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'Comedy
and culture'
at the 2004
CONVENTION

the Skeptic

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Reflections on a Phenomenon

This issue represents the culmination of 24 years of publishing *the Skeptic* and it is probably a good time for a bit of reflection about our journal and about Australian Skeptics in general. *The Skeptic* began as a four page broadsheet, but with the second edition it emerged as a 16 page A4 sized magazine. Since then it has evolved through many manifestations and, with the aid of improved computer technology, grown into the familiar journal you are now reading.

In that time we have broadened the scope of our activities away from a rather narrow focus on common paranormal claims, into a skeptical coverage of many and diverse matters that have interested our readers. We have also attracted a wider selection of contributors, from a wider range of expertise, who have assisted in broadening our horizons and improving our understanding.

One of our aims has been to do something that is not necessarily a priority of all similar journals or organisations, that is, to maintain a sense of humour — to temper advocacy with wit. Many groups with a serious purpose succumb to a grave temptation to take themselves far too seriously — to confuse purpose with

method. To a large extent, we have resisted that temptation and, as was emphasised by the inclusion of comedians at the recent convention, Skeptics enjoy a good laugh in a good cause. A humorous approach can often help in getting a serious message across, or as H L Mencken put it in his famous phrase, “One good horse laugh is worth a thousand syllogisms”.

During the life of Australian Skeptics we have held an annual convention every year since 1985, most of which have been highly successful, with the most recent one in Sydney counting among the successes. We even managed to hold a World Skeptics Convention in 2000 which, reports suggest, has not been bettered as a function by any of the other World Conventions. It was a lot of hard work, as conventions always are, but success makes it worthwhile

Another advance we have made, and I believe we are unique among Skeptics groups world-wide in this, is to capture all our back issues in electronic format, first with the *Great Skeptic CD* and then with the updated *Great Skeptic CD2*, containing 23 years of output and much more besides. This, plus our production

of a video on water divining, has raised our profile around the globe, leading to sales of our work in many countries.

A further indication of the impact achieved by an advocacy group (as the Skeptics is) the amount of media attention it attracts. By that token, Australian Skeptics must rank among the most successful of such bodies in the world. It is a rare week in which a Skeptic does not appear, is quoted, or has provided some useful information in the media. That is not at all common among our colleagues overseas. We get a pretty fair run in the media because we are available and reliable

Many people have been involved in our success, as committee members, as contributors, as subscribers and supporters — all part of the Skeptics network. Our thanks are due to every one of you, as are our very best wishes as another year comes to an end. We hope you will all be back in the new year, and if you notice a portly chap with a white beard wandering around a shopping centre, please don't attack him as a symbol of superstitious exploitation of the young. It might just be ...

Barry Williams

Around the Traps

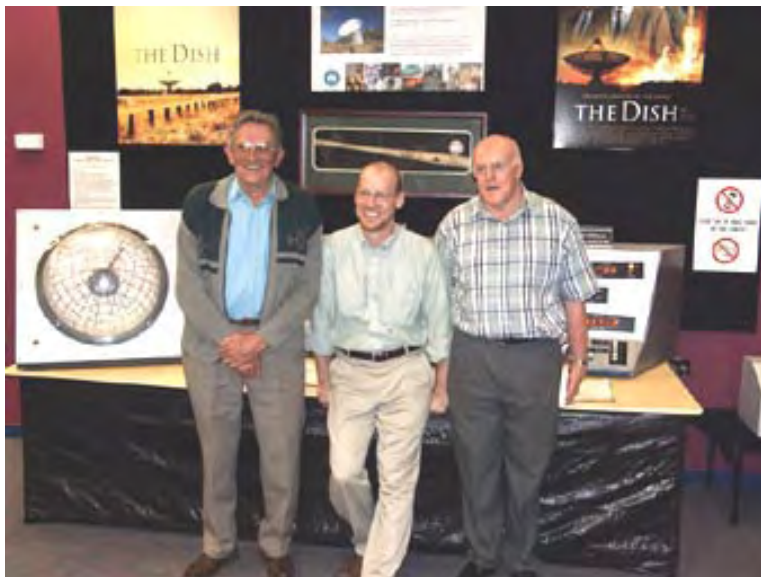
Seeing stars

During his recent highly successful visit to Australia as a special guest of the Australian Skeptics and keynote Speaker at the Convention, “Bad Astronomer” Phil Plait was taken on a tour of astronomy and space exploration landmarks in Australia.

Among the sites he visited were Tidbinbilla Tracking Station and the ruins of Mt Stromlo Observatory in the ACT, as a guest of the Canberra Skeptics.

Then, under the tender care of Alynda, Peter Rodgers and Eran Segev from the NSW Committee, he went to Siding Spring where he was treated to a tour of the telescope sites and a light aircraft flight around the area by *Skeptic* subscriber and astrophysicist, Andre Phillips.

From there, he went to Parkes, where he gave his “Moon Landing Hoax” talk to members of the Central Western NSW Astronomical Society at the famous Parkes radiotelescope dish. History minded readers will know that this facility was instrumental in receiving the images of the first human steps on the moon.



Phil Plait flanked by Neil Mason and Cliff Smith

Fittingly, there were two special guests in the audience, Neil “Fox” Mason and Cliff Smith. On the night of July 21 1969, working under the supervision of John Bolton, Mason was the telescope driver and Smith was in charge of maintenance (including making sure there was enough petrol in the generator’s tank). Phil was photographed with the two guests at a mock-up of the telescope control panel made especially for the film, *The Dish*.

Phil wound up his successful tour with a talk, co-hosted by The Australian Museum Society, at the Australian Museum. Phil, who was a great guest and speaker, can no longer claim that he has never seen the Southern Cross.

In passing

It has been a sad quarter since our last issue for some of those with whom Skeptics have had fundamental disagreements.

In early October, Prof John Mack, the Harvard psychiatrist who famously gave credence to alien abduction stories, was knocked down by a car on a visit to London and died as a result.

Possibly the most famous ‘abductee’ of all, Betty Hill, whose claim to have been abducted

by a UFO in 1961 started the whole improbable field, died in her 80s at her home in the USA. Also passing from the scene was Joyce Jillson, who became famous as one of the astrologers who allegedly advised Nancy Reagan on auspicious dates for meetings for her husband, the President.

Finally, the French chemist, Jacques Benveniste, whose claims about ‘memory’ being retained by water, gave a boost to the homeopathy promoters, died in France after heart surgery.

While we might have disagreed with their claims, we are nonetheless saddened by their passing.

UFO Abductions: the evidence

Visiting Skeptics were startled at the recent national convention in Sydney to see a UFO flying around the foyer of the venue, where it homed in on the only rocket scientist in attendance, the Skeptics Investigator-in-Chief, Ian Bryce. It would require a dramatic suspension of disbelief to see this as being purely coincidental, so we have no alternative but to assume the craft was under the control of an alien intelligence.

Shocked Skeptical bystanders were rendered paralysed and mute as the apparition apparitioned and hovered around the head of the nonplused Bryce. In itself, surely this is evidence of how a powerful energy unknown to science (EUTS) is capable of interfering with the central nervous system and critical faculties of even the most adamant Skeptic.

Fortuitously, the raid was rendered relatively impotent by a phenomenon first noted by H G Wells in his novel *War of the Worlds*, to wit, alien incompetence. In that case, the evil (or perhaps misunderstood and themselves victims of childhood trauma) Martians fell victim to an Earth virus; in this case it was a result of imperfect intelligence estimates brought about, no doubt, by faulty distance viewing techniques involving an inappropriate scale problem. The intergalactic craft, when it arrived to carry out its nefarious purpose, was insufficiently spacious to engulf an entire Bryce and its thwarted galactoid inhabitants had to be content with abducting his pen.

So perish all sinister plans to subjugate Earth to the evil designs of aliens.

(Expect to see this story appear, slightly changed and totally unattributed, in a near future edition of *Nexus*.)

All in the family

Why is it so difficult to distinguish between the concepts of “ancestors” and “descendants”? We don’t know, but it seems to be a problem for some of those working in our ‘quality’ media.

The ABC has, within the past few



Gallant Ian Bryce under attack from alien ship

months, displayed at least one example of confusion in a documentary about Aboriginal people in the NT seeking to restore the reputation of a man who had been killed in the 1920s. It described his descendants as ‘ancestors’, while the Melbourne Age recently published this gem:

To complete her story of pioneering courage, Mrs Evans struggled 100 kilometres to a doctor. These days, her ancestors feel they are still treated as remote pioneers who should put up with rough conditions — like regular power cuts.

The old cliché “Gone to join his ancestors” does not mean he is living with his grandkids.

Somebody blundered

Is it just us, or have the internet spammers started eschewing the Nigerian Letter in favour of an obsessive interest in the sexual prowess of everyone of late? We are constantly being bombarded with offers to increase certain intimate dimensions or potions to spice up our libido. This one, just in, has really piqued our interest:

Since the 20 age, your trunk sluggishly desists makes a grave hormone known as Someone Increase Hormone. The reduction of it, which controls levels of other internal secretions in our organic structure is directly responsible for many of the largest ordinary designations of growing old, such as furrows, gray hair, subsided power, and weakened sexual purpose.

If there are any doctors out there who know the full details of “Someone Increase Hormone”, would they please reply in strict confidence to Bunyip under a plain brown paper wrapper? It sounds like just the sort of thing that someone should not be without.

Commercial opportunity

The Skeptics have for sale several comestible items that bear striking resemblances to a variety of identities, both sacred and secular. You can have the deity of your choice limned in a selection of nourishing spreads (our Vegemite Zeus is particularly tasty) or why not try our Lamb Casserole William Shakespeare or a packet of Johnny Cashews? No discerning collector should be without one. No offer over \$10,000 will be refused.

Bunyip

Convention Round-up

They came from all across the Wide Brown (and getting browner by the day) Land to visit the 20th annual Skeptics National Convention. We had delegates from every state and territory, except the NT, and it was a pleasure at last to put faces to names that we have long known. Glenn Cardwell, our Skeptical Nutritionist, was there from Perth; Bryan Walpole came from Hobart (but he also spends time on Macquarie Island in the Antarctic); Veikko Tanner dropped in from Julatten, which is so Far North in Far North Queensland that locals regard Townsville as “Down South” and Doug Irvin came from Townsville itself. Nor should we forget Russell and Robyn Kelly, a couple of Borderline Skeptics, whose journey was not so long, but it did begin at the evocatively named Wombat Gully. It was great to meet them all, as well as to re-establish many old friendships. We think they all enjoyed themselves and we have had lots of positive feedback about the convention.

Phil Plait, the “Bad Astronomer”, our overseas keynote speaker, spoke informatively and entertainingly about the plethora of conspiracy theories that surround astronomy and space flight, with special refer-



Bad Phil Plait

ence to those that claim that the Apollo Moon landings were all a Hollywood stunt. Phil enthusiastically participated in all phases of the convention and later toured and gave talks at astronomical sites around NSW and the ACT, as mentioned elsewhere in this issue. We are very grateful to Phil and would be delighted to see him back here again in the future.

One thing in particular was mentioned approvingly by many partici-

pants, and that was our decision to lighten up proceedings by including two professional comedians and two professional magicians among the line-up of speakers. Both Sue-Ann Post and Flacco had the audience in stitches (to the chagrin of the doctors aplenty in the audience) with their rather offbeat views of the world, but both also had much of serious interest to impart, wrapped up in their comedy.

Sue-Ann, who bills herself as “Australia’s Only 6 Foot, ex-Mormon, Lesbian, Feminist, Diabetic Comedian” spoke both hilariously and movingly of her experiences stemming from her association with all the facets that make up her title. She mentioned in passing that when she and Flacco had attended the Edinburgh Fringe Festival some years ago, they had been introduced as a “typical Australian couple” (which probably accounts for the drop in migration here from Scotland).

In characteristic mode, Flacco spoke about a book, “Releasing the Imbecile Within” written by one Paul Livingston who, he claimed, was a figment of his imagination (Paul claims the vice is versa). He explained in detail how even the most

Skeptical among the audience could release their inner imbecile and thus fit much more comfortably into a world of reality TV and the Internet.

Mark Mayer baffled the audience in a highly entertaining presentation, by speaking to dead people and reading minds of the living, while Steve Walker unveiled several new jokes and tricks as he magically entertained those who attended the dinner. When asked to “put the kettle on”, Steve happily complied (see photo).

Ian Bryce got the Friday proceedings rolling with results of his investigations into many devices, including some that had appeared on the ABC's *New Inventors*, that had serious conflicts with well established scientific principles (more about this later). Four people from different backgrounds spoke of why they supported evolution rather than creationism as the explanation of why we are as we are. Colin Groves (anthropologist) Paul Willis (palaeontologist) and Phil Plait (astronomer) spoke of the preponderance of scientific evidence, with many details. David Millikan, as befitted a minister of religion, took a slightly different tack, though he agreed that the scientific evidence made a nonsense of creation 'science'.

Alternative medicine was scrutinised, first by Peter Bowditch with a characteristically hard-hitting and rapid-fire assault on its more idiotic fringes, to be followed by David Brookman, a medical educator, with a more formal presentation of the differences between the approaches of alternative and orthodox healthcare. Steve Roberts spoke of “having a big one”, referring (we think) to the very large numbers involved in the practice of homeopathy and to large numbers in general.

Various prominent Skeptics then tried to end it all by consuming handfuls of homeopathic sleeping pills, with no ill-effects being evident (though some of them were overheard slurring their sibilants later in the evening at the dinner).

One mistake we probably made was in billing a debate about science



Sue-Ann Post



Flacco



Steve Walker

and politics on the topic of global warming and nuclear energy. We heard plenty of good science and politics from Ian Plimer (geologist), Colin Keay (physicist) and Danny Kennedy (Greenpeace advocate) but it really wasn't a debate. Debates are probably not the best way to discuss these issues anyway, but all three speakers provided much food for thought.

Education, particularly in science, came under scrutiny from Cheryl Capra (primary teacher) and Martin Bridgstock (university lecturer) talking about techniques they used to enlighten their charges to the wonders of the world, and the need for and use of, skepticism in their endeavours. Richard and Alynda joined in with their frenetic and entertaining *Mystery Investigators* show for schools.

Lynne Kelly (more of whom later) wound up the proceedings with practical demonstrations of how skeptics could use science and psychology to make their points in an easily comprehensible and user-friendly way.

We hope to have a dvd of highlights of the Convention available in the not too distant future.

Awards

As is customary at our annual conventions, we presented two awards at this one. The Bent Spoon Award, “presented to the perpetrator of the most preposterous piece of pseudoscientific or paranormal piffle” caused more discussion than is usual among the judging panel, consisting of the various state committee members present. From a large field of nominations on our web site, the finalists came down to two TV programmes.

The first was an effort named *Sensing Murder*, aired on the 10 Network. This programme showed details and discussions of unsolved murders in Australia and then, with total disregard for the sensitivities of relatives of victims, used a panel of self-described psychics to spout highly improbable “evidence” that, they claimed, might aid in solving the crimes. As an exercise in bad



Leading Skeptics ending it all

taste, this was a highly favoured contender.

The second programme was *The New Inventors*, shown on ABC TV. While the programme itself was unexceptionable and while it did act as a showcase for many worthwhile inventions and provided support for inventors, a number of the inventions selected for showing relied on principles that can only be seen as pseudoscience. Most strikingly was one that claimed to use low intensity sound to remove bacteria from water supplies. Several Skeptics had contacted the producers of the show, requesting that they employ someone with a scientific background to vet claims, but this was not done.

When it came to the vote, although *Sensing Murder* was an appalling example of sensationalism and credulous insensitivity, it was felt that the ABC should be expected to adhere to higher standards in its programmes, than were normally exhibited by commercial networks, and the Bent Spoon award was won, very narrowly, by "The Producers of *The New Inventors*."

There was no such controversy about the selection of the Australian Skeptic of the Year. Lynne Kelly has been a Skeptic subscriber since the

very beginning. With degrees in both science and engineering, Lynne had a very successful career as a high school science teacher and published several books. This year she had *The Skeptic's Guide to the Paranormal* published by a major publisher, with a US publishing deal (and possibly a TV series) in the offing. In this endeavour, Lynne has gained a great



Alynda and Richard give a pointed and balanced presentation



Skeptic of the Year meets Santa

deal of experience in media and public speaking as a result and she never misses an opportunity to promote skepticism and Australian Skeptics. Lynne Kelly is a most worthy recipient of the accolade Skeptic of the Year.

Her award scroll reads:

*Australian Skeptics Inc
has great pleasure in awarding the title
Australian Skeptic of the Year
2004
to
Lynne Kelly
Who, by her forthright approach as
a teacher and author,
and in her dedication to presenting Skepticism
in a positive, thoughtful and up-beat light
in her teaching, writing
and media appearances,
has contributed substantially to the
continuing health and wellbeing
of our society.*

Convention Miscellany



Mark Mayer baffles Margaret Kittson



Bryce, booze, Bowditch



Steve Roberts



Steve Walker channels Slim Dusty



David Brookman



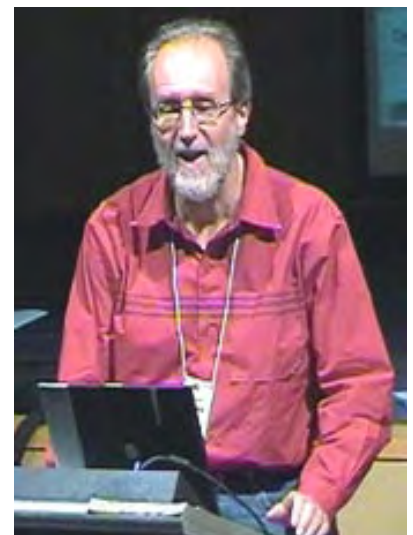
Cheryl Capra



Ian Plimer



Danny Kennedy



Colin Groves

Fourth Skeptics World Congress

A report from the front lines
of world skepticism

**The World Skeptic's Congress,
Abano Terme, Italy, October,
2004**

If Argentina had been more skeptical of the lies and corruption twenty years ago, then it would be a different country today. So we were told, with vivid descriptions of life in a country where bank accounts are zeroed. But then again, it is also a country where people disappear without explanation. It is sometimes better not to ask questions. The Argentinean editor of the new Spanish language skeptical journal, *Pensar*, Alejandro Borgo, was arguing that skepticism should encompass economics and politics as much as, if not more than, claims of the paranormal. The Canadian professor of nuclear medicine convinced us that the need is to be skeptical of all medicine, not just that which we label as 'alternative'. The Spaniard wanted to make sure religion was on the agenda. The Brit said 'skeptical' was such a negative, the word should be avoided all together, to which all agreed — except me. And so the debates began — and this was only at dinner on the night before the congress began.

The *World Skeptics Congress* was held in Abano Terme, near Padua, Italy, in October 2004. How did skept-

icism vary between the countries represented in our small group eating pizza and drinking Italian wines? They were so very different because of the social, political, religious, cultural and educational environments. This was a fascinating start to a fantastic experience. By the end of the congress, with many other countries added to the mix, the insights gained would have a profound affect on my thinking and make me very glad I am a skeptic making a public stand in Australia.

The Congress was organised by the Italian Skeptical organisation, CICAP along with its parent organisation, CSICOP. Most presentations were in English, with those who spoke only Italian having ear-sets and access to a team of translators.

The food was great! (Important things first.)

Opening the debate

Opening sessions discussed whether a dialogue is possible between skeptics and parapsychologists. Dr Caroline Watt, President of the Parapsychological Association, works in the Koester Parapsychology Unit of the University of Edinburgh, where she made it clear that research is not only into possible psi (psychic phenomena of all descriptions), but also into what made peo-



Lynne Kelly is a science teacher and author. Her latest book is The Skeptic's Guide to the Paranormal. She was awarded the accolade of Australian Skeptic of the Year for 2004 at the recent Australian Skeptics Convention.

ple believe they were experiencing psi. Working with Richard Wiseman (Professor of Psychology at the University of Hertfordshire) among others, it is clear that both sides of the debate can collaborate if there is a desire to do so. I was convinced that a positive attitude from skeptics to working with those who do not necessarily agree with us, can only be good for the public profile of skepticism, but also for our joint ultimate goal (isn't it?): the search for truth. Watt openly acknowledged the range of parapsychologists from those who are willing to accept the outcomes of rigorous testing to those who are so rigid in their beliefs in psi that no negative test would be considered conclusive. For them psi is a matter of faith. That reminded me of the range from true skeptics to cynics in our own ranks.

Richard Wiseman is a role model for the way skeptics should approach the media — he is fun, lively, enthusiastic and applies scientific method with rigour and relish. When firewalkers argued that the physics doesn't apply to them because they believed they were protected by a 'force field', he had them acknowledge on camera that this means they could traverse a sixty foot course, not the mere ten feet we skeptics claim physics tells us will be the maximum. Having agreed, they then jumped off, dramatically in front of the cameras, at about twelve feet, with burnt soles. Wiseman is working with parapsychologists to explore why some experimenters consistently get positive results when the test conditions appear to be stringent. He said:

We should not be dogmatic. We should be ready to engage in dialogue with those parapsychologists who are willing to collaborate. There should be an enormous sense of inquiry to find out what is really going on.

Guidelines

Professor James Alcock from York University, Toronto, Canada offered up some valuable guidelines for



Prof Richard Wiseman

parapsychology to be accepted by mainstream science.

1. There must be an unambiguous definition of psi.
2. The theory must be able to be falsified.
3. The null hypothesis must be given credence.
4. Replication must be achievable by another experimenter.
5. The theory must be predictive, not only post hoc.
6. The theory must have consistency with other areas of science.



Massimo Polidoro

The last point led to further discussion about just how much of traditional physics and neurophysiology is wrong, and hence must be radically revised, if psi is 'true'. Hence evidence is needed. As these specifics of physics and other sciences have passed all the above rules with ease over many decades, then there is going to have to be a strong case for psi.

A point which made a strong impact on me was that for all other sciences we can set an experiment in first year at university, or much earlier, in which the teacher can be sure the whole class will get the same result. There is at least one solid point of basis for the science which every student can experience. This is not possible in parapsychology. There is no such experiment.

Alcock argued that for the question of the existence of psi to be resolved, skeptics need to say what would confirm the claim, and parapsychologists need to say what would confirm it doesn't exist. As the latter is not forthcoming, the question can never be resolved. Mind you, the ability for many claims of psychology to live up to these standards was questioned by the psychologists themselves!

Investigating claims

Many sessions looked at the investigation into various claims and were wonderfully entertaining examples of scientific method at work. A particularly fascinating one was presented by Luigi Garlaschelli, Professor of Chemistry at the University of Padua, and the Senior Research Fellow for CICAP, where he reported on recent research into what he considers the real source of the Sword in the Stone. He has located the sword, withdrawn it from the stone and replaced it. He denies that he is now King of All England. Read about that on his website at <http://www.luigigarlaschelli.it/swordhome.htm>. Prof Garlaschelli also provided an intriguing display of weeping statues and liquefying blood of St Januarius. It is all on his

website — in English when you hunt. Fantastic reading.

Randi rampant

James Randi presented. Of course. And it was fantastic. Of course. Stories of the weirder of the applicants for The Prize could not fail to entertain an audience of skeptics, and presented with Randi's flair, he succeeded with honours. One claimant could tune in to the DNA of dogs. OK. Fair enough. And into the DNA of bullets? Yes, metal type bullets. Another complied with the rules that the claim must be stated in only two paragraphs. Unfortunately for Randi, his two paragraphs covered eighteen pages, both sides, and was unreadable. There was the guy who arrived on the doorstep with an empty suitcase. What for? The million dollars. Other cases were impossible to test because the nature of the claim was ill defined or a matter of faith. Then there are those with lawyers. The rules get rewritten so often the whole exercise becomes an endless game of paperwork about definitions.

One of Randi's favourites was the two guys from Dubai who believed they made the sun rise every morning. They don't know how, just that they work together to make it happen. How do you test this, short of killing one? Or both? If it then doesn't rise, Randi promised, he would pay the million dollars.

Randi also talked about the tests he found difficult emotionally, which focussed on those who truly believed, were self-deluded or were children led to believe in their abilities. People with a strong emotional investment in the outcomes of the test had to be treated with a great deal of care.

Would Randi like to see the Prize won? He said, and I quote as accurately as my rapid scribble could manage:



The Author with Ian Rowland and Ray Hyman

I would gladly give away the million dollars, although it would hurt, because it would be an investment in increasing the knowledge of human beings and we are all human beings. Let's celebrate that fact.

Randi was asked: "What if someone cleverer than you comes and deceives you to take the million dollars?" to which Randi replied that it is a risk he has to take. He feels he must make a public stand for what he believes in and put his money where his mouth is. He also acknowledges calling in the relevant experts from science and related disciplines whenever he needs them. He sees himself as the ringmaster for the investigations.

Deception

The Magic of Deception was a fun filled set of sessions. Richard Wiseman did magic and did science — and did both with an entertaining flair. Using the audience as guinea pigs, we were easily deceived. What we saw, and what we would have reported we saw, were very different. The research behind the reliability of eyewitness reports is worrying for two reasons. Obviously it is a huge concern in the law courts, but also because it is the basis of the majority of reasons people believe in the paranormal — those convincing anecdotal

dots. The jury, and the general public, is swayed by the confidence of the speaker, far more than by the reliability of the evidence.

When Chris French (Professor of Psychology and Head of the Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit, University of London) played Led Zeppelin's *Stairway to Heaven* backwards, I could hear nothing. When I was told to listen for Satanic messages, I could hear the word Satan three times. When given the full paragraph of what I should be hear-

ing to read on the screen as I listened, the unintelligible noise clearly repeated the words on the screen. It is astounding what you hear as long as you know what you are hearing!

Ray Hyman, Professor Emeritus of Psychology, University of Oregon, talked about magicians, deception and self-deception. Here I take the opportunity to be totally self-indulgent, because meeting Ray was an absolute highlight for me. As many of you will know, I have put many years into developing my own divination system, Tauromancy. When I was investigating cold reading for *The Skeptic's Guide*, I went out and tried it. I found that even though people accepted that I was a fraud, psychic credit was still given to the system, be it astrology or tarot. So I invented my own — a totally invalid 'ancient Chinese' system of metal masks and chopsticks, called (by an inappropriate Latin derivative) Tauromancy, so there was nothing in my entire reading which was not firmly based on science and the art of cold reading. I had the most wonderful discussion with Ray Hyman, the writer of the very first article in 1981, the much quoted "Cold Reading: how to convince strangers you know all about them", and Ian Rowland, the author of what is now considered the definitive book on the topic, *The Full Facts Book of Cold*

Reading. These guys were very generous in acknowledging that I was the first in the world to create a totally scientific system. My head swelled a considerable amount by the end!

Bilingual performance

Ian Rowland performed his magic on stage and proved that we could all be deceived and thoroughly enjoy the experience. Throughout the congress, speakers had adjusted as unobtrusively as they could to the needs of a bilingual audience. Rowland decided to run with it. The translators are required to translate whatever is said as literally as possible. By having his translator, Matt, make confessions about his personal life, Rowland managed to get the audience to laugh with a time delay built in — those hearing it in English preceding those in Italian by a significant moment's silence. The incredible work of the team of translators was then acknowledged enthusiastically by the whole audience.

At first, I worried the bilingual nature of the Congress would be a problem. Soon I realised that it would be an asset. In and around the venue, the ubiquitous translators seemed to materialise whenever a problem arose and fade again as soon as they were no longer needed. Trouble with understanding an order in a nearby restaurant caused one such mysterious appearance, a rapid flow of Italian with requisite hand gestures, and all was solved with smiles.



James Randi interviewed by Massimo Polidoro

Maybe she said: “the woman’s representing the Australian Skeptics so you need to make allowances!” I have no idea, but the problem, like the translator, had disappeared.

Watching the Executive Director of CICAP, Massimo Polidoro, interview Randi was a delight. He oscillated with ease between perfect English and (I can only assume) perfect Italian, with the hand gestures noticeably more energetic when speaking in Italian. There was the obligatory conference interjector who had lengthy speeches to make when offered the chance of a question after every session. Being in Italian, I had no idea what his pontifications were

about but he was certainly passionate about them. The Italian speakers were not much the wiser, telling me it was to do with a post modernist approach to science — they thought. The Italian panellists responded with equal vigour, passionate speech and much hand waving. This was thoroughly enjoyable even without a knowledge of the content. I think I am in love with all Italians. At no stage did I feel anything but a bonus in the bilingual nature of the Congress.

Massimo Polidoro’s interview of Randi was the Saturday evening’s entertainment. We were treated to archival footage of Randi’s career, questions direct to the man himself, and tributes from Richard Wiseman, Ray Hyman and Joe Nickell. What a wonderful career. It is well worth reflecting on the influence one man can have on the thinking of a significant proportion of the world through his own words and those of the skeptical organisations he has inspired.

Global perspectives

Sunday’s sessions were devoted to looking at skepticism from a global perspective. I had marked this with

less enthusiasm than the rest of the sessions when reading the program in advance. I was wrong. It had the most profound effect on my thinking in terms of the Australian Skeptics and our role in the world. I will have a great deal more to say on this and so it will form an article of its own.



The author lunching with Alejandro Borgo, Argentina, Ian Rowland, England, Barry Karr, USA, Luis Gamez, Spain.

It will also greatly influence everything I do and say in the Australian Skeptics for a long time. I will just summarise a little of what happened here. Under the Chairmanship of Barry Karr, Executive Director of CSICOP, USA, we heard people from Germany, the UK, Italy, Argentina and Spain tell us of the negative impact of the word 'skeptic' and the behaviour of some skeptics in the public arena.

Sergio Della Sala, Professor of Neuroscience at the University of Edinburgh, warned us of the Seven Sins of Skepticism in a talk he titled *A (bombastic) Rant*. Here's fodder for debate. How many are typical of members of the Australian Skeptics?

Sin the First: Pride and a patronising and condescending tone.

Sin the Second: Scholarly Impropriety. We should expect the same level of peer review of our own activities that we ask of the believers.

Sin the Third: Inbreeding and inaccuracy — which comes about from constantly drawing on our own skeptical literature rather than going out and doing it ourselves.

Sin the Fourth: Spraffing* about science. *Scottish word for 'chewing the fat'. We should write less, write better and avoid triviality. (Oops, hope he doesn't see this article.)

Sin the Fifth: Omnipotence. Claiming 'it is already explained by what is known.' Much of it isn't.

Sin the Sixth: Initiated Bias and Authority Bias. We tend to accept things written by our own and reject them if written by one of 'them'.

Sin the Seventh: Haziness in our message. Beware of mixing science and technology and being linked to industry, especially the pharmaceutical industry. We are about method, not sources.

During the next session on alternative health, from Russia we heard how skepticism is based around pseudo-physics in that secular state. So the many miraculous cures are touted in terms drawn from physics. In deeply religious countries like



Prof Mona Abousenna from Egypt

Spain and Argentina, such claims are delivered as miracles and attributed to God. In China, the basis for the still prevalent witch doctors is in herbal and traditional medicines, but we were warned to be very careful to separate the rural Chinese herbal medicine claims from those of the more educated Chinese who often mix the herbal and 'western' traditions. The latter may lead some major advances, while the pseudoscientific practices of the witch doctors are a major cause for concern. From Egypt we heard about the enormous difficulties of even asking questions in an Islamic society.

Something Mona Abousenna, Head of English at Ain Shams University, Cairo, said, gave me reason for a sudden reflection on what makes Australia such a great place for a skeptical organisation to really have an impact. She said that 'beliefs in paranormal phenomena are a symbol of civilisation's backwardness.' She talked about the lack of religious liberation allowing free thinking which requires a religious reformation first. We have had ours — centuries ago.

To be truly skeptical, there is a need for religious behaviour and way of thinking to be separated from daily life. In the Middle East, these are totally enmeshed. The traditions

enable belief without question and hence the belief in contradictory events is not a problem. They are simply not questioned. The education system and family enshrines this way of thinking and accepting without question, from birth.

Abousenna is a female defending rationalism in an environment which is antagonistic not only to what she is saying, but also to the fact she is a woman saying it. She risks her life by saying things we would not even consider controversial. I was unable to stop reflecting on the difference between her role and mine as women making a public stand for rational thinking. I have it so easy and she has it so hard. She has risen to the top of my most-admired list!

Conclusion

As a result of these sessions, I reflected on what had been said by people from that very first dinner, through many formal and informal meetings between, to these final riveting sessions on skepticism in many countries, and came to the conclusion that there are many reasons why we, in the Australian Skeptics, are in a unique position to lead the world in presenting an new voice of skepticism — a positive, uplifting voice. As an organisation, there are many indications we have already started that. I will be writing more on this topic — be warned!

In only three days my thinking had undergone radical changes. CICAP, the Italian organisers should be congratulated on a truly amazing congress. I was honoured to represent the Australian Skeptics and duly presented CICAP with our latest CD of *The Skeptic* and *The Great Water Diving CD*, while handing out Australian Skeptics pens to all and sundry. Please let me represent you at a World Congress again!



The Paranormal Strikes Back:

how I was sued for being a Psychic Criminal

Recounting a rather scary experience for a Skeptic.



Martin Bridgstock is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Science at Griffith University. He does not encourage his students to throw eggs at critics.

Skepticism is about investigating claims of the paranormal. Skeptics have a range of intellectual and practical tools which, usually, enable them to make sense of the paranormal in natural ways. Sometimes, though, the paranormal can turn and bite. If it does, you may find yourself in a kind of paranoid world, where the truth is turned on its head.

My nightmare began one Friday afternoon in 2004. I was at work, and had been checking references in the University library. When I returned to my office, a small message had appeared by my door. I get these all the time. Usually they are from students seeking special treatment, help or extensions on essay deadlines. This was different, though. It was from a senior constable, inviting me to phone her about the service of a summons.

Being summoned

Summons? What had I done? My knees went rubbery. The worst legal trouble I've ever faced is a speeding fine. Why would the police be issuing me with a summons? I called a friendly solicitor, who advised me to receive the summons and see what it was about. I phoned the police-woman, who told me it was a civil

matter. The police were just serving the document. She read bits of the summons to me. I couldn't grasp its meaning. Nor, apparently, could she. "Yadda Yadda Yadda," was her summary of parts of it. So I headed to the police station on the weekend, and collected the document.

Hands trembling, I took the complaint and read it. Then I read it again. It seemed to have no connection with anything in the real world. My name was at the top all right, except that I was named as a Professor. Let's call the complainant Petra Crank. She lived in a nearby city, and I didn't know her. Two women were named as my co-conspirators: I didn't know them, either.

Assorted boxes were ticked, indicating that Petra was frightened that I would assault or do bodily injury to her, destroy or damage her property, or procure other people to do the same. What a terrible person I must be. The detail followed.

The case against

The complaints were, apparently that I had stolen a mass of documents including statutory declarations, police photographs and trade marks. What's more, I had arranged for more thefts to be made. This wasn't all. Apparently I had also

The Paranormal strikes back

broken and entered her premises and car, and stolen yet more documents. Worst of all, I had arranged an assault. Apparently I had induced students or friends to throw eggs at her from a moving vehicle. She had been hit in the right kidney. All the complaints were jammed together, laced with exclamation marks. Here are a couple of samples, to capture the flavour:

** STOLEN STATUTORY DECLARATIONS & DOCUMENTS, POLICE PHOTOGRAPHS DRAWN DESIGNS, GRAPHICS, RIGHTS UNDER SEAL & TRADE MARKS SERIES!!! ARRANGED TO HAVE OTHER DOCUMENTS UNDER SEAL STOLEN*

and

**ARRANGED ASSAULT — HAD STUDENTS & OR FRIENDS THROW EGGS AT ME FROM A MOVING VEHICLE —HIT IN RIGHT KIDNEY*

Exactly what Petra was doing with police photographs was not at all clear. Nor was it clear how she knew that I had students throw eggs at her: did I give bonus marks for a hit? Universities offer courses in weird subjects, but egg-throwing was one I'd never heard of.

Still shaken, I contemplated my options. This was a civil case, but the content of the complaints was clearly criminal. Either I was a one-man crime wave, or there was something very odd about my accuser. No times or dates were given for these events, so I couldn't check my diary and see where I had been.

What was going on? Why was I being accused of crimes by someone I didn't even know? I felt sick. Luckily, I shared my problem with a friendly manager in the Faculty of Science. She looked thoughtful. "Yes, don't you remember," she said "earlier this year I think it was. She wrote pages of stuff about you. I sent it all to the



The author speaking at the Skeptics Convention

legal department. Something about aliens and President Bush."

I made a mental connection. I had been contacted by a bevy of nuts when I had sought publicity for my Skepticism, Science and the Paranormal course the year before¹. The University had helped me with the publicity, fixing up press and radio interviews across Australia. This sounded like the latest — and nastiest — nutcase surfacing as a result. Well, if I had acquired this problem as part of my legitimate work, maybe the University would help me with legal representation. It was worth a shot.

Legal representation

I trotted down to our legal department. They had just moved offices, and I accosted a bewildered-looking bloke surrounded by cardboard boxes. I explained my problem and he was uncertain: it looked personal, he thought. Still, he'd put a case to

the Pro-Vice Chancellor, and see what he would do. It was all a bit out of his league: he was more used to rentals, consultancy contracts and the like.

Unknown to me, wheels were beginning to turn. The faculty manager sent an email supporting my position. The Dean phoned, urging strongly that I be supported. Another administrator, who had talked to Petra, gave the lawyer her opinions. And help came. A reputable firm of Gold Coast solicitors was hired to help me². So when I went for the preliminary hearing — the Meeting, it's called — I was in the company of two tall, very intelligent young women lawyers, an associate and a clerk. If the case actually had to be fought, I was told, a barrister would be brought in to argue my case. We worked through some preliminary questions. I signed papers denying all knowledge of the crimes and allegations and we chatted about what would happen.

In court

We sat for a couple of hours: our court was running late. And I became aware that Petra Crank was sitting just a few metres away. She was alone, armed with bags full of documents and files. Apart from deep-set blazing eyes she looked pretty normal. I took the opportunity to look at the documents Petra had sent earlier. I read them twice, and still couldn't figure them out. As far as I could gather, I was accused of training student mediums to take over her thoughts. "AGAINST MY WILL!!!" Petra emphasised. (Well, it would be, wouldn't it?) Then there was verbiage about the stealing of documents. The Father, Son and Holy Ghost headed a list of people, with Petra in second spot. (I wasn't on that list: I think it was good guys only). Sherry Turkle, a distinguished American academic, was mentioned,

to no purpose I could fathom. Breaches of Contract, Boston University³ . . . what on earth did it all mean? I was chilled to note that a young woman colleague of mine was mentioned as well. I hoped she wouldn't be dragged into this.

Then we were called to the court, and in we went. I hid behind my solicitor, peeking out while she explained that there was no chance of mediation. The magistrate was a no-nonsense bloke. He heard my solicitor out, then turned his gaze on Petra. He advised her that her action was based on a misconstrual of the law. It was marked on the file that it had only been accepted because she insisted. He told her that if she lost, as she probably would, she would be facing large bills. He advised her to withdraw and seek legal advice.

Petra was not happy. She had evidence she said. Boston University. Professor Bridgstock was a known parapsychologist⁴. But yes, she would seek legal advice and withdraw the case. Apparently on the way out she gave me a glare that would have melted metal. I was unmelted, not being a psychic. And that was that. I shook hands with my lawyers, and headed back to work. Neither I nor my colleague have heard from Petra since.

A result

The obvious point that comes out of all this is that it could have been a great deal worse.

My University stood by me, and the magistrate squashed the ridiculous charges very promptly. Still, it was nerve-wracking, and cost hours of my time that could have been spent doing something useful. And if I hadn't been a member of the University, the cost of the lawyers would have been substantial.

Of course, nut-cases have rights under the law, just like anyone else. On the other hand, it is worrying that their obsessions can be translated into legal action which can require highly expensive lawyers to rebut. I did not pay for my defence,

the University did, and that money comes from taxpayers and students. My own losses were minor.

The perils of quackery unrestrained

How much worse could it have been? Well, contemplate the case of Alfred Russel Wallace, the co-discoverer of evolution. In a weak moment, he accepted a challenge from a flat-earther named Hampden, who offered £500 to anyone who could prove the Earth's surface was curved. Wallace and Hampden agreed a test, taking sightings over a long straight canal. Wallace won, and pocketed the £500. Then, for many years he was plagued by Hampden's abuse, denunciations and threats. His wife received letters saying things like:

If your infernal thief of a husband is brought home some day on a hurdle with every bone in his head smashed to pulp, you will know the reason. Do you tell him from me he is a lying infernal thief and as sure as his name is Wallace he never dies in his bed.

Wallace struck back with all the legal means he could, but Hampden leavened craziness with cunning, and the persecution went on for nearly two decades, costing Wallace many times the original sum of money⁵. He regretted he had ever accepted the challenge.

The wash-up

Recently, my case entered what I hope is its final phase. A psychiatrist called from a Gold Coast hospital. He was startled when I mentioned Petra's name immediately — who else could it be? I filled him in on the background, and we talked a little. I gathered she was under medication, and would probably be out of circulation for months. Relief all round: Petra was getting the treatment she needed, and I would not be bothered any more.

What moral should we draw from this? Skepticism is important, and spreading the key ideas is not only valuable, it is usually enjoyable as

well. Still, perhaps the Scooby-Doo slogan is appropriate: be afraid, be sort of afraid. Or at least, be a little bit careful. Paranormalists may be simply people with mistaken ideas. I suspect, though, that there is a continuum among believers. Some are fairly normal, some are weird, and some are much worse than that. Although the paranormal is our quarry, it sometimes turns and bites. And its teeth can be rabid, as Wallace found out.

Notes

1. I wrote about some of these earlier (Bridgstock 2004)
2. Short, Punch and Greatorix, they were called. I especially liked the 'Punch' bit.
3. I have never been to Boston University, nor had any contact with anyone there.
4. Obviously, I'd dispute this. How can I be a parapsychologist when I am unconvinced of the very existence of psychic phenomena? And I don't hold the rank of Professor, much as I'd like to.
5. Wallace (1905) has given a good account of this, and Shermer (2001) summarises the main points very well.

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Fractured Fundamentalists

Rats in the Ranks and Bats in the Belfry

A close look at the disparate elements of the "Religious Right".

One problem with the term 'Christian fundamentalism' is that it conveys the impression of a monolithic ideology and a correspondingly monolithic political organisation. Another widespread opinion about fundamentalist political action in this country is that it is highly successful, as evidenced by restrictions on the rights of gays and increased levels of censorship.

Without wishing to underestimate the significance of the threat, I will argue here that both of these impressions are exaggerated and that Australia's Religious Right is

(a) seriously fragmented on a number of different levels; and

(b) unlikely in the longer run to achieve any of its major goals.

'But wait a minute', I hear you say. 'What about all the fundos in Federal Parliament, and the rise of Family First, and all the nut-cases whose letters I read in the paper every day, not to mention talk-back radio?' Yes, I agree that there are a lot of them out there, and that they can be very noisy indeed, but to what extent do these people represent a powerful political movement?

As our Prime Minister is supposed to have said, where politics is concerned, disunity is death. So exactly how united is this Christian fundamentalist 'bloc'? Let's begin with that litmus test of commitment to true fundamentalism, namely creationism.

Creationism

It would be difficult to conceive of a more divided house than the modern creationist movement — and we all know what happens to houses divided against themselves. The Young Earth Creationists (YEC), who believe that the earth was created within the last 6,000-10,000 years, spend much of their time attacking Old Earth Creationists (OEC), who don't share this belief. YECs also enjoy attacking each other, as witness the longstanding hostility existing between Australia's two premier creationist groups, Answers in Genesis and Creation Research.

And when they run out of nasty things to say to each other, YECs start having a go at the Pope, whom some people might mistakenly regard as a natural ally of the Reli-



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gious Right. But you see, in 1996, Pope John Paul II 'got it wrong' by officially defending both the evidence for evolution and the consistency of that theory with Catholic religious doctrine. Some glorious YEC effusions followed the papal pronouncement:

The Pope's declaration that Charles Darwin's theory of evolution 'was more than a hypothesis' ... is an insult to all true Christians. Firstly, Charles Darwin did not come up with this so-called theory ... He had no original scientific data ... Scientific population statistics disprove evolution, yet equate to our current world population based on just 4,300 years [of human existence] ... Most scientists agree [that 'special scientific creationism'] is a far superior model ... One can only come to the conclusion that the Pope is ill-informed, has taken leave of his senses, or both. (R.P. Holt, letter in Melbourne Herald Sun, 31 October 1996)

As well as providing a good example of internecine warfare on its own account, creationism is the elephant in the Religious Right's living-room. It is a belief that can neither be generally trumpeted, for fear of alienating public support, nor openly denied, for fear of alienating ultraconservative Christian support. Leaders of emerging groups such as the Family First Party should always be asked to state publicly and clearly where they stand on the issue of creationism.

Protestants vs Catholics

Alliances between fundamentalist Protestants and conservative Catholics always remind me of the Nazi-Soviet Pact: there might be short-term tactical advantages to such arrangements but they're never going to work in the long run. Rev Jerry Falwell of America's Moral Majority discovered this when he tried to fashion a political organisation out of far right-wing Protestants, Catholics and Jews. The horses in this troika have centuries of discord and bitterness behind

them and simply won't pull together in the same direction for very long.

This problem has bedevilled the Australian Religious Right from its beginnings in the 1960s and 1970s. Protestant doctrinal purists have been quick to condemn Fred Nile's Festival of Light and similar groups for their 'compromise with error' ie their accommodating attitude towards the Catholic Church. One pastor even felt that members of organisations like the Festival were what the Bible called 'workers of darkness: from such turn away'. Perhaps feeling slightly unwelcome, conservative Catholics have rarely been prominent in the Australian movement and have sometimes expressed concern about certain of its policy positions eg regarding the treatment of asylum seekers. (They are, however, very strong on issues like abortion and censorship.)

Some individuals manage to walk the Protestant-Catholic tightrope with a fair degree of skill, but these people are quite exceptional. Bill Muehlenberg, a Baptist, has held senior positions in the Catholic-dominated Australian Family Association for many years. But from a conservative Catholic viewpoint even he fails the 'litmus test', being a firm creationist, and I suspect he's a tiny bit shaky on the role of the Virgin Mary, too. Perhaps someone could ask him.

Pentecostals vs The Rest

Politicians anxious to increase their appeal to the Christian community as a whole should be wary of focusing solely on Pentecostal churches, as speaking in tongues is regarded with disdain by a large proportion of evangelicals. Many of them would join with respected preacher Dr G. Campbell Morgan in describing the Pentecostal movement as 'the last vomit of Satan'. Dr R. A. Torrey even claimed that the movement was 'emphatically not of God, and founded by a Sodomite'.

Another leading commentator, H. A. Ironside, denounced Pentecostal practices as 'disgusting ... delusions and insanities.' Their meetings were

'pandemoniums where exhibitions worthy of a madhouse or a collection of howling dervishes are held night after night'. The meetings caused 'a heavy toll of lunacy and infidelity'. (Vinson Synan *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition* [2nd ed., 1997], 146)

While these comments were made many years ago, most Christians still regard the more extravagant manifestations of Pentecostalism with suspicion and even contempt. I remember once speaking with a devout Baptist woman who suddenly formed the (mistaken) opinion that I was a Pentecostalist. She turned white, stammered something about 'works of the Devil' and scurried from the room — of course, it could have been my aftershave. I have since noticed that mentioning Hillsong or one of the other large Pentecostal congregations in gatherings of more moderate Christians will always elicit a loud groan.

With regard to the Pentecostal-based Family First Party (FFP), I simply note that its performance in the recent Federal election was greeted less than ecstatically by the Religious Right press. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, the party was actually expected to do much better than it did. Secondly, its major success in landing a Victorian Senate seat was due to what many Christians regard as an unprincipled preference deal. Thirdly, it will not be forgiven for 'undermining' Fred Nile's Christian Democratic Party (CDP) campaign in NSW. Fourthly, no-one yet knows how strongly it is prepared to push core issues like trying to ban abortion and having creationism taught in schools (the party is viewed by some fundamentalists as especially 'weak' on the evolution issue).

And lastly, FFP is seen as a mob of Pentecostals — enough said!

Calvinists vs Arminians

'Calvinists vs Arminians? What, free will and predestination and the rest of it? Surely that was all sorted out ages ago!'

Not for these folks it wasn't. Any grouping of evangelical Christians

Fractured Fundamentalists

which includes some conservative Presbyterians and other Calvinists is lumbered with a gaping ideological fissure, akin in some ways to the Protestant/Catholic fault-line. You can always paper over these cracks, but because they involve a bedrock level of division and mistrust they tend, more or less gradually, to subvert long-term alliances.

This was brought home to me recently when I read a book review in the evangelical weekly *New Life* (9 September 2004). This journal has been an outspoken supporter of Religious Right causes and organisations for many years. The review of something called *Why I am not a Calvinist* was written by one Bill James, and I was immediately struck by this paragraph:

It is impossible to ignore Calvin's importance, but that doesn't mean we have to like him. In fact, a few years ago when my wife and I had some hours to spend in Geneva ... we toyed with the idea of going out to the cemetery to spit on his grave.

The review went on to complain about the way in which 'Calvinists manipulate language to evade the plain teaching of Scripture' and 'evangelise with their fingers crossed behind their backs, because they are holding out a universal offer of salvation which in fact only [a limited number of people known as "the elect"] can in fact accept'. James concluded that the book incontrovertibly demonstrated that 'Calvinism is irrational, immoral and unscriptural'.

Many *New Life* readers undoubtedly agreed with every word of James' review, but the Board of Directors had a fit and prominently featured 'an unqualified apology' in the very next issue:

... This newspaper has never taken an exclusive denominational approach and has consistently respected the differing theological views of its readers and contributors [N.B. as long as their views are neither 'liberal' nor 'Romish']. On 9 September a book review was published with statements that were not

within the required standards that have been established by New Life over many years. One point that especially offended readers was that Calvin's influence was totally unfortunate in the history of the Christian church ... [T]here will be greater care taken in the future.

(*New Life*, 16 September 2004)

While these critical differences in religious doctrine can be downplayed in the short term, and while a political movement has no real power, they are always bubbling away beneath the surface and tend to manifest themselves at the most embarrassing and unexpected times. Basically, ultraconservative Calvinists despise ultraconservative non-Calvinists and temporary political alliances over issues like bioethics and gay rights will not alter this fact.

Organisational conflict

For its size, Australia has far too many Religious Right groups. They maintain a surface politeness towards each other, but there are many personal and group rivalries and animosities. The emerging CDP vs FFP struggle, mentioned above, may be seen as one of these. Broadly, however, many conservative evangelicals tend to view the CDP and associated Festival of Light as old hat, the Australian Family Association as insufficiently Protestant, Salt Shakers as too strident, creationist bodies as too narrow and the Pentecostal-based groups as too ... well, as too Pentecostal.

Jim Wallace's Australian Christian Lobby (ACL) is currently trying to rectify this situation. It has recently advised its supporters that it has now:

... seen the realisation of its three-year objective, [namely] that [the 2004 Federal] election should see the Christian vote and opinion acknowledged ... [ACL] is playing an essential role in the return to more Godly government. However, all this has created opportunities that we must be prepared and able to take if we are to ... realise the victory for the

long term. ('ACL Supporters: Are you committed to consolidating Christian influence in politics?', email dated 22 October 2004)

Wallace goes on to say that he plans to move the ACL's National Office to a more prominent position near Parliament House, Canberra; establish offices in each state; and increase his staff and publishing capabilities. If he secures the finance necessary to achieve these objectives, the ACL will become Australia's pre-eminent Religious Right organisation, far better-led, better-connected and better-resourced than any of the others. Whether Wallace can actually pull this off remains to be seen, but of one thing he can be sure: he won't be getting much help from like-minded groups with their own financial needs and priorities.

Other issues

When they're not tangling over central doctrinal issues, members of the Religious Right happily squabble about a whole range of minor questions, just like any normal, non-God-ordained political party or group. Should women be pastors of churches? Depends on which brand of fundoo you're talking to. Should children be allowed to read Harry Potter? Ditto. Is it possible in good conscience to vote for the ALP or the Greens? Strangely, some very conservative Christians will answer 'Yes'. Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ*, while initially well-received in fundamentalist quarters, is now coming under critical scrutiny for its reliance on specifically Catholic sources:

... 35-40% of [Gibson's] material does not come from any canonical gospel, but from traditional Roman Catholic portrayals. In six or seven major scenes the material is from the mystical writings of Anna Emmerich (1774-1824), a Roman Catholic mystic (and anti-Semite). (New Life, 26 August 2004)

When you think about it, it would be very strange indeed if fundamentalist Protestants, in particular, could ever be persuaded to march in

lockstep. These people believe in a personal relationship with God, unfettered by the injunctions and interpretations of church, state and even their best friends. You're supposed to establish your approach to issues, including political ones, by praying about them. Does that sound like much of a recipe for unanimity?

Achieving the goals

A 'modern' Religious Right has been operating in Australia since the early 1960s, emerging from its embryonic phase a decade later with the establishment of bodies like Fred Nile's Festival of Light. What has the movement, with its thousands of active supporters, achieved in that time?

To help put this into perspective, ask yourself these questions. Are abortions and divorces reasonably easy to obtain in Australia? Have the social positions of women and homosexuals significantly improved in this country over the past 35 years and — on the whole, and taking setbacks into account — do they continue to improve? Is evolution taught as fact in the vast majority of educational institutions? With the exception of child pornography — which, incidentally, was banned as the result of media and police campaigns rather than the feeble and belated protests of the Religious Right — are censorship restrictions considerably lighter today than they were 35 years ago? Is the practical situation

regarding refusal of medical treatment and even euthanasia rather more humane today than it was in the 1960s?

I suggest that the answer to all these questions is: Yes. In saying this, I am not underestimating the difficulties still being faced in all of these areas, nor am I asserting that the battles have been won forever. However, if the Religious Right had had their way, abortion would have been virtually or completely banned, divorce rendered extremely difficult, the status of women and the level of censorship left as they stood in the 1950s, homosexual behaviour by either sex strictly prohibited, creationism taught in government schools, and as for the refusal of medical treatment and euthanasia ...

As matters stand, however, fundamentalist and other ultraconservative Christians have made little or no progress in these areas, and don't look like making any significant gains in the foreseeable future. This is mainly because what they are really fighting is the nature of modern life, in other words, a 'social' or 'socio-historical' rather than a purely political enemy.

Conclusion

Fundamentalist Christianity will continue to influence the political attitudes of a small minority of Australians, something around the five per cent mark if election results are

anything to go by. This is enough to gain occasional parliamentary representation in houses elected by proportional voting systems, although the faces keep changing: support used to flow mainly towards the Christian Democratic Party, flirted briefly with One Nation, and may now be shifting to the Family First Party. Sometimes, parties of this sort may exercise the balance of power, although in practice there are strict limitations on the amount of mischief they can make. They need to gain the support of a major party for any particular measure of theirs, and they know that oblivion awaits any politician deemed by the public as 'irresponsible'. It's really quite amazing how little Fred Nile MLC has achieved in a parliamentary career lasting over twenty years.

While it's always worth keeping an eye on these people, their track record is generally unimpressive. Christian fundamentalism in Australia is not the monolithic force which it is often claimed to be, nor are many of its political manifestations greatly to be feared. Even within the general Christian community they form a minority group and, as far as I can judge, are held in rather low regard. Despite the aspirations of Jim Wallace and his friends, the major political objectives of the Religious Right should remain unrealised.



Theological Dispute

Good Samaritan

Stop! Don't jump!
Well, there's so much to live for!
Well ... are you religious or atheist?
Me too! Are you Christian or Jewish?
Me too! Are you Catholic or Protestant?
Me too! Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?
Wow! Me too! Are you Baptist Church of God, or Baptist Church of the Lord?
Me too! Are you Original Baptist Church of God, or Reformed Baptist Church of God?
Me too! Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1879,
or Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915?
Then die, heretic scum!
Pushing him off the bridge

Man About to Leap Off Bridge

Why not?
Like what?
I'm religious.
I'm a Christian!
Protestant.
Baptist.
Baptist Church of God.
Reformed Baptist Church of God.
Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915!

The False Bits From Humbug

Delving deeper into dodgy arguments

During Jef's long-service leave from Griffith University in the second semester of 2003, he extensively re-wrote and expanded a book originally written by both Jef and Theo. Our book has been known by its short title of *Humbug* in its various manifestations and revisions, and portions of our book, and aspects of its history and development have now featured in four issues of *the Skeptic* (five including this one). We offered the book to a major publisher in April of 2004. It was looked upon with favour, and we expected a successful outcome pending further negotiations.

But at this point (May 2004) Griffith University's Office for Commercialisation asserted Griffith copyright over 85% of the book (the proportion written by Jef — largely during his long-service leave). We have been in dispute with the Office for Commercialization ever since, and cannot publish our book while the dispute continues. The details of the dispute are fascinating, but it is not appropriate to canvass those details here — except to say that we dispute any claim by the Griffith Office for Commercialisation to any of our work. Our arguments turn on many grounds, but the Office for Commercialisation (at the time of writing) concedes only one: prior publication. This is where our association with *the Skeptic* has paid off handsomely.

The initial "piece of the action" claimed by the Office for Commercialisation was 56% of the net. That is, 56 cents in every dollar earned through future sales of the book (after costs). That figure was the "publisher's return" (of 2/3) on the 85% of the manuscript contributed by Jef. However when the OFC discovered that chunks of *Humbug* had been published inter alia in Jef's and then Jef and Theo's articles in *the Skeptic*, they recognised that they could hardly claim copyright over material that had already been published in this way.

After some more "comic-opera" argy-bargy, the OFC dropped their claim for a "piece of the action" to 28%. This figure was not justified with any quantitative evidence, so we can only assume that the OFC is engaged in a diminishing series of claims based on an infinite regression. As each new issue of *the Skeptic* is published, it apparently triggers an iteration in the series. Each iteration leads to a halving of the percentage claimed. So after this article is published, we assume their claim will halve to 14%, and thereafter to 7%, 3.5%, 1.75% and so on. In a few years or so, *Humbug* will once again belong to the creators of *Humbug* (except for that niggling and ever-diminishing remnant which will approach, but never actually reach zero).



Jef Clark is a lecturer at Griffith University and Theo Clark is a science teacher. They are descended from common ancestors, in Jef's case one fewer than Theo.

So, without further introduction, we present to you, more of *Humbug* which will forever remain out of the clutches of the commercialisers. Our selection this time is the subset of fallacies in *Humbug* which begin with the word “False”— hence the title of the article.

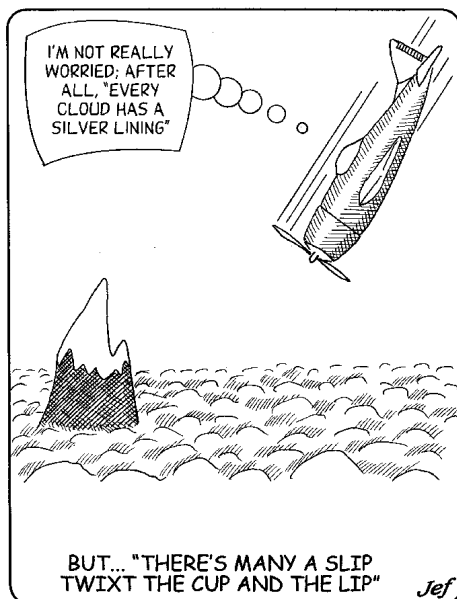
False Analogy

Other Terms and/or Related Concepts

Misuse of analogy; metaphor as argument; cliché thinking.

Description

A false analogy occurs when an advocate presents an example of a phenomenon and implies that the example either proves or compellingly illustrates something about another phenomenon. An example might be an argument that access to firearms should not be severely restricted, as access to kitchen knives is not severely restricted and yet like firearms they are sometimes used to kill innocent people. This analogy deliberately ignores critical differences between guns and kitchen knives. Such an example might have some value as a figurative analogy (the purpose of a figurative analogy is illustrative and metaphorical) but it is obviously flawed if it is intended as a literal analogy (advanced as a proof).



Example

Glenn Tropicana is an investment adviser and he is giving a sales pitch to a couple of prospective clients, Sheila and Dennis. Glenn is trying to persuade them to sign up for a regular monthly contribution to an investment scheme. The scheme may or may not be suspect — that is not the issue here. During his spiel, Glenn states: “You know what happens with a steady drip of water into a bucket... before you know it the bucket’s full. If you invest only \$200 a month, in no time you will have a great nest-egg”. Dennis replies: “that’s all very well, but what if there’s a hole in the bucket that we don’t know about”?

Comment

Glenn has met his match in Dennis. Glenn attempted to use his analogy of water dripping into a bucket as a compelling illustration of the wisdom of making a regular contribution to the scheme he is promoting. However Dennis is clearly a critical thinker and a skeptic. He recognised the flaw in the analogy. When he recognised the flaw he could have simply said “investments are a lot more complex than water dripping into a bucket — you’ll need to present me with a better argument”. However he chose to use Glenn’s analogy against him by extending it, and introducing a confounding variable — the possibility of a leak in the bucket.

A common problem with the use of analogy to support an argument is that another analogy can usually be found to support the opposite position. For example, there are many metaphors, proverbs, clichés, traditional homespun sayings etc in our own culture which seemingly contradict each other. Consider a situation where someone may try to make a case for increasing the number of workers in a project team by citing the venerable proverb “many hands make light work”. The proverb seems to be self-evidently true, and supports the notion that an increase in the size of the team would be a reasonable position to take. However someone else could use a plausible counter-

proverb to support the opposite point of view, *viz*: “too many cooks spoil the broth”. The latter proverb invokes a common experience of some large teams — separate agendas, lack of coordination, “too many chiefs, not enough Indians”.

The fact that many proverbs are directly contradicted by other proverbs is an indication that reliance on proverbs or analogies in decision-making or resolution of issues is fraught with danger. We might (for example) be presented with an exciting once-in-a-lifetime business opportunity. We mull over the decision. A series of proverbs come to mind... opportunity only knocks once; make hay while the sun shines; seize the day; strike while the iron is hot. We invest. We go broke. Reflecting on our financial disaster, another set of proverbs comes to mind... look before you leap; act in haste, repent at leisure; haste makes waste; there’s many a slip twixt the cup and the lip; don’t count your chickens before they hatch.

False Attribution

Other Terms and/or Related Concepts

Unreliable source; fabricated source (also *cf* appeal to authority).

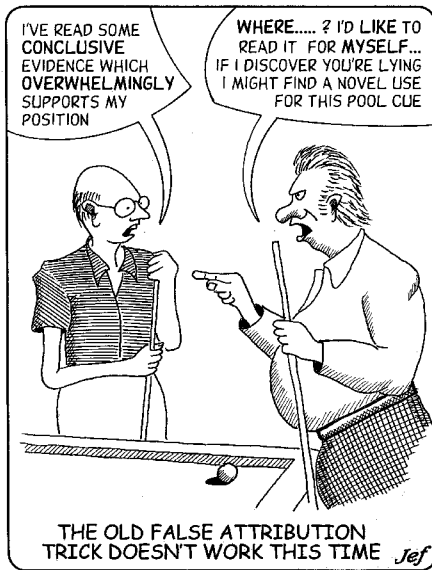
Description

This flaw in reasoning occurs when an advocate appeals to a marginally relevant, irrelevant, unqualified, unidentified, biased or even non-existent source to support a claim. The advocate may in some cases have a “half-hearted” degree of faith in the alleged source (he or she may have a dim recollection of having read something somewhere about the topic), or he/she may deliberately fake knowledge of a source which he/she knows doesn’t exist.

Example

Simon Murgut and Jenny Peristalsis are selling home-made herbal extracts at the local market. They have a sign at their stall advertising a “special slimming mixture”. The main ingredient is paspalum juice.

They are challenged by Kevin Jaded, a skeptical bystander. He says: “how do you know it works?” Simon immediately says: “there has been a recent study published in the *Medical Journal of Patagonia* which shows that eating four grams or more of paspalum each day results in the loss of up to 500 grams of body fat per fortnight”.



Comment

If Simon did in fact read such an article, and if he is truthfully reporting the findings, he is not guilty of false attribution. However, if he only recalls that Jenny once mentioned about a month or two ago that she had read somewhere in a South American journal that eating some paspalum each day results in the loss of some body fat, then he is guilty of false attribution. In this case, he is deliberately misleading Kevin about his own degree of certainty about the supposed “facts”. If however, Simon is just inventing the reference, then he is guilty of the most reprehensible form of false attribution — deliberate deception through the citation of a fake source.

The deliberate or inadvertent fabrication of source information is a common feature of vigorous discussion. It is a tactic often used in desperation by an advocate when he or she feels that the argument is about to be lost. The seeker after truth will

often be assured by the advocate that he or she has read some compelling facts about the topic under discussion. Facts which unequivocally support the advocate’s position. The initial response of a seeker after truth to apparent dissembling of this kind should be a courteous request for a specific citation. This request should not be in the form of a provocative challenge if the skeptic wishes to maintain a positive emotional climate as the discussion proceeds. In making the request, the point should be made that “going directly to the source” is always more reliable than a second-hand report.

The skeptical seeker after truth will not reject the claims *a priori*. Nor will he or she accept the claims *a priori*. He or she will reserve judgment on the issue, and will ask the advocate for the details of the source — with a view for reading it for him or herself. Note that this request for a citation so the skeptic can read the alleged information for him or herself will not usually resolve the question on the spot, so the question may remain open. However the more dedicated debunker may decide to pursue the issue beyond the particular discussion as a matter of principle. If the skeptical opponent subsequently finds out that false attribution has taken place, he or she could take the trouble to contact the advocate (perhaps even several months after the initial discussion), and would then point out that the advocate’s source doesn’t exist, or the interpretation was in error.

False Cause; Correlation Error

Other Terms and/or Related Concepts

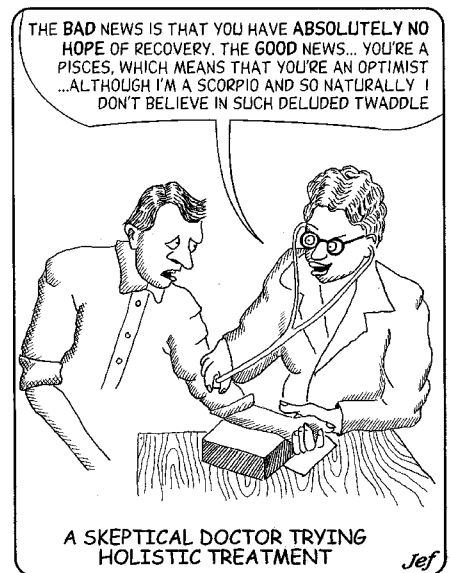
Post hoc ergo propter hoc (after this, therefore because of this); false association; superstitious belief.

Description

This flaw is the result of the common human tendency to associate events which occur in sequence and to assume that there is a causal link. When an advocate claims that there is a causal relationship between two

events, he or she needs to give a plausible reason beyond simple association. There are two possible “levels” of false association:

1. The relationship may simply be apparent rather than real (eg “coincidence”). In this case the error is a “false cause” because there is no causal relationship.
2. There may be an actual link, but the claimed “direction” of cause and effect is in error. In this case the flaw is “correlation error” because the cause and effect are reversed, or indirectly related.



Examples

- 1. False Cause:** Terry Towelling is complaining to his friend Jody Farnarkle about his lack of success in the job market “the last three job interviews I’ve had, I didn’t get hired... it’s a real puzzle because I would have thought I’m a shoo-in. But I was thinking about it, and I’ve just realized that all three interviews were on a Friday. I’m not normally the superstitious type, but I’m never going to an interview on a Friday again”.
- 2. Correlation Error:** Aaron Fibreglass is writing up his report on the link between self esteem and obesity. He concludes: “there was a correlation of 0.8 between morbid obesity and low self esteem. We need to raise the self-esteem of obese people to

help them overcome their weight problem”.

Comment

In the first example, Terry is probably not really convinced about the link between Friday and his lack of success at job interviews. Nevertheless, he is taking no chances, even though he has virtually acknowledged that to take any notice of the day of the week is essentially superstitious rather than rational. Further reflection might have enabled Terry to discover the real problem with Friday interviews — he plays a regular game of social squash on Friday morning and he usually goes to Friday job interviews directly from his squash game without having had a shower. Terry’s error is trivial rather than serious.

However the “false cause” error can have very serious consequences. For example, the false cause error during the European dark ages led to the widespread belief that illness, famine and personal misfortune was caused by black magic and sorcery. Such beliefs led to ‘witch-hunts’ (literally) and unfounded but widely believed accusations of sorcery. The absence of skepticism in communities wallowing in superstition led to the burning to death of innocents falsely accused of witchcraft. In the present day, the false cause error has led (for example) to premature or unnecessary deaths of cancer patients due to diversion from effective treatments (to ineffective or harmful treatments offered by quacks or frauds).

In the second example, Aaron claims low self-esteem causes obesity. However on the evidence presented, causation could be in the opposite direction — obesity could be the cause of low self-esteem. Or both could be caused by a third, unidentified variable. To a skeptical scientist, such a strong correlation between obesity and low self-esteem is potentially of great interest, but a series of sophisticated follow-up studies would be needed to determine the nature of the correlation and the direction of causation.

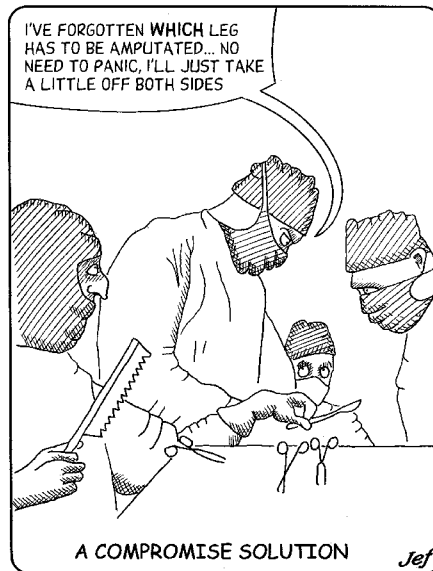
False Compromise

Other Terms and/or Related Concepts

Splitting the difference.

Description

The advocate asserts that because he or she doesn’t understand or accept the opponent’s views, in fairness the two should agree to “split the difference” and agree on a middle position. Such an approach to addressing an issue is more about mollifying the parties to a disagreement, rather than arriving at the truth of the matter.



Example

Jason Typeface and Wolfgang Von Volkswagen are senior bureaucrats in the Department of Justice, and they have been engaged in a protracted discussion on the wording of a sentence in their jointly-authored report on police “stop, question and search” powers. Jason has come to believe that police effectiveness in drug law enforcement is dependent on an absolute power to stop, question and search at their own discretion. Wolfgang believes that any questioning or search of suspects should only take place in the presence of legal representation. They agree to split the difference and the final sentence reads “police may stop and search suspects at their own discretion, but any evidence so ob-

tained cannot be used to prosecute the suspect”.

Comment

It is a safe assumption that neither Wolfgang nor Jason is satisfied with the compromise wording of the sentence. Neither of them actually believes that the stop, question and search policy they have come up with is the best one. Yet the reader of their report might make the assumption that the view expressed is a consensus reached by the authors. To avoid this misperception, Wolfgang and Jason should make it clear in the wording of their report that their conclusion is a compromise rather than a consensus position. Their compromise then would be open, rather than concealed.

There is a more intellectually respectable alternative to an open compromise. Wolfgang and Jason could be quite explicit about their disagreement, and make it clear that they came to different conclusions as a result of their study. They could indicate that they have “agreed to disagree”, and they could state their separate conclusions. This would then leave it up to the decision-makers who read the report to decide on a final policy. This alternative would be the one favoured by the seeker after truth.

If they adopted this approach, both Jason and Wolfgang would preserve their integrity, and they would be free to argue vigorously for their own favoured position. This approach is common in public documents such as reports of parliamentary enquiries, where a “minority report” is commonly included when consensus cannot be reached.

Part of the problem with this issue is the emotional loading associated with the term compromise. In almost all contexts where the word is used, it carries either a positive or negative connotation. In the context of peace talks, industrial negotiations and the like, to compromise is to put aside “selfish” considerations in the interests of a “fair” outcome. In the context of principled decision-making, a person who compromises

is seen as morally deficient. The seeker after truth is always prepared to entertain the possibility of a compromise, but in doing so, he or she will be candid about differences, while putting differences aside in the interests of fostering a pragmatic and workable outcome.

False Dichotomy

Other Terms and/or Related Concepts

Excluded middle; black-and-white reasoning; false dilemma; polarization of debate; forced choice.

Description

The advocate presents an issue as “black and white” when it is in reality “shades of grey”. The reasoning put forward is unjustifiably “all or nothing” rather than subtle and measured. Debates about emotive issues such as euthanasia, GM foods, criminal justice, race relations etc are often polarized in this way.



Example

During an election campaign, the incumbent Attorney-General, Frank Payne appears on television and makes his case for a review of current censorship laws affecting television broadcasting. He states that the review of the laws will be informed by broad community consultation. The interviewer (Barbra Twining) asks Margo Blarneypickle (President

of the Collective for Smashing of Post-Colonial and Patriarchal Oppression) to comment. She states: “there cannot be any censorship imposed by the State...anyone should be able to hear or see anything they like... any level of censorship is oppressive”.

Comment

Margo is portraying the issue as censorship versus “freedom of speech”. She is attempting to put one issue up against the other and she is hoping that her version of the issue prevails in the “contest”. The flawed belief at the core of this strategy is that censorship is “all or nothing”. In fact, the degree and nature of censorship which might be exercised in any society is subject to multiple variables. It is perfectly reasonable for example, for standards of what constitutes obscene or violent material to change over time along a continuum. The debate should be about how far along the continuum and in which direction the standards should shift — not on whether standards should be abandoned or raised to a level of complete repression.

In the present example, and if Barbra were an effective interviewer, she would challenge Margo on her “all-or-nothing” stance and either dismiss it as an unworthy contribution to the debate, or probe her position with examples which would be problematic for her. For example, she could ask her whether she would be in favour of live broadcasts of executions on free-to-air television, or the removal of doors and screens from public toilets. Such challenging examples would be an appropriate use of *reductio ad absurdum* by Barbra to point out that it would be ludicrous to apply Margo’s views without qualification. Such a challenge might provoke Margo and lead to her indignant exit from the debate. But it’s also possible that it would function as a reality check and cause her to modify her position and engage more effectively in the discussion. Whether she leaves or moderates her position, the debate would be more fruitful.

Many individuals are unhappy with ambiguity and complexity. Such individuals prefer to characterize an issue as “black or white”, as they find dealing with nuanced shades of grey unsatisfying or confusing. The seeker after truth, on the other hand, should not attempt to oversimplify any issue in order to bring it to a premature or unjustified resolution. It is much more acceptable in principle to decide that an issue has to remain unresolved, rather than oversimplifying and drawing the wrong conclusion.

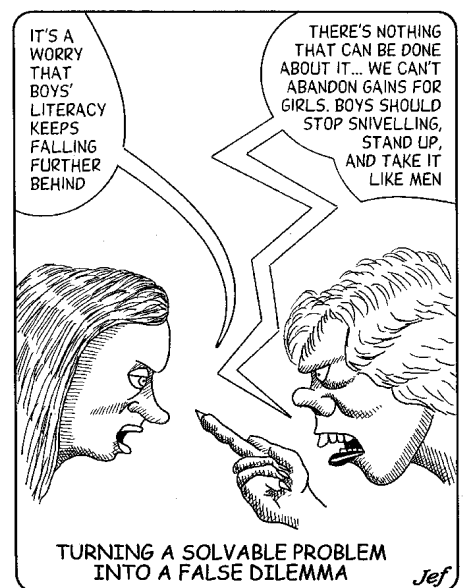
False Dilemma

Other Terms and/or Related Concepts

False linkage (of choices); concocted dilemma.

Description

This is the error of portraying one choice as necessarily excluding another, even though there is no necessary connection. For example, an advocate might make the following statement: “they should solve world poverty before they try to put humans on Mars”. While this may sound superficially plausible, the unstated and bizarre implication is that the advocate believes that if money were not expended on a Mars expedition, it would be diverted to the alleviation of poverty. This is clearly false.



Example

Dr Harry Oversteer is an epidemiologist with an interest in health statistics. He is having a conversation over dinner with Sally Butt, an old school friend. He remarks that men's health generally is in a much poorer state than the health of women in general. He points out that on almost all measures of mortality and morbidity — from suicide to heart disease, men fare significantly worse than women. He speculates on whether there should be more health promotion programs targeted specifically at men to address this anomaly. Sally bristles and forcefully states the following: "It's taken the better part of a century to have women's health taken seriously by a male-dominated medical profession and public policymakers, if we embark on the course you suggest, women's health will take giant strides backwards".

Comment

What Sally is saying, without any evidence or compelling logical reason, is that a focus on men's health will necessarily lead to reduction of health services to women. This is clearly not a sound coupling of events. It is even possible that an increased focus on men's health will lead to better targeted health programs across the board. In the example given, a more reasonable response from Sally might be: "I can see the anomaly you've pointed out... the issue that needs to be addressed is how men's health outcomes can be improved, while at the same time ensuring that there aren't any adverse effects on women's health. We need a response which is acceptable to the whole community".

Sally's error arises from the supposition that there is a fixed health budget, and that an increase in disbursement of funds to one group — *ie* men, necessarily results in less resources going to another group. Sally is right to alert Harry to the possibility that increased health promotion targeting men may lead to diminution of emphasis on women's programs. Her error is in asserting that it definitely will lead to this outcome.

Note that increases or decreases in the expenditure of scarce budgetary resources on government programs is a legitimate topic for political debate and social commentary. It is also true that the total "cake" available for allocations to programs is necessarily limited. At times, increasing budgetary allocations to program 'X' may have a clear link to a decrease in budgetary allocations to program 'Y'. If this is the case, a genuine dilemma may be argued, and the benefits of one program can be directly compared and contrasted to the other program. The seeker after truth will be able to distinguish a false dilemma from a genuine dilemma, and will make his or her case accordingly.

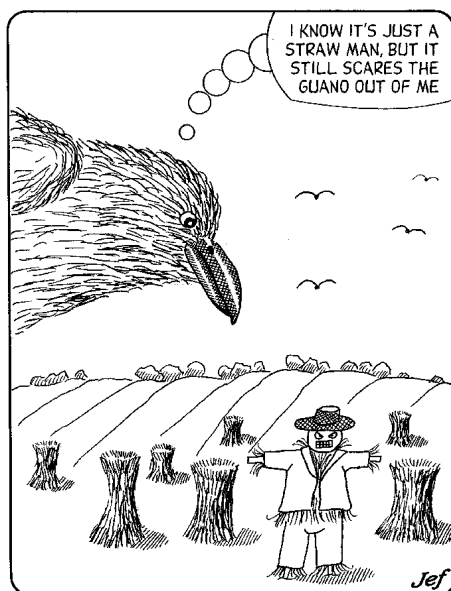
False Positioning

Other Terms and/or Related Concepts

Straw man; false target; aiming off; caricaturing a position; misrepresenting a position.

Description

The advocate attacks a weakened, exaggerated, over-simplified or otherwise false or distorted form of the opponent's argument rather than the real one. Commonly, the advocate presents a simplified caricature of the opponent's argument, then demolishes this 'straw man', which is nothing more than a falsely constructed target of the advocate's own invention.



Example

Harry Cackleberry has just taken the floor during a public debate on the teaching of evolution in schools "These evolutionists would have us believe that our great-great-great grandparents were nothing more than monkeys. They say that one day, hundreds of thousands of years ago, a monkey gave birth to a human. Now I ask you ladies and gentlemen, how can a monkey give birth to a human"?

Jim Flakehammer, an evolutionary biologist with a research institute, challenges Harry from the floor and says: "You are giving a false account of the evolutionary explanation of human origins. The way you put it, evolution is an easy target to be knocked down — the idea of a monkey giving birth to a human is quite ludicrous. However the real account given by evolutionary theorists is far harder to dismiss. The current view of scientists working in my field is that humans and monkeys are related through a common ancestor from which both species have evolved gradually by natural selection".

Comment

Harry may genuinely believe that his simplistic version of evolution is the one held by evolutionary scientists. In which case he is committing the "false positioning" error in ignorance. However it is often the case that the false positioning error is a deliberate rhetorical device designed to "wrong-foot" an opponent.

For the purposes of analysis, we will assume that in the present case, Harry is being deliberately disingenuous. He is fully aware of the actual claims of evolutionary scientists. However he is uncertain of the strengths of his argument against the real theory of evolution. He therefore conceals his knowledge, and advances a hackneyed caricature of the theory of evolution in order to create an easy target for scornful comments. His motives are to win the argument on the day,

Continued p 31 ...

The Psychic Skeptic:

Part 1

**Our intrepid investigator
chances her arm on “the
other side”**



Karen Stollznow is a linguist who is currently pursuing further studies in the USA. A member of the NSW Committee, she has conducted many previous investigations for the Skeptic

While psychics can describe themselves as ‘skeptical’, can a skeptic be psychic? Is psychic ability in the eye of the beholder?

These questions arose when I stumbled across a job opportunity for psychics, advertised at careerone.com.au. Job sharing, casual work and second, even third jobs are necessary evils in today’s world. Some ‘replenish stock’ in supermarkets at night, others telemarket or work behind a bar. Only the very few can earn a few extra dollars as a psychic. That would require a specific skill, wouldn’t it? But what kind of skill? Psychic ability or cold/warm/hot reading skills and a glib manner? The job advertisement was a call from an “ethical psychic network in the US, as seen on TV”, seeking psychics and tarot readers (“pros only”) to work from home for chat room, telephone and email readings.

The telephone psychic industry emerged in Australia during the early 1990s with the advent of 0055 numbers. This incited a trend generating thousands of hotlines. Simon Turnbull’s Australian Psychic Asso-

ciation estimates that there are some 3000 services currently in existence. Psychic hotlines have evolved into a multi-million dollar industry. From its inception, the industry was completely unregulated (see “Operation Termite”, *the Skeptic*, 14:4). Today, nothing has changed. Anyone can establish a telephone psychic business (or indeed any psychic venture) and anyone can work as a telepsychic ... or so I assumed.

The company

Absolutely Psychic is operated by ACM Entertainment, a company whose very name suggests the solemnity with which we should view the entire industry. The company recruits ‘psychic associates’ online, advertising in chat rooms, on mailing lists and job boards, seeking staff from as far away as New Zealand and the UK. Interested parties were urged to submit an application via an online form. Professing no psychic, nor indeed *any* paranormal abilities whatsoever, I wondered how far I could push an application be-

fore I would be revealed to be a skeptic posing as a psychic!

Absolutely Psychic's standards are extremely high: Our clients immediately notice that all readers are carefully handpicked. We are very 'picky', and we're proud of it! Unfortunately, 94.3% of most applications are turned away. Ask around, we're not kidding!

Surely I had no chance of infiltrating the ranks. Why, even if I did purport to have psychic abilities, they only accept 5.7% of applicants! As they repeatedly claimed:

We staff ONLY THE BEST PSYCHICS.

The criteria became even more stringent:

[We are] only interested in readers with actual reading experience. Actual reading experience is defined as professionals that have experience giving readings to clients either via a Professional Psychic Network or private practice. Professional reading experience is NOT defined as experience giving a once in a blue moon free reading to a friend or family member. Professional experience is not defined as having a deck of tarot cards laying around somewhere. Though interests do lead to growth, please, only contact us when you have attained growth.

The Australian Skeptics has a number of talented cold readers on board but with no magic skills or reading experience, professional or amateur; I am no Ian Rowland or Derren Brown. I would be relying upon a credible demeanour but surely a 'professional' would know the difference?

The requirements

The application would be a rigorous four-stage selection process of testing. Besides psychic ability, the only other requirement was a typing speed of 30 wpm. Firstly, the online application form would sort the wheat from the chaff. Then would follow an email reading test and a fifteen minute online chat room

reading test. Finally, success at all of the previous levels would lead to a gruelling ten minute telephone test. The assessment procedure would be a psychic survival of the fittest.

The application form issued a caution to those who had worked for the competition, who fall beneath their lofty standards:

DO NOT list PRN / Ms Cleo and / or "book-stores" that fall under this company. Yes, we know every reader on the Globe has worked for this company. And yes, we know why you are no longer there! We've heard a 100 Gazillion times! If this is your only experience, please reapply after you have acquired more experience. Our statistics show these qualifications never passed our evaluations. Again, we only staff professionals with solid professional accurate reading skills!

Well might Absolutely Psychic disassociate themselves from the infamous 'Miss Cleo' crowd. In a skeptical success story, where typically money talks rather than ethics, the Miss Cleo group were sued for false advertising, fraud and other unlawful business practices. The group advertised "Find the answers for free — free three-minute psychic readings". This 'freebie' comprised of a non-billed period of three minutes during which a phone attendant would note the caller's contact details. The unsuspecting caller was then transferred to a 'psychic' and instead of receiving a free reading, were immediately billed without being advised of the charges! The company was also exposed for performing scripted readings. A copy of one such script is shown at: www.courttv.com/news/feature/cleo/script1. Other scams among the "94 violations" included billing deceased people for calls. The company slogan was "Miss Cleo – Keepin' it real!".

With no experience at all, cold reading or otherwise, I had to bluff my way through the application form. Given their strict selection criteria, I assumed they would meticulously verify my work history. I had to sum up my initial 'psychic

awareness' so I applied the tried and tested formula.

As a child, my family often exclaimed at my remarkable resemblance to an elderly family member known to have psychic powers. This was a portent that I was to become a second generation psychic. From an early age, I could predict when the phone would ring and the identity of the caller. Soon, I saw images of future events and began receiving messages from the deceased. I started giving readings, just for fun, to family and friends who were astonished with my accuracy! They nurtured my gift and news of my abilities spread uncontrollably by word of mouth.

Areas of specialisation

I was required to state my reading specialties from a list of options, I selected those topics about which I was best informed: 'psychic', 'spirit guides', 'mediumship/channeling', 'dream interpretation', 'angels' and 'past life regression'. I dared not list astrology as a specialty:

For Astrology: Please note that since are [sic] supported by leading Astrology Organizations we only staff Astrologers that continue to present our image for providing excellence. Therefore, a separate evaluation is given for Astrology. To be considered for Astrology you must be able to pull up a chart for any birth place on the globe and dissect it in less than 50 seconds. This is not something many are able to do.

Absolutely Psychic specialise in astrological readings at astronomical prices, offering \$US90 'electional charts' to set the date, hour and minute when a client should schedule their wedding, surgery, business deal, etc. Their web sites notes that psychic Joan Quigley (unrelated to Absolutely Psychic!) "set many times and dates" for Ronald and Nancy Reagan.

Absolutely Psychic were clearly in search of celebrity psychics.

"Do you have any special certifications?" the form asked, non-specifically. 'Yes'.

The Psychic Skeptic

“Do you have any clips of Media appearances you have made?” I thought of my various media appearances as a skeptic, chuckled and ticked ‘yes’.

“Have you written any books, newspaper articles, columns, and magazine articles on Psychic, Astrological or Tarot phenomena?” Have I ever! ‘Yes!’

“Do you refer clients to Candles/Witchcraft/Santeria/Spells/Voodoo and do you advise on death/health issues or making a lover return?” ‘No’. The internet abounds with tales of ‘phony psychics’ who delve in these practices, promising to remove curses, cast spells, offering ‘psychic protection’ and generally manipulating vulnerable clients for financial gain.

I guessed that Absolutely Psychic would want to distance themselves from litigious ‘majick’, given the horror stories of exploitation connected with these practices.

“How do you rate your accuracy as a psychic?” 96%! This sounded like an impressive yet modest figure, in keeping with their high expectations. Moreover, I could provide numerous testimonials attesting to my precision. After filling out contact information and answering numerous questions about computer requirements I encountered the following final message:

We thank you for your interest in Absolutely Psychic Network. Due to the amount of requests we receive, we cannot provide feedback/follow up information.

I honestly didn’t expect to ever hear from them.



Email test

Bright and early the next morning, there was a special email awaiting me. Without fanfare, the email listed the details of step two, the email test. I had obviously passed the first round! I feared this was on the basis of my trumped-up application. Now I had to demonstrate my supposed abilities. Surely now they would see through my ploy!

The email test instructions were as follows:

This email reading test will first be reviewed for 3 things: psychic ability, following directions, and professionalism. If you pass we will contact you for an live one on one chat room reading test with a live person.

SELECT ONLY ONE — EITHER ROBERT OR ALICIA.

ROBERT — He has Blue Eyes, Brown Hair (full head of hair) 5’10, 155 pounds, 33 years old and very good looking (in case that helps). General reading on Love & Business/Money. Birth Information not available.

ALICIA — She has Brown Eyes, Red Hair (from a bottle). Very attractive (in case that helps.) Early 50’s. Gen-

eral reading on Love & Business/Money. Birth Information not available.

I knew I could easily follow the directions and give the appearance of professionalism but was certain that my lack of psychic ability would be exposed. I selected as a subject ‘Alicia’ as her profile somewhat resembled that of my mother. I figured I would engage in a ‘warm

reading’, employing psychology, ‘specific generalisations’ and telling them what they would want to hear. I thought I could make some assumptions based on the subject’s gender, age and the subjective, vague ‘clues’ provided about her appearance. The instructions stipulated that the reading must be completed within 24 hours of acceptance into the second round of tests. “Most of our readers can easily do a 600 word email reading in 7 minutes with their eyes closed while typing.” So I mustered all of my powers of generality and set to work, producing the following over a 40 minute period of time.

Dear Alicia,

I feel as though you are preoccupied with a current relationship. It may be a new or potential relationship or an ongoing one in which you have recently found a renewed sense of happiness and purpose. In the past you have been troubled by love and always unsure about taking it to the next level. I can feel a sense of excitement for the future, one that you, and that special someone, will share together. You now know that you are loved. People are smitten with your beauty, both inner and physical. You take great care of your appearance and other people notice you.

You like to surround yourself with friends and loved ones. You like to have close female friends but also have a bit of a tomboy streak in you too! Sometimes you feel as though your friends demand too much of your time. You love them but sometimes have trouble saying 'no' to them. Sometimes it feels as though you are the one offering all the advice and no one will listen to your problems. There is a shoulder for you to cry on and she is closer than you think.

Health is an issue of major importance right now. You are very conscious of your health. You have experienced a recent health scare that has encouraged you to focus on your own health and that of your family. Try to clear your environment of anything toxic or irritating. I know you are sick of sickness itself and don't want the medication but it will work. You do need to be vigilant of your situation and follow doctor's orders but worrying won't help and you know you're in control. You know you need to take more time out to relax. Indulge yourself more often and make time for that holiday! You need to be kind to yourself as well as thinking about family and friends.

You can always depend on your inner resilience to make things happen for you. In the past you have been taken off your mark, but I feel a future of confidence and happiness if you take care of your health and your romance and remember to not let negative influences get in the way of your success.

Financially, you are quite comfortable but would like a little more money to fulfil a few plans you have underway. You try to be responsible in your spending but like to splash out often and treat yourself! Hold back a bit now for that special purchase. Right now you are looking to your future financial stability. With maturity comes security. I see stabil-

ity in your future, but if you take care to tie up some loose financial strings. If you wait for the good things in life, they will come to you. I see a large financial bounty in your life. It could be your employment, or it could be even bigger! Keep an eye on the stock market. I feel your chances might be there.

I see positive changes in your employment that will allow you to fulfil your personal goals. There are some areas that need clarification, especially with business partners or key people. Watch out for inside rivalry because someone who is less qualified, but more cut-throat than you might try to jeopardize this.

The main thing to remember is to always follow your own intuitions. Life is mysterious and not always black and white like some would lead you to believe. As long as you stay close to your feelings, your life will always be exciting! In closing, your future is bright and full of adventure. Never take second best because I feel only the best for you and your future!

Always finish on a positive note! The broad reading was intended to bombard the testers with images, ideas and promises. It needed to resemble the traditional notion of a reading and appeal to the reader. It had to be based on stereotypes that the reader would either relate to or rationalise to fit in with their own life.

I applied generalisations about love, friendship, health and finances that covered many possible situations and scenarios. I had a bob each way — saying one thing then immediately saying the opposite and anything in between. The reading was a confusing mish-mash of flattery, obvious statements, clichés and non-specific advice, all delivered with a caring demeanour. Despite this, I still thought it was more comprehensive and better than any reading I

had ever been given in all of my years of investigations!

I emailed the reading to the 'test co-ordinator' and within hours received the following response:

Thank you very much for submitting your email reading. You did a fine job. We would like to issue a 1-1 online chat room test reading in our chat room.

I had passed the second test! A chat room test was scheduled for the following day. Although I had completed the application and email reading in my own time, could a skeptic pass a real-time psychic test under pressure?

To be continued...



... Humbug from p 27

rather than to genuinely explore the issue.

Note that the term "Straw Man" — one of the alternative terms for "false positioning" (given under Other terms and/or related concepts above) is at times used to mean something quite different to false positioning. This can sometimes lead to confusion. The alternate meaning is roughly equivalent to "bogeyman". That is, a scary apparition which is apparent rather than real — some imagined problem or consequence of an action which is conjured up by a party in a dispute to stop a proposed action. This usage is similar to the expression "paper tiger". The implication is that although a consequence of an action looks fierce (or difficult), in reality it is nothing to be concerned about.



Cellulite: a build-up of food toxins

Smiting the enemy, hip and thigh

It was back in 1993 that I received a letter from Professor Terry Ryan, Clinical Professor of Dermatology, Oxford, England. I had read the article by him and Sergio Curri on subcutaneous fat in women. Their description of cellulite (referred to as panniculopathy) and potential cures was far too esoteric and erudite for my brain. His response to my request for a simple answer was:

So far as treatment is concerned, it is helpful to avoid obesity. It is also helpful to maintain fluid clearance from the adipose tissue and this is aided by exercise and gentle massage. Everything else is hocus pocus!

Had anything changed in the last decade I wondered? There was still the claim that cellulite was a build-up of toxic waste, primarily from a 'bad diet', hence cellulite was forced into my professional territory.

Creams and machinery are still promoted to banish the orange peel, or cottage cheese, appearance from women's thighs and hips. Brochures tell us of the amazing properties of horsehair mitts, nutrition supplements and fat-absorbing soaps.

My interest in cellulite was originally sparked with the release of the *The Hip and Thigh Diet*, by Rosemary Conley in 1988. She claimed that: "faulty circulation is thought to

be the root cause of the disorder" and that cellulite "all begins with the stagnation of the blood in capillaries". I thought blood stagnated only when you are dead. It was even reported in an advertisement that cellulite was "undigested food" which had anatomists searching for the tube connecting the duodenum to the thigh through which lumps of sandwich and biscuit could travel.

The beginnings

It is difficult to find the origin of the word 'cellulite'. Scherwitz and Braun-Falco claim that it originated in French medical literature around 1816. Rossi and Vergnanini claim that the term was first used in the 1920s. Well-known quack-buster Stephen Barrett says that the idea of cellulite being a problem took off in 1973 with the publication of *Cellulite: Those lumps, bumps and bulges you couldn't lose before* by Nicole Ronsard.

In Australia, women were targeted by Conley's *The Hip & Thigh Diet* and *Cellulite Revolution* by Leslie Kenton who told us in 1992 that "as of this moment literally hundreds of medical references to cellulite exist", which is literally hundreds more than I can find with a Medline search today. But then, a medical reference to one person



Glenn Cardwell, a sports dietitian and public speaker on the subject, writes a regular column for the Skeptic.

might be an unsubstantiated, non-peer reviewed article to others.

Definition

What is cellulite? “A non-technical term for subcutaneous deposits of fat, especially in the buttocks, legs and thighs” according to my *Taber’s Cyclopedic Medical Dictionary*, 19th edition. “Cellulite is an alteration of the topography of the skin that occurs mainly in women on the pelvic region, lower limbs and abdomen. It is characterised by a padded or ‘orange peel’ appearance”, say Rossi and Vergnanini. Professor Ryan told me “cellulite is a gradual degeneration of the connective tissue supporting fat cells. It is age-related and accelerated by interstitial fluid collection, excessive fat load as in obesity and possibly by female sex hormones”. No expert has found toxic chemicals or undigested food in cellulite. Although there is wide agreement that cellulite is primarily body fat, it is still not well understood why the lumpiness should take effect.

Why does cellulite appear?

There seems to be structural differences between ‘cellulite’ fat stores and regular fat stores. Fibrous connective tissue separates the fat cells into clusters. Much of the connective tissue is collagen, a protein. With age, extra collagen is formed to change the structural geography of the stored fat. There is evidence that blood flow in the cellulitic areas is slower (not stagnating, Rosemary), but the role this plays is not clear.

These changes encourage a mild oedema in the area, with the extra water giving rise to the orange peel look. Further pronouncement of the cellulite occurs if the fat cells enlarge and the skin loses elasticity with time. Certainly, there appears to be a greater amounts of fluid associated with cellulite areas when compared to other areas of body fat. One theory is that cellulite has a higher level of proteoglycans, molecules of proteins and polysaccharides combined, which have high water-attracting properties.

Cellulite often increases with age, possibly compounded by female sex hormones and overweight, and certainly has a genetic component permitting women to blame their mothers for yet another aspect of body shape. Cellulite is more common in white women than black or Asian women.

The cellulite effect may become more obvious:

- ◆ In overweight women as fat cells enlarge and the fat begins to bulge from the fat cell compartments
- ◆ With high salt diets as the sodium may cause more fluid retention (deleting salt at the dinner table may not help as about 80% of all salt in the diet is added by food manufacturers).
- ◆ During the week pre-menses with fluid retention.

Why don’t men get cellulite?

Men have a different connective tissue pattern on their hips, thighs and buttocks making it unlikely to ever create small bulges of fat cells. Men also have thicker skin (there’s got to be a one-liner there), hence the skin remains smoother and is less likely to sag. Of course, men rarely suffer fluid retention. A man’s ‘cellulite’ comes in the form of a single bump on the abdomen, or the shirt-stretching ‘beer gut’.

Is cellulite dangerous?

We must not confuse cellulite with obesity. They can exist independent of each other. Some women will be a healthy weight, yet have cellulite. In these circumstances, cellulite is not a health threat. Once waist circumference of women exceeds 90 cm (100 cm in men), then the risk of health concerns increase, due to the rise in abdominal fat and not to any attendant cellulite.

Therapy

Even if cellulite is of little interest to you, you will have seen many ‘cures’ promoted. From soap that absorbs fat from your body and pantyhose

that breaks down cellulite, to vibrating-belt machines and wooden rollers to move up-and-down the thighs. In 1999 a product called Cellasene sold dramatically on the premise that it would remove cellulite. It was no surprise that in March 2003 the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) in the USA made the manufacturers cough up \$US12 million in compensation to disgruntled consumers because the claims for Cellasene were “false and unsubstantiated”. The FTC website details many other cellulite scams.

One product that has been investigated is Endermologie, a hand-held massage tool that compresses the affected areas between two motorised rollers. It progressively smooths out the adipose tissue over the treatment course. It was originally developed about 30 years ago in France to soften scar tissue, especially from burns. The treatment procedure entails 10 minute sessions and some research subjects complained that the treatment was painful. One group (Chang *et al*) found the treatment useful with a reduction in thigh diameter after 14 sessions, while another group (Collis *et al*) found no effect. The latter group also found little effect of a cellulite cream containing aminophylline.

The most popular remedy by far has been the cellulite cream. It is cheap and efficient to manufacture and transport. It may even offer a temporary effect. The process of massaging the cream into affected areas could force some fluid drainage into the lymphatic system and away from the cellulite, thereby causing a temporary reduction of the dimples. Massaging the cream into thighs twice a day could improve the appearance until a couple of days without massage reveals that the effect is only temporary and not worth the \$39.95 (+ \$4.50 p&p) for each jar. Nine out of 35 subjects in the Collis paper suffered a skin reaction from the aminophylline cream they used.

Some time back I did speak to two plastic surgeons in WA who said that liposuction may help improve the appearance of cellulite, but both

Cellulite

agreed that cellulite just looked like fat on the operating table.

1.1 million solutions offered

Unfortunately, you will not find much balanced information about cellulite and its treatment. It is a lucrative business and there are over 1.1 million websites that would love you to invest in their particular remedy. Whenever successful cellulite reduction is reported, it seems to be more likely when there has been concurrent body fat loss through better eating and exercise. This complies with a common weight loss belief system that has the following formula:

Product A + low joule diet = body fat loss: Therefore Product A causes body fat loss!

QED

My tip

This article is not intended as a comprehensive review of cellulite. I am not qualified to do that. I have only attempted to make some sense of the topic. I don't think that anyone can dispute that cellulite is dimpled body fat, and that virtually all commercial 'cures' are scams. In this world, merely the selling of hope will generate funds. Exercise and healthy eating may reduce the size of the bumps and dips. As yet, there is no simple and effective way of eliminating cellulite. The greatest treatment I can think of is to accept your body, be happy and live well. That way you can spend your money more constructively.

Free e-book

If you have got some value from reading about nutrition-related myths, then you are welcome to download my free e-book that discusses a range of myths. Some of these myths have already appeared in the pages of *the Skeptic*, others haven't. My plan is to update the book every month or so. Naturally readers are welcome to send the e-book to others who may find it useful. It is available from www.glenncardwell.com (just click on 'free e-book').

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Moving?

Don't forget to let us know

If It Sounds Like a Duck...

Trawling the far fringes of pseudomedicine.



Peter Bowditch, as he confesses in this article, is a man of many accomplishments, however, he modestly refrains from mentioning his fame as a fashion plate.

This is the text of a presentation given to the 2004 Annual Convention of Australian Skeptics on November 13, 2004 and to the 2004 Annual Conference of the Manly Warringah Division of General Practice the following day.

When I give these talks I introduce myself by mentioning the three parts I play in the skeptical world. I am the Vice President of Australian Skeptics, the Boss and Chief Decision Maker of the RatbagsDotCom Empire, and the Executive Officer of the Australian Council Against Health Fraud.

One thing I have noticed over the years is that the followers of alternative medicine and the believers in *woowoo* and the paranormal generally seem to lack a sense of humour. An example of this is that there have been several comments about me assuming the title of “Boss and Chief Decision Maker”, as this apparently indicates that I have a colossal ego and am extremely self-important. These claims may indeed be true, but most people would assume that the title was meant to be amusing. I always respond by saying that as I am the only inhabitant and employee of the RatbagsDotCom Empire, I can call myself whatever I like.

This lack of a sense of humour may explain the continued existence of some of the claims and cures of alternative medicine, simply because they are so ridiculous that it is almost impossible not to laugh when first meeting them. The sad thing is that not only do some people fail to see the humour, they actually take them seriously. The sites mentioned below illustrate this. These sites are drawn from the collection of oddities at *Quintessence of the Loon* (www.ratbags.com/loon/), and all were alive on the web on November 11, 2004.

Horse Iridology

(www.equineiridology.com)

I have spent a lot of time around racehorses. They are delicate animals, so delicate in fact that the merest hint of the weight of my money on their backs can cause them to run slower than usual. Like most gamblers, sorry — track investors — I like to go down to the saddling enclosure to check out the withers, hocks, fetlocks, gaskins and croups, and after I have inspected the jockeys I look at the horses. I must admit that I have never paid much attention to horses’ eyes, except for those times when one of the

If it sounds like a Duck

animals gives me one of those superior, baleful looks to remind me that when I am walking home because I don't have the bus fare, he will be riding in an air-conditioned van. Not to mention how each of us are going to spend our retirement years.

Iridology is not the only quackery practised on horses. There are acupuncturists who somehow manage to thread their fine needles through the tough skin of horses to reach the vital meridians inside, but my favourites are horse chiropractors. A racehorse is a well-trained athlete, with all that means for muscle condition and density. The muscles between a horse's spine and the top of the horse are quite substantial, and seem to be adequate for supporting the spine even when the horse is carrying 55Kg of jockey, saddle and lead shot. Horse chiropractors claim to be able to manipulate the vertebrae of horses, but I certainly would not like to shake hands with anyone with that much strength in his thumbs. (Especially if he is a Mason.)

Reiki Attunement

(<http://angelreiki.nu/reiki/distant.htm>)

A couple of years ago I took a course to become a Reiki practitioner (it took three days), but I haven't been keeping up with progress in this healing modality. Reiki heals by the practitioner channelling some higher power, and apparently it can be done remotely, such as by telephone.

As well as Reiki Healing, which fixes all the usual things that alt-med heals, like cancer, arthritis and piles, there is also Reiki Attunement which aligns the chakras and generally gets you feeling good. (This is best explained by analogy to a car, where replacing the gearbox is healing, but getting a tune-up is attunement.) The problem is that all the time and money spent at the attunatorium can be wasted if you get stuck behind a Volvo and in front of a road-rager at a red light on the way home, because what goes on

after the light turns green can seriously disrupt the holistic you.

According to this web site, you can now have remote attunement as well as healing, although there seems to be some controversy in the Reiki community about this. The conventional orthodoxy is that healing can be done remotely but attunement needs physical proximity. The author of this site believes that the matter has been settled scientifically, and he presents evidence (with novel spelling intact):

Some, like William Rand, (see his article on Reiki Distant Attunement at his site at www.reiki.org) feel that distant attunements might work, but his clairvoyants feel that distant attunements do not contain all the "frequencies" of energy that the regular attunements contains. (Although how they could determine this I cannot imagine, especially there is no known or reliable method of determining the strength or completeness of anyone's reiki. Perhaps they invented a Reiki-Om-Meter to measure the energy?) Clairvoyants that i know tell me that they have watched both Distant and Hands-On attunements and they see the same thing occurring in both. So is this a case of my clairvoyants are better than yours?! Or perhaps we might take into account that clairvoyancy has never been the most reliable of practices. If we through intent do an attunement hands on or distant, then we should trust that the creator, the source of Reiki will ensure that everything is exactly as it is supposed to be!

Many people in the Usui/Tibetan schools of reiki are taught that the "reiki guides" do the attunements (this is not a belief held by the majority of reiki practitioners). If your teachings/beliefs are that the "reiki guides" do the attunements, is it not an inconsistent belief to think that since they do them that they can certainly do them distantly?

Fundamentally it has to come down to a question of evidence, proof and

faith. Where is the evidence to back up claims such as these? That is the problem with making such claims when they are unprovable. I can make claims. For example, i could claim that the space aliens started reiki millennia ago, buy shooting humans with their Reiki Ray Guns which focused cosmic energy on them. In reality when you doodle when talking on the phone you are subconsciously linked to the space guys and they are giving you new symbols! And I can say that i know cause I channeled them while on the phone and they told me. Barring objective evidence, this has exactly the same validity as anyone's claims regarding distant attunements. This is more about faith and belief than anything else.

However, having said that, we must evaluate what evidence we do have. Countless thousands of reiki practitioners and masters have been attuned distantly. In the final analysis — barring any way to objectively measure the energy or process — we must examine whether or not they can do reiki. From what i can tell, and a lot of people with much much more experience than I, the answer to that is "Yes, they can".

Urine Therapy

(www.universal- tao.com/article/urine_therapy.html)

It's a real nuisance when you need to get some pharmaceutical supplies late at night and the shop's closed. Of course, the inconvenience level depends on what you wanted to buy and what you planned to do with it, but we are talking about medical emergencies here. If it is something minor then perhaps it can wait, but if you have just discovered, for example, that your hippocampus is inflamed then something needs to be done real quick. Similarly, it is discouraging to turn up at the ER with a raging case of hangnail only to find that the victims of an explosion at a pickle factory are getting all the attention.

Isn't it lucky, then, that you can carry a first aid kit around with you all the time? Not only that you can do it, but that you do do it. I'm relieved. There seems to be a large overlap between those who believe that urine is good for trauma treatment and those who claim that humans have not evolved to eat cooked food of any kind, and we should all eat nothing but raw vegetables. The extremists of the raw food movement promote a system called "Natural Hygiene". It was one of these people who came the closest I have ever seen to getting supporters of alternative medicine to challenge an alt-med claim when he said:

[M]enstruation as most of us experience it is neither natural nor healthy. Ovulation does not depend on it. And it can be changed very much for the better — even to the extent of not experiencing it at all yet remaining healthy and fertile. How this can be done has been known and written about by health practitioners for centuries, and practised just as long by women willing to make the simple but significant lifestyle changes involved. So why haven't most of us heard about this before?

It is because the lifestyle improvements involved, although simple, are quite a change from most modern women's habits of living and eating. No drugs or even nutritional supplements are required, but what is essential is the adoption of what health writer Leslie Kenton calls a 'high raw way of eating'.

That's right — women only have periods because they don't eat right! The cessation of menstruation seen in anorexics is evidence of an adequate diet! This really would be funny if it wasn't so stupid. As I said, this gave even hardened alternative supporters something to think about, although none of them in the particular forum where this was posted could actually bring themselves to declare it nonsense. I suppose getting them to ask "Are you sure about that?" was at least a step in the right direction.

Biophotonic Therapy

(www.biophoton.com/bt/biophotonic_therapy.htm)

The use of coloured lights has a long history in the annals of quackery. Sometimes it takes the form of shining lights on people to fix what ails them, but this is different. Biophotonic Therapy involves taking a sample of the patient's blood, exposing it to some exotic energy source and then putting it back into the patient's blood vessels. Once inside it increases the chemiluminescence of the red blood cells. This can only mean that it makes them glow in the dark.

The value of this is not immediately obvious, but it could be that the glowing erythrocytes transport the magical healing powers of light to all the hard-to-reach parts of the body. One obvious side effect that I can see is that this would suffuse your body with a pink glow when the lights were out. I imagine that this therapy would require hospitalisation, as it would be quite disturbing to household pets and small children to have someone wandering about the house looking like a pink nightlight. In hospital, though, it would make it easy for the night nurses to check vitals, because they would just have to look over the curtains to see if your aurora was still reflecting off the ceiling tiles.

(If you think that this is nonsense and could only be on a web site and not anywhere in real life, consider this: after I gave this presentation to the Australian Skeptics convention, one of the interstate visitors told me that there was a Biophotonic Therapy conference taking place that very day in the hotel where he was staying.)

Dr. Bertha L. Veronneau, D.D.,D.Sc

(<http://aquarianctr.org/altmed/>)

Do you remember the science you learnt at school? It doesn't matter if you have forgotten it, because it was probably all wrong. For example, did you know that the heart has seven

ventricles and pumps air? I'll bet you thought those models of molecules you see in museums are just metaphors, but if you look through a microscope you can see real molecules, and they have little red, blue and black dots in them. The black dots are metals. Did you know that the liver chews things and then sends kelp or alfalfa to the thyroid gland and penicillin to the salivary glands?

Bertha is one of the great loons of the 'net. No collection of kooks and loons is complete without a reference to her, but she has the unnerving habit of occasionally disappearing. When this happens, calls are made to loyal web site visitors to find the new location of her site and eventually it is found and everyone can get back to normal. The other unnerving thing about Bertha is that she has followers who think that she knows something. Here is another quote from Dr, Bertha L. Veronneau, D.D.,D.Sc:

At this time of life of the intelligence of the Cosmos, we understand the Molecule (Ion, atom) to be the basis of all chemical substance, A chemical substance can be a monad, or a kenetic grouping. A determination of the quality of the substance is determined by the molecule as seen in the microscope. Is it of the human body, or is it toxic to the human body? This is important to know. Are we consuming foods and medicines, or applying lotions to our bodies that might case deterioration. When a product has a side effect it is destroying something in your physical self. We need to learn to renew our bodies... rebuild. You cannot rebuild the body with toxic substance.

I should mention here that, just as I am a qualified Reiki practitioner, I also hold the degree of Doctor of Divinity. Well, I will after I send in the \$25 final payment.

Another wonderful loon who shares with Bertha the quaint trait of vanishing without trace and then popping up again after everyone has despaired of ever seeing her again is Nancy Luft. Nancy doesn't have a lot to say about alternative medicine,

If it sounds like a Duck

but as she believes that the entire world is run by a network of conspiracies she probably thinks that the pharmaceutical companies are connected to the great CIA conspiracy. Her speciality is telling us about how the conspiracists use satellites (she always calls them "sputniks") to beam messages into our brains.

She says that the explosion of Mount St Helens was not volcanic but was caused by a sputnik missing its target. I have seen the hole in the side of the mountain with my own eyes and all I can say is that the target brain must have been extremely dense or protected by a very good tinfoil helmet if that much energy was needed to rearrange it.

Amber Rose

(www.amberrose.com/)

When I first saw this site it was talking about "beesting therapy". I misread this as "beasting" and thought for a moment that I had stumbled on one of those web sites from Belgium or Holland that the moralisers keep talking about. It now talks about Bee Acupuncture, which seems to have two possible modes of operation. One would be to grind up the contents of a beehive, smear the mixture of honey, wax, dead bees and bee excrement over the patient, and then stick needles through it into the flesh beneath. The other would be to train bees to sting patients at acupuncture points.

A major problem with the training regimen would be that the bees die after stinging someone, so the training would have to be only up to the stage of the bee locating the relevant meridian and then walking along it to the desired acupuncture point. The bee could then be annoyed by an external stimulus to make it drive in the stinger. Perhaps it could be connected with a couple of tiny electrical wires and the therapist could press a button to give it a shock when stinging time came. It all sounds very complicated to me.

To get serious for a moment, many people have violent immune reac-

tions to bee stings and even bee danger. Bee stings are comparatively rare (I have only been stung once in my life) and it is possible for someone to be highly susceptible and not know it until the first sting happens. I doubt that a naturopath's office is the location of choice for someone's first experience of anaphylactic shock. But, of course, alternative medicines are all natural and have no side effects.

DigiBio

(www.digibio.com)

One criticism directed at alternative medicine is that it is not backed by science. The usual response to this is to point to Dr Jacques Benveniste and his body of work showing that dilution beyond Avogadro's Number does not remove the effect of solutions of chemicals. I was saddened to hear that Dr Benveniste passed away on October 3, 2004. He was the man who came up with the idea of water having a memory, thus providing much encouragement to homeopaths who used this to claim that there was some scientific evidence for their fantasies. He later claimed that it was possible to extract this memory and store it in an electronic form, and to then transmit it to other places where it could be installed in different water. Almost exactly five years before his death, Dr Benveniste wrote to me to say:

Our experiments have been recently reproduced in a major American University and several labs in France. We should be launching momentarily the international replication by 10-15 other labs worldwide. ... Upon completion of the present replication job, a scientific report will be submitted to a major journal.

I am still waiting for the results to be published. I hope someone goes through his notes and gets his work into a form where it can be released to overthrow the current paradigms of physics and chemistry. Dr Benveniste is no longer eligible for a Nobel Prize, as these are only

awarded to the living, but I am going to suggest to the appropriate authorities that he be immortalised by the concept of Benveniste's Number. This is Avogadro's Number raised to the power of Avogadro's Number, and represents a limit to dilution which could make even the most ardent homeopath start to think about what is possible.

Now things start to get personal. In August 2004 an item with the title "The Evil Works Of Peter Bowditch" appeared in an Internet forum related to alternative medicine. It quoted an article by an Australian journalist, Eve Hillary, and came from a site owned by a man named David Icke. He is famous for his theory that the central committee of the Illuminati, the world's most powerful and secret society, are all lizards and regularly change shape (the process is called "shape-shifting") to reveal their reptilian characteristics. Known members of this group are the British Royal Family and the US royalty of The House of Bush.

Reptilian Agenda

(www.reptilianagenda.com)

There are certain characteristics which help to identify the lizard people. One of them is Rh negative blood. I am AB negative, but there's more to the story. From the earliest I can remember, my favourite word has been "lizard". When I was a surfer, I always liked to sit on a flat rock at the end of the beach rather than on the sand. I was born on an equinox, the perfect time of the year for exothermic creatures because in summer your flat rock can get too hot to walk on and in winter you can become as sluggish as a creationist's brain activity. Not only was I born on a suitable date, but it was following a major flying saucer sighting, and one of the theories is that the lizard genes were introduced by aliens to establish a fifth column for when the visitors return to take over. (I have tried to discuss these things with my mother but she just looks embarrassed and tells me not to be silly.) I

was a failure at catching games like football when I was at school, and apparently it had something to do with the articulation of my shoulders making it difficult for me to catch the ball.

David Icke Medical Archives

(www.davidicke.net/medicalarchives/)

Not only does David Icke have web pages about the reptiles, but he also has a site about medical conspiracies. It was here that the article mentioning me was published (it is on some other non-Icke sites as well). At this point I should mention that Eve Hillary, who wrote it, often has material published in Australian alternative health and lifestyle magazines and is treated as if she is a serious journalist. In this piece she refers to research from 1995 showing that 18,000 people die each year from medical mistakes in hospitals, but a year earlier she had been citing a 2000 paper by the same researchers and saying that it said 10,000 (it didn't). Apparently, she assumes that her readers will never check her "facts".

Here is a quote from the article:

The Australian Skeptics group has spawned a number of offshoots. Peter Bowditch, a ruddy faced man with a blunt military manner is the vice president of the group. He keeps busy running a number of websites, one of which is www.ratbags.com/rsoles. Not one to trifle with social niceties, he has compiled an extensive list of persons and organisations that he states on his website are, "a collection of a thousand arseholes". Among those targeted are Christian websites, anti-vivisection and animal welfare organisations, alternative medicine and environmental groups. He invites anyone to contact him by e-mailing "The Proctologist". His targets, however, are not accorded the right of reply. Bowditch makes no apologies; "owners of sites linked to from here may be offended and feel that I am holding them up to ridicule by calling them arseholes." Furthermore, he

makes it clear that those displeased enough to consult a lawyer about defamation will have their law firms; "immediately placed on the arseholes list and linked from this site.

Normally, Bowditch, the website and the Skeptics could be dismissed as just another group or a byte in cyberspace, were it not for the fact that their spur leads into the corridors of political power in much the same ways as Steven (sic) Barrett's Quackbusters do in the US.

My only comment is that the way that my "targets" are "not accorded the right of reply" can be seen at www.ratbags.com/rsoles/files/mailbox.htm.

When I talked about my lizardness before, I assume that everyone took it as a joke. Remember how I said that alternative medicine believers have no sense of humour? Here is another quote from Eve Hillary's article:

Bowditch also has a link to a restricted access discussion group that is only open to 'approved' members. The discussion group, QuackbustersOfTheIlluminati, states its purpose as being: 'This is a meeting place for the anti-alternative-medicine committee of the Illuminati, where we can meet and consider our attack on health freedom within the broader agenda of world domination.' It is not known what relationship Bowditch has with this group, why it is secretive or why it was formed.

I emailed Ms Hillary and invited her to join the secret society, although I told her that she would have to serve a probation period before I could introduce her to the Queen, the Pope and Bill Gates and that I was not high enough in the organisation to go further than that. She would have to speak to one of them if she wanted to meet Rupert Murdoch. She never answered my email.

I would like to finish on a serious note. The sites I have shown may

appear to be ludicrous, but for every one of them there are people who believe what is written there. If people can be deceived by such obvious nonsense, or by the ridiculous conspiracy theories put about by people like David Icke and Eve Hillary, then it is no wonder that they can be taken in by the seemingly legitimate quackery sites which are full of scientific words and pretend research, or by the fearmongers talking about the dangers of vaccines, or by pseudoscientists who claim to have the only correct answer (which is suppressed by the orthodoxy to protect turf and income).

The people who are deceived by these quacks are not stupid — they simply do not have the scientific knowledge or even the critical thinking skills to separate truth from nonsense. It is the duty of doctors and skeptics to not only oppose quackery but to educate consumers and patients about what is possible and what is not. This will not be an easy task, but difficulty is no excuse for giving up the fight.



Convention Moment



Paul Willis waxes lyrical

Skeptical, Comical and Very Rational

A funny man with his feet
firmly planted
in reality



Richard Cadena, our globe-trotting interviewer, has returned from his native USA and is now domiciled in Adelaide.

Lawrence Leung is not your typical skeptic. He is young (26), Asian, a comedian, writer and performer, and while he does have a beard, it is black. Lawrence performs comedy, has appeared on TV and radio, and performs solo shows. His solo shows are best described as documentary comedies that blend stand-up with multimedia and personal storytelling.

In 2001, he debuted *Sucker*, a show exposing the psychology and techniques of confidence artists, swindlers and card cheats. It played in Melbourne, Adelaide, Sydney, Edinburgh and Dublin. At the 2003 Melbourne International Comedy Festival, Lawrence debuted his follow-up show *Skeptic*, a comic documentary that traced his childhood fascination with ghosts, psychics and scepticism. Part science-lecture, part boys-own-adventure, Lawrence used a slide show presentation of his recent ghost hunting exploits around Scotland and clever statistical analysis to debunk popular TV psychic John Edward.

I saw his one man show, *Skeptic*, at the Adelaide Fringe Festival and interviewed him at his home base of Melbourne.

Richard Cadena: *Can you talk about your shows, how you choose them?*

Lawrence Leung: When it comes to writing solo shows I like to tackle topics and themes I'm intensely interested in. My first show was about con artists and confidence games. The psychology about how people are deceived. My follow-up show, *Skeptic*, was a show about how people deceive themselves. I studied psychology at university, which is, of course, what I'm interested in. When it comes to doing a show about the nature of belief and skepticism, because I'm a comedian, I try to talk about these issues in a way that is entertaining but also educational.

RC: *How did your first show come about?*

LL: It is the same thing about deception. Trying to work out why do people believe certain things.

RC: *Did you get conned at some point?*

LL: No, no, no one conned me but I did a lot of research into the way

people are fooled. And then it struck me: con artists — how did they do their thing? So I did a lot of reading, made up a few scams myself.

Right in the middle of my research, this van pulled beside me and these two guys were trying to sell me speakers through the window of the van. One of them had a clipboard to make it look all official. They said, 'We're overstocked and our boss is going to be so angry with us unless we can off-load this stuff, so well sell it to you for cheap'. I said no and they drove off but in hindsight I should have said, 'what you are doing is a derivative of the old gold brick con, which started in the goldfields of California. Let me explain it to you because you are doing the modern incarnation of it. The old speaker scam through the window of a van'.

RC: *What has been the response to your show Skeptic?*

LL: It has been very, very positive. The best thing to talk about is where the audience comes from because I had no idea how to pitch my show to a particular market. I perform a show in the Adelaide Fringe, Edinburgh Fringe and Melbourne Comedy Festival. Sometimes the audiences are made up of what I'd term the stereotype of the academic/skeptic, 50 year old male with the big beard, greying, spectacles, sitting with their arms crossed and nodding their head in approval. They tend to be the audiences that don't really laugh. But having said that, I've met a lot of wonderful skeptics who see it and then say, 'Yup, that is what should happen. We should have young people talking about these issues for a mainstream audi-

ence'. Which is also what I'm trying to do.

Other audiences who are made of middle age women who come along because they go; 'Aw, this is a show about psychics and ghosts'. They giggle away throughout the stories and then I start debunking John Edward at the end and they go all quiet. I've had psychics turn up to the show and at the end of the show say, 'I loved it and here is my card, I'm a psychic'. I say to them, 'But shouldn't you be seeing the media as



Lawrence Leung and friend.

the enemy"? 'No, no, because no one ever does shows about us'.

Then there are a lot of young people as well who are there just for laughs. OK, it's a comedy show, he is doing a show that is not the usual stand-up; let's see what this one's about. They leave the show saying, that was really good, I haven't really seen a show about something like this before.

RC: *How have your friends responded to your show or you being a skeptic?*

LL: A lot of them were not surprised because I used to be a devil's advocate in conversations. You know those 3am conversations after a long night, when you're eating

souvlaki and you're drunk and everyone is talking about 'Is there a God?; is there this and that?'. They get into really deep and meaningful conversations about pyramids or whatever and I would always take the skeptical point of view, even when I was not in my best physical state (*laughing*). I was still able to talk about things from a critical point of view. If you don't actually have any evidence for that, be careful when you latch onto any explanation no matter how wonderful we wish it would be.

RC: *Do your friends refrain from mentioning paranormal beliefs to you or do they tend to be skeptical?*

LL: Some are skeptical but a lot of them aren't and we do have challenges. I think they kind of get sick of me always having my skeptical point of view. 'Oh, what does Lawrence think of THAT?' Well actually, it is funny you should say that, because correlation does not necessarily mean causation, just

because those two things happened doesn't mean they are related. 'Oh, there is Lawrence again with his correlation doesn't equal causation argument'. I say, 'But listen to what you're saying'. 'Yeah, but...'. I think people want to believe. I don't lose friends because I'm a skeptic. If anything it just makes the conversations more excitable.

RC: *Sounds like you have been a skeptic since you were born?*

LL: Yes, (*laughing*) from the moment I was born. I think when I was little, I always read books from the library. Got children's books about, how to be a ghost hunter, get a torch. As kids, you are always interested in dinosaurs, UFOs, or what-

ever. I was always the one who read everything but I didn't so much believe it. My friends were like, 'yeah, yeah, ghosts'. I don't believe it but I still love the area.

I realised towards my teenage years, when you get into these arguments with people and you get really passionate about it. You realise it comes down to how people believe in things. It is the how and why. That is probably why I got into studying psychology because I wanted to see what it was that made one person see the pencil move and say it's a ghost and another person says it's the wind. Why, for the same event, can two different people see it in two different ways?

RC: *Have you come up with an answer?*

LL: I guess it is different people have different worldviews of what they are willing to believe about a locus of control. Where is everything controlled? Is it from within you? Do you blame everything else or do you see you had a part to play in the situation? Some people think, 'we can't control everything so there must be something out there'. Everyone decides where this locus of control is. It is a basic human need. We need to find control in our lives, our environment and also where we are heading in our lives. How do we control it? Is it bad decisions, bad luck, fate, outside factors?

RC: *What do you think would move someone from one view to another?*

LL: Probably things that could be described as profound life events. Death is a classic one.

RC: *So you don't think you could argue one out of a worldview?*

LL: I don't really think so. I think a skeptic can be just as headstrong as a new age believer can. You can't really change someone's point of view once they've decided that is how they are going to see the world, unfortunately. What we can do is educate the people who are either

undecided or slip and slide between different worldviews. And people are like that these days, they choose to believe one thing strongly but another thing they are quite able to say, 'come what may'.

RC: *Do you run into a problem of people viewing your skepticism as cynicism and if so, how do you deal with that?*

... sometimes psychology is just common sense with statistics

LL: Being a sort of performer, comedian and writer, the first thing I had to think of, especially for this show (*Skeptic*), it had to be not just educational but entertaining. Once I realised it is easier to get the message across when it is sugar-coated in a very humorous form.

You get the message across a lot more easily but also it strikes a chord with people more because you're not hammering them over the head with YOUR ideas, YOUR opinion, and YOUR point of view. You are saying, 'this is what I believe and you decide for yourself'.

When it is done with comedy it is like political satire, finding and exaggerating the absurdity of an issue. When I was explaining the show to the different festivals, I'd say it is a show about skepticism.

They'd say, 'people don't want to see a show about skepticism. They want to see something funny'. 'The show is funny', but if you say, 'Do you want to see a show about ghosts and psychics', then you've got their interest. Then they say, 'What is it about?' and I say 'It's ghosts and psychics and me trying to find the truth'. That sells the show better than saying this is a show about skepticism. I've found that quite interesting because what I'm saying is, 'I'm not going to give you my point of view until you come along and see it for yourself'. On the other hand, it's interesting to see that people are more interested in the 'What if?' aspects of ghosts and psychics than they are to see something that is about science and skepticism.

RC: *Obviously you have an interest in skepticism but why did you choose ghosts and John Edward?*

LL: Ghosts came about because I was in Scotland at the time and everyone was telling me that Scotland was the most haunted place in the world. Edinburgh has so many ghost tours. OK, this is a great place to start my journey. Taking photos, meeting people, talking to believers, and talking to people who conduct the ghost tours. It's real interesting, on the one hand, the tour guides believe it, but on the other hand they have more stories about the believers on the tours than about the ghosts. When you ask them they talk about how much money they have made out of it (*laughing*). 'Oh, so you are a failed actor but you're conducting this ghost tour and you make a lot of money out of people's belief systems and curiosity, very interesting'.

RC: *Do the tour guides tend to be believers or they don't care they are just doing a job?*

LL: From the ones I've met, they are very cynical and it is just a means to an end. They can be quite hammy as in ham actors during the ghost tour and afterwards at the

pub when they are sitting and chatting it is, 'That's another night done'. I say, 'You're not scared of ghosts?' 'No, we are just doing this thing.' It is great to see someone who is trying to create a world, a reality and undercut themselves straightaway after the tour. It is quite funny.

RC: *And John Edward?*

LL: I needed to find something for the show to get my point across about skepticism and belief but I also had to find something the audience could relate to. John Edward was on prime-time television in Australia and he also toured right before I was to perform the show. I thought that would be a great thing to do, to go along to see his show and explain to the audience what happened in the show and also statistically go through what he did in the show. Debunk what he does, his cold reading.

RC: *Have you heard of the Australian Skeptics?*

LL: Yes I have. I've met some after my shows in Melbourne and Adelaide. I think they would prefer me to go deeper. They say, 'Great, it was really entertaining but you should have torn them apart'.

RC: *Could you have done that and remained entertaining?*

LL: You could, but it is not what I wanted to do. My point of view is where I find this area very fun and exciting. Those grey areas. I do find these arguments enjoyable. Where there is an argument, you see a skeptic and a psychic arguing about something they clearly can't agree on because they are talking in two very different languages almost. And that to me I find very humorous because it shows something about human nature.

In my show I wanted to show that as well, so that is why I kind of made fun of myself as a skeptic

because I wanted to poke fun at hard-nosed skeptics as much as I wanted to poke fun at psychics. I found that was quite successful. People could see I was laughing at myself. It is quite an absurd thing to do, to go out to look for ghosts. If I could do this in a fun way, everyone is enjoying it, the skeptics, psychics, and the undecided. For myself, this area of skepticism boils down to me enjoying what it is about human nature that makes people believe things and not believe other things.

RC: *Other than your shows, how could you get younger people interested in skepticism?*

LL: It probably has to start in the schools. When I went to school there was science and religious education. There should be something which is closer to maybe philosophy or psychology. A critical thinking course which looks at how things are portrayed in the media, with a critical eye, looking at how people go about persuading the masses and how we as human beings believe things because it suits us at a particular point in time. I think that would be a really healthy course for secondary students to look at things from a critical point of view.

When I studied psychology, there was one unit called "Histories and Theories of Psychology". For some reason it was the lowest attended stream of psychology and the following year they got rid of it and other subjects. It was the most enjoyable course because it was a psychologist getting up there and just basically bagging psychology. Talking about where the fundamental principles and assumptions came from and what the problems were for all of them. I looked at it and I just went, this is the best course in psychology because it asks: what is psychology? Is it a science at all or is it really closer to astrology than it is to physics, for example. It is trying to categorise people along dimensions of

something which clearly can't be measured. Everyone is quite different. Also what it did was take all the different ideas and theories from psychology and located it in its historical context and you found out where all the biases came from.

That was the type of course that had to be a prerequisite. It shouldn't just be an elective subject, that should be a compulsory subject. Courses like that in critical thinking are going to be helpful for society in general.

RC: *So what do you think of psychology?*

LL: I came through the other end thinking, that sometimes psychology is just common sense with statistics.

RC: *So what is next for you after your show?*

LL: I have written and performed weekly segments for a comedy TV show called *In Siberia Tonight* (SBS) in which I make amusing five minute documentaries and social experiments. I also appear on breakfast radio on 3RRR Melbourne, with a regular segment called *The Truth*, where I debunk common myths and misconceptions. I've also got a screenplay, which is based on my first show *Sucker* and is currently being developed by a film producer.

RC: Great, we'll keep an eye out for you and thanks for your time, Lawrence.



Confronting Creationism

Defending science against superstition is a full-time job



Richard Saunders, when he is not investigating mysteries and making videos, is President of the NSW Skeptics

Professor Eugenie C. Scott has dedicated her life to battling the creationism movement, especially the push to have a creationist point of view taught as science in US public schools. I first meet Eugenie in October 2004 at the Berkeley public library when she, as part of the Bay Area Skeptics, hosted my talk entitled “And You Thought The Duck-billed Platypus Was Strange!” in which I gave an overview of some of the Australian paranormal investigations, of which regular readers of *the Skeptic* are well aware. At the time I asked Eugenie if I might interview her for the journal.

Eugenie is based in an office in ‘The National Center for Science Education’ located in Oakland, California and it was there I went to conduct the interview.

RS: *Are the creationists making a mark in the science text books?*

ES: Actually it’s more subtle than that. We don’t have creationism in the text books. What we have to watch out for is efforts to weaken the presentation of evolution in the text books, to water it down, disclaim it, present it

inaccurately, present it as a weak theory that has been challenged by these new observations they keep bringing up.

We have a T-Shirt with Darwin on the front and on the back the 1st amendment of the US constitution which says:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

This means that the government schools have to be rigorously neutral. You cannot promote religion in the schools and you cannot denigrate religion in the schools and that’s the way it should be. If you are promoting biblical creationism, you’re violating the 1st amendment and this is the grounds that we on our side of things have been using to challenge the fundamentalists for the last 30 years.

RS: *It’s a pity that you have to use this tactic instead of using the science of the argument.*

ES: Yes. The good news is that the scientific and the education communities are solidly behind the teaching of evolution and there is no wavering whatsoever. The problem is that in the United States we have unusually high degree of decentralisation in the education system. There is no national curriculum as each state has its own, but even these are not obligatory. The big

decisions about what is taught and who is hired are made at the local level. The district sets the curriculum and can leave evolution out if they want. So even if the teachers want to teach evolution, if there is a lot of pressure at the local level from parents, then evolution just won't be taught.

RS: *Are there people who are fooled by the use of the word 'science' in 'Creation Science'?*

ES: It can be used as an excuse. We are following one case at the moment in northern California, where a geology teacher told her class that there are two scientific theories for the age of the Earth. One is that the Earth is billions of years old and the other that Earth is 6000 years old. Not that one is a religious view at all — but that they are both scientific views.

RS: *Are the creationists a unified force?*

ES: There are two types of creationists. One is the traditional 'Young Earth Creationists' like Answers In Genesis, Ken Ham etc, who believe that everything was created about 10,000 years ago by God and that there was a great flood. They are the largest group, very well funded, and



The author in California with Phil Plait and Eugenie Scott

have been around a long time. They, however, have had major losses in the courts and are now no longer trying as hard to get creationism taught in the schools. What they *are* doing is trying to stop evolution being taught. Basically they repackage their creation arguments and call it 'Evidence Against Evolution'. If you ask them what they call evidence against evolution they use the same old, 'gaps in the fossil record', 'the second law of thermodynamics', same old same old.

The second group is 'Intelligent Design'. They are far more clever as they have learnt that they cannot make it obvious that they believe that 'God did it'. If you have creation science then you must have a creator and therefore advocate a religious point of view and that's failed in the courts. What the Intelligent Design people do is not to claim any agent. They say that they are agnostic about the agent, that's not important. They say that there are some things in nature that cannot be explained by a natural cause. Therefore (*whispers*) a supernatural cause!

So this is a much subtler form of creationism, you have to dig down several layers before you see that this is special creation. They have been much more successful lately.

RS: *How do they get on with the more traditional creationists?*

ES: It's an uneasy relationship. It's sort of like 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend'. Answers In Genesis has a page on their web site that criticises the Intelligent Design people for being 'insouciantly Biblical'. The creation science folks are miffed that the ID people are not bringing the argument back to the Bible. At the same

time, the ID people like to keep the creation science people at arm's length, as they know they don't have any credibility in the academic or science community. The ID people get apoplectic if you call them creationists. But in the end they both believe in special creation.

RS: *So ID is a masquerade?*

ES: That's right. Although the ID movement is the bigger circle so to speak and the creation science is really a sub-section of that. There are supporters of ID who are not Young Earth creationists nevertheless they are serious, they believe they have got good science, they haven't convinced the rest of us yet. Their science is awful!

RS: *How are you treated by these two groups?*

ES: I get on quite well with the creation science people, but have a more testy relationship with the ID people. I do work hard to keep it civil. I do not feel very kindly towards Jonathan Wells, who is very well trained in evolutionary biology. I know the people he took courses from; he got a PhD from the University of California, Berkeley,

Confronting Creationism

in cellular molecular biology. I know he understands this material. In my opinion, he is misusing the education that he received to deliberately leave out aspects of the explanation to mislead people. I cannot respect that.

RS: *Do you know of a creationist who has come to the conclusion that it's just plain wrong?*

ES: Yes. There are some very poignant stories. One man, a former Young Earth creationist who is one of the few people for whom understanding the scientific evidence was sufficient to convince him that the world is very old. However he is still a creationist, in the sense that he believes God created everything.

RS: *There is a feeling in Australia that in order to gain more support for our side, we should seek more support from mainstream churches. Is that the feeling here?*

ES: Absolutely. When I was a college professor in Lexington, Kentucky, I was involved in a controversy when a local group, 'The citizens for balanced teaching of origins' came to our school board and ask that creation science be taught. Needless to say that 'up with this we would not put!' We formed a coalition with the local clergy who did not want biblical literacy taught in science class. It was extremely valu-

able to have this kind of support. They showed that it was not a case of 'science vs religion'.

RS: *How is the near future looking for your centre?*

ES: We are running as hard as we can to stay in the same place. But you know, we put out a hell of a lot of brush fires. Ultimately this is all about education. What is science, what is evolution — there is so much misunderstanding out there. There is misunderstanding that you have to choose between science and religion.

RS: *What about the longer term? Do you think with the rapid growth of scientific understanding that these creation groups will still be going strong in 20 – 30 years?*

ES: It's not a question of scientific education, it's a question of religion. This will never be solved by throwing science at it. People need to think they are not losing anything by rejecting creationism. People of faith feel very strongly that if they accept evolution they have to give up religion, then forget it... it's not going to happen, they won't do that. This is one reason we try to work with the moderate and mainstream religions. A lot of folks out there in the mainstream churches still don't know that evolution is OK.

RS: *Does the scientific community take you for granted? "It's all OK, we'll let Eugenie handle it?"*

ES: That was the case about ten years ago. We now have this division of labour, so to speak. We do the grass roots but the larger scientific groups can publish to a great extent with book reviews etc. We found out that the ID people were going to be presenting a briefing to the Congress in Washington, to a science committee. This was a real jaw-dropper. We notified the members of the big science associations in Washington and they were able, at very short notice, to get someone in there to take notes. These notes were sent out to everybody! It was a wake-up call. 'The ID people are talking to Congress!' WHAT? So it's a good collaboration with us doing a lot of the ground work.

RS: *Thank you Eugenie.*

I left Eugenie with several copies of the *Great Skeptic CD2* as it contains many articles and books on creationism from an Australian point of view.

Contact The National Center for Science Education
<http://www.ncseweb.org>



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Words from Beyond

More thoughts on the wisdom in words



Mark Newbrook is a linguist who writes from the wilds of The Wirral. Sometimes, when his computer is working, the words get through.

Tongues of men and aliens

Gary Anthony and I have continued to examine linguistic claims associated with UFOs. One aspect of this involves the spellings used for allegedly alien words. Some of these spellings seem designed to support a claim. For instance, one such word is spelt *ghanasvan* or similarly. Note the initial digraph *gh*. This is rare in English and thus suggests exotic origin generally, but more specifically it is reminiscent of Indic or Celtic, which are language sub-families from cultures popular in New Age/fringe thought. And in fact the *h* is redundant: the spoken word as reported orally commences with [g] as in *go*, and *ganasvan* would have worked fine.

On a broader front, we had some interaction with Paul Potter, who upholds the veracity of the very strange 'messages' which well-known abductee Betty Andreasson (now Luca) reportedly received from alien entities. Those which are not in English are simply strings of words familiar or otherwise, drawn or seen as drawn (often with some distortion) from Latin, Greek and other

languages. Where a word exists in inflected forms in the source language, the citation (dictionary) form is virtually always the one which appears here. There is no grammar. In fact the sequences do not really exemplify language in use; they are lists of words.

Potter translates the 'messages', adding grammar as it suits him. They are mostly warnings of impending doom, often through the Sun surprisingly going nova. His own attitude to learning can be seen in his web-site remark that any challenges to his ideas 'will be ignored with great aplomb!' But is there perhaps a plausible source for these texts that involves no aliens...? Maybe someone who doesn't actually know Greek or Latin but has dictionaries and a conversion table for the Greek alphabet like the one at the start of *Greek For Beginners*? Why would aliens communicate like this, anyway? If they know Latin and want to prove it, they can write in Latin, surely?

There are in fact other cases involving UFOs where a string of the citation forms of words taken from a foreign language is presented as if it

were a meaningful sentence. One such case arose in the Garden Grove abduction case of 1975, later acknowledged as a hoax. The sequence (allegedly channelled) was *nous laos hikano* (early Greek: ‘mind’, ‘people’ as in *we the people*, ‘[I] come’). A gloss ‘I come in the mind of man’ was offered; but all three forms are citation forms, and the grammar has merely been added by the translator. ‘I come in the mind of the people’ would be *eis ton noun ton tou laou hikano* (or similar, depending on the dialect).

Central Asian Navajo?

John White’s ally Cyclone Covey (remember ‘EMSL?’) endorses various extreme diffusionist linguistic claims. Some of them involve alleged incidents demonstrating the mutual intelligibility of surprising pairs of languages. Fringe works report many such incidents but the evidence is never forthcoming. Covey’s leading case involves early-mid C20 Navajo and Uighur (Turkistan). He believes (with Ethel Stewart and others) that some (non-Inuit) ‘Native American’ groups such as the Navajo actually left Central Asia only in the last 1000-3000 years and that their languages are therefore still close to some Asian ones. I suggested he arrange a test. Oh no, he thinks it is up to the linguistics establishment to do that — and in any case a negative result would not persuade him, because of (alleged) recent linguistic divergence.

In fact, only someone trapped in early C19 methodology — as many ‘epigraphists’ are — would recognise any evidence for non-prehistoric links between Navajo and Uighur, let alone mutual comprehension. Covey uses the usual impossibly loose criteria, throughout. For instance he believes in links (of some kind; he is unclear) between Sioux and Greek, because both sometimes use Object-Verb-Subject word order. But so do very many languages. And his own Greek example does not

even have this order anyway! Stewart’s linguistics is even weaker.

Covey has now begun to argue (if we are understanding each other correctly; I am still not totally sure that he knows what I am referring to) that ‘Native American’ languages as a group are an exception to the well-established theoretical and methodological principles determining whether alleged correspondences between forms in different languages (showing ‘genetic’ relationships or contact) are likely to be genuine or not. If valid, this would justify at least some of his loose comparative methods. But there is no precedent at all for such an exception to these principles, which are partly grounded in sheer statistics and (in general terms) have repeatedly been confirmed around the world. I have asked for evidence. (But when I asked Covey for evidence of links between Mixe and Chinese, proposed by him in his previous letter, he said that he was unable to provide any, inviting me to identify it myself! So I am not all that hopeful... It should also be pointed out that, if such loosening of procedures really **were** shown to be legitimate in respect of a specific group of languages, it is likely that **many** rival analyses of the data in question would emerge as roughly equally well supported; so a firm decision that Covey or any of his allies was correct on the specifics would still be precluded.)

More philological and epigraphic fun (and related matters)

1) Readers may remember the claims of Oak and others regarding the global historical primacy of Sanskrit — the ancestor of the modern Indic languages such as Hindi — and Hinduism. In something of a reversal of that view, some are now claiming that it is the main Islamic version of Indic, Urdu, that should be seen as basic. On the basis of grotesquely feeble arguments, they claim:

(a) that the grammar of Hindustani (Urdu and Hindi together; the two

are very similar), which they describe as ‘especially simple’ (on the basis of one feature!), could not possibly be derived from that of Sanskrit, which they regard as an unnecessarily complex and ‘primitive’ language;

(b) that only 10% of its vocabulary is of Sanskrit origin (this figure is arrived at partly by deriving many such words from cognate forms in Persian, which they find more congenial as it is the language of an Islamic country);

(c) that phonological elements in Urdu borrowed from Arabic are in fact ancestral; etc.

Well, no.

2) In her revisionist books on early Christianity, notably *Jesus The Man*, Barbara Thiering claims that a number of New Testament Greek place-names refer in different places to different locations. In each case, one location is as normally understood, the other is associated with the Qumran complex developed by the Essene sect and now famous for the Dead Sea Scrolls. At times Thiering simply asserts the truth of this view, but she does mount various arguments — none of which has convinced the scholarly mainstream. One of them is in part linguistic: the NT text displays both singular and plural forms of the name Jerusalem, and Thiering claims that the former refers to the real Jerusalem, the latter to the ‘new Jerusalem’ at Qumran. But in fact the name appears in **three** forms, two singular and one plural; and it is not at all clear that Thiering is right about what they signify.

Of course, Thiering is not on her own in reinterpreting aspects of the language of the NT. I have previously referred to ‘Dave’ and his bizarre reinterpretations of NT Greek morphology; and then there are writers such as Jordan Maxwell and the well-known John Allegro who propose novel philological origins for key religious vocabulary. I have dis-

cussed Maxwell's nonsense before; for his part, Allegro traces many Semitic (Hebrew, Aramaic) and Greek words to common ancestors in (guess!) Sumerian, but as usual provides no adequate argument. I am grateful to Daryl Colquhoun for bringing this case to my attention.

3) Another Sumerian fan is Paula Sten, who also argues that 'comparative analysis' shows that 'man has had two phonetically recognizable written words from 40,000 BC' [sic!] and had more not long after, and that there are links between Basque and Algonquin (more Fellian diffusionism). I had heard of Sten from Covey (*q.v.*) – he promotes her, as he does Ethel Stewart and others — and then found her quoted on a Melungeon web site devoted to the affairs of this Appalachian community which appears to be partly Portuguese in origin (though this has been disputed). The editor seems to have believed that Basque is, or at least was, spoken in Portugal.

Several other pieces on this web site present extreme views on the status of the Portuguese (*eg* one suggests that the Portuguese population is so distinct genetically that issues arise in the context of organ transplants). Indeed, Portuguese nationalism looms large in many discussions of the early settlement of the Americas (a point which will not be lost on Australians). Most people in Portu-

gal believe (against international opinion) that the world was extensively explored by Portuguese navigators before 1492 but that this was kept secret. Indeed, this 'Portuguese Policy of Secrecy' is taught as fact in Portuguese schools. And one of the most one-sided and unsatisfactory papers in the diffusionist literature is a 1992 piece re-analysing Columbus himself as Portuguese (and denying the right of anyone who is not a Portuguese specialist to assess the issue). Portugal punched well above its weight in early modern times and (once again) pride in its history is wholly legitimate; but it is all too easy to be seduced into over-glorifying one's own ethnicity and thus talking nonsense — be one Greek, North Indian, Portuguese or whatever.

I have subsequently seen more of Sten's work, sent to me by the admiring Covey. Her ideas about language are mostly very strange and she presents her philological and epigraphic theories extremely inexplicitly and densely and without anything resembling adequate argumentation. Unless these faults can be addressed, she does not warrant much attention.

The Singing Cure

Paul Newham is another non-mainstream phonetician (compare

Godwin, Paget, Tomatis etc) who writes as if largely unaware of the linguistic mainstream. Such authors either miss the insights of linguists altogether or re-invent strange wheels. Newham for his part makes only fleeting references to most relevant aspects of linguistics and some of his claims are false or indemonstrable (*eg* that song emerged before speech). He does demonstrate a good knowledge of the physiology and physics of speech sounds; but the use he makes of this knowledge is more dubious. Drawing inspiration from traditional ideas around the world, he argues that attention to one's voice leads to profound psychological benefits. Along the way he accepts some very suspect linguistic claims made by Jung and even some (not all) of the non-standard claims of Reich; he also writes with a measure of approval of the bizarre and linguistically untutored ideas of Peter Brook about the development of a 'universal language of sounds'. And one looks in vain for the results of controlled studies supporting his own theories. Newham's 'Voice Movement Therapy' may have some value but it clearly needs stronger support.



Seen at the Convention



Audience reaction to Peter Bowditch's new shirt.

The Science of Religion

Suggesting that the supernatural is just natural after all.

In 1946 Maurice Cornforth¹ wrote:

The rapid and brilliant development of modern natural science seems definitely to confirm and justify the materialist view of the world. The natural explanation of all things, which such ancient thinkers as Thales, Democritus or Epicurus could establish only speculatively and in very general outline, is being established scientifically and in ever growing detail and comprehensiveness by the advance of natural science during the past three hundred years.

Continued investigations in the almost six decades since those words were written have continued to confirm Cornforth's statement. Every phenomenon and every thing in this world of ours is the result of the enormously complex interaction of physical, understandable, entities. That includes religion and all other aspects of human behaviour.

There have been attempts, including that by the late Stephen J Gould² (a founding Skeptic) to keep religion and science apart and he, in particular, regarded them as belonging to two separate non-overlapping magisteria, to which he gave the acronym NOMA. That approach was no more than an attempt to isolate and protect religious belief from the

ever-expanding revelation of the workings of the real world which is gained by scientific investigation.

All in the mind

The science of neurophysiology has provided a much clearer understanding of the link between the world around us and the world of comprehension inside us, than was available to Cornforth's great thinkers of the past. Our connection to the outside world can now be seen as the result of the ebb and flow of chemicals and electricity in the body's nervous system and, in particular, in the multitudinous interconnections between the cells of the brain. The light, heat, sound waves and touch of our environs provide the stimuli to generate a picture of the external world in our mind and all our interactions with the external world are determined by our responses to that image. Fortunately for us the image is usually correct. If I see a chair and sit down in it and it keeps me off the floor then it is truly there. In that way I repeatedly confirm the correctness of my image as I go about interacting with the other objects of my world.

Unfortunately the formation of the image can also go wrong. The chemicals in drugs upset it; physical damage to the brain upsets it and some-



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times something innate in the mechanism of the brain distorts it. There is a vast number of reports in the literature of psychology, sociology and neurology of what the mind “sees” or “hears” when the image does not correspond to external reality. All the apparitions and voices which are the stock-in-trade of the religious visionaries have been more or less duplicated in other people as a result of brain disturbances arising from natural causes. How can one assess whether the image is a true representation of the external world? Again, as with the chair, only by attempting to manipulate or use the external world as pictured by the image.

Images are held or being generated in the brain all the time. When we are asleep we have dreams ranging from the ephemeral to the “lucid” dreams of such intensity that it takes some time after waking to recognise that the experienced image was in fact a dream. Even awake some people apparently experience startling images in their minds. Some believe that they have actually met aliens; been operated on by them; have been taken into their spaceships.

The images some people have had of being contacted by aliens are accepted as no more than brain disturbances because there is never any acceptable physical evidence and the idea is quite inconsistent with all we have otherwise confirmed about the speed of light and the distance to the nearest star system. Indeed, if the image of alien contact in one person’s brain were to be accepted widely as evidence of the real presence of aliens, there would be widespread panic and the mobilisation of massive defence forces. That reaction doesn’t happen, the report is ignored, it is imaginary.

Why then do other reports of startling visions gain acceptance? They have no more physical evidence of their reality than those of the aliens.

All the evidence points to the fact that the image in the brain arises from its response to an external physical input or from the internal interactions between the various processes involved in 24-hour me-

tabolism. There can be no physical evidence of an incorporeal God or anything else which is incorporeal, that is, emits no light or sound, cannot be touched. The image of a god does, however, exist in the human brain and it is represented by humans in pictures, sculptures and words. How, without any physical reality on which it could be based, have those images of God or gods taken hold in the human brain?

God has an evolutionary history

The scientific groundwork for an answer to that question was laid in 1890 when J. G. Frazer published the results of his anthropological study of magic and religion in his book *The Golden Bough*. With an overwhelming collation of data, Frazer showed that the idea of God had an evolutionary history. It all started with the earliest human beings attempting to control their environment by magic. If you want rain then splash water around. If you want to have success in the hunt then dance the desired result or draw the imagined successful scene. It was not a great jump to believe that the things that humans could not control, but which happened anyway, were controlled by even more powerful but unseen humans. These became the spirits or gods. Indeed the earliest of these superhumans were very human, had families and exhibited all the characteristics of normal humans such as anger, revenge, love and ambition. Truly the gods were conceived in the image of humans.

The people who could tap the power of the gods were, for that reason, very powerful members of the community. They were the medicine-men and witchdoctors; they also evolved along with society in which they lived. As Frazer³ commented from his studies of culture in Africa: “and here the evidence for the evolution of the chief out of the magician, and especially out of the rainmaker, is comparatively plentiful”. From simple magician to chief and on to king or queen, the role of conduit to the gods gave great secular power to

the chosen individuals. Their commands, formulated from their own human desires, were given with all the awesome majesty of the gods. We have more or less passed the stage of the absolute monarchs who had that second-hand authority, but the priestly caste still retains the same power over a great mass of the people. Their special raiments, ceremonies and incantations to their particular god betrays their origin as magicians and witchdoctors but their authority is increasingly being contested as the transparent human base for their edicts conflicts with the real living needs of their subjects. It is very hard to maintain that God says no to condoms in the face of AIDS.

Once scientific investigation reveals, as it has done, the natural evolutionary origin of religion and its gods and its role in society as well as its confinement to our brain activity, the veil of mystery has parted. The “agnostics” can now make up their minds. God exists but only as a product of the evolving mind.

Far from science and religion being separate magisteria they are in fact separate aspects of the one human endeavour to control the world in which we find ourselves. The idealist path of belief in the supernatural led through magic to religion and God and a deadend of endlessly interpreting and re-interpreting words to adjust to the changing demands of society. The materialist path led from experience and testing of the natural world through science to unending understanding and real control.

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The Unreal State of Real Estate

Tricks of the real estate
trade examined

Don't Sign Anything! How to protect yourself from the tricks and traps of real estate. Neil Jenman, Rowley Publications, Sydney, 2002

“Being skeptical is your first protection against the lies in real estate,” Jenman cautions. Nevertheless, knowing the tricks of the trade cannot hurt.

According to Jenman, the fundamental problem in real estate arises because of a conflict of interest between the professional and the consumer – always a recipe for disaster. Take dentists, for example: the consumer wants good teeth, but dentists benefit most from expensive dental work¹.

Of course, dentists are dedicated professionals who spent four plus years honing their skills and are no doubt sincere about trying to save us from our teeth rotting habits².

However, real estate agents only require four *weeks* of training. It is not too much of a stretch of the imagination to suppose that some agents who enter the industry are in

it for the “easy” money. Getting around \$10K per sale sure beats commissions from persuading people to switch from Telstra to Optus and back again *ad infinitum*.

But it is not *that* easy. There are many agents, there only are so many properties for sale and competition is fierce. This is where the conflict of interest arises. It is in the interest of the real estate agent to:

- 1) Get the seller to assign him the job of selling her property (called *getting a listing*)
- 2) Sell the property before the agreement with the seller expires.

While it is the primary goal of the seller to:

- 3) Sell the property at the best possible price

A seller usually interviews several real estate agents before picking one. The easiest way for the agent to win a listing is to play to Goal 3 by overestimating the price that the property is likely to fetch. Jenman calls this the *Quote Lie*. The agent thus achieves Goal 1 — but how to achieve Goal 2 with an unrealistic price?

Apparently, the industry has come up with a clever solution that will seem familiar to anyone who ever worked in the public service — activ-



Michael Lucht is a mathematician with a philosophical bent. He's from N-W Tasmania.

1. This might explain why my childhood dentist rewarded me with sweets after every visit.

2. After all, for all I know my dentist could be a subscriber. Hi Brendan!

ity takes the place of progress. The agent hopes that in this way, when the property fails to sell at the promised price, the consumer will believe it is the fault of the market and not the agent. Jenman calls this process *Conditioning*.

According to Jenman, conditioning has been institutionalized to the extent that the whole periphenalia of the industry — advertising, inspections, auctions — are perverted to its cause. This also explains why real estate agents like to sign up sellers for three to four months or longer — squashing dreams takes time.

Advertising Bonanza

Besides generating the appearance of progress, real estate advertising is a great way for agencies to advertise at zero cost. Some enterprising agents even make a profit on advertising by pocketing kickbacks from the newspapers; it is like paying an agent not to sell your property! Even a hardened skeptic might start believing her house was at the vertex of a particularly inauspicious cluster of earth rays.

One question immediately springs to mind — how to sell without advertising? Jenman claims that paying for advertising when one already pays a commission to the real estate agent is absurd.

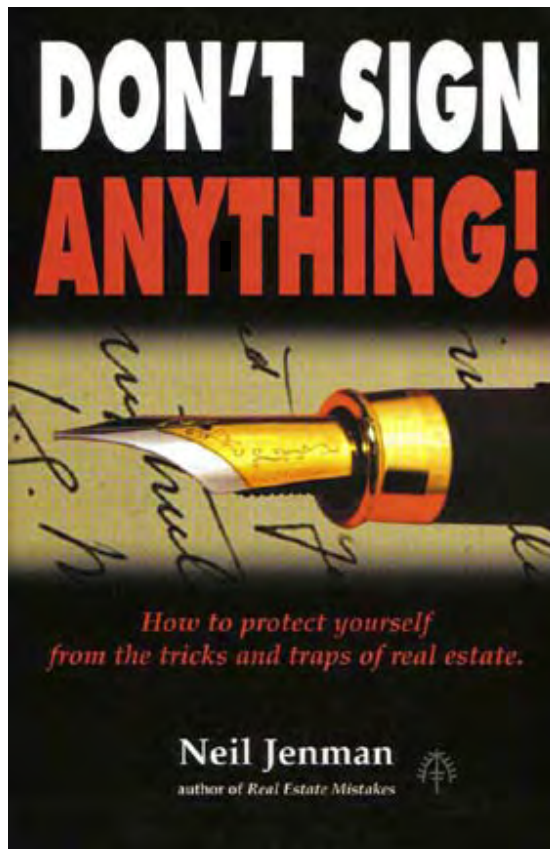
Going to a real estate agent and being asked for money so that the agent can find a buyer makes as much sense as going to a butcher shop and being asked for money to find a cow.

Even if one disagrees with Jenman, it is far from obvious why the address and basic information of a property should not suffice to attract genuine buyers. Or are there really people who buy based on a picture and a description like, “A bonanza of rewards lie behind the front door of this bonanza beachside located home”³? Ah — the poetry!

3. *The Advocate Property Guide*, 8 July 2004, R12

Open Inspections

According to Jenman, another conditioning tool is the open inspection. After all, why not simply show serious buyers around *whenever* they want? Beyond the ulterior motive of generating activity, there again is an über-ulterior motive — people who are thinking of selling their property often visit open inspections to check out the real estate agency. This gives the agent the opportunity to make more listings.



Auctions

Saying that Jenman does not like English Auctions is like saying that Shirley MacLaine is just a tad weird. Apparently, English Auctions not only never fetch the best price; they even played a role in the collapse of the Roman Empire!

Before commenting on the merit of this, let us first consider auctions in a little detail. In an English Auction, bidding starts low, buyers keep raising their bids, and the last (and highest) bid wins. When a real estate agent mentions ‘auction’, he usually means English Auction.

However, there are other types of auctions. Jenman advocates the Sealed Bid Auction in which every interested party makes a bid *without* knowing what the other buyers are going to bid and without the chance to subsequently raise their bid. The party with the highest amount in their sealed bid wins the auction.

To be fair to Jenman, according to the case studies he collected, English Auctions attract unethical behaviour in the way that Star Trek conventions attract young men wearing glasses who know what J2EE⁴ stands for.

One of the tricks of the trade is dummy bidding in which representatives of the agent or seller bid merely to raise the price. Clearly, Jenman is correct — dummy bids are nothing short of fraud. Besides being unethical, it undermines the whole point of an English Auction (to which I will shortly come).

Some Real Estate agents argue that dummy bids are necessary to raise the price to the reserve. Jenman responds, why not start at reserve and avoid dummy bids altogether? He provides his own answer — many reserves are utterly unrealistic because of the Quote Lie. The real estate agent’s goal is to get the best possible price *below* reserve and then pressure the seller to accept it.

This is helped by the fact that in English Auctions the participants are under pressure to make irrevocable decisions in seconds, allowing the agent to lean on buyers and sellers alike to produce a result. With the ability to “sleep over it” removed, an English Auction can be dangerous, unless one is lucky enough to possess a generally disagreeable personality; Bobby Fischer should be safe⁵.

4. Java 2, Enterprise Edition. Tragically, the author has yet to attend a ST convention.

5. And John McEnroe. ‘You want me to sell my house for \$20,000 below reserve? You can not be serious!’

Up to this point, it is hard to argue with Jenman. Where he comes unstuck is by stating that an English Auction — by its very nature — will get a lower price than a Sealed Bid Auction. The truth is a lot more complicated. English Auctions have one advantage over Sealed Bid Auctions — they reveal information about other people’s valuation of the sale item, thereby allowing valuations to change on-the-fly. Dummy bids sabotage this mechanism because bidders can no longer be certain that the competing bids are genuine. Conclusion: Auctioneers who support dummy bids are not only unethical, but ignorant as well.

So which is better, English Auction or Sealed Bid (assuming complete honesty)? Auctions fall within a branch of mathematics/economics called game theory.

Research into auctions has uncovered the following results⁶:

	Property is wanted for personal use. The bidder does not care about valuations made by others.	Property is wanted for eventual re-sale. The bidder takes valuations made by other people into account.
Bidders does not mind loosing the property (Other similar properties are available.)	Sealed Bid and English will fetch about the same.	An English Auction is likely to fetch more \$ than Sealed Bid
Bidder very much wants this property (Property is unique in a way significant to the bidder.)	A Sealed Bid Auction is likely to fetch more \$ than English	Game Theorists raise a small white flag.

6. The table is a modified version of the summary table from “Auction Strategies” by Kate Reynolds (<http://www.agorics.com/Library/Auctions/auction8.html>) who took it from “Going, Going Gone: Setting Prices with Auctions” by Loretta J. Mester, *Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia Business Review* (March/April):3-13. (Disclaimer: The author is not an authority on Game Theory. Follow the given advice at your own risk. Or, to put it another way, please don’t sue!)

So, for example:

◆ If you want to sell your home to an owner-occupier, and your house has features (location, design, garden, etc.) that make it unique in manner significant to buyers, then a Sealed Bid Auction is the way to go.

◆ If you want to sell your unit, which is one of many nearly identical units, to an investor, then English Auction is worth considering.

So contrary to what Jenman says, English Auctions are not intrinsically evil.

The Harm Done by Conditioning

Jenman states that homebuyers spend on average of 85 days looking for a property. This means that one has to wait three months to have as many potential buyers for one’s house as one has during the first week. So contrary to what usually happens, one should expect properties to sell *fast*.

Imagine that the “For Sale” sign was put up yesterday. If one fancies the house, perhaps one should make a high offer quick, before someone snaps it away.

Conversely, imagine that the plastic of the “For Sale” sign is fading and spiders, at least, found a suitable home because of it. What could be wrong with this house? Are the owners asking for too much?

Hence, Jenman argues, the conditioning process, by delaying the sale, actually lowers the price of properties.

More Good Stuff

At least with respect to conditioning, the consumer shares some of the blame by selecting the real estate agent who gives the most creative quote — naturally selecting against honest agents. However, there are other real estate practices that make conditioning look positively virtuous. Jenman explains the bonus commission swindle, investment property scam, bait pricing, and the use of death notices to find new listings. He also clarifies the machinations of Get Rich Real Estate Gurus and explains “Hydraulicling”⁷.

The worst frauds are the ones where the con men are in cahoots with (more or less) respectable lawyers and banks. Jenman sensibly recommends focussing the tarring and feathering on the “respectable” parties, rather than the scammers who are accustomed to being driven out of town.

Jenman also covers negotiation strategies for both buyers and sellers. This is not advice for those who are looking for a “steal”. Jenman is a proponent of wholesome values — “The basis of all ethical negotiation is that both sellers and buyers get a ‘fair deal’”, “low debt and careful living equals happiness” and “always finish your broccoli!”⁸.

Conclusion

It is good to have people willing to question the accepted “wisdom”. (Well, at least as long they are reasonably rational.) In the real estate industry, the accepted wisdom includes the assumption that we need to engage real estate agents to sell properties, and that advertising needs to be separated

7. No, Jenman stops short of advocating the drowning of those pests.

8. Correct, the last quote is fictitious. It shows just how easy it is to rebel against wholesome values.

rately paid for. Jenman not only is rational, but has also collected an impressive array of data to support his case (documented in a legion of footnotes).

His book has some faults. At times it is a little repetitive, as if some of the chapters were written to stand on their own, and not as chapters of a book. Moreover, Jenman's description of how exactly a sale should be handled is a little unclear. Should one, for example, set a firm closing date for the Sealed Bid Auction?

Jenman is rightfully angry about the abuses of English Auctions, but a more objective study of the pros and cons of the various auction types would have been useful.

Jenman has started his own real estate system, which like ISO 9000 tries to standardise quality. Unlike ISO 9000, I think his system could be a good idea. The Jenman system is non-brand specific. For example, "The Professionals" in Burnie follow the Jenman system, but most members of "The Professionals" chain do not.

An essential part of the Jenman system is the Real Estate Guarantee (given in the appendix in his book⁹) which is an excellent consumer protection device. Show it to your (prospective) real estate agent, sit back with a glass of red wine and watch him squirm as he attempts to wriggle his way out of it¹⁰. Jenman gives explicit permission for every consumer to use his guarantee — with *any* agent. Arguably, the best guarantee is that if the property sells below the lowest price for which the agent thinks the property will sell, the agent forfeits his commission — effectively protecting against the Quote Lie.

In short: real estate involves big bucks; spending \$29.95 on Jenman's book will be a sound investment.

9. It can also be downloaded from: <http://www.jenman.com/index.php>

10. This, admittedly, is not an altogether wholesome source of pleasure.



A Plea from Nigeria

For some time now, we have been bringing to you in our pages the writings of Leo Igwe, who heads up the Nigerian Skeptics. Most Australians know little of the largest country in Africa, apart from it having given its name to a particularly persistent financial scam, but Leo has alerted us to much more that is happening in his country.

It must take a great deal of courage to be a Skeptic in Nigeria, far more

than is required in Australia, and we would like to assist the small band of Skeptics there.

We received the following message from Leo recently and are delighted to give it publicity here. Australian Skeptics is planning to donate books, CDs, DVDs and other items to their library. We can only urge any subscriber who would like to assist them with his work to contact Leo at the address below.

Today, more than ever, Nigerian Skeptics need your support to defend reason, science and critical thinking.

In Nigeria, belief in superstition and supernatural nonsense is alarmingly high — and continues to rise with disastrous consequences on the people and the society. Generally there's a national reversion to primitive irrational beliefs and pseudoscience. Nigerian Skeptics are waging a fierce battle against this dangerous trend while striving to enthrone the values of enlightenment and intellectual rebirth.

With the support of the Center for Inquiry (US), Nigerian Skeptics secured an office apartment with a library. But we need your support to fully run and operate the Center.

There's a lot happening in Nigeria today that needs skeptical action and intervention and it takes resources to wage this battle against the forces of irrationalism and superstition.

We urgently need your support in the world's least skeptical country.

**Help us spread the word
We look forward to your donations**

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Out of the Mouths of Babes

Using science to find
out about us.

Descartes' Baby: How the Science of Child Development Explains What Makes Us Human; Paul Bloom, Basic Books.

We have handled with equanimity the concept that the Earth is not the center of the universe, though some good fellows who championed that idea when it was new suffered mightily for doing so. Most of us, even the redoubtable Catholic Church, have accepted that evolution explains animal diversity, and even the emergence of humans, although there are some who for religious (not scientific) reasons are kicking and screaming in refusal.

Science cannot itself take on the existence of gods, for that is not a scientific question, nor is the existence of an afterlife. But souls; now there is something that science, and especially modern neuroscience, might go to work on. In this book, Bloom takes an even more basic approach, hardly mentioning such technological wonders as the scanners that show brains at work. He examines a wealth of clever experiments on babies and children to answer about babies the question posed more often about disreputable politicians: "What do they know, and when do they know it?" The answers provide an entertaining and in-

formative evaluation of what we might be able to tell about souls.

Rene Descartes, the seventeenth-century French philosopher, seems to have gotten it wrong, but his views have been extraordinarily influential. That may be because Descartes' views are, as Bloom shows, natural ones. Descartes promoted "dualism": the body exists, and it is a machine of meat which, when it is alive, is coupled with an immaterial soul. As we have come to know better about what brains do, and what broken brains cannot do that whole brains can, and what computer programs can do that brains cannot and vice versa, science is approaching what Frances Crick called "the astonishing hypothesis": what makes me me and you you is nothing more than brain processes.

There is always the possibility that religious believers will "one up" this explanation; as long as there are any gaps in it, they can always say that souls are what fill the gaps, just as they used to think the soul was circumscribed more and more until it had to be located in the pineal gland. (That was another of Descartes' mistaken ideas.) Not only are the neuroscientists chipping away at anything mystical that goes on in our brains to make ourselves us, but Bloom argues that evolution itself



Rob Hardy is a US psychiatrist and regular reviewer for the Skeptic

has made us into dualists. We are wired to perceive material objects and mental manifestations as separate entities, and so naturally we think of the two as separate realms.

That might be used by some as a justification that the two views and dualism are the right ways to look at the world, but Bloom shows that our innate knowledge about such things often betrays us. Wonderful experiments described here show how baby minds grasp physical nature. If a baby sees something unexpected, like a box hanging unsupported in midair, the baby will look at it for longer than if the box were simply sitting on the floor. We can tell by such experiments that babies expect a thing to stay where it is, or to move in a sensible fashion. But we evolved a knowledge of the physical world that has broken down as we got better at examining it.

The Sun coursing over the sky, to make the same orbit the next day, led us, with our inborn understanding of physical events, to think that the sun was doing the moving, but we have learned better. Even as babies we also had an understanding that solid objects move in certain ways and affect each other by contact; it turns out that such solid objects are really not solid at all, but mostly empty space interrupted by tiny whizzing particles. Babies have reasonable ideas of cause and effect, but such linkages have come apart in the minuscule world of quantum mechanics. We evolved in a universe where there was no need to deal with such ideas, or with the possibility of moving at close to the speed of light and all the counterintuitive

manifestations that involves. We got the physical part of it as right as our development needed for it to be, and then eventually we developed enough to see that we were looking at the physical world with physical blinkers.

Our tendency to divide the physical world off from the mental (or spiritual/soul) one, Bloom asserts, comes as an accidental consequence of brain functions that we use to interpret the thoughts and behavior of other people. Babies might stare with surprise at a floating box, but if the box sits on the floor, they want to look at something else. They do not, however, treat people the same way. Babies confronted with a formerly animated face which becomes still and expressionless become antsy. From the very beginning, then, babies treat the world as dual. Bloom goes on to explain experiments that show that children have inborn knowledge of fairness that is at the heart of our ability to get along with others. "From this perspective, our moral feelings are no less adaptations than our taste for sweet foods and our perception of solid objects." We are from an early age able to empathize with the pain of others, which leads to compassion and to helping them; it's all commendable behavior, and no less so because we come into the world hard-wired to perform it.

We perform it because it pays to perform it, and it simply gives us a reproductive advantage. Empathetic people (and those with altruism and other laudable traits described here) are most successful at working in societies, and we are social animals.

What's more, they will be more effective in understanding and raising children, and so the behavior will be passed on.

Bloom is clearly a materialist, not a dualist, but wisely avoids any attempt to prove the issue. What he has done instead is not to examine if dualism is justified, but merely why belief in it is so prevalent. The belief that objects are not really solid is just as fundamentally unnatural as the belief that mind is an emergent physical property of the brain. This could be heavy stuff, and philosophers have argued heavily for centuries one way or the other. But Bloom has a diverse array of interests, and includes discussion of such subjects as slapstick humor, autism, modern art, and disgust. Those familiar with Noam Chomsky's claim that we have special "language organs" in our brains that make us linguistic creatures will find that idea mentioned here, but vastly expanded to show our "physics organ" and "social organ".

Throughout Bloom has illustrated his arguments with summaries of his own or others' experiments on babies. Those who would expect a materialist also to be a pessimist will be disappointed; he declares himself to be a "morally optimistic materialist," and gives examples of moral improvement (like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) that would have made little sense to our forebears. Not bad for a bunch of natural-born dualists.



Time to Renew?

**If you received an enclosed Renewal Notice, it is.
If you didn't, it isn't.**

Thoughts of Freethinkers

Great Freethinkers – Selected Quotations by Famous Sceptics and Nonconformists. Edited by James C. Sanford. Metacomet Books. 2004. 250pp. pbk.

This is a handy reference book for all sceptics, humanists, rationalists and other freethinkers. The quotations cover a wide spectrum: as well as religion there is ethics, knowledge, morality, psychology, nature, science, the arts, politics, society, economy. Quotations that rang a bell with me included:

The greatest tragedy in mankind's history may be the hijacking of morality by religion.

Arthur C. Clarke, the British science writer and humanist, 1991

I believe in life everlasting but not for the individual.

George Bernard Shaw, British playwright, critic, sceptic, 1950

My plainness of speech makes them hate me, and what is their hatred but a proof that I am speaking the truth?

Socrates, Greek philosopher, unconventional theist, 4th century BC

Convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies.

Friedrich Nietzsche, German philosopher and atheist, 1878

The final test of truth is ridicule. Very few religious dogmas have ever faced it and survived.

H. L. Mencken, US journalist and social critic, agnostic, 1918

Such is the nature of men, that however they may acknowledge others to be more witty, or more eloquent, or more learned, yet they will hardly believe there be many so wise as themselves.

Thomas Hobbes, British political philosopher, sceptic, 1651

The State is the altar of political freedom and, like the religious altar, it is maintained for the purpose of human sacrifice.

Emma Goldman, US anarchist, atheist, 1910

To talk of immaterial existences is to talk of nothings. To say that the human soul, angels, God, are immaterial, is to say they are nothings, or that there is no God, no angels, no soul. I cannot reason otherwise.

Thomas Jefferson, US President, political theorist, theist, 1820.

Although freethinkers have always been in the minority it is pleasing to find so many of world repute so identified. Amongst the sceptics are Averroes, 12th century Arabic philosopher; Charles Baudelaire, 19th century French poet; Eugene Delacroix, 19th century French painter; Gustave Flaubert, 19th century novelist; Galileo Galilei, 17th century Italian astronomer, physicist; Joseph Heller, 20th century US novelist; Ernest Hemingway, 20th century US novelist; David Hume, 18th century British philosopher; James Joyce, 20th century Irish novelist; Niccolo Machiavelli, 16th century Italian statesman, political theorist; Henry Miller, 20th century US novelist; Michel de Montaigne, 16th century French essayist; George Orwell, 20th century British novelist, social critic; Dorothy Parker, 20th century US writer, critic; Salman Rushdie, 20th century British novelist; Gertude Stein, 19th century US writer; Mark Twain, 19th century US writer, humorist; Oscar Wilde, 19th century British playwright, critic; Ludwig Wittgenstein, 20th century British philosopher.

Then we have many rationalists; among them Ambrose Bierce, Niels Bohr, Noam Chomsky, Marie Curie, Havelock Ellis, Julian Huxley, Ernst Mach, Bertrand Russell, Margaret Sanger, Percy Bysshe Shelley. We must

not forget prominent humanists who include Arthur C. Clarke, Richard Dawkins, John Dewey, Sidney Hook, Paul Kurtz, Walter Lippmann, Iris Murdoch, Karl Popper, Carl Sagan, Edward O. Wilson. Prominent agnostics include Thomas Carlyle, Confucius, Clarence Darrow, Charles Darwin, Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein, George Eliot, E. M. Forster, Stephen Jay Gould, J. B. S. Haldane, Thomas Henry Huxley, Henrik Ibsen, John Keats, D. H. Lawrence, Sinclair Lewis, W. Somerset Maugham, Marcel Proust, H. G. Wells, Virginia Woolf, Emile Zola.

Among prominent atheists there are Hannah Arendt, Simone de Beauvoir, Jeremy Bentham, Annie Besant, Bertolt Brecht, Charles Bradlaugh, Samuel Butler, Albert Camus, Friedrich Engels, Ludwig Feurbach, Anatole France, Sigmund Freud, Emma Goldman, Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Marx, William Morris, Friedrich Nietzsche, Emmeline Pankhurst, Pablo Picasso, Jean-Paul Sartre, Arthur Schopenhauer, Leon Trotsky, Kurt Vonnegut.

Finally there are unconventional theists such as Aristotle, Joseph Conrad, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, William Hazlitt, Oliver Wendell Holmes, William James, Immanuel Kant, Abraham Lincoln, John Stuart Mill, Paul Robeson, Socrates, Walt Whitman; deists including Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, Thomas Paine, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Adam Smith, Voltaire, Mary Wollstonecraft; and materialists such as Anaxagoras, Democritus, Epicurus, Lucretius.

Freethinkers can not only find many pearls of wisdom in this collection but also feel a glow that we are part of a great group of people who contributed so much to a humane society.

James Gerrard

Forum

Two Cheers for Alternative Medicine!

The common view of 'alternative' medicines among skeptics seems to be that they are merely useless; junk produced and marketed by ruthless profiteers to take advantage of sick and anxious people. Ten years ago I shared that view whole-heartedly; but the experiences of parenthood and middle age have softened my views somewhat. I believe now that alternative medicine has a legitimate place.

By 'alternative medicine', I am not referring to systems like homeopathy, which are inherently irrational, or to treatments like massage and reiki, where a practitioner is directly involved: I refer chiefly to the kinds of tablets and capsules that can be bought off the shelf at pharmacists and supermarkets. Rather than dismissing these treatments out of hand, I believe we should take up an attitude of experimentation and establishing consensus. Here are my reasons why, and some of the experiences that shaped them.

The placebo effect

Even if we assume for a moment that all non-pharmaceutical preparations are totally inactive, there would still be a place for them, because of the placebo effect. Sceptics have a lot of trouble coming to terms with the placebo effect — I know I did — because it just seems so wrong: how can a rational person

be made to feel better by something that has no biochemical impact? But once we recognize that there are a lot of things which irrationally make us feel better — a smile from a passer-by, having a hurt finger kissed, nearly getting the right lottery ticket number — placebos don't seem so outrageous. I think of them as drugs for the unconscious mind — and since the mind is the organ which contributes most to how we feel, placebos can be very potent indeed.

Of course, it has to be the right placebo. The unconscious mind is simple; it's not stupid. Tell it that cheap sugar pills will cure your impotence and it will laugh at you. But find a placebo with the right price (cost = potency), the right name ('horny goat weed') and impressive antecedents ('used by Latvian shepherds to promote lambing in their flocks') and the subconscious mind can be tricked into doing its stuff. And why not? I've had several battles with my subconscious mind. I've found it a powerful ally and a dangerous enemy. If it takes trickery to get it on my side, I'm all for it.

People are different

My family has a genetic sensitivity to peanuts, which varies from person to person. If I eat fifty peanuts,



Jon Jermey is an indexer and computer trainer who lives in the Blue Mountains. Other publications include numerous articles on computing and the Internet and co-authoring the definitive book on Website Indexing.

I suffer a mild discomfort. If my daughter eats one, it could be lethal. It's transparently clear to me now that people have different biochemistries. So if we react differently to peanuts, why not to echinacea, or St John's Wort? The fact that it didn't work for you, or for your sister, or for ten people in a medical study, is suggestive, but not conclusive. Perhaps your genes are different.

The results of medical testing, in fact, often look like this: 'Of fifty patients who trialled Treatment X, five reported a worsening condition, five reported an improvement, and forty reported no change. This was the same as in the control group, so Treatment X was considered to have no effect.' Fair enough, if you're a doctor. But if I was one of the five in the group who showed improvement, I'd want to know where I could get more of the stuff — wouldn't you?

Self-experimentation

A few years back I caught the 'flu and decided to try echinacea. Did it work? No, so I stopped taking it. Did I expect it to work? Not really. But I thought that it might. And for half the price of a box of pharmacist's cold tablets, it was worth a try. Generally speaking, people aren't stupid. If they try something and it doesn't work, they'll give it up. If the condition continues to annoy them, they'll try something else, and go on until they've exhausted the options or found something that works.

If conventional medicine offers options, they'll probably explore those too. But for the multitude of conditions that conventional medicine can't yet help, why not experiment? After all, it's exactly what doctors in pharmaceutical laboratories are doing. They have larger sample sizes and more stringent controls, but I have one big advantage: I only have to find something that works for me.

Right now I am trialling a treatment called 'Macu-vision for eye health', to see if it clears floaters in the eyes. My tentative conclusion is that it doesn't, but just like paid researchers I have to allow for confounding conditions: new glasses, a stiff neck and a case of the 'flu. I've trialled charcoal tablets for irritable bowel syndrome (conclusion: works like magic!) and ginkgo biloba for tinnitus (probably no effect). If I can get one in ten treatments to work I will be delighted; even one in a hundred would still make it worthwhile. And any clues I can get to help me are gratefully received.

Communication and consensus

Among the earliest communities on the Internet — and still among the busiest — are support groups for medical conditions. And much of the traffic back and forth is to do with remedies for these. Conditions that a typical GP would see once every few years are explained, discussed and debated on a daily basis. New treatments are described and reviewed. Web sites go up and are linked to. Knowledge is shared.

I had a dramatic demonstration of the power of the Internet when I began seeking medical help for tinnitus (ringing in the ears). To my doctor, tinnitus was synonymous with hearing loss; she sent me to an otolaryngologist, who cleaned out my ears and sent me on to an audiologist, who told me I had perfect hearing. That was the end of the line for conventional medicine.

Luckily I was equipped to do some of my own research, and I found material on the Internet indicating that tinnitus might result from a crooked jaw. I went to a physiotherapist for some exercises and to a dentist for a plate to hold my jaw straight at nights. The tinnitus reduced by about eighty per cent. Not 'alternative' medicine, to be sure, but an unconventional approach that I might never have thought of without help.

Conclusion

So what should a skeptical approach to alternative medicine look like? It could begin by distinguishing between treatments that could in principle have some effect and those that can only ever be placebos. It could acknowledge the role of the unconscious in responding to treatments and practitioners and recognize its importance in well-being. It could recognize that people differ biochemically in their responses to treatments, and that a treatment which works for one person in a hundred is still a treatment which works. It could acknowledge that, as well as a minority of gullible people who need to be protected, alternative medicine is used by people who are rational, well-informed and capable of making intelligent decisions.

It could acknowledge the experimental way in which many users are testing these treatments, and the generally clear and unbiased reports they make to others around the world. Most importantly, it could recognize that while alternative treatments are a gamble, for most people they are a relatively cheap gamble that could pay off in a big way.

Editor's response

I doubt if most of our readers would disagree with much of what you write, Jon. The placebo effect, although not fully understood, is well-recognised as an important part of testing any medical product or procedure. The Skeptic's main beef with "alternative medicine" is not that some of it doesn't work or might be dangerous, it is that much of it relies on subjective anecdote and not on any objective test of efficacy.

It will be interesting to see if we receive any comment on your article.



Letters

Anti-Immunisation

*Brian O'Sullivan
Taringa QLD*

Between 1958 and 1967 I practised in a country town in the Upper Burnett region of Queensland and found anti-immunisation existed and fell into various classes.

1. As always immunisation was dangerous.
2. Opposed by God. We would not be showing trust in the Lord if they had their children immunised. (It was Hillbilly country and there were many branches of Christianity, very strange sects.)
3. These diseases did not exist and immunisation was a scheme concocted by Doctors to make them rich. Doctors were rich already — everyone knew that, this evil scheme would make them richer.
4. Sheer laziness.
5. They were too poor.

A lot of share farmers were very poor but the Shire Council ran regular immunisation clinics for tetanus, diphtheria, whooping cough and poliomyelitis free of charge for children and a small charge for adults (25 cents, per injection).

One morning a farmer sneaked up to the hospital with his son where I was conducting an out patient clinic and requested I give the boy an anti-tetanus injection. I mean sneaked as he kept looking over his shoulder and refused at first to give his name and address to the out patient clerk

His son was 6 or 7 years old and had a large filthy infected laceration of one of his feet. The wound was leaking pus and his bare feet were ingrained with dirt and cowdung. According to the father the boy had caught his foot on some barbed wire a week or so before and had had absolutely no treatment.

I organised the nursing staff to take the boy through to the treatment room where they scrubbed his legs, cleaned the wound, applied an antiseptic dressing, bandaged the foot and gave him a shot of penicillin.

Meanwhile the father was pleading with me to give him a tetanus injection. We had a peculiar situation in those days as the Commonwealth paid grants to cities, towns and shires for immunisation campaigns but refused any funds to provide the various types of sera at hospitals, certainly not country hospitals in Queensland. Even if I had wanted to give the kid a shot I was unable to do so as the State government would not permit us to buy any tetanus toxoid. The father did not want a Tet Toxoid injection anyway he wanted an anti-tetanus injection, the type made from horse serum and no longer recommended as it was dangerous. I told the father this and said 'Of course he doesn't need an injection as he would be immunised and would have had his preschool booster'. 'Oh! No! He has not had any injections of any type as we would not be showing trust in God if we immunised our children!'

I am afraid I lost my temper and said "Well you had better start praying. If he is developing tetanus neither of the injections would work and most children still die from tetanus even in

the biggest and best teaching hospitals in Australia". I paused for breath and shouted after him as he ran away, "If he gets tetanus and dies I will see you go to gaol for murder".

There was a happy result though; next morning he, his wife and their four children lined up at my surgery to be immunised.

Editor's Note

Dr O'Sullivan has written and published a book about his experiences as a GP in outback Queensland in the 1950s, some of which have been published in these pages. We will carry a review in a later issue.

About depression

*Nigel Sinnott
Sunshine West, Vic.*

A year ago your Editor kindly published an article of mine on "Existing with Depression". I was pleased to see it in print, and imagined it would attract a bit of comment, but I received probably more feedback, mainly by e-mail, about the article than about everything else of mine (put together) that has been published during the past forty years. I was particularly astonished that all the comments on the depression article were complimentary, as I was confident that one or two respondents at least would strongly disagree with me! I wish now that I had printed and kept hard copies of

all the e-mails, as I lost most of them as a result of two computer software corruptions in 2004.

A friend and neighbour spoke to me recently and told me that in November, while listening to the radio, she had heard a report about recent research on exercise and depression. She was unable to give exact details, but the gist of the report was that, although regular exercise could be beneficial for people with mild depression, exercise was often useless or counterproductive in cases of major depression. This seems to fit well with the point I made in my article that exercise generally made me feel worse, or even much worse, when I was depressed. (In fact wanting exercise or being able to enjoy it is a reliable sign that my depression levels are already very low.) I have searched a number of ABC web-sites, but have not located the report. If anyone else heard it, I would be interested to know where.

I would like to thank everyone who wrote to me about the article, and I am most grateful for the comments and encouragement I received when writing and revising it from Leanne Pethick (depressioNet), Maria Prendergast, Barry Williams and Dr Phil Wood.

The article will very likely be reprinted, as an appendix, in a book on depression that has been written by Maria Prendergast and will be published by Penguin Australia.

On toast

*Gavan O'Connor
Wembley WA*

I want to bring to the attention of members a genuine miracle.

Ten years ago Diana Duyser of Florida made a piece of toast. Toast is lightly burned bread, where the pattern of burning is more or less random. Given the number of pieces of toast made in the world each day and the instinct we humans have for recognis-

ing patterns, especially patterns of faces, it's not surprising that the odd toasted surface has on it something that could be construed as a picture of a face.

Ms Duyser's toast had such a pattern, a pattern she avers is a representation of the face of Mary of Nazareth, the mother of Jesus. That itself is no miracle. What is truly miraculous is this; there are about 3,000 million women in the world at the moment and about the same number have lived since humans dropped out of the trees and began their unrequited search for intelligence and honest politicians. Not only has Ms Duyser sorted through the 6000 million women's faces (plus those of a few cross dressers) to identify the one on her toast, she has managed to match it up with a face for which there is no contemporary representation.

Ms Duyser has astounding powers. She should be in demand by police and security forces all over the world. It's not her toasted cheese sandwich that should be auctioned on eBay. It's she who should be auctioned. I'm willing to start the bidding at \$3.50.

A real Paine

*Scott King
St Ives NSW*

I am currently reading *The Age of Reason* published by Thomas Paine in 1794. This author and social reformer was considered quite a radical and a bit of a "pain" in his day. While a devout believer in God he took great delight in ridiculing the so called written Word of God and also the institution of the Church that used it to promote its own power. In this sense I think I have to give him at least an Apprentice Skeptic guernsey.

He makes some very pithy observations about the inconsistency between the doctrine of organised religion and the true nature of God as he sees Him revealed in nature. But there is one point he makes that I consider particu-

larly worthy of sharing. In discussing the credibility of miracles he says:

...it raises a question in the mind very easily decided, which is, is it more probable that nature should go out of her course or that a man should tell a lie? We have never seen, in our time, nature go out of her course; but we have good reason to believe that millions of lies have been told in the same time; it is, therefore, at least millions to one [chance] that the reporter of a miracle tells a lie.

That just about sums the whole thing up for me! I don't think I have heard it put any better by others over the past 210 years, even if his grammar and punctuation are a little dated.

Religion - hindering a more moral society?

*Sten Bjerking
Dunkeld VIC.*

I have always found it irksome that every time some moral issue is being debated the media always trot out some cleric or other to give their "expert opinion" on the matter.

Along with many other skeptics I believe that morality has nothing to do with religion. I will even go further and suggest that belief in a religious dogma compromises one's ability to be as moral as a secular person. To justify this I use the argument that it is far better to do good for purely altruistic motives than because of a fear of God.

I have recently observed a specific example of how belief in the Christian concept of God can hinder a more moral attitude and consequent humane outcome in society. Considering the way that people tend to judge others for all manner of digressions from that seen as ideal my observation is that we can be very selective.

Nobody blames a person for being physically deformed, mentally handicapped, or suffering from a debilitat-

ing illness. There is no hesitation however in blaming an individual for being lazy, a bully, a criminal, or perhaps even for being overweight. A clear distinction is drawn here. On the one hand the former group are seen as being afflicted by a condition over which they have no control and on the other hand the latter group as not using the controls they have.

We are quick to find excuses to explain the transgressions of those that are close to us, however. Clutching at any possible explanation that will shift the blame from the relative or close friend, we use excuses like “he was abused as a child” or “he came from a broken family”, to explain the transgressions. By this strategy the burden of guilt is shifted from the one we care for to another party.

Moving on from here in a logical progression it is a small step to come to the conclusion that nobody is responsible for what they are as they were not responsible for making themselves or the character shaping environment they were placed in. If we accept the above argument then the way we as individuals and society as a whole treats transgressors requires some review. It would seem logical that to be consistent our motivation should be the same when treating a physically deformed person, as a person whose behaviour is socially unacceptable. The motivation should be to make them physically well on the one hand and socially well on the other.

Now this is a difficult concept for most of us to accept. Personally I am as angry and vengeful as the next man when I hear of a violent crime involving innocent victims. I can see however that this is a flaw in my character as I accept the logic of the preceding argument. Although the word rehabilitation is sometimes used when the treatment of criminals is discussed. It is quite evident that this is not what the general public are interested in nor is it the primary focus of our penal system. We hear much more about “justice being done” and “paying a debt to society” than rehabilitation.

The consequence of treating those whose behaviour is socially unacceptable, in a way that is consistent with the above philosophy, may not necessarily mean that they are treated more leniently. If the only criterion regarded as acceptable for allowing a transgressor back unfettered into society, is that he has become or has been made “socially well”, then it may be that many would never be allowed to return. As things stand now a murderer or rapist is released once he has “paid his debt to society”, regardless of how socially unwell he is.

I have presented this argument to a number of people and the responses have been interesting. Those that are secular have generally been prepared to consider the logic of the argument and, although uncomfortable with the inevitable conclusion, concede that it seems correct and fair — perhaps a more moral approach. When presented to Christians however I have found the reaction to be a spontaneous and absolute rejection of the argument. “God gave us freedom of choice” I am told, and therefore everyone is responsible for their own actions. In other words they are responsible for what they are. I have not had the opportunity to present the argument to Muslims or Jews but I suspect the response would be similar to that I have experienced from Christians.

Questions about us

*Eric Harman
Darwin NT*

I joined Skeptics because I wanted to discuss certain items of which I am interested with other persons who have an inquiring mind. After joining I wrote to the local branch by both email and snail-mail. I have had no reply, they did not even have the courtesy to say “Bugger off, we know the truth and do not need your opinion”. (Our apologies; the Darwin branch is presently inactive. **Ed**)

Many Christian Fundamentalists believe that everything in the Bible is the truth because it is in that book. Some of your correspondents give the impression that everything in the Bible just has to be untrue because it is in that book. The only difference that I can see in these two groups of Bible Bashers is in the colour of the blinkers which they wear to protect their perceived truths from the profoundly profane processes of observation, examination and analysis.

One item which I would like to discuss is the origin of our particular species. Anthropologists have been telling us, over many years, how much we have gained from our upright bipedal stance. I would like to ask why no other primates have emulated us. Is it because none have tried? Or is it because all who have tried failed? I suggest the latter. All other animals that seek their food during the day have sexual intercourse during the day, those that seek their food during the night have sexual intercourse at night. Mankind alone seeks his food during the day and has sexual intercourse upon retiring for the night! Could this be the secret of our success? If our arboreal ancestors had not changed their sexual behaviour before descending from the trees, I believe that when they went around in an upright position, after intercourse, there would be a very high risk that the sperm would dribble out of the vagina before fertilising any ova. Although breeding would not be impossible without the change of sexual behaviour, I believe that the chance of success would have been very much less, and the chance of breeding rate falling below that which is necessary for survival of the species would be very high.

So how did this change of behaviour come about? Dian Fossey In one of her books tells us that in one variety of gorilla in Africa the males are strong enough to pull branches from trees together to form a nest, the females are not strong enough to do this. If our ancestors managed to perform this feat and the females could not, what inducement could they offer the males

to share the nest apart from sex? Almost all of their food grew on the trees, even the occasional high protein colobus monkey. Could this explain why woman, alone among the animals, is sexually receptive at all times?

Why do several religions regard pork as unclean? Those of us who have eaten pork which was not cooked sufficiently know that it can cause sickness and diarrhoea. Anyone who ate this meat raw would have a very good reason to call it unclean. Mankind as a species has been around for one and a half million years, we have only been using fire for half a million! That is hardly enough time for the religious bodies to adjust their bigotries.

Did Methuselah live 960 lunar years? This would equal something like 74 solar years. Did Lot's wife die of syphilis? A disease in which the bones become soft and brittle, like chalk, or like a pillar of salt.

Thank you for your entertaining and enlightening epistle on the decline and fall of the Skeptic Empire. Thank you also for showing a little more brevity and levity than Professor Gibbon. As I am no longer able to whip you with a horse or any other creature larger than the reluctant rodent attached to my computer, I suppose that I must enclose a cheque for another years subscription. My club committee insist that no-one else shall be whipped on the steps of that salacious asylum as the steps are already much too slippery from an excess of defaulters blood.

We've been had

*Mark Newbrook
The Wirral UK*

Alan Moskwa (24:3, p 62) comments on my example sentence with eight successive occurrences of the word *had* (24:2, p 44). He is right to say that one of these instances of *had* is a proper name. But of course I myself stated this. And I did not misinterpret the sentence; it is indeed a spoof, deliber-

ately invented to make this point. (See below on why it really does make this point.) Furthermore, Alan's own example with 11 successive occurrences of *had* is indeed valid. The only problem is that this example, while intelligible and grammatically standard, is a single sentence only in terms of punctuation, not in terms of grammar. It therefore cannot be cited as a sentence (which is what David Kozubei was mainly concerned with), only as a piece of running text.

However, the main point here is that (as I originally stated) both Alan's example and mine involve 'mentioning' rather than 'using' linguistic forms (describing this merely as 'purely and simply correct use of punctuation' is to that extent misleading). This is crucial, because in the context of the relevant argument any mentioning of a form or sequence is a dodge. As can easily be demonstrated, such a move artificially creates the possibility of very many longer grammatical sequences which would otherwise be ungrammatical, and it thereby undermines the systematic investigation of syntax. Our examples differ from 'General it consists stringing' makes no sense in that the sub-sequences mentioned in them (had had etc) are themselves grammatical and meaningful. The examples are thus less dramatic; but they are of the same general type. Had had had, read as three successive instances of the verb form had in use, with no mentioning (and no name or other dodge), is just as 'ungrammatical' as 'General it consists stringing'.

It should be noted that no one is trying to 'redefin[e] grammar and meaning [generally]' in order to make a sequence like 'General it consists stringing' work. My point was rather that certain particular longer sequences in which such sequences are embedded — or in which there are several successive instances of had — are themselves redefined (as I would say, unreasonably) by writers such as Kozubei as being 'grammatical' and 'meaningful' in the same sense as these characterisations apply to uncontroversial sentences involving no mentioned forms.

More on Mead

*James Gerrard
Kew VIC*

Mark Newbrook's letter "Anthropological controversy" must have been written to test the reader's skeptical ability. Firstly a skeptic will note that Newbrook's main argument to refute Clark's article's item on the Mead controversy was that there were a number of anthropologists defending Mead.

Now a matter, particularly one of science, is not decided by a democratic vote but on the evidence. Mead initially had the whole public behind her claim, including that of Freeman. It was only when Freeman began examining the evidence that he changed his view, which he published in his two books *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth* (1983) and *The Fateful Hoaxing of Margaret Mead* (1999 — which followed the coming forward of one of the two Samoan hoaxers with her sworn statement).

Again Newbrook criticises the Melbourne debate between Rubinstein and myself on the controversy only on the grounds that "many local skeptics were not even aware there was an 'anti-Freeman' case which warranted attention". What had that to do with the debate (assuming it was true) as Rubinstein was there to put that case?

Another non-skeptical slant by Newbrook was to label Rubinstein as a prominent Skeptic and Gerrard as a fervent supporter of Freeman. I think most skeptics would consider Rubinstein as a fervent supporter of Mead whilst myself was the prominent Skeptic (founding Secretary of the Australian Skeptics and prominent over the years in exposing such false claims as psychic surgery, clairvoyance, divining, mental telepathy). I believe I had an easy win in the debate because I had all the evidence that Freeman had collected whilst Rubinstein had practically none.

I consider noted science writer Martin Gardiner pithily closed this controversy with his comment:

Margaret Mead's admirers will continue to raise howls of protest, but Derek Freeman's conclusions are unshakable. Mead's reputation will continue to go downhill, and her most famous book has become worthless. The sad facts are all detailed in Freeman's account of Margaret's gullibility.

GM or not GM

Gary Goldberg
Silver Spring, Maryland USA

In his article on GM foods, Scott Campbell made an interesting statement:

As long as the relevant experts are satisfied that it is safe, people should be left to decide for themselves whether or not to purchase it.

Yet, proponents of alternative medicines and dietary supplements demand unrestricted access to their products of choice WITHOUT such evidence while frequently campaigning against GM foods which HAVE been tested.

A Survey

Garry P Dalrymple
Bexley North NSW

We can all agree that a Skeptical state of mind is a good thing, but what characterises a Skeptic? In the weeks before the Sydney convention I revived a survey previously used at Science Fiction (SF) conventions. I wanted to see how alike or different SF fans are from Skeptics, as this had recently been a point of debate in both communities.

SF fans and Australian Skeptics have at least three things in common. Firstly, a conscious decision to opt in and self identify as a SF fan or Skeptic, *ie*, many other people read SF

or think Skeptically but do not choose to become a 'SF fan' or a 'Skeptic'. Secondly, we believe that collectively we think more frequently, deeply and critically about SF or the paranormal than do most other people. Thirdly there are 'brand name' issues with the media and public perception of exactly what a SF fan or Skeptic is. Depending on who you ask 'Science Fiction' may be Starwars, Special effects movies, Unicorn and Crystal Novels, Star Trek fanaticism or Teenage Witch and Demon infested TV shows. Skeptics are claimed to be UFO deniers and close minded cynics etc. This isn't how we see ourselves and is a barrier to public understanding of our interest.

To date I have been encouraged to received back nearly forty of the hundred forms given out.

To stimulate a skeptical debate about skepticism I offer these tentative results, based on the political section of the survey. Is there a notably Skeptical or Unskeptical political party? The answer is, well ... perhaps.

The four most frequently mentioned 'Skeptical' parties were Labor (9), The Greens (8), Australian Democrats (7) and the Liberals (6). But, the four most frequently mentioned 'Un-Skeptical' parties were Christian Democrats (11), Family First (8), The Greens (7) and One Nation (6). Setting the two sets of responses against each other and giving Most Skeptical mentions a value of 1 plus and Least Skeptical mentions a value of 1 minus, you get an adjusted an 'Australian Skeptical Spectrum' of the following;

Labor 8+

Australian Democrats 5+

Liberals 2+

The Greens 1+

Nationals, Socialist Alliance, CEC, Unity, Aust Progressive Alliance (all on -2)

One Nation -5

Family First -8

Christian Democrats -11

As many surveys recorded several 'most' or 'least' Skeptical party nominations some sort of optional prefer-

ence system seems more appropriate than declaring a single 'Most' or 'Least' Skeptical party *ie*, some 'votes' are worth a half, a third, or a sixth of a single 'most'/'least' nomination. Extending the 'Skeptical state of mind' image a little further suggests another way of expressing a result. Assume that Australia had a 'Skeptical State' and an 'Unskeptical State'.

Their respective Senate representations would be;

The SKEPTICAL STATE's Six Senators (quotas) are, Liberals 1 seat (1.17), Labor 1 seat (1.69), The Greens 2 seats (1.87), Australian Democrats 2 seats (1.87)

The UNSKEPTICAL STATE's Six Senators (quotas) are, Nationals 1 seat (0.66), The Greens 1 seat (1.42), One Nation 1 seat (1.2), Christian Democrats 2 seats (2.08), Family First 1 seat (0.86), Australian Democrats no seat (0.04)

How would you like to see the government trying to work with a Senate of that make up?

Makes you think (Skeptically?) about how we skeptics are seeing the political sphere.

If you didn't get a survey at the convention, send me a stamped self addressed envelope and I will send you one. I hope to make available to the Editor results from the rest of the survey in time for later editions of *the Skeptic*.

If you have a completed survey form please send it to me at:

Garry P Dalrymple
*Post Office Box 2
Bexley North NSW 2207
Home Phone no 02 9718 5827 (after 7 pm)*

The Editor is very glad that you are not in charge of the Commonwealth Electoral Office, Garry. It's hard enough trying to work out the results of elections as it is.



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We all knew it had to come to an end sometime, and now that day is upon us — the *Great Skeptic CD*, that wonderful compilation of all issues of the *Skeptic* from 1981 to 2000 (plus much more) has ceased to be. We have sold out. (No, not our principles — the disc.)

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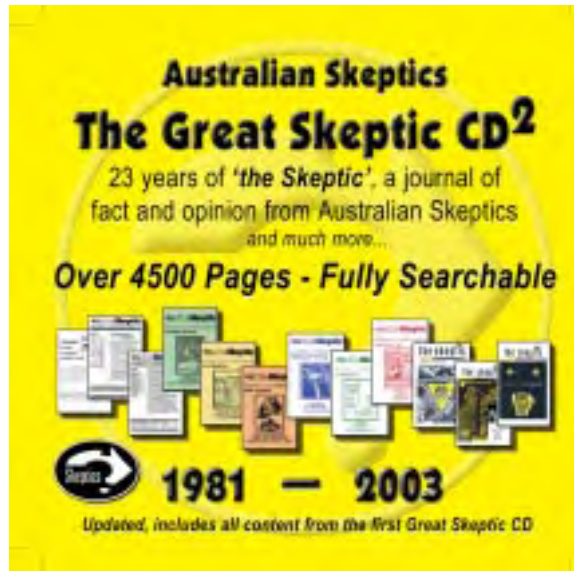
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