Cincinnati Skeptic

Newsletter of The Association for Rational Thought

Vol. 8 No. 7 **June/July 1999**

What every skeptic could inquire for, For every why he had a wherefore?
-- Samuel Butler, Hudibras, 1663

In this Issue:

April Meeting

The Magic of Mpingo, Time Travel and Spontaneous Human Combustion

The April membership meeting was a round table dedicated to serious skeptical conversation. President Roy Auerbach began with a report on pseudoscience in the high end hi-fi market. Roy developed an interest in high fidelity stereo sound in college, and has kept up with it somewhat ever since. It is a field where you might expect good science and engineering to prevail, since its goal is to produce the most realistic sound possible. But that is far from the case, according to Roy, who says that the ultra-expensive stereo equipment market is riddled with pseudoscience.

High fidelity devotees are even showing signs of fragmenting into rival factions, one made up of audio skeptics who doubt the usefulness of many hi-fi products, and the other of "audio crazies" capable of believing that marking the edges of CD's with a green (only green, no other color) marking pen improves the sound. As you can see from Roy's use of "audio

(Cont. Pg 6)

May Meeting

Bigfoot Makes Lasting Impression on Ron Schaffner

Ron Schaffner is so impressed with Bigfoot and his strange kin that he has been investigating reports of sightings of unusual animals for something like twenty years. What impresses him most is people's willingness to believe in such creatures in the absence of any good evidence.

He even carries an impression around with him: one of the more notorious pieces of Bigfoot "evidence": a plaster cast of a large (perhaps 16" long), bare, human-like footprint alleged to be a Bigfoot print. The one thing this reporter could conclude from the cast is that whoever made it thinks Bigfoot has a hundred percent flat feet. Not even any heel.

The study of creatures like Bigfoot, animals that may not be anything more than figments of someone's imagination, is included in cryptozoology. Cryptozoology like many sciences includes both mainstream and fringe elements. There are mainstream zoologists whose field of interest is the study of animals whose existence is in scientific dispute. And there are fringe cryptozoologists whose studies are limited to animals whose existence is not in scientific dispute, including for example the Loch Ness Monster and Bigfoot. Scientists have little time for investigating the non-scientists or their imaginary animals. This is where investigators like Ron make

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The By-Laws require that officers for the following year be elected annually at the May meeting. They begin their duties on following July 1.

"What do you think, skeptic?"

Talking of a breast cancer patient who refused to see a medical doctor in favor of consulting a psychic healer. The patients life was considerably shortened but, said a defender of quack medicine: "...her final years were still a miracle." And she, "continued to stress over and over that this outcome should not be considered a tragedy, because the patient was so happy..." A medical doctor responds:

Well, there, perhaps, she's got you. Breast cancer is a long, drawn-out thing. You can spend 5 or 10 or 15 years in a constant agony of anxiety about having a fatal disease, or you can find a lie and be happy for the same time. Which is better? That's the conundrum facing all skeptics. Lies allay anxiety—and too much anxiety, particularly about the future and death and pain, which are inevitable, is one of the things that makes life not worth living. Skepticism aims to find out the truth in all things. The lie which skeptics tell themselves is that the truth always, in the end, makes things better. Always. That lie is to relieve the anxiety *they* have that sometimes, occasionally, what they're doing *as* skeptics, is not the kindest thing they can be doing. It's recursive and *very* ironic.

I find that a little skepticism about skepticism is occasionally in order, especially when it comes to health, death, and thinking about the human condition. As a doctor, I find myself quite often taking a position which is just a little more optimistic than the straight facts will completely justify. I'm not Levashov (the psychic healer), but neither am I a computer. The placebo effect is real and beneficial—that's been scientifically proven, and is not a subject for skepticism. And yet it's not available to complete practicing skeptics as a therapy, either on one side of the doctor's desk or the other. Another conundrum. -- Steve Harris, MD

from *SkepticMag Hot Line*, the internet edition of *Skeptic magazine* and the cyberspace voice of the Skeptics Society.

Spreading the Good News about Greening the Earth

A full page ad in the Washington Post shows a chimpanzee covering his ears - refusing to listen to the good news: "CO_2 levels are going up!" That's pretty great, huh? Plants thrive on CO_2 the ad explains, making this a greener, more productive planet. It's one of nature's building blocks. Without CO_2 life on Earth would cease. So don't be a chimp, do your part to make this a better world: trade in your dinky little economy car and get a sports-utility gas guzzler, turn up the thermostat and burn those hydrocarbons. Support for the ad came from electric utilities and the Western Fuel Association.

-- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 23 April 1999

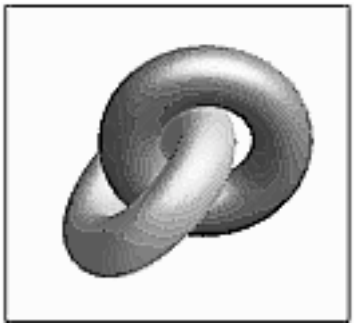
From the Un-Easy Chair...

Miracles are very personal events, they happen to individuals. Or they occurred long ago and far away. So how can you ever protest their truth: you weren't there, you didn't see it, perhaps it did happen just as it was told. Yet, we skeptics tend to doubt tales of wonder. We question their truth and accuracy in the first place, and if it is not realistic to deny, we look for rational explanations of the event. The question I have is this, what would actually constitute a real miracle? And, if one did occur, how would we know it and how would we record it for others and for posterity in such a way that there could be no doubt: *here a miracle happened*.

Skeptics reject miracles on general principles we call natural law. To argue a "true miracle" is contrary to science begs the question that we know all of natural law. Unexpected healing of a deadly illness has been acclaimed miraculous, but that assumes we know in each such case when death is inevitable. I don't think we do. If a man were to fly up into the air by his will alone, or perceive events at a place hundreds of miles distant, some might claim it a miracle. But skeptics would surely ask (1) how did he do that, and (2) amend the laws of nature to include this as "new findings." There are few things science knows to be impossible with absolute certainty—which leaves little leeway for miracles.

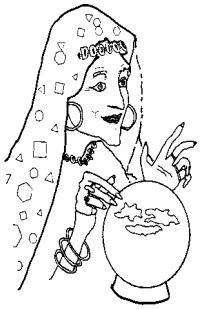
If the miracle happened elsewhere, or in the past—what evidence would suffice. Pictures, even photographs can be faked. Even if a record is left behind, such as the famous *Shroud of Turin* with its portrait of Jesus, skeptics will examine it carefully for fraud. Yet, assuming for the moment the C^{14} dating had given a first century date, and the blood tested as blood. To the skeptic all this would prove here is a portrait of a man from the beginning of the Christian era. We would want to know, how was the portrait put on the cloth? To claim it was a miracle simply begs the question, whether there was a natural process to imprint cloth with a portrait, which we no longer know. To know something was truly a miracle, we have to understand that it is absolutely impossible.

I would suggest the known impossible resides in the realm of geometry where some combinations are impossible. To find a frog in a box that has never been opened is impossible. The box that has never been opened, however, does not exist. Perhaps the famous sword of King Arthur inserted into the living stone would qualify. I don't see how a sword of soft iron can be inserted into country rock that is otherwise undisturbed, unless through a miracle. My favorite, however, is this which requires penetration of the fourth dimension. Imagine two ordinary ring donuts



cut from of two dense, contrasting, well grained species of wood, say red oak and zebra wood. Insert one ring through the other without breaking either. Only a miracle could do that, and careful microscopic cell by cell inspection could indicate whether the wood was ever broken. Such double torus would proclaim for all time: here a miracle took place.

—editor



No true skeptic would ever let the stars and spirits guide him. He can get thoroughly lost on his own.

—bio-astrologer Esmeralda von Löwenzahn-Dentdelion

Alternative Medicine: Congress Consults the Stars.

A 1988 TV commercial had an actor in a white smock with a stethoscope endorsing a health product. "I'm not a doctor," he began, "but I play one on TV." Close enough! Rep. Dan Burton (R-IN), chair of the House Government Reform Committee, has scheduled a Feb 24 hearing on "Patient Access to Alternative Medicine." The lead witness will be actress Jane Seymour, who plays the title role in "Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman." According to our sources, subsequent hearings will feature Dr. Tom Hanks and Dr. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Source: *What's New* by Robert L. Park (12 February 1999)

Too Many Books.... Too Little Time....

The Baltimore Case:
A Trial of Politics, Science, and Character
by Daniel J. Kevles
(New York: W. W. Norton & Co. 1998)

In a recent review on the internet Michael Shermer recommended that everyone read this book cover to cover. Only thus can we learn how biomedical science really works, and how a disastrous miscarriage of justice like this can develop and drag itself out over ten years to the detriment of the accused. Shermer is right, but the task he lays out for us is by no means easy. Kevles, a professional historian, has written a clear, straight forward narrative about the accusations of fraud in some research procedures and experiments leveled against Thereza Imanishi-Kari. Also accused was Nobel prize winner David Baltimore, a colleague at Harvard and a co-author of the paper in question. He was however not the lead author, yet as the most famous member of the group he came under heaviest fire. And, he stood by and backed the honesty of Imanishi-Kari throughout. The case itself was a complex of escalating accusations of misinterpretation, malfeasance, and fraud against a biomedical scientist by a post-doctoral fellow. It dragged out over ten years, involved hearings in Congress, and investigation by the NIH Office of Scientific Integrity.

The case is extremely difficult to follow for two reasons. For one, the science itself is exceedingly complex. It involves the use of trans-genic, inbred mice, a large data set taken from multiple experiments involving chemical reagents which do, or sometimes do not do, what they are expected to. Interpretation of these data requires insight, experience, and statistics. The work is part of ongoing investigations by many laboratories into the functioning of the immune system, in which the paper in question was only a small step forward. Kevles uses the first chapter to lay out the science and the experiment for us. He gives us diagrams, drawings of apparatus, xerox of the contested laboratory note book pages, all this in sufficient detail. Still the logic of the experiment is demanding and I am not sure I understood it completely.

The second issue making this narrative difficult to follow is the enormous cast of characters which became involved in the investigation. There are first the large contingent of scientists who served on the various review committees when only misinterpretation was charged. Then staff members from various offices of the NIH served as accusers and investigators. Finally a congressional committee tried to make an example of Imanishi-Kari, harassing her in the process. A wide variety of experts, consultants, and technicians from the FBI and Secret Service were drawn into the investigation.

In brief, a foreign scientist was accused by an American post-doctoral fellow, first of misinterpreting data, which she then escalated into accusations of data fraud. The news media took the whistle blower to heart, describing her as the mistreated victim of a powerful establishment. Congressman Dingell's committee went after the accused in McCarthy like fashion, trying her in the press and never allowing her to see the actual case against her. The NIH, which had jurisdiction over her as a grant recipient, cooperated with the Congressman. In this particular case the post-doctoral whistle blower was a personable young woman scientist, who was extremely articulate, cocksure of herself, her memory, and her interpretations of the data, and just plain wrong.

The result was a serious miscarriage of justice in which an innocent was hounded for nearly ten years by the combined powers of the NIH fraud squad, congress, and some of her colleagues. Thereza Imanishi-Kari did find one strong supporter in David Baltimore, who laid much of his reputation, career, and good name on the line, and suffered for it.

— Wolf Roder

There's a notable family named Stein:
There's Gertrude, there's Ep, and there's Ein.
Gert's prose is the bunk;
Ep's sculpture is junk;
And no one can understand Ein!

Fashionable Nonsense:
Postmodern Intellectuals Abuse of Science
by Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont
(New York: Picador, 1998)

What are we to make of this quotation from the French philosopher and sociologist Baudrillard about the recent Persian Gulf War? Is his invocation of scientific concepts metaphorical? Does he mean his statement about geometry literally? Does any of it make sense? (p. 147):

> What is most extraordinary is that the two hypotheses, the apocalypse of real time and pure war along with the triumph of the virtual over the real, are realized at the same time, in the same space-time, each in implacable pursuit of the other. It is a sign that the space of the event has becomes a hyperspace with multiple refractivity, and that *the space of war has become definitively non-Euclidean.* (from Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Indiana Univ. Press, 1995) p. 50, italics in the original, *La Guerre du Golfe n'a pas eu lieu.*)

In this volume, which first appeared in Paris as *Impostures Intellectuelles*, Sokal and Bricmont take apart a number of fashionable French philosophers. They show, in the words of one British journalist that "modern French philosophy is a load of old tosh." (p. 3) In the above quote they comment that "hyperspace with multiple refractivity" does not exist in any science, and ask, what would a Euclidean or non-Euclidean space of war look like.

Other writings examined are by Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Bruno Latour, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Paul Virilio. This volume tries to show that such writers abuse scientific concepts and ideas. They throw scientific terms at their non-science readers, out of context, without explanation, or without regard for their relevance, or even their meaning. Thus, it is not clear whether a concept is used as metaphor or to be taken literally. In the first instance such use does not advance understanding, in the second it is mostly plain wrong, since the writers have not understood the science. Yet, these French "savants" have become leading lights in recent American scholarship about science by academics calling themselves "postmodern."

Sokal and Bricmont score "mystification, deliberately obscure language, confusion, and the misuse of scientific concepts" (p. xi) which have made inroads into American academic circles. They are thereby commenting on the sources of "relativism" in English speaking post-modernist and cultural-studies in which science has been described as nothing more than myth, narration, or a social construction. It is all great good fun, or would be if it were not so sad.

Where I am disappointed is that the authors consider "science" only the physical, natural or hard sciences. Defending these against the nattering of the postmodern crazies is about as easy as angling fish in a barrel. This leaves the residual idea that the relativists are perhaps correct about the social sciences and history, and that these in fact are nothing but "a consensus of experts" or "the ideological agendas of powerful elites." Yet, there is a difference between facts and lies in history, which have to be sorted out before reasonable interpretations can be made. In economics price theory is fairly reliable, while "supply siderism" is quackery. Certain generalizations in the social science are widely accepted and have stood the test of experience. Examples are the interaction of supply and demand in economics, social network models in sociology, or exponential distance decay in human interactions in geography. While opinion may be more important in the social than the natural sciences, the ultimate arbiter is evidence about what is going on in the real world.

—Wolf Roder

Glass Houses are Half Full

For the past nine years, Milwaukee has been labeled the worst place in the nation for racial disparities in home loans. However, as the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* pointed out on 5 April, the area's minority loan denial rate "was 23.9 percent, which is lower than the 34 percent national average." Can these two facts be reconciled? Yes, because the driving factor in the disparity is the incredibly low denial rate in Milwaukee for whites -- only 8.3 percent. No one quite knows why the area enjoys such a good collective credit rating, although suggested reasons include good savings habits, a low bad-debt rate and a high marriage rate. Thus, despite the racial disparity, home-loan approval in Milwaukee is better than average for all races.

—*Vital Stats*, April 1999 (Statistical Assessment Service)

Magic of Mpingo (from pg 1)

crazies," this rivalry has already descended to name calling. The people Roy calls audio crazies more generously label themselves "golden ears." The golden ears return the favor, calling the audio skeptics "cyborgs."

Fine hi-fi stereo components may be had for two to three thousand dollars, but with a resilient credit card you can spend as much more than you might like. And there are plenty of people out there to help you. There are hi-fi companies who sell amplifiers wired with silver wire, claiming that silver conducts electricity faster than copper does. That's true, but it's not a change that makes a difference, except in the size of the dent in your wallet. Amplifiers wired with gold are also sold, although gold conducts electricity less well than copper. (Not that gold is completely useless in hi-fi equipment: a gold wash on a connector is useful because it prevents tarnish that could break the connection.)

Cables used to connect stereo components are another area of creative exploitation of customer ignorance. Monster brand cables have been an enduring success in this field. They are marketed with pages of very scientific and often semi-accurate chit chat about the importance of various refinements on the sound produced at one million cycles per second. Unfortunately, human ears can't hear sounds at this frequency, or any frequency anywhere near it. The bottom line: these expensive cables don't improve sound within the range of human hearing. If you are particularly anxious about the effect of cables on sound, you would do better to stop by Radio Shack and buy coaxial cable, which although expensive, is much cheaper than the hyped cables produced for the high end hi-fi market.

Audio Critic, a magazine written for audio skeptics, tested M2.2 Monster cables, which come equipped with special "network boxes" on each end. The boxes are labeled "To Amplifier" and "To Speaker." In their investigation, *Audio Critic* dismantled the network boxes, and found that they were made of two layers of metal. One box was completely empty, and the other had a 100 Ohm resistor in it, an empty gesture according to Roy. Such tests do not appeal at all to readers of *StereoFile*, a magazine for the opposite camp, who believe that blind tests of amplifiers, for example, are a desecration of the hi-fi experience.

But Monster Cables are pedestrian compared to the efforts of the Shun Mook Company. Shun Mook pushes the "magic of Mpingo" as a corrective for wayward resonance that threatens to spoil your hi-fi experience. Mpingo is an African word for ebony. Ebony, applied correctly to a hi-fi system, is alleged to absorb and regulate resonance. According to Shun Mook, the correct way to apply ebony is to buy their tiny disks of Mpingo ebony, 5/8 inch by 1/2 inch, at $50 each, and stack them on top of your amplifier and other stereo components.

If you are a vacuum tube enthusiast, Shun Mook suggests that you reduce harsh mechanical, non-musical resonances alleged to emanate from your vacuum tubes by perching specially fire-proofed Mpingo disks with tiny wire feet on top of your tubes. Or you can cut down on (imaginary) non-musical resonances caused by your record changer by using an $895 "record clamp," a stack of ebony discs that sits on top of the record as the record rotates. All of this is accompanied by reams of nonsensical pseudoscientific blather aimed at convincing you that less money in your pocket will make huge improvements in the sound you hear. Roy's advice is to put your money back in your pocket and spend it on good speakers, where money is a difference that makes a real difference in what you hear.

Roy's report was followed by a discussion of whether black metal trays make meat defrost any faster than just putting the meat on the kitchen counter. After considering the relative melting speeds of ice cubes on black aluminum trays, ordinary cookie sheets, and upside down Styrofoam cups, the group concluded that yes, if you keep pouring hot water on the black metal tray, the meat will defrost faster there than on the counter top.

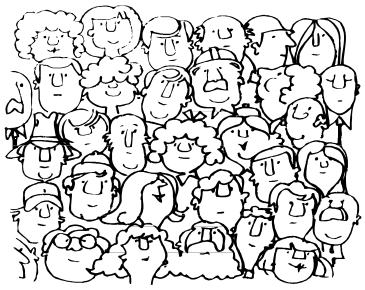
The defrosting discussion was followed by discussions of the possibility of teleportation or metatransfer (as in "Beam me up, Scotty"), hydrothermal rifts, the origin of life (here on Earth or elsewhere or both) and a report by Publicity Coordinator Gary

Himes on speculative theorizing on time travel.

There are major problems with time travel: even a very short trip would require the energy produced by an entire star. But there is nothing in the currently accepted laws of physics which rules out time travel, according to Gary. Time travel is the stuff of highly speculative science, not outright fantasy. One possibility is traveling through a "worm hole," connecting two black holes, popping on one end and out the other in another time and place. Among the problems: you couldn't choose what time or place, and if the very fragile worm hole collapsed while you were in transit, that would be the end of you as well as the time travel.

Another method might be a rotating cylinder. Imagine that you had an object ten times as large as the sun which you were somehow able to roll into an infinitely long cylinder that spun at several billion rotations per second. Now imagine that you could enter the cylinder somewhere along its length, and exit it at another point. Out you would come in another (again unspecified) time and place.

Or perhaps two cosmic strings (theoretical objects possibly left over from the Big Bang when the universe began) could be lined up together, or with a black hole, and produce a way to travel in time. If all of this seems a bit of a stretch, just think what a stretch landing a human being on the moon would have seemed to people living a mere 300 years ago.



Vigorous discussions of whether computers actually improve our quality of life, holograms (a light projection of an image that seems to have three dimensions), the possibility of halting the aging process, and whether that would be a smart thing to do, followed.

Members ended up wondering about spontaneous human combustion. Meeting Organizer Brad Bonham, reading from *Secrets of the Supernatural: Investigating the World's Occult Mysteries,* by Joe Nickel and John F. Fischer, (1996), explained that spontaneous human combustion is a poorly understood but explainable phenomenon in which a person burns with the immediate surroundings, for example, a chair, but leaving the rest of the room untouched. Usually the person is elderly, not mobile, and has used sleeping pills or alcohol and was smoking or very near an open fireplace at the time of the accident. The fire is not "spontaneous" but caused by smoking or the nearby fire. A variety of circumstances can account for the failure of the fire to spread. In one case cited by Nickel, for example, the floors and walls of the room were concrete.

-- Reported by Virginia Jergens

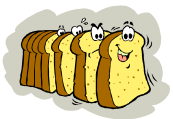
The Pigasus Award for Supporting the Most Useless Study:

The James Randi Educational Foundation has given the Pigasus award in the above category to Joe Firmage, who gave up a two billion computer business to spread "***The Truth.***" Which, according to Joe, is that humans aren't smart enough to have invented the computer chip. It was reverse engineered from stuff found in one of those crashed UFOs. The government is hiding the truth to preserve our self esteem.

Bread

A man dropped a slice of bread he had buttered for lunch on the floor. And, believe me, it fell with the buttered side up. Obviously, God was trying to tell him something. So the man went to his Rabbi, and told him what had happened. The Rabbi thought for a long time, and finally said: "Surely, God is trying to tell you something, but what it is I don't know."

So the next time the Rabbi went to the National Conference of Rabbinical Scholars, he presented the problem to the assembled wisdom of the meeting. And all the Rabbis pondered long and hard about what message God might have tried to give.



After the Rabbi returned home, the man asked him what all those learned heads had discerned. And the Rabbi gave him this answer: "Here is what God has been trying to tell you, my friend, you buttered your bread on the wrong side!"

Bigfoot (from pg 1)

their contribution, rounding up the evidence claimed by believers and interpreting it from a scientific point of view.

Ron introduced A.R.T. members and guests at the May meeting to Bigfoot using a video tape of a Leonard Nimoy Mystery television program. This program, an evenhanded mixture of sound information and sheer nonsense, includes a slow motion version of the most famous alleged "evidence" for the existence of the large, furry beastie known in the U.S. as Bigfoot, footage filmed by Roger Patterson in 1958.

The Patterson film, although hailed by enthusiasts as a priceless sighting of Bigfoot, is in Ron's opinion a hoax. This reporter must admit that that's exactly what the film looked like to her: a few frames of a guy in a gorilla suit loping aimlessly about the woods. The zipper line, for example, is apparent.

Roger Patterson died some years ago. All others associated with this film deny that it is a hoax. There is are many reasons to doubt their statements. Jerry Romney, believed to be the man wearing the ape suit in the film, has refused to admit his complicity in front of the television cameras, but is claimed to have told someone that he was the Bigfoot stand-in. Romney has both the walk and the height, nearly seven feet, of the filmed Bigfoot. It appears possible the John Chambers, who made costumes for *Planet of the Apes, 2001* and *Lost in Space*, may have made the suit used. Although two rolls of film were shot, only ten feet are still in existence, leaving about a hundred feet unaccounted for.

Roger Patterson was an amateur investigator at the time he filmed the alleged Bigfoot. He had undertaken the investigation in response to news that crews building roads in northern California were complaining about damage done by a giant, human-like creature that turned over trash cans and caused other damage. The Roger Patterson film, regardless of its authenticity or lack thereof, was the beginning of the recent spate of Bigfoot sightings and turned Bigfoot into an international phenomenon.

Many cultures have included stories of large, dangerous human-like creatures. Native Americans believed in such creatures. They did not call them Sasquatch, however, that moniker was coined by white Canadians for their Bigfoot like stories. The Asiatic version of the legend is called the Abominable Snowman or Yeti. Even Theodore Roosevelt wrote about a Sasquatch like animal. But it was not until Roger Patterson filmed the creature in the woods that Bigfoot achieved celebrity status. Advertisers are still willing to pay for the use of the film in commercials.

Charles C. Sutton

Bigfoot sightings became so common that some followers of the phenomena organized the Bigfoot Association of North America to collect all known information on Bigfoot sightings. This organization, which you can reach at 1-800-Bigfoot, collects all the stuff claimed to provide evidence of Bigfoot's existence: films, casts of footprints, samples of hair, sound recordings, still photographs, and so on. Most of this "evidence" the organization itself dismisses as hoaxes. Nevertheless members continue to speculate about the nature of Bigfoot. On the basis of no corroborating evidence whatever, some Bigfoot enthusiasts have concluded that the alleged animal migrates, leads a nomadic life and lives in small groups of several females and a lone male. The mere fact that no one has ever seen one Bigfoot migrate, much less several, is not allowed to ruin the fun.

Most of Ron's own investigations have been in response to complaints by people living in rural Ohio and Kentucky. Generally these people seem not to claim that they have seen Bigfoot. They report that they have seen something animal-like and strange, and the police or reporters attach the Bigfoot label to the event, inadvertently building the legend. Many cases

he can explain: a "white ape" sighted in Kentucky was likely a tall, bearded, blond man with long hair who had escaped from a mental hospital; or Bigfoot like animals in Ohio most likely were recently reintroduced black bears. Abandoned exotic pets also account for some sightings. Ron believes if he could spend all his time investigating these cases, instead of taking time out to earn a living, he could explain 95 percent of them. As it is, he explains what he can and turns the rest over to the scientific community.

For more information, visit Ron's web site Creature Chronicles at http://home.fuse.net/rschaffner. Ron began publishing Creature Chronicles, a newsletter devoted to Bigfoot sightings, in 1980. Now Creature Chronicles has migrated to the Internet and expanded to include news of and links to many other creatures of doubtful authenticity. The site is an easy to navigate, highly informative introduction to the arcane science of cryptozoology.

-- Reported by Virginia Jergens.

A Puzzle for Thinkers

Math grades, you say?

The tenth grade at Euclid High, where no class is permitted to have more than 30 students, took a math exam. A third of the students obtained a B grade, a quarter got a C, and a sixth a D. An eighth part of the students received an F grade.

How many students received a grade of A?

from Robert Müller-Fonfara, *Mathematische Denkspiele*, (1997)

Solution to last months puzzle - Five children and true statements:

For each child only one of four conditions can be true: a boy and the statement is true, a boy and false, a girl and the statement is either true or false. Start with the first, or last, child and assume sex and truth or falsity trying each of the four conditions in turn. Work your way through the statements until you encounter a contradiction or impossibility. Answers are: (1) boy, true; (2) boy, true; (3) girl, false; (4) girl, false; (5) girl, false.

Race and Crime: Is "Profiling" Reasonable?

The practice of police "profiling" made headlines last month when New Jersey's Superintendent of State Police was fired for claiming that minorities are disproportionately involved in drug crimes. According to state police statistics, three out of four people arrested on the New Jersey Turnpike over a two-month period were minorities, principally blacks, who make up only 13 percent of the national population. Similarly, FBI Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) data show that 63 percent of drug arrests in New Jersey were of minorities. Nationwide, the most recent (1997) FBI data show that 30 percent of those arrested for "serious" crimes were black, as were 41 percent of those arrested for violent crimes and 56 percent of those arrested for murder.

These statistics, which only track crimes reported to the police, pose a "chicken and egg" problem. As University of Maryland criminologist Katheryn Russell puts it, "The high numbers of blacks arrested are partially the result of police targeting them in the first place." Are black Americans more likely to commit crimes, or are their higher arrest rates a function of discriminatory police "profiling"? For an answer, we need to go beyond crime report data.

Even uncontested racial disparities may be explained by other factors. For example, the National Household Survey of Substance and Drug Abuse finds that nearly the same proportion of blacks and whites say that they use illegal substances—roughly 12 to 13 percent for both groups. Yet 37 percent of those arrested for drug-related crimes such as trafficking or possession are black. But Bureau of Justice Statistics data trace the higher rate of black arrests to the type of drug used (more often crack cocaine or heroin), the amount possessed or trafficked, and the frequency and the circumstances of use, often on city streets in areas of intensive police surveillance.

> Not all increases in police efficiency guarantee an increase in social justice: which is one more reason why statistics alone can't determine public policy.

Differential arrest results could still be the result of more intensive police attention to blacks rather than greater involvement in crime. There are, however, ways of cross-checking these conclusions. For homicides, the FBI keeps supplemental statistics providing data on the age, sex and race of both the perpetrators and their victims. These data show that 37 percent of murderers are black, 31 percent are white, and 32 percent are of "unknown" or "other" racial origin.

Most importantly, the annual National Crime

Victimization Survey (NCVS) provides a window on criminal activity beyond the FBI crime reports. The NCVS interviews victims of major crimes, which include rape, aggravated assault, and robbery (but not, for obvious reasons, homicide). For crimes committed by a single individual whose race can be identified by the victim, 25 percent of perpetrators are black. For robbery, the figure climbs to 51 percent black. These figures have held fairly constant for many years.

It would appear from these numbers that police "profiling" of likely suspects based on demographic statistics, including racial origin, has a reasonable basis. Needless to say, vastly more males than females are arrested for violent felonies. It follows that profiling elderly females of either race has never been considered an effective policing strategy. Moreover, if profiling reduces crime, blacks as well as whites benefit. In fact, blacks make up over 48 percent of murder victims. Yet not all increases in police efficiency guarantee an increase in social justice.

There remain serious questions about the meaning of these racially disparate statistics. Most importantly, we need to consider the underlying "base rate" of crimes committed. Few people in any population commit serious crimes. The majority of blacks as well as whites are law-abiding. Yet racial appearance is what gets targeted because a higher percentage of crimes are committed by blacks than by whites. Hence, the focus on racial appearance as the basis for profiling ensures that there will be a high number of what scientists call "false positives." That is, a statistical association between a group and a certain type of behavior casts suspicion on all members of the group, even those who do not engage in the behavior.

The causes of crime are complicated and cannot be reduced to skin color. Yet the statistical instrument used in profiling is attuned to a small set of very general criteria presumed to indicate criminal likelihood—race, sex, and age (as well as factors such as time of day, type and location of vehicle, out-of-state license plates, etc.). Thus, the police may be acting "rationally" rather than out of racial bias in focusing on blacks, just as it is more rational for them to focus on males rather than on females. Both demographic groups are differentially likely to commit crimes. Yet most individual blacks, like most males, never commit serious crimes.

The unpleasant truth is that profiling can be statistically valid yet have discriminatory real-world results, since most blacks who are stopped on suspicion (like most males) will be innocent people. And the more innocent people within a given group who are treated as suspect, the more all members of the group will suspect discriminatory motives on the part of the police. Paradoxically, police behavior that is rational in terms of crime solving may also increase racial stereotypes and worsen racial tensions. That's one more reason why statistics alone can't determine public policy.

—*Vital Stats*, April 1999, (Statistical Assessment Service)

ART Business

May Membership Meeting

Officers for the coming year were elected,

President: Roy Auerbach
Vice-President: Nurit Bowman
Secretary: Virginia Jergens
Treasurer: Rick Prairie
Investigations Officer: Dick McGrath
Media Resources Coordinator: Joe Gastright
Meeting Organizer: Brad Bonham
Membership Committee Chair: Brad Bonham
Membership Secretary: Roy Auerbach
Newsletter Editor: Wolf Roder
Program Committee Chair: Brad Bonham
Publicity Coordinator: Gary Himes
SANE List Manager & Web Site Manager: David Wall

Brad Bonham reported on her continuing investigation of the rumors that Febreze, a fabric odor eliminator made by Proctor & Gamble, kills pets. The rumors appeared on the Internet in May, 1997 and began to spread very rapidly after an emergency pet care clinic in Boston faxed the rumor to veterinarians. Now there are several web sites with sound information about Febreze, which is harmless to pets. The new rumor is a warning about the alleged dangers of sodium lauryl sulfate, a personal care product ingredient as common as it is harmless.

It seems like a good idea, but needs a little work....

The aspirin maker, Bayer, took out a large ad in the New York Times to promote its volunteer employee program, "Making Science Make Sense," aimed at getting kids interested in Science. As an example, the ad suggested getting them to start thinking about "why lighter things fall faster than heavier things." That even started us thinking! If this program is going to work, they had better start with Galileo's "Dialogues."

-- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 23 April 19 99

The Association for Rational Thought is an independent, nonprofit, scientific and educational organization. We share the philosophy of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), an international organization which investigates allegedly paranormal events, sponsors workshops and publishes *Skeptical Inquirer*, a journal of investigations of paranormal claims.

A.R.T. meets on the second Saturday of each month September through June, 10:00 AM at James Tavern in Blue Ash and publishes *Cincinnati Skeptic* each month. A.R.T. meetings are open to the public. A.R.T. also maintains a database of information on paranormal claims for local new media to consult and investigates local paranormal claims. A.R.T. was founded by Cincinnati area skeptics in 1991. Annual dues are $15.00 and include a subscription to the *Cincinnati Skeptic.*

For more information call: President Roy Auerbach (513)731-2774 or Nurit Bowman, (513) 731-0642 or visit our website.
Address Changes and Corrections, Membership Questions: Roy Auerbach (513) 731-2774 E-mail: raa@one.net

Mailing Label Information: "00/00/00 Member": You are a member in good standing; your membership will expire on the date on the label. "Lapsed": *(highlighted)* - your membership has expired. Please send your dues as soon as possible.

Yes! — I want to support the important work of **The Association for Rational Thought** and receive *Cincinnati Skeptic* and meeting notices. I have enclosed funds for:

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We have kept dues low and will continue to do so in spite of rising costs. However, if you are able to, your additional contributions are very much appreciated. Please give generously, if possible. Thank you very much!

I would like to make a contribution in addition to my dues to further the important work of the Association:

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Make your check payable to the **Association for Rational Thought** and mail to A.R.T., P.O. Box 12896, Cincinnati OH 45212. *Contributions are not at present tax deductible, but we are working on it.*

¤Request subjects for future meetings_____

¤Please do *not* include my name and address in mailing lists exchanged with other groups.

Skepticism and ART on the Electronic Media

For the latest in skeptical news via e-mail, join SANE, the Skeptical Area Network Effort. You will find cheerful, rational messages from CSICOP, James "The Amazing" Randi, your fellow local skeptics and ART in your e-mail box every week. This is our means of staying in touch between issues of the *Cincinnati Skeptic*.

Be sure to check out our NEW & IMPROVED skeptical website at http://www.cincinnatiskeptics.org **--- It contains: our BLURBS on various subjects; lots of nifty links to skeptical thinking around the world; the information for joining SANE; the basic definition of who we are, what we do, and our bylaws. In addition, you'll find such things as how to get to our meetings held at James Tavern; other ways to reach us; and how to send sample copies of the newsletter to potential members.**

—David Wall, Web Site Manager

Web: http://www.cincinnatiskeptics.org **E-mail: darkon@one.net**

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The Association for Rational Thought is an organization committed to encouraging rationaal, well- informed evalution of fringe-science, pesudoscience, and paranormal claims. A.R.T. encourages the investigation of paranormal and pseudoscientific claims from a responsible, scientific viewpoint and the distribution of the results of such investigations to the public. You are cordially invited to become a member of A.R.T. Membership information is included elsewhare in this issue.

Preview Of Coming Attractions....

Place: James Tavern at Cooper Road and Reed Hartman Highway. It is a great place to gather and then have the lunch/social portion of each meeting. This location is very accessible for folks wielding walkers, wheelchairs and the like. Coffee is available with a small donation during the meeting.

Tenth Meeting of the 1998-1999 Season!

Please mark your calendar and plan to attend!

Date and Day: 12 June 1998 -- Saturday

Time: 10:00 AM - 12:00 PM -- program
12:00PM - 2:00 PM -- lunch

Topic & Speaker: As of this printing plans are not yet complete but watch your mail for an announcement of the exciting, facinating meeting for June!!!

Next year, Same Time, Same place

This will be our final meeting of the year.
Our next regular meeting will be in September ,1999.
Watch your mail for picnic information
and more.....
See you then!!!!