

Bay Area Skeptics Information Sheet
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Editor: Kent Harker

ASTROLOGER TRIPS ON BAS

[BAS has a remarkably efficient network of ears that keeps in touch with up-coming radio and TV shows promoting the paranormal. The word goes out to skeptics in the area who then call in to or attend the programs. The result is that from 25% to 90% of the callers are skeptics, barraging the guests with questions they are unaccustomed to finding in their travels.

Recently on KGO radio, a S. F. "talk" format, astrologer Jean Avery appeared as a guest on the Michael Krasny show and asserted that Michel Gauquelin supported astrology.

BAS founder and advisor ROBERT STEINER wrote to KGO and has given" BASIS "permission to publish his letter to Krasny and to Avery before receiving a response from Avery, anticipating that hell will be gelid long before that happens.

For those not familiar with the work of Gauquelin, (which must include Ms. Avery) he conducted extensive statistical analyses of the birth signs of various groups (politicians, etc.) to see if there were any correlation with their professional proclivities. He found a significant correlation with athletes and the aspect of the planet Mars, which he dubbed "The Mars Effect." That study has been roundly criticized by skeptics for years on very solid grounds.

In any event, Gauquelin is an outspoken critic of astrology, but the faithful are only familiar with the results of this one study and are only too happy to lift the whole thing out of context, totally unaware of the Gauquelin's overall position on the question. Ms. Avery may have to undergo psychic surgery to have her foot removed from her mouth. -- Ed]

Dear Michael:

As usual, I enjoyed your show tonight. Your guest, Jean Avery, was simultaneously both quite sure and quite wrong in her assertion that Michel Gauquelin strongly supports astrology.

When Don Henvick, of Bay Area Skeptics, called her on this, she reiterated her position. She boldly challenged Don to find anything showing that Gauquelin doubted astrology at all. She virtually dared Don to send in data supporting his position. You assured her

that you would forward to her any such forthcoming data.

Shortly after that segment of the show, Don called me and requested that I send the data on to you.

Enclosed are two copies of the final two pages of Dr. Gauquelin's book entitled "Dreams and Illusions of Astrology".

Please forward one copy to Ms. Avery, along with a copy of this letter.

Sincerely,
(signed) Robert Steiner

NOTE TO JEAN AVERY

Dear Ms. Avery:

You are obviously sincere in your beliefs. You are just as obviously wrong on this one. Since you made your erroneous assertion over the radio to millions of people, in all fairness to your listening public, I respectfully suggest that you send a letter of retraction and correction to Michael Krasny. In continued fairness, I would further suggest that you request that he inform his listeners of your acknowledgment of your erroneous assertion.

I am sure that you would not wish to mislead the listeners into believing false information. Setting the record straight would be a proper gesture for all concerned.

I look forward to receiving a copy of that letter. When received, this letter and your reply will be published in "BASIS", Bay Area Skeptics Information Sheet.

Thank you for your anticipated demonstration of your integrity and dedication to truth.

Sincerely,
(signed) Robert Steiner

[The following is excerpted from the conclusion of Michel Gauquelin's "Dreams and Illusions of Astrology", pages 157 and 158:

"Is astrology illusion or reality? There are several possible answers. There is no doubt that in our world astrology is socially and psychologically much alive. The horoscope is a product that is bought and sold, and that leads people to dreams. But the dreams of the clientele are answered by the deceptions of the charlatan, as well as by the illusions of the researcher who is sincere but not very lucid.

"This psychological reality is based on a firmly rooted scientific error. As interesting as it may be, the origin of astrology was developed on mythological bases that are not at all compatible with modern scientific objectivity, and especially, serious scientific examination is never favorable to this ancient doctrine. Electronic astrology is no more than a gadget that has no solid basis at all; predictions about the future of the world are examples of rather pitiful Nostradamian sleight of hand. The horoscope is certainly a commercial reality, but it is a scientific illusion, or rather just an illusion.

"The fortune teller and the explainer of dreams of days gone by have nothing in common with Freud's or Jung's interpretation of dreams.

"There is no doubt that in a few cases some of the oneiric symbols of the old "dream books" cannot be completely stripped of every clinical truth. In the same way, it seems clear that the hour of birth seems a privileged moment in human life when certain still-mysterious cosmic influences can be manifested. That there might be a little more than simple chance in this is really impossible - and we have said so.

"But this is an academic problem that only the historian of science will be able to answer later perhaps, if he possesses sufficient documentation. Today, the roller of charlatanism, disguised in the tinsel finery of modern technology, represents a psychological and social danger. And since the most painstaking studies have shown the inanity of horoscopes, there should be a strong rising up against this exploitation of public credulity. Unfaithful even to the cosmic dreams of antiquity and dangerous to the honest researcher, this exploitation dishonors those who practice it.

This is why commercial astrology and its charlatans must be struggled against. But they need not be made into martyrs. The struggle must be carried on by revealing to the public the psychological traps of the horoscopes they buy, and by interesting them in the scientific work dedicated to cosmic influences. The sorcerer gave way to the doctor, even in the mind of the general public; at the dawn of the age of interplanetary travel, it is time that the fortune teller leave the stage in his turn, and be replaced by a new man of science."

[Some Bay Area Skeptics will remember Bill Moore who attended our May 1985 monthly meeting featuring speakers James Moseley and Kal Korff; from the audience he told us a great deal about his findings on the alleged "saucer crash" near Roswell, New Mexico. Moore claims to have found documents in the National Archives; his subsequent investigations turned up much allegedly confirming evidence of this claim -- indeed, so much that it looked positively compelling -- until it began to crumble. -- Robert Sheaffer]

CSICOP PRESS RELEASE

Recent widely publicized "Top secret" documents which claimed to reveal that the U.S. Government secretly recovered a crashed flying saucer and four alien bodies near Roswell, N.M., 40 years ago, are "clumsy counterfeits" according to spokesmen for CSICOP. "The evidence clearly shows that these are hoax documents."

Designated CSICOP UFO investigator Phil Klass conducted the research and included in his report the finding of Jo Ann Williamson, an official at the Military Archives in Washington. The hoax documents claim that shortly after a crashed saucer and four alien bodies were recovered in July, 1947, President Truman created a top secret group called "Majestic-12" (MJ-12), consisting of a dozen of the nation's top scientists, to study the craft and the aliens.

The MJ-12 documents were released to the news media in late May by William Moore and two associate UFO researchers: Stanton Friedman and Jamie Shandera. They seemed to confirm earlier claims by Moore of a secret government recovery of a crashed saucer.

According to Moore, photos of the MJ-12 documents were found on an undeveloped roll of 35 mm film received by Shandera in 1984 from an unknown source. Moore claims that he, Shandera and Friedman spent more than two years in trying to authenticate the MJ-12 documents before recently deciding to make them public.

Moore recently publicly stated that "it is our considered opinion, based upon research and interviews conducted thus far, that the document and its contents APPEAR to be genuine. At the very least, it is possible to state with certainty that absolutely nothing has surfaced during the course of our research which would seem to suggest otherwise."

According to Moore, this research included "many days...spent combing through the records at the National Archives as well as both the Truman and Eisenhower Presidential Libraries...."

Moore's claim is challenged by Klass who turned up hard evidence in a matter of several weeks to show that key documents are counterfeits. Klass wrote to the directors of the Presidential Libraries to obtain documents of the same vintage and checked with officials at the National Archives who themselves already had become skeptical of one key memorandum.

Moore and Shandera acknowledge that this memorandum is a cornerstone of their claims for the authenticity of the MJ-12 document: "For the first time," according to Moore, "we had an official document available through a public source that talked about MJ-12." According to Shandera, the memo "gave us an auditable trail to a (government) document that referenced MJ-12."

This document appeared to be an unsigned CARBON COPY of a

memorandum dated July 14, 1954, written by Robert Cutler, assistant to General N. Twining. The memo informed Twining of a last-minute change in the plans for an MJ-12 special studies project briefing of President Eisenhower and the National Security Council to be held on July 16.

But Cutler could not possibly have written this July 14 memo, telling of very recent changes in Eisenhower's schedule, because Cutler had departed Washington 11 DAYS EARLIER ON AN EXTENDED TRIP TO VISIT MILITARY FACILITIES IN EUROPE AND NORTH AFRICA AND DID NOT RETURN TO WASHINGTON UNTIL JULY 15.

Suspicious about the authenticity of the Cutler/Twining memo arose at the National Archives in the wake of inquiries generated by release of the MJ-12 documents. The memo was found by Moore and Shandera in July, 1985, in one of 126 boxes of once Top Secret USAF intelligence documents, each of which is given a register number by USAF before being turned over to the National Archives. The Cutler/Twining memo "does not bear such a number," according to library officials.

This prompted the National Archives to dig deeper. On the surface, the memo, on onion-skin paper, appeared to be an unsigned carbon-copy. But analysis showed that it did not have the characteristic "Eagle watermark" of all government onion-skin paper like that found on other Cutler memoranda in the library. Furthermore, indentations from the impact of typewriter keys were visible on the back side, showing that it was typed original. The memo bore a security classification which did not come into use for a decade.

Shandera told Klass on June 27 that a very extensive check had been run on the authenticity of the Cutler memo. He claimed "we found numerous other documents with the same letterhead, same typewriter, same type style." But Klass obtained photocopies of authentic Cutler memoranda and letters written during July 1954 from the Eisenhower Library and they did not bear out Shandera's claim. "Even casual comparison of the clean, high-quality typeface on these documents with the typeface of the Cutler/Twining memo provides further evidence of a counterfeit," Klass said.

Another key document, found on the 35 mm film roll and released by Moore, which appears to be a President Truman letter creating the MJ-12 group, also is a counterfeit, according to Klass. It authorized Forrestal "to proceed with all due speed and caution.... Hereafter this matter shall be referred to only as Operation Majestic Twelve" i.e., MJ-12. Shandera told Klass that he and Moore had carefully checked the Truman letter's authenticity. "We had the typing checked, to determine the kind of typewriter [used]."

Klass challenges Shandera's claim on the basis of other Truman letters written in the same 1947 period to other Cabinet members. Examination of the typeface and format of these authentic Truman letters indicates that the Sept. 24, 1947 letter to Forrestal is a counterfeit, created by superimposing a spurious message on a

photocopy of an authentic Truman letter.

For example, authentic Truman letters to Cabinet members begin: "My Dear Secretary...", and the full name and address of the intended recipient is typed in at the lower-left corner of the page. But in the letter in question, the counterfeiter forgot to type Forrestal's name, title and address in the lower left portion of the page, and used "Dear Secretary Forrestal."

Klass invited Moore and his associates to join his own efforts and expressed the hope that they will now be more responsive than in the past to his requests for information in their possession which might aid in pinpointing the person(s) responsible for fabricating the hoax.

Klass's detailed report on the counterfeit papers will appear in the Winter edition of "The Skeptical Inquirer."

"THE EMPIRICIST THINKS HE BELIEVES ONLY WHAT HE SEES -- BUT HE IS MUCH BETTER AT BELIEVING THAN AT SEEING." -- Santayana

RAMPARTS

[Ramparts is a regular feature of "BASIS", and your participation is urged. Clip, snip and tear bits of irrationality from your local scene and send them to the EDITOR. If you want to add some comment with the submission, please do so.]

From a publication aptly named "Twilight Zone" there are advertisements of New Age junkets if one is tired of the Club Med scene and the Paris routine.

If current planning is a measure of the true faith of visionary New Agers, the magazine staff puts as much stock in this stuff as we do. After announcing the impending disasters following Harmonic Convergence (August 17th) the article offers a \$1777 tour to "witness Quetzalcoatl lore and mystique" in late September. For \$2,222 you can go to Peru and make "Contact with the Star Gods of the Andes."

If you prefer making "direct contact with...the mythic realms of the gods," follow Dr. A. Villoldo, or do an Incan tour with an honest-to-goodness shaman for \$2,450.

Perhaps a not-too-modest allegation to "claim your immortality among psychic energy medicine healers" for the not-too-modest cost of \$2,850 will fill the bill if our allotted 74 years seems inadequate. Meals and airfare included.

Ever leave your heart in San Francisco? Put your hands over your

chest before you consider the Philippine junket. This one is not to see Imelda's Shoe Museum, but a "promise of ample opportunities for everyone to experience psychic healing at the hands of the better psychic surgeons." 2900 bucks a pop. If you haven't the loot to indulge yourself for the above fare, only \$575 gets you one week with Mexico's Huichol Indians. REALLY with the indians: sleep on the ground, eat food cooked over an open fire, etc. The rigors of this spartan living will be suitably rewarded because ALL of the Huichol are prophets. Take along your handy-dandy Berliz Huichol Indian phrase book, however.

JOHN TAUBE clipped some more crystal nonsense from the "Chronicle". BAS Board of Director member Lawrence Jerome's June article in "BASIS" should be kept near the phone when someone asks about crystal power. The rocks are proliferating like underground Big Macs in Moscow. These talismans of the New Age spiritual movement are alleged to do everything from resolving marital conflict to curing AIDS.

"After a stressful day at the office, I come home to my new meditation partner -- a quartz crystal," says a S.F. insurance broker.

For the more practical-minded, a young woman fan "placed a spire of clear quartz in front of the stage [during a rock concert] to 'record' the music's vibration." Others claim a crystal beside your car's carburetor improves gas mileage; a quartz in your fridge cuts the electric bills.

Shop owners are definitely tuned in to the power of crystals. The business is booming, which is proof that crystals work if you are on the right side of the counter. Forbes magazine reported that the faithful and hopeful will spend \$100 million on the rocks.

If skeptical balance means anything, the four-column space article revealing the power of crystals ended with four paragraphs from scientists (whadda THEY know). Dr. Lionel Weiss, a professor of crystallography at UCB says, "I think it's more religious than scientific; a matter of faith, like touching a piece of the cross."

Weiss, who must have spent the better part of his life around the things, ought to know the spiritual power of those little rascals.

Well, if Weiss didn't set things aright, John Taube did in a letter to the editor of the "Chron". John warned that women might soon come forward proclaiming that they got in a family way from the crystal in their boudoir. Taube told 'em to contact BAS to see if the crystals could take our \$11,000 challenge money.

EDITOR'S CORNER

What is it about the "good 'ol days" that is so appealing to

people? Is it the notion that if something is ancient and venerable it is ipso facto true? Astrology, for example, has changed so little a modern practitioner can pick up a book written by 1st century astronomer Ptolemy and feel right at home.

The so-called scientific creationists adore old knowledge and want to throw biology back at least 150 years to pre-Darwinian thinking; all the rest of the life sciences must be dragged kicking and screaming in the process. More recently the creationist faction is in the process of a FORMAL retrograde movement to Newtonian physics.

The Institute for Creation Research (ICR) (the vast majority of creationist "research" is of the armchair variety: sifting the literature for statements that may be taken -- preferably out of context -- to imply current scientific thinking is unsound or incorrect.) announced in its official publication, "Acts & Facts", vol. 16, #8, (August 1987) that the Thomas G. Barnes Institute of Physics has been established, whose goal is "...to promote research supporting a return to classical physics (as opposed to quantum physics and relativity theory) in the context developed by Dr. Barnes in his recent book, "Physics of the Future", published by the ICR."

An interesting idea, thought I, a Physics of the Future that is actually a Physics of the Past? I wondered what it was about modern physics that upset creationists so much. Physics seems so "clearly" factual -- even less dependent on historical and circumstantial evidence than evolution, for example. So I asked around a bit and got some interesting answers.

The crux of the matter turns out to be the concept of relativism. Einstein proposed that when it comes to very great speeds, vast distances and super masses, classical (Newtonian) physics just won't work. In the universe, there is no favored frame of reference, e.g., measurement of the speed of light is independent of "any" reference point. This runs counter to our common sense because we live in a dimension circumscribed by short durations of time, tiny distances, and very slow speeds.

That motion is relative comes not as a giant surprise when one thinks about it for awhile. We have all had the experience of waiting in a car at a stop light and doing a double-take when we hit the brakes, only to find that the car in the next lane was moving and we were stationary. What is "fixed" in the universe? What is moving relative to what? In short, there is no anchor; no "center" of the universe, no Valhalla, no Olympian mountain. Where in such a universe does one find the throne of God? If there is no center around which the rest of creation revolves, where does that place deity? Can God be someplace that has no unique spatial orientation or special significance?

If this seem to be a rather unimportant consideration for your basic astrophysicist or cosmologist, fundamentalist are very much

troubled with it because it looms large in their theology. In a book written by creationist Robert Gentry ("Creation's Tiny Mystery"), he throws in an astounding proposal completely out of the context of his own book. He alleges he has formulated an adequate theory (which he does not divulge) which places the center of the universe 100,000 light years from earth! Naturally, that is the dwelling place of God, according to Gentry. Our own galaxy is about 100,000 LY in diameter, and earth is roughly 2/3 of the way from the center. Hence, Gentry places the center of the universe in or very near our own galaxy.

Of course he could not have any natural theory about his preposterous conjecture -- it would have to be supernatural. (As soon as supernatural propositions are allowed to explain some phenomenon, anything goes. The imagination is the only limit. Supernaturalism is ok in theology but does violence to science.) Other reasons why creationists cannot countenance modern physics have nothing to do with physical laws or evidence: it has to do with doctrinaire, literal interpretations of the Bible -- preferably the Authorized Version (King James).

There are other implications of relativism that are equally dire: If relativism is apparent in the physical universe, what philosophic ideas might flow from it? A relativistic morality? A relativistic ethic? When fundamentalist congregations tire of the harangue on the satanic menace of communism and secular humanism the air can be freshened a bit with a tirade on the evils of Einsteinian physics. The moral decay of the world is due to satan's patron C. Darwin who taught us we "came from monkeys" and Einstein who instructed us that everything is relative. It makes life easier to have one's problems simple and well defined. But there is a third prong on the devil's pitchfork -- quantum mechanics.

Quantum physics runs afoul of the fundamentalists because it asserts that, at the sub-atomic level, certain information cannot be determined with precision. This inability is not just a technological difficulty; i.e., if we only had finer, more precise instruments with which to measure more accurately there would be no problem -- it is a theoretical barrier that says the information is unobtainable no matter what precision is available. This idea is articulated in the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle (dubbed derisively the Heisenberg Unknowable Principle by creationists).

To the creationists, this is anathema. It builds into the universe a degree of absolute "unknowableness" that leaves randomness in the purest sense at the heart of basal matter. Such a notion of randomness does not sit well in the mind of a strict constructionist determinist, and creationists are a heavy cut of determinist cloth. To a creationist, every leaf that falls, every hair of every head must be accounted for; indeed, the position and momentum of every particle in the universe, must be knowable, nothing left to chance. The entire course of the universe from alpha to omega has been predetermined by Jehovah down to the last

quark, according to the fundamentalists.

Does evidence count? Only if the evidence "proves" that the Bible is literally true. Members of the Creation Research Society must pledge an oath of biblical inerrancy in order to be admitted to the ranks. One starts out knowing what the result must be, it only remains to cut and file the facts to make them fit. The poor "normal" scientist is hamstrung with natural laws and has to work in the dim light of uncertainty with only an occasional flash of brilliance, never seeing the entire picture.

The creationists are thankfully not representative of the mainstream of Christianity, but they are militant and have an impact far beyond their numbers. The recent resounding defeat creationists suffered in the Supreme Court has not thwarted their resolve. In their determination to destroy science education, that defeat was only a minor skirmish in a Holy War. For human beings to advance, we must counter those who would use almost any means to stop the growth and expansion of knowledge. Awareness is the beginning.

"There is no error to be named that has not its professors. " --
Kipling

MEMES: MENTAL PARASITES
by H. Keith Henson

The first half of this article discussed the concept of memes; that is, replicating information patterns. They, along with the humans they infest, and our communication channels, make up a memetic ecosystem (roughly equivalent to "culture"). Memes within this ecosystem can grow in influence or die out. Memes have a relation to people similar to the relation viruses have to cells.

Most memes are either symbionts or at least harmless, but some are deadly to those they infect. It was proposed that our susceptibility to religious and parapsychological nonsense (often quite dangerous nonsense) is a side effect of evolved mental structures that have been so important in the success of humans that we cannot get by without them.

Is there evidence for these mental structures? If so, why do they provide a supportive environment for memes that are potentially harmful? One such module was described by Michael Gazzaniga in "The Social Brain". He called this module "the interpreter." I think of it as an "inference engine." It is closely connected to our verbal abilities, but we are not normally aware of its activities, even in other people. Gazzaniga demonstrated the activity of this module with some very clever experiments on split-brain patients. By observing the module failing, we can clearly see how it is doing

the best it can with insufficient data.

What Gazzaniga did is to present each side of the brain with a simple conceptual problem. The left side saw a picture of a claw, and the right side saw a picture of a snow scene. A variety of cards was placed in front of the patient, who was asked to pick the card which went with what he saw. The correct answer for the left hemisphere was a picture of a chicken. For the right half-brain it was a snow shovel.

"After the two pictures are flashed to each half-brain, the subjects are required to point to the answers. A typical response is that of P.S., who pointed to the chicken with his right hand and the shovel with the left. After his response I asked him "Paul, why did you do that?" Paul looked up and without a moment's hesitation said from his left hemisphere, "Oh, that's easy. The chicken claw goes with the chicken and you need a shovel to clean out the chicken shed."

"Here was the left-half brain having to explain why the left hand was pointing to a shovel when the only picture it saw was a claw. The left brain is not privy to what the right brain saw because of the brain's disconnection. Yet the patient's own body was doing something. Why was it doing that? Why was the left hand pointing to the shovel? The left-brain's cognitive system needed a theory and instantly supplied one that made sense given the information it had on this particular task"

The inference engine was a milestone in our evolution. It works far more often than it fails. But, as you can see from the example, our inference engines will wring blood from a stone; you can count on them finding causal relations whether they exist or not. Worse yet, the inference engine is too simple to know when it lacks relevant data. Even if it did, it has no way to tell to the verbal (conscious) modules of our minds that it has constructed a shaky theory.

Even more prone to errors, and harder to imagine how we could get along without it, is our ability to learn from others. This is THE critical factor that has allowed humans to occupy the widest ecological range of any animal. But as a side effect it makes us susceptible to all kinds of infectious nonsense, from astrology to Marxist economics to faith healers. Our censors of incoming information (which may lie in the same part of the brain as the inference engine) seem to use instant "plausibility" standards no better than the example given above.

I suspect that the small fraction of us who consider ourselves skeptics are not much better off in this respect. I have noticed that Bob Steiner finds it no great effort to fool an audience of skeptics into making wildly incorrect assumptions with stage magic. It is our use of other memes (or meta-memes) such as the scientific method as tools to weed out non-reality beliefs that makes us successful skeptics.

"Successful" memes (independent of utility OR of being rooted in reality) by definition infect a large number of people. Some induce the people they have infected to concerted action. A few of this class can be incredibly dangerous. What we call social or political movements and cults can be viewed as side effects of memetic epidemics, much as a fever is a side effect of an infection by a germ.

Memes-as-infecting-agents provides an interesting way to view both current and historical events. The current clash between the Soviet empire and the western culture group can be viewed as a conflict for minds (meme turf) between the competition-intolerant mono-meme of communism and the western meta-meme of tolerance which emerged from the Renaissance.

In this view, the ultimate (though unaware) protagonists of World War II were memes such as the Nazi "master race," and the Marxist-Leninist meme. And the gruesome self-inflicted genocide that swept Kampuchea in recent years can be considered a side effect of the spread of a particularly wild variant of the communist meme in an unusually receptive society.

In spite of catastrophic effects on their host, selection against these memes can be a slow process. The Shakers persisted for close to a century in spite of their ban on having children. Really harmful memes of this class either die out or tend to evolve the same way parasites do; that is, they become helpful symbionts. This is clearly seen in the normal progression of cults to mainstream religions. Calvin (who had dozens of people executed over theological disputes) would hardly recognize Presbyterian memes three hundred years later.

The development of cultural immune systems can progress much faster. Witness the backlash against the cultural revolution in China. CSICOP itself could certainly be considered as an element of a cultural immune system.

One of the most difficult things about being a skeptic is continually being confronted in our literature, our meetings, and in life with "stupid" behavior in people who "should" know better. Memetics as a study may allow us to mentally think of susceptibility to memes (even those which threaten survival) as a quite different parameter from what we call intelligence. We may come to see having a belief in UFOs or ESP as bad luck, much like the bad luck of catching a cold. We do, after all, need some way to explain the wide variety of strange beliefs that infest many Mensa members.

As a field, memetics is just getting started, so the speculations and conclusions in this article should be taken with a grain of salt. But an understanding of hard-to-avoid human susceptibilities and an ecosystem-like model of replicating information patterns that have no short-term interest in their host (and indeed no

consciousness at all) seems to go a long way in making irrational behavior understandable.

One other thing to consider. Would a rational understanding of why and how people are parasitized by magical beliefs decrease the number who are infected with such memes? It is possible that memetics as a school topic could develop immunity to (or prompt avoidance of) whole classes of damaging memes in a way analogous to the way the germ theory of disease induces practices (don't drink ditchwater!) that contribute to good health. Does anyone want to run a large, long-term study and find out?

WOOOOPS!

Editor's retraction and apology! I suggested, in my September article on logic, that readers "send in their papers for grading" on the statement about statistical anomalies and psi. Well, good students that "BASIS" readers are, you did much better than that. BAS advisor ROBERT STEINER phoned me to point out an error not in the statement about psi, but about an assertion that I made that he just couldn't swallow.

If the problems of parapsychology are intractable, the principles of logic are not: it is possible to resolve a matter and resolve it with a pleasing finality. My erroneous statement was, "If the premise is false and the argument ironclad, the falsity of the conclusion is guaranteed." In fact, if one begins with a false premise anything is possible. My error is a bad one because it involves a very elementary principle. My apologies to "BASIS" readers and my thanks to Bob for his astuteness; Steiner gets an A in Logic 101, and the teacher must repeat the course!

SKEPTICS IN THE NEWS

BAS board member SHAWN CARLSON has been making some headlines for skeptics in general and BAS in particular. Shawn has been interested for some time in the weeping icon phenomenon in which statues or paintings, typically of the Virgin, are thought to shed human tears. Iconoclast Carlson has used his background of physics and his personal ingenuity to make his own weeping pictures.

A feature story in the "San Jose Mercury" begins with, "A Berkeley scientist has done for the Mona Lisa what some believers say God as done for certain religious icons: given a lifeless image the ability to cry." Although Shawn won't reveal (not even to skeptics) the method he uses to make his copy of Mona teary, he says it does not take a genius. And his Ms. Lisa can sob away for months.

Of course Shawn does not suggest that the weeping picture of the Virgin in the Greek Orthodox church in Chicago to which throngs

are making a pilgrimage is a fake, but until skeptics are allowed to make a thorough investigation to rule out a material origin, common sense says that a supernatural explanation need not be entertained. To date, Archdiocese Bishop Isaiah and other officials think it would be "sacrilege" to turn over a religious object for testing. "How can the earthly examine the divine?" he said.

Easy, Your Excellency. Just don't ASSUME it's divine before testing.

ROBERT SHEAFFER, past Chair of BAS and UFO expert, appeared on Channel Two's "2 At Noon," a Bay Area news report. The segment lasted for about 20 minutes of the one hour live broadcast. The topic was, of course, UFOs, and Dr. James Harder, a U.C. Berkeley physicist was invited to present the pro side to the viewing public.

Harder began his pitch by asserting that the evidence of an alien presence is overwhelming. Robert countered that if it is so overwhelming, why is Harder in such sharp disagreement with his professional colleagues? (Far less than 1% of the scientific community accepts Harder's "extraterrestrial hypothesis" for UFOs). Then Harder stated that sightings by those whose position require reporting (police, etc.) are above ridicule and they cannot be looking for publicity or money.

Sheaffer reminded us that the average person reporting a UFO is not ipso facto a fraud or a liar. The fact that perception and recall of anomalous occurrences is complex and subjective is reason enough to be cautious about assigning a particular interpretation to the events.

The show hosts had asked for letters from viewers who had UFO sightings. The letters with the best experience were selected and the writers contacted to have their stories re-enacted on video tape for airing and analysis on the show with the two guests. The first one shown was the most interesting. One Wayne Totter and some friends were on Mt. Tamalpais (one of the highest mountains in the Bay Area) near the top at noon on a clear day when they saw, approaching land from over the Pacific, a spherical UFO "with rings like Saturn."

At one point, Totter said that numerous smaller craft seemed to exit the main vessel and hover in its vicinity. Then all of them began to descend, and just at the surface of the water, the smaller orbs re-entered the mother ship and all disappeared into the water. Harder responded that this was a typical report from what appeared to be lucid, normal, honest people; i.e., something that must be seriously considered.

Sheaffer countered that here we have a momentous event of an alleged spacecraft entering a major population center at noon on a clear day and only one group of people claims to have seen it.

What about all the people on the beach? The people at sea in the area where the craft entered the water? What about all the civilian and military controlled airspace that extends for miles out to sea? What about all the military surveillance equipment that dots the coast? "If a meteor were to pass over, it is observed and reported by thousands over a very large area," Sheaffer said.

In what seemed almost a desperation attempt, Harder flatly asserted that the government is involved in a cover-up "to protect society from the fear of an alien invasion" and suggested that military intelligence has a payroll to fund UFO debunking, "to which Mr. Sheaffer would certainly deny any connection!" he taunted. With what we have come to know as Robert's characteristic aplomb, he countered, "Jim, if you find out about this bankroll, please let me know how to sign up, because I'm working on a shoestring!"

It was not too long ago that there was not even any interest in balancing paranormal claims. In the Bay Area we are particularly fortunate to have skeptics who are expert and articulate. Thanks and congratulations to Robert and Shawn.

While "BASIS" does not advertise, we like to pass along information that you might find valuable or interesting. For those interested in the creation/evolution debate, a new booklet is out, titled "The Other Quote Book" in answer to a recent creationist publication called "The Quote Book".

Very often, evolutionary writing is the subject of creationist sifting for statement that can be made to say, out of context, that evolution is in disarray and falling.

The book can be obtained by writing to: Dr. A. G. Wheeler, Dept. of Physiology, University of Queensland, St. Lucia, Queensland 4067, Australia; cost is \$9.00, which includes shipping and handling for air mail. U.S. checks are ok.

HOW SCIENCE REJECTS A THEORY

Astronomer Norm Sperling of the Chabot Observatory, Oakland, will address the October meeting of BAS.

As science attempts to figure out how nature works, it proposes candidate paradigms to fit current data. An elegant and clever candidate paradigm that joins fragmentary data may turn out to include other surprising aspects. Often the proposer of such a candidate paradigm (if an individual) gains great prestige. This is the case with Darwinian evolution, Newtonian mechanics, and Einsteinian relativity. More often, an equally elegant and clever candidate paradigm fails -- that is, new data falsify it. Thus went Lockyer's meteoric hypothesis, for example.

The discussion will delve into the history and philosophy of science, the meaning of "belief", pseudoscience, and human attitudes.

Join BAS on Oct. 27 for this interesting topic from an interesting speaker.

Opinions expressed in "BASIS" are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of BAS, its board or its advisors.

The above are selected articles from the October, 1987 issue of "BASIS", the monthly publication of Bay Area Skeptics. You can obtain a free sample copy by sending your name and address to BAY AREA SKEPTICS, 4030 Moraga, San Francisco, CA 94122-3928 or by leaving a message on "The Skeptic's Board" BBS (415-648-8944) or on the 415-LA-TRUTH (voice) hotline.

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