious one, there is the bonus of a generous helping of humour and good fun. As I said at the time, I can't imagine conferences on subjects such as modular algebra or disorders of the lower intestinal tract generating such amusement and laughter.

Which is why I think that, just as magicians have made a great contribution to scepticism, so comedians should be persuaded to participate. In fact, I think I detect amongst professional comedians a growing interest in raising a laugh or two by lampooning some of the traditional targets of scepticism. Recently I heard on the radio a comedian entertaining his audience by ridiculing homeopathy; what he said was also true. (I still have fond memories of watching on stage an hilarious sketch in which Mel Smith played the part of a medium who bore more than a passing resemblance to Doris Stokes (complete with cardigan and carpet slippers), while Griff Rhys Jones played a member of the audience who was adamant that every 'contact' was for him, at one point insisting that a message that 'came through' was from his deceased goldfish.)

However, back to the Dublin congress. Among the speakers was Gabor Hrasko, Vice President of the Hungarian Skeptic Society (HSS). This society has its origins in an informal group that started up in 1992 but 15 years later a more active organisation was established. A visit to the HSS website (<http://www.szkeptikusarsasag.hu/en>) reveals that this is indeed a very dynamic organisation, and one of its activities has been

to campaign for the establishment of a Darwin Day in Hungary. In Dublin, the affiliation of the HSS to ECSO (the European Council of Skeptical Organisations) was ratified and the HSS will host the 14th European Skeptics Congress in Budapest. This is likely to be held in September 2009. As the HSS website notes, "That year is quite remarkable: it is the International Year of Astronomy. Also Darwin's 200th birthday will occur on February 12, 2009 and it will be the 150th Anniversary of the publication of his famous book, *On The Origin of Species*".

The Sunday morning of the Dublin congress consisted of three parallel workshops: Biosciences, Belief Systems and Media and Policy Issues. I opted for the middle one of these. It was noteworthy that much of the time the discussion gravitated to complementary and alternative medicine (CAM). One of the participants made the suggestion that the fact that there is alternative medicine at all, but not alternative astrophysics, biochemistry, geology, etc., indicates that perhaps there is something wrong with orthodox medicine that should be put right. (He was, I believe, alluding to the idea that modern western medicine, unlike CAM, is too mechanistic and impersonal.) My contribution to this discussion was to disagree. There *are* in fact 'alternatives' to many disciplines of science – astronomy, archaeology, palaeontology, zoology, etc. – but one big difference is that medicine is *applied* science. And, yes, it's about maintaining good health and alleviating illness and injury, but it's also lot to do with public demands and expectations, enterprise and careers. It's big business. It's about power. And I don't think that CAM really has anything at all to do with the health and illness side: it's about all those other things. In fact, to really understand the phenomenon of CAM in western society I believe we need to consult economists. When I made this point at the meeting I asked if there were any economists present, and there weren't.

So there are at least two groups of people whom we need to encourage into our ranks: comedians and economists. Oh – and women. At the final plenary session in Dublin I did raise the vexatious matter of the dearth of female sceptics (to be fair there were more female delegates present than is usually the case). The only contribution from the audience was from someone who said that women are too busy consulting alternative therapists. This point was actually made by a woman.

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



Reviews

VOICES FROM THE PAST?

Ghost Hunters: The Victorians and the Hunt for Proof of Life After Death

by Deborah Blum

Arrow Books, £8.99 (pb), ISBN 978-0099469346

In 1848, in Hydesville, New York, two sisters, Kate and Margaret Fox, began 'communicating' with the spirit of a murdered man using a series of coded rapping sounds. Whatever their motives initially, these girls were to become the originators of the modern Spiritualist movement. Within a few years, hundreds of mediums and sensitives would discover an ability to communicate with the dead and séances would provide an exciting repertoire of voices, rapping, manifestations and spirit guides, bringing messages from The Other Side.

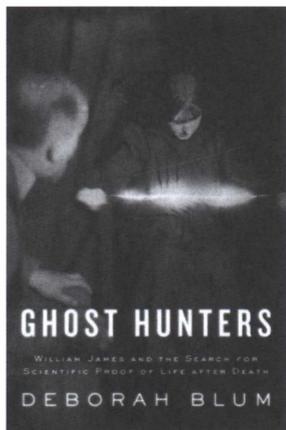
These séances in turn attracted 'investigators', most of whom were either already believers or sceptics eager to expose self-deception or outright fraud.

Deborah Blum, a Pulitzer Prize-winning science journalist, gives an interesting overview of the origins of the spiritualist movement, covering a period roughly coinciding with the life of the psychologist and philosopher William James (1842 - 1910). James devoted much time and effort to what soon became known as Psychical Research but after some 25 years could only conclude that while some of the phenomena he had observed were real, he could give no explanation for them.

While Blum does make some attempt to place Spiritualism in a wider historical context, much of the writing is anecdotal, with little attempt to dig beneath the surface. Why, for example, should all those spirits have waited until the mid-19th century to get in touch? Having decided to reveal their existence, why had they largely gone quiet again by the mid-20th? The Fox sisters we know were eventually outed as frauds, as was the absurd Madame Blavatsky, but what happened to Eusapia Palladino and all the others who seemed so convincing at the time? They seem to have disappeared as abruptly as the dead for whom they provided a bridge to the living world.

We ourselves are so surrounded by special effects and created images that tales of spirit guides, ectoplasm and 'crisis manifestations' seem no more than historical curiosities and this book does nothing to raise them beyond that.

Mike Hutton



THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

How to Win Every Argument: The Use and Abuse of Logic

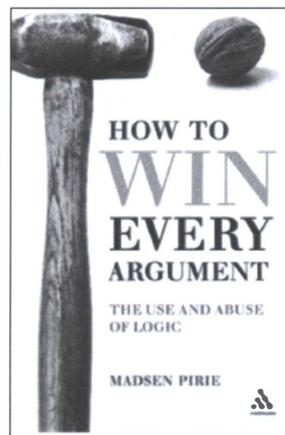
by Madsen Pirie

Continuum, £8.99 (pb), ISBN 878-0-8264-9894-6

A catalogue of those hardy perennials of human reasoning, fallacies, might seem like something for the specialist only, but this lively, even breezy, guide is a highly readable handbook, running alphabetically from abusive analogy to wishful thinking. Along the way we find, of course, the classic fallacies of affirming the consequent, the undistributed middle and argumentum ad hominem. Alongside them are perhaps less well-known types such as poisoning the well, the runaway train and Thatcher's blame, the latter two, at least, not so often mentioned by Aristotle and his colleagues.

Each of the 80-odd entries is a clear and careful explanation of a fallacy, but what distinguishes this book from other books on logic and argumentation is a Machiavellian coda in each case, suggesting how an unscrupulous reader might make skillful use of the fallacy in order to beat an opponent. Naturally, the fair-minded, noble, truth-seeking readers of this journal would never dream of deliberately using invalid arguments to help demolish the cherished, time-honoured and universally popular theories and stories of life-threatening charlatans and psychic crooks. Would they?

Paul Taylor



FROM THE SUBLIME TO THE GOTHIC

Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphor and Media into the Twenty-first Century

by Marina Warner

Oxford University Press, £18.99, ISBN 978-0-19-929994-2

Marina Warner has produced an extremely corporeal book, nearly 500 pages long, exploring the intangible: our relationship to concepts of the soul and the ethereal, and the way that relationship has been expressed in metaphor ('the symbolic imagination'), in the context of science, religion and art, from the Enlightenment to the present.

She does so in an erudite and scholarly cultural history (perhaps too much so for the general but interested reader)

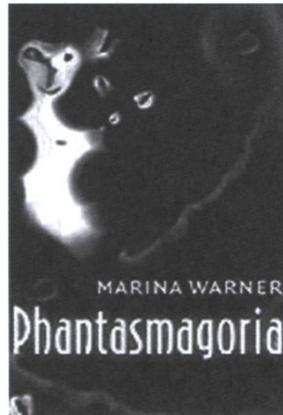
that rummages through obscure byways to find associations between seemingly disparate manifestations of a vitalistic conception of human existence.

By its nature, such a wide-ranging study has to rely heavily on other sources and some have been digested better than others. Warner is clearly on familiar territory for example when discussing Renaissance science, Roman Catholic arcana or photography, less so when tackling the complexities of cinema history or nineteenth-century psychical research (and this partial list itself gives an idea of her eclecticism). Whatever she turns her hand to always elicits interesting insights. Inevitably, however, where there is an emphasis on breadth, depth tends to suffer.

The language is at times elliptical and the prose dense and allusive. Links can be difficult to follow as she lays out topics in a bricolage, often leaving the reader desperate for connective tissue and more sense of an overarching thesis, rather than a juxtaposition of fascinating snippets with too little to synthesize them. The result is a sense of breathlessness giving rise to a frequent feeling of puzzlement over what seems a collection of arbitrary – if fascinating – ingredients stirred into the mix.

Where the book really comes alive is when Warner foregrounds her own experiences, such as an uncanny moment in the shrine of Santa Caterina de' Vigri in Bologna, or weighing a sample of 'ectoplasm' at Cambridge. In the end perhaps she is a poet rather than a historian, yet her effort to clothe the immaterial has given us a rich pudding to pull apart and examine in further detail.

Tom Ruffles



Lister's introduction of antiseptics from 1865.

Before this, medicine derived largely from the Hippocratic tradition that diseases were not entities in themselves, but mainly or wholly due to imbalances in the individual (originally, in the 'humours'). The main methods were bleeding, purges and emetics, especially the first, which was also particularly harmful. One might note, however, that current thinking is reinstating the individual, for example in variations in genetic susceptibility to illnesses, and the effects of life-style, e.g. obesity. To explain the lack of progress, Wootton offers a combination of factors, including vested interests, difficulties of communication, mere accident, etc. He mentions, but could have developed further, the whole question of professionalism, which can raise standards but can also produce stagnation and self-interest. Another large question is the relationship of medicine, magic and religion, but one book cannot deal with everything.

Wootton also criticizes other historians of medicine, though, oddly, usually not naming them. He objects both to a Whig view of natural, if not steady, progress and a relativist view that the past must be judged by its own criteria. He rightly warns against assuming that the 'medicine' of past times was essentially the same thing as we mean by the word, or at least an early attempt at it. He seems to be aiming at both a general and a specialist readership, and the writing is certainly clear and always interesting. Curiously, there is no bibliography, only "further reading". There is also a website, www.badmedicine.co.uk.

John Radford

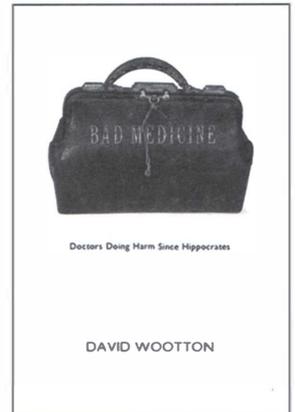
KILL OR CURE

Bad Medicine: Doctors Doing Harm Since Hippocrates

by David Wootton

Oxford University Press, £9.99 (pb), ISBN 978-0-19-921279-8

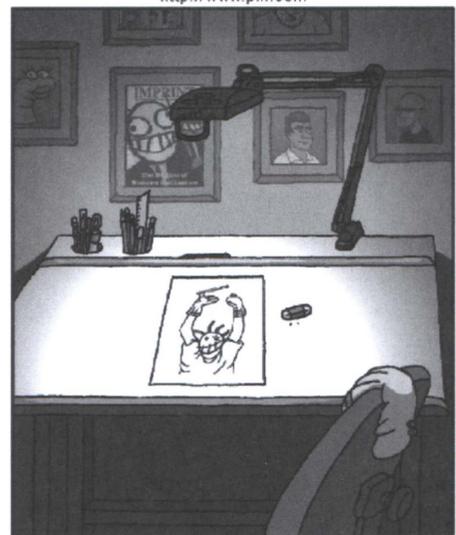
The main theme of this book is that, until the modern period, beginning in the middle of the 19th century, professional medicine did, on balance, more harm than good. A subsidiary theme is that very often, even when the knowledge which might improve things was available, it was neglected for long periods. Real change was dependent in particular on, first, the use of controlled experiments and statistical comparison, and second, the germ theory of disease. Two especially significant points were, respectively, John Snow's systematic analysis of the incidence of cholera in the 1850s, narrowing the causes down to the water supply, and Joseph



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There has never been a comic called "The Parking Lot is Full".



LETTERS

A Proposal for Televised Debates

“If you are only a minority of one, the truth is the truth.”

M.K. Gandhi

I was wondering what you and your co-sceptics might think about establishing some sort of public or media-based debating chamber to argue some of the claims and counter-claims you discuss. Surely if neither side (conspirators vs sceptics) has anything to hide, or gain, but the truth, such a mixed televised forum should be an absolute priority. It would no doubt attract a great deal of public interest and be very informative. Perhaps it could involve an audience and an unbiased jury of some kind to reach some sort of verdict regarding proof beyond reasonable doubt. After all, if such a balanced process is good enough for our justice system, it should be more than adequate for establishing proofs of other matters of real importance. What do you think?

Mark J. Glover
Warrington

Editors' reply: We are well aware of the problems of deciding important issues on the basis of jury systems and certainly do not think that issues of scientific truth can ever be decided that way. After all, if we take Gandhi's quotation at face value, a jury system certainly would not have been appropriate to decide the truth, would it? A minority of one on a jury would be out-voted. Having said that, we think a series of televised debates on controversial issues is a great idea and we certainly have nothing to hide! Any broadcasters out there interested?

Jesus in Japan

Re. *Hits and Misses* (*Skeptic*, 19.4, p. 5), I have this to say on the

matter (the following extract is from Newbrook, 2007):

A different revisionist approach to the Old and/or the New Testament involves the relocation of the events described away from Palestine to some other quite distant area, or the suggestion that biblical figures lived at times in remote places. For example, Jesus is said to have survived his crucifixion and to have relocated to Kashmir or Japan, eventually dying there. There is a linguistic aspect to the version involving Japan, centering on a temple chant at Herai in northern Honshu where the ‘Grave of Jesus’ is exhibited (see also Mazza & Kardy, 1998, Desmarquet, 1993, etc.). Bergman (on the web) claims that this chant is in fact in Hebrew, modified to fit Japanese phonology. It is also claimed that a document dating from around 100 CE and written in the kana syllabary (several hundred years before kana are known to have existed) exists in the area; this text allegedly shows that Jesus is indeed buried in Herai, and contains his will. But Bergman's reading of the chant can be made to seem plausible only by very special pleading. In 20 minutes I devised a Latin reading which is closer to the Japanese phonetics than Bergman's Hebrew is and also fits the situation better (‘Dark Age’ missionaries in Japan). The most plausible analysis is still that this is a normal Japanese folk-chant with some sequences that display accidental rather approximate similari-

ties to Hebrew words. And the key document is probably a C19-20 forgery.

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Mark Newbrook
Wirral, Merseyside

Doubting Dawkins

I hope that the rather eulogistic review of a book on Richard Dawkins (*Skeptic*, 20.3) does not mean that to be a sceptic you have to agree with everything he says. Dawkins has declared himself to be a sociobiologist, a controversial doctrine about which many are very sceptical. Further, Dawkins was a zoologist and so, when writing about human behaviour as he did in *The Selfish Gene*, he was writing only as an informed layman with his own opinion rather than as a scientist in this field of research. Most cultural anthropologists – those who do study human social behaviour – disagree with the claim of the sociobiologists that there are fixed human behaviour patterns.

Adam Buick
Ham, Surrey

Sceptical of *Skeptical Stats*

I've always found *Skeptical Stats* entertaining and I generally emit a couple of “Ugh!?” per issue, but the first item on that page of *Skeptic* 20.3 quite took my breath away. £15 million per minute ... million?

...per minute?

There are half a million minutes in a year so the quote is telling us that the personal debt increases by £8 trillion a year: that's £130,000 for each man, woman and child! As an increase? Who is lending this lot? What are they all buying? That's an additional small house every year for each and everyone!

It's a pleasure to read the magazine so I assume you just put this in to see if I was paying attention.

**Peter Lancaster
Maldon, Essex**

Editors' reply: Er... yes, that will be it. We just put that in to see if you were paying attention. We re-checked the Credit Action web page where it says "Britain's personal debt is increasing by £1 million every 4 minutes – so it looks like we gave a figure that was 60 times too large. Sorry!

The Meaning of 'Agnosticism'

Sally Marlow is correct to claim that, in the UK, the use of the word 'agnostic' implies "wishy-washiness and a lack of willingness to engage with the bigger questions" ("Believe it or Not", *The Skeptic*, 20(4), Winter 2007). However, it is surprising that, in an article on agnosticism, she never once explained the word's true and original meaning.

While most people apparently believe that an agnostic is someone who sits on the fence or revels in not having an opinion, Huxley coined the word to counter gnosticism (the belief in esoteric mystical knowledge, especially about God). Agnosticism is therefore a positive belief: a belief that nothing is known or can be known of the existence or nature of God.

In a general sense, all scientists are agnostics. That is, they are not believers in 'truth'. They believe that all knowledge is provisional

and that nothing can be known for certain. Everything we claim about nature is on the basis of varying probability. Some things we claim are very probable (almost certain), much else is less probable. More importantly, what we claim to believe may change (it frequently does).

Consequently, there can be no "dynamic agnosticism" and it cannot "give life a meaning" (life has no meaning). In its religious sense, agnostics are people who believe in the existence of God (so "Christian agnostic" is tautology); it's just that they believe that nothing can be known about this God. Jesus would not agree; he was certain that he knew all about his God.

I have no idea what Mark Vernon believes; he seems very confused and I am not inclined to read his book. Unfortunately his confusion has infected Sally Marlow.

**Stewart Campbell
Edinburgh**

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. Email communication is preferred. We reserve the right to edit letters for publication.

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We are also considering adopting a new title. We are well aware of the negative connotations that the word "sceptic". Although we feel that such attitudes are based upon misunderstanding a new, more universally acceptable title could only be a good thing. Let us have your suggestions for a new title. If we adopt your suggested title, we will let you have a year's free subscription to the re-launched magazine!

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