



The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics

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NTS News and Events

Ron Hastings' article, "The Rise and Fall of the Paluxy Mantracks," appeared in the September, 1988 issue of the journal Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith. Ron gives a concise history of the mantrack claims and describes how they were laid to rest for most observers. The article also shows how the resolution of these claims has given unexpected new insights into dinosaur locomotion.

The Board of Directors has elected Mark Meyer as NTS Treasurer and board member. We still need to fill the post of Secretary, and would like to know if any of you are interested.

Our bibliography for librarians, "Scientists Confront Pseudoscience" has gone out to libraries in the north Texas area. This five page document lists books in print on the subject of science versus pseudoscience, and on many specific topics such as creationism, psychic powers, astrology, and medical quackery. Our thanks go to James Rusk for starting this project and getting the list nicely laser printed. If any of you want a copy, send us an envelope with 25 cents postage.

NTS membership is growing! Skeptical Inquirer subscribers in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex have been invited to join, and we've had a good response. Our membership has grown from about 80 members to over 100 members in just the past couple of months.

Some members have asked how business gets done in NTS. A reasonable question. The Board of Directors holds its regular meetings at 1:30 p.m., before the monthly program. Members are welcome to attend.

We have had more than \$250 in donations from members in the last few months. While we try to set our annual membership fees to cover expenses, we certainly will not turn down additional gifts. We appreciate the help, as well as the personal time many of you have given us. Our major expenses are the production and mailing of the newsletter, and the stationery, postage and copying that ~ with getting our message out to our members, the news media and the public.

More money extends our reach.

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NTS Members Get National Publicity

Member Eddie Vela's story regarding pseudoscientific and superstitious beliefs of high school biology teachers, featured in the September 10, 1988 Dallas Morning News has been picked up by the Associated Press wire service. As a result, the research of members Raymond Eve and Dana Dunn has received wide publicity. The researchers have been interviewed by CBS, ABC and United Stations radio news network, one of the researchers appeared in a feature story on the Channel 8 local news, and they have participated in radio talk shows with WKTN (Tampa-St. Petersburg), XTRA (San Diego), KGIL (Los Angeles), and KING (Seattle).

Want to know what all the excitement's about? Come to our November 20 meeting, when they will tell us about their findings.

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NTS Features Programs on Homeopathy

by **John Thomas**

Dr. Harold F. Newman of the Food and Drug Administration spoke at our September meeting. Dr. Newman is also a member of the Against Health Fraud, a non-profit entity organized to "...heighten community awareness about suspected health and nutrition misinformation, fraud or quackery..." Dr. Newman described the FDA's jurisdiction and its efforts against fraudulent health practices. He also discussed the agency's drug approval process. The FDA is required to find new drugs to be both safe and effective before approval. This necessarily results in long and expensive clinical trials to distinguish drug action from placebo response and random effect. Some members questioned the FDA's wide discretion to accept or reject studies, particular those from other countries, since use of foreign studies could speed up the approval process.

Dr. Newman discussed homeopathic practice briefly, and its special legal position. When the 1938 Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act was passed it provided that all drugs then in either the United States Pharmacopoeia or the Homeopathic Pharmacopoeia were not to be considered as "new drugs" requiring proof of safety and efficacy. Because of this purely political decision (the provision was guided through Congress by a senator who was a prominent homeopathic physician), the FDA today has no power to investigate or regulate homeopathic remedies.

Dr. Joe D. Goldstrich addressed our October meeting on the subject of homeopathic medicine. Dr. Goldstrich is a medical doctor, a graduate of the UT Southwestern Medical School, and a specialist in cardiology. He is now exclusively engaged in the practice of homeopathic medicine in Dallas. Tim Gorski's article in the last issue of The Skeptic reported on some of Dr. Goldstrich's activities.

Dr. Goldstrich consented to appear before us and make the case for homeopathy. I found him a sincere and engaging person. Obviously deeply interested in the welfare of his patients. Homeopathic involves long patient interviews so that the physician can gather enough personal information to decide on which of more than 1,000 remedies are appropriate. Dr. Goldstrich plainly enjoys the patient-physician interaction, and he described several successful treatments. He told us that he is alert for patients with conditions for which homeopathy "won't work", and refers those persons to physicians practicing 'traditional' medicine. Dr. Goldstrich has apparently not given up a belief in antibiotics for bacterial infection or radiation therapy for cancer; rather he seems to have added homeopathy onto standard medical

practice to deal with those complaints that standard practice cannot treat, or does not clearly understand, or just considers trivial and self-limiting.

After some discussion of the specifics of homeopathic treatment, we all waited eagerly for the answer to the key question: What is the empirical evidence for the efficacy of homeopathic treatments? Dr. Goldstrich frankly admitted that there is essentially no such scientifically credible evidence. His strong belief in the "law of similars" (like cures like) seems to be based on his own clinical experience and on personal testimonials from others. Members pointed out that the rationale for controlled experiments in medicine was to rule out alternative explanations for apparent healing - explanations such as the placebo response, variability in disease activity, or the physician's natural tendency to remember successful responses and forget or discount unsuccessful ones.

Dr. Goldstrich was completely candid with us on this point: there is, at best, very little scientific evidence for homeopathy. In fact, even the 18th century "provings" of remedies now in the Homeopathic Pharmacopoeia have never been repeated or checked. Goldstrich said that he was interested in attempting a blinded study such as that suggested by Tim Gorski in earlier correspondence. We have offered to assist in the blinding operations of such a study, if Dr. Goldstrich decides to proceed with one.

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NTS Annual Party

You say it's about time for a party? We agree! NTS and Mel Zemek will host an afternoon get-together at Mel's home, Saturday, December 3. We have many new members since our last social event, so take this opportunity to meet fellow skeptics and exchange ideas. All members will soon be receiving an invitation with a map and other pertinent information.

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NTS Survey Results

About 20% of you responded to our survey. Here are the results:

The name. 68% thought the name satisfactory; 32% did not, and suggested alternatives such as "science and rationality advocates", or "association for critical thinking." We will likely retain the word "skeptic" in our name, but make more effort to assert the real and positive aspects of the skeptical approach.

The meetings. 47% found the meeting time convenient. 25% found it inconvenient, and 31% were indifferent. 53% found the location convenient, 16% inconvenient, and 31% were indifferent. It appears that so long as we claim to serve the north Texas area, there is no perfect location. We feel that the location on the UTA campus has advantages other than just being a central spot in the Dallas Fort Worth area. Occasionally holding meetings in locations other than our home base may be a good idea, though.

The programs. 58% of you thought the programs were good. Many made suggestions for improving them, such as having more big-name speakers, or having more programs in debate format, or having fewer programs in a year, if necessary for more planning and preparation. We appreciate all the suggestions and we hope to improve the quality of the programs in the coming year.

The newsletter. 79% of you rated the news letter good-to-excellent. Some suggested more coverage of local pseudoscience activities, more book reviews, or more member contributions (Please do!). The operative word seems to be "more." We're pleased that you think the newsletter so important. We believe that the better we can make it in factual

content, good writing and topical coverage, the more influential it can be in changing public attitudes.

Activities and goals. Most agreed with the general approach we are taking. Most of you seemed to feel that advancing science and rationality and educating the public on pseudoscience issues were more important than debunking per se. Again, many wanted more of everything.

Thanks to all who responded to the survey. We always want your comments, criticisms and suggestions. (Hint: We will publish letters to the editor).

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NTS Ghost Busters?

The newsletter of the Texas Association for Parapsychology (formerly the North Texas Parapsychology Association) was recently filled with articles about ghosts and haunted houses. We thought we must be missing out on something, so we wrote the TAP and asked for help:

Ms. Jan Browning
President, TAP
610 Presidential
Suite 104
Richardson, TX 75081

Dear Ms. Browning:

I read with interest the stories about ghosts and haunted houses in the October issue of The Source. The authors seem ~ of ghosts and spirits¹ and most seem to enjoy convivial relations with them.

The North Texas Skeptics is a local association aiming to educate the public about the use o~ the scientific method in acquiring knowledge of our world While we do not reject paranormal claims out of hand, we do believe that those claims should be subjected to the same critical inquiry that would be expected for any other factual claims. If ghosts are objectively real, and not merely something occurring in the mind of the beholder, then it should be possible to produce evidence of that reality which would convince a skeptical but open-minded observer.

I would be most appreciative if you or anyone you know could tell me where I might experience ghosts or hauntings under satisfactory observing conditions. I look forward to hearing from you and learning more about the existence (or not) of ghosts.

Yours truly,
John A. Thomas
Chair

We'll let you know if we get a chance for any real ghostbusting.

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NTS Chair Appears on Heritage Cable System

Chair John Thomas appeared on the "Social Issues" TV interview show sponsored by Professors Tony Picchioni and Paul McGee of North Lake College in Irving. John and the hosts had a lively discussion of science and empiricism,

critical thinking and the problems of inculcating a heat skeptical outlook in young people. This show will be broadcast several times on the Heritage cable system over the next month.

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Meeting Schedule:

November 20 - Professors Ray Eve and Dana Dunn of UTA have been researching the level of scientific competence among high-school and grade school science teachers. They have some fascinating (and disturbing findings to report. This study has attracted nationwide attention.

December 11 - Dan Korem, local writer, ~ producer and magician will explain cold reading and discuss his adventures in exposing psychics and faith healers to skeptical inquiry. Korem's book, Powers, is now in its second printing. This will be an entertaining introduction to alternative explanations for startling "psychic" powers.

All meetings will be at 2:00 p.m., Room 101, University Hall, University of Texas at Arlington (Corner of Cooper and Campus Drive)

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Funds Needed to Expand Study of Pseudoscientific Beliefs

Dr. Ray Eve and Dr. Dana Dunn of the Sociology Department of the University of Texas at Arlington have been developing a study of the prevalence of pseudoscientific beliefs among high school biology and life science teachers. To date, the researchers have completed a pretest of their survey instrument which has resulted in a national sample of responses from about 200 teachers. (The news is not good; for details, you are encouraged to attend the November 20th NTS meeting, where they will present their findings in detail). At present, the researchers are attempting to locate a foundation which would be willing to assist in funding a fully representative national sample of 1500 biology and life science teachers, so that findings can be more safely generalized, and so that subgroup differences by region, type of school, teacher background, etc., can be more closely investigated. Dr. Eugenie Scott, the executive director of the National Center for Science Education, has offered to donate the first couple of thousand dollars required to complete a national, statistically representative study, but an additional six or seven thousand dollars minimum will be required. (Federal agencies have been approached, but seem to find the topic too unconventional). Therefore, anyone with any good leads concerning where the extra funds might be located is encouraged to contact the researchers at (817) 273-2661

Incidentally, Ray and Dana have been in contact with The Botanical Research Institute of Texas (BRIT), a group attempting to retain the former SMU herbarium in the area, and which is also interested in attempting to use botany studies to improve science education in the schools. BRIT has kindly offered volunteers to help with the research, and, it would appear, is an organization to which NTS members might wish to develop closer ties, since it shares many of our interests.

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A recipe for skepticism?

by Deborah A. Boak

Is it possible to teach critical thinking? Can this portion of human intelligence be learned? Or is this kind of IQ like a person's sex, height, and eye color, as so many seem to assume? Intellectualism is only elitism if the latter is true. But if skepticism can be learned, then skepticism, and human progress have a chance.

Thousands of Riverside-Brookfield High School students since 1960 have explored critical thinking and basic logic with teaching materials written by Fred Smith and Brant Abrahamson. These include both teacher and student manuals covering topics such as: Authorities, Prejudice in Group Relations, Seeking Information, and Logical Fallacies. A terrific annotated bibliography is included.

These materials address the universal need for students, whether in New York or Texas, to develop critical thinking skills. These booklets would also be helpful to anyone who would teach, speak to groups, or in any way educate the public. They outline effective methods of developing a logical organization for presentation of a topic, or for demolishing the force of arguments based on faulty reasoning.

I found the treatment of logical fallacies an excellent review of the sorts of questions that are effective in exposing nonsense. Imagine students drilling and practicing to recognize examples of over generalization, false cause and effect, crowd appeal, self-evident truth, thin entering wedge (fallacious thinking about trends), straw-man types of arguments, and arguments that accuse instead of explain. The mind boggles at what the results of such a curriculum might be if applied nationwide! The goal of the writers is to provide students with structured thinking habits that will allow them to recognize and avoid common shortcomings in logic. But of course these kinds of skills are valuable and need to be developed and honed by people of all ages.

What makes these manuals most interesting is the specific way they outline the teaching of critical thinking. For example, students are encouraged to identify and analyze logical fallacy and absurd argument from media and everyday experience sources. Quizzes and exercises are indexed as well. Ultimately, the authors see students of such materials becoming teachers themselves, able and, one hopes, virtually compelled to identify and reject fallacious thinking. In other words, intellectual skills are taught that cannot be forgotten because they are constantly being applied in everyday life. Once you learn to walk, you don't go back to crawling on all fours. The only irritant in reviewing these manuals was the realization that their approach really ought to be at the core of all school subjects. The authors, unfortunately, tend to focus exclusively on the traditional content of school "social studies." But it is equally true that good history, good literature and good science depend on such an approach. It is one which is well suited to flexibility in learning so much talked-about these days. It can be applied in virtually all of the variety of teaching methods now in use: lecturing and note-taking, memorization, immediate feedback, individualization, personal application of concepts, mastery of learning and positive reinforcement. The authors should be promoting these sorts of materials as the basis for an overall curriculum and not just a particular school subject.

I also wondered how difficult it might ultimately prove to incorporate such an approach into public school curricula. To the extent that students might be able to generalize critical thinking into their everyday lives, it might prove uncomfortable for authority figures who occasionally resort to logical fallacy in exercising their authority. This might include parents as well as school officials, teachers and coaches. This begins to fall into the category of a philosophy of childrearing. There is a tendency for students to be told what to think, and yet their greatest security is in teaching them how to think for themselves. This conflict needs to be resolved in favor of the youngsters' autonomy and not in favor of the comfort of their authority figure. It's exciting to think of the possibilities if this decision were taken. NTS has a copy of these materials for anyone interested in receiving them, or you can write the publisher at:

The Teachers' Press,
3731 Madison Ave.,
Brookfield, IL 60513

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