

# NEW ZEALAND SKEPTIC

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## How Thinking Goes Wrong

Michael Shermer

*This article originally appeared in the excellent US magazine Skeptic, edited by Shermer, (Vol 2 No 3) and also forms Chapter 4 of Shermer's book Hope Springs Eternal: How Pseudoscience Works and why People Believe in It. It's a thought-provoking piece which should be handy reference for any skeptic's library. This is part one of three.*

In one of the most important books ever written on the philosophy of science, Sir Arthur Stanley Eddington made this observation in *The Philosophy of Physical Science* (1958, p. 9): "For the truth of the conclusions of physical science, observation is the supreme Court of Appeal."

It is that simple. Whenever there is a dispute we have merely to look and submit our conclusions to the Court. The decision will be obvious and indisputable. Of course, if it were really that easy Eddington would not have had to write an entire book about it, covering all the problems scientists confront in the physical sciences, a relatively "pure" enterprise compared to the biological and social sciences.

The problem is that the Court is staffed by illogical, emotional, ego driven, culturally biased, and socially embedded observers. The observations never just speak for themselves. They are filtered through these fallible brains, and in the process thinking can and often does go wrong. And not just for those pseudoscientists, paranormalists, and fringe-belief inhabitants whose claims skeptics often take such

delight in skewering. The multi-faceted fallacies of thinking, unfortunately, apply to everyone, even the most rigorous and careful of scientists and skeptics. Even skepticism, taken to an extreme, can be an inhibitor to creative and critical thinking.

Thus, it is a useful exercise for us to reexamine these various ways that our thinking can go wrong. I have subdivided them into different categories, with lists of specific fallacies and problems in each. As a positive assertion on how thinking can go right, I begin with what I call Hume's Maxim and close with what I call Spinoza's Dictum.

### Hume's Maxim

The importance of skeptical publications in this late 20th-century resurgence of interest in miracles and various claims of the paranormal cannot be overstated. Yet it is  $\Rightarrow p3$

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## The Joys of Cold Reading — You Win Some and Lose Some

When Brian Edwards interviewed Uri Geller some years ago, Dr David Marks of Otago University used the printed transcript to demonstrate that that Brian had been the victim of highly skilled "cold reading", rather than the witness to remarkable extra-sensory powers as he appeared to believe at the time.

Brian has obviously earned the lesson. When Ms Rosemary Altea, the famous seer and spiritual healer, tried her techniques on on a recent *Top of the Morning* show, he simply refused to be drawn and our world-famous connection to the spiritual world was left floundering.

Ms Altea claims to see dead relatives standing beside the living who then reveal remarkable truths and pass on meaningful communications. In this case, Dr Edwards's father was standing by and telling her some remarkable truths about Brian's current life so that she could pass them on — even though he would presumably know them already. (As it turns out, no one can be certain that Brian's father is dead. One wonders how Ms Altea will explain her visions should he turn up alive and well.)

The revelations from the other world began with suggestions of "moving" or "relocating." Given that most people in New Zealand move house once every four years this was a reasonable shot. When Brian said he hadn't moved "the moving" visions were replaced with messages regarding sloping land with some steps to a garden. Which is also a fair stab in the semi-dark, given that it is common knowledge that Brian lives in the country on a 13 acre lot — and in Auckland it would be near impossible to find 13 acres of flat land. When this also appeared to be a dead end Brian appeared to put her out of her misery by telling her that they were building a water garden at the bottom of a slope in their property. "Fish?" she "saw" — "No fish," said Brian.

Maybe Brian's father was moving from cell to cell — the connection seemed less than satisfactory.

Later in the interview Ms Altea claimed that she could always establish her veracity by giving people some information she could not possibly know without information from the other side — like the fact that the Edwards were building a water-garden. "No — I told you that" said Brian, closing the trap.

She moved on, while Brian continued to keep his lip quite firmly buttoned — except to set further traps. She rambled on about his father, passing on the normal platitudinous messages — such as the fact that he had receding hair — until Brian pointed out that he never knew his father and knew little about him except that he had spent six months in prison for bigamy. Brian wanted to know where his father had been for the last 57 years, but Ms Altea refused to discuss this, except to say that there was something unpleasant involved. (Death maybe?)

This session was not going too well. Finally Ms Altea explained, with a measure of exasperation "Of course I don't have to prove anything. I know that what I experience is true, and I just tell people what I see." Well, so do five year olds making up their own fantasies. But they don't go on the Oprah show, write books, tour the world and make large sums of money. Maybe there is a case for different standards of evidence.

During her introduction to us all, Ms Altea had promised to conclude the interview with a final "pearl of wisdom" but, knowing that she had picked up so little, she suddenly prepared to leave. The cruel Brian reminded her that she had promised him some special and truly meaningful message from his long lost father. "He loves you!" came the stunning revelation as she escaped from the studio. Given that his father didn't want him, and had pressured his mother to have him placed in an orphanage, this (as Brian put it to me, when I checked the



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facts with him), seems to run against the evidence.

This interview revealed how cold-reading really works by demonstrating how dreadfully it fails if the subject simply refuses to respond with the normal enthusiastic response to any hint of a "hit". At the end of the session, listeners must have been wondering how this "famous spiritualist" had become so famous, and how she had ever managed to get on to the Oprah Winfrey show. On the other hand it may have confirmed what many of us believe it takes to get on to the Oprah Winfrey show...

One thing — we can be sure that this particular interview will never appear in Rosemary Altea's CV.



Owen McShane

equally important to remember our historical antecedents and how they analysed and critiqued such claims in their own time.

One of the greatest skeptics of the Modern Age is the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-1776), whose work, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, is a classic in skeptical analysis. The book was originally published anonymously in London in 1739, as *A Treatise of Human Nature*, but, in Hume's words, "fell dead-born from the press, without reaching such distinction as even to excite a murmur among the zealots." (An author's biggest fear is not being panned; it is being ignored.)

Hume blamed his own writing style and reworked the

manuscript into *An Abstract of a Treatise of Human Nature* in 1740, and again in 1748, as *Philosophical Essays Concerning the Human Understanding*. The work still gained Hume no recognition, so in 1758 he brought it out in a final version as *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, which comes down to us today as his greatest philosophical work.

Ironically, when Hume finally did achieve fame and position, his critics often attacked his earlier works, a practice Hume found "very contrary to all rules of candour and fair-dealing, and a strong instance of those polemical artifices, which a bigoted zeal thinks itself authorised to employ," as he wrote in an "Advertisement" to the final publication!

In Section XII, "Of the Academical or Sceptical Philosophy," Hume distinguished between "antecedent skepticism", such as Descartes's method of doubting everything, that has no "antecedent" infallible criterion for belief; and "consequent skepticism," the method Hume employed that recognises the "consequences" of our fallible senses, but corrects them through reason: "A wise man proportions his belief to the evidence." Wiser words could not be chosen for a skeptical motto.

For the modern skeptic, Hume's Section X, "Of Miracles," provides a foolproof, when-all-else-fails analysis of miraculous claims.

That is, when one is confronted by a true believer whose apparently supernatural or paranormal claim has no immediately apparent natural explanation, Hume gives us an argument that even he thought was so important (and Hume was not a modest man) that he

placed his own words in quotes and called it a maxim.

I think it is so useful an argument that it bears repetition, as Hume's Maxim: The plain consequence is (and it is a general maxim worthy of our attention), "That no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavours to establish."

When anyone tells me that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should really have happened. I weigh the one miracle against the other; and according to the superiority, which I discover, I pronounce my decision, and always reject the greater miracle. If the falsehood of his testimony would be more miraculous than the event which he relates; then, and not till then, can he pretend to command my belief or opinion.

## Scientific Problems in Thinking

### Theory Influences Observations

In his quest to understand the physical world, Werner Heisenberg concluded: "What we observe is not nature itself but nature exposed to our method of questioning." This is especially true in quantum mechanics, where the "Copenhagen interpretation" of quantum action states that "a probability function does not prescribe a certain event but describes a continuum of possible events until a measurement interferes with the isolation of the system and a



single event is actualised (1987, p. 412).

The Copenhagen interpretation eliminates the one-to-one correlation between theory and reality. The theory, in part, constructs the reality. Reality exists independent of the observer, of course, but our perceptions of it are highly influenced by the theories through which we examine it. Philosophers thus say that science is "theory laden." Eddington put it this way (p. 110):

*Suppose an artist puts forward the fantastic theory that the form of a human head exists in a rough-shaped block of marble. All our rational instinct is roused against such an anthropomorphic speculation. It is inconceivable that Nature should have placed such a form inside the block. But the artist proceeds to verify his theory experimentally-with quite rudimentary apparatus too. Merely using a chisel to separate the form for our inspection, he triumphantly proves his theory.*

This is true not only in the physical sciences, but in all observations made of the world.

When Columbus arrived in the New World he had a mental model that he was in Asia, and proceeded to perceive it as such. Cinnamon was a valuable Asian spice and the first New World shrub that smelled like it was declared to be it. When he encountered the aromatic gumbo-limbo of the West Indies, Columbus concluded it was an Asiatic species similar to the mastic tree of the Mediterranean. A New World nut was mistaken for Marco Polo's description of a coconut. Even Columbus' surgeon declared, based on some Caribbean roots his men had uncovered, that he had found Chinese rhubarb.

A theory of Asia produced observations of Asia, even though Columbus was half a world away. Such is the power of a wrong theory to deceive our senses and our mind.

### Observations Change the Observed

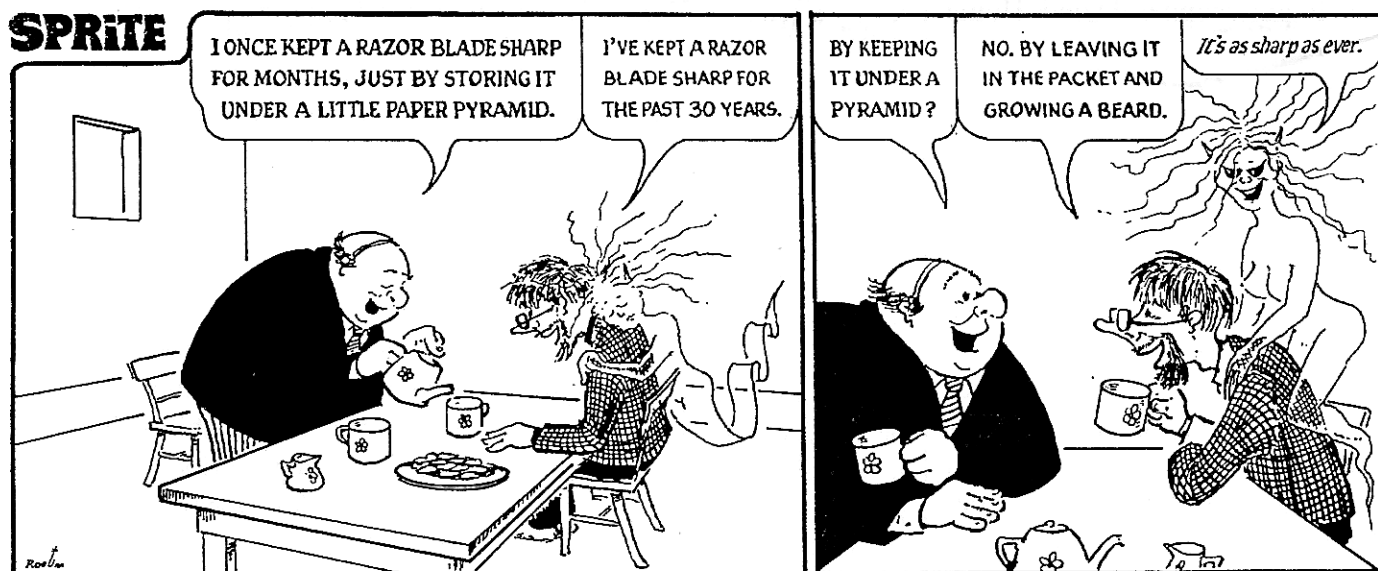
Physicist John Archibald Wheeler once noted the change in thinking that quantum mechanics had wrought in our understanding of nature (1987, p. 427):

*Even to observe so minuscule an object as an electron, he must shatter the*

*glass. He must reach in. He must install his chosen measuring equipment. It is up to him to decide whether he shall measure position or momentum. To install the equipment to measure the one prevents and excludes his installing the equipment to measure the other. Moreover, the measurement changes the state of the electron. The universe will never afterward be the same.*

The problem is especially true in the human and social realm as the act of studying a problem can change it. Anthropologists know that when they study a tribe the behaviour of the members may be altered by the fact they are being observed by an outsider.

Margaret Mead was apparently duped by her female subjects in Samoa, who acted the way she expected them to with regards to their teenage sexuality. This is why psychologists use blind and double-blind controls. If subjects know what experimental conditions they are being subjected to, they may alter their behaviours. Or, if the psychologist knows which group they are in, he or she may



Donald Rooum, *Skeptic* (UK)



perceive the behaviour to be appropriate for that condition.

Lack of such controls is often found in tests of paranormal powers and is one of the classic ways that thinking goes wrong in the pseudosciences.

### **Experiments Construct Results**

The type of equipment used and the manner in which the experiment is conducted, very much determines the results. The size of telescopes throughout history, for example, have shaped our theory of the size of the universe. Hubble's 60-inch and 100-inch telescopes on Mt. Wilson in Southern California, for example, provided the seeing power for Hubble to determine individual stars in other galaxies, thus proving that those fuzzy objects called nebulae that were thought to be in our own galaxy, were actually separate galaxies. In the 19th century, craniometry defined intelligence as brain size, and measured it as such; today intelligence is defined by the IQ test.

To illustrate the problem Edgington presented this clever analogy (p16):

*Let us suppose that an ichthyologist is exploring the life of the ocean. He casts a net into the water and brings up a fishy assortment. Surveying his catch, he proceeds in the usual manner of a scientist to systematise what it reveals. He arrives at two generalisations:*

*(1) No sea-creature is less than two inches long.*

*(2) All sea-creatures have gills.*

*In applying this analogy, the catch stands for the body of knowledge which constitutes physical science, and the net*

*for the sensory and intellectual equipment which we use in obtaining it. The casting of the net corresponds to observations.*

*An onlooker may object that the first generalisation is wrong. "There are plenty of sea-creatures under two inches long, only your net is not adapted to catch them." The ichthyologist dismisses this objection contemptuously. "Anything uncatchable by my net is ipso facto outside the scope of ichthyological knowledge, and is not part of the kingdom of fishes which has been defined as the theme of ichthyological knowledge. In short, what my net can't catch isn't fish."*

Likewise, what my telescope can't see isn't there, and what my test can't measure isn't intelligence.

### **Anecdotes Do Not Make a Science**

Anecdotes - stories recounted in support of a claim - do not make a science. Without corroborative evidence from other sources, or physical proof of some sort, 10 anecdotes are no better than one, and 100 anecdotes are no better than 10.

Anecdotes are stories told by biased and selective human story tellers. Farmer Bob in Puckerbrush, Kansas may be an honest, church-going, family man, but we need concrete physical evidence of an alien spacecraft or alien bodies, not a story about landings and abductions at 3:00 a.m. on a deserted farm road.

Likewise with many medical claims; I do not care if your Aunt Mary's cancer was cured by watching Marx Brothers movies, or taking liver extract

from castrated chickens. It might have gone into remission on its own, which some cancers do; or it might have been misdiagnosed; or, or, or...

What we need are controlled experiments, not anecdotes. We need 100 subjects with cancer, all properly diagnosed, 25 of whom watch Marx Brothers movies, 25 of whom watch Alfred Hitchcock movies, 25 of whom watch the news, and 25 of whom watch nothing. Then we need to deduct the average rate of remission for this type of cancer, and then do a data analysis to determine if there is a statistically significant difference between any of the groups. If there is, which would be extraordinary, we better get confirmation from other scientists who conduct their own experiments separate from ours, before we hold a press conference to announce the cure for cancer.

### **Pseudoscientific Problems in Thinking**

#### **Scientific Language Does Not Make a Science**

Packaging a belief system in the facade of science using the language and jargon, as in "creation-science," means nothing without evidence, experiment, and corroboration. Because science is such a powerful system in our society, those who wish to gain respectability but do not have evidence, do an end-run around this problem by trying to look and sound the part. Here is a classic example from a New Age column in the *Santa Monica News*:

*This planet has been slumbering for aeons and with the inception of higher energy frequencies is about to awaken in terms of consciousness and spirituality.*

## Job Opportunity!

The University of Hertfordshire (Hatfield, UK) wish to appoint a lecturer/senior lecturer in psychology. The successful candidate will teach on the undergraduate BSc in psychology and undertake joint research within the newly formed Perrott-Warrick Research Unit.

This Unit carries out research into unusual, and often controversial, areas of psychology. Current projects include: Parapsychology, the psychology of luck, lying and deception, belief in the paranormal, communicating science to the public and eyewitness testimony.

The Unit intends to expand upon these projects and applicants interested in any related areas (e.g., subliminal perception, false memory syndrome, hypnosis, etc.) are encouraged to apply.

The post will initially be for 2.5 years but may be extended to 4.5 years.

Additional information is available from:

Dr Richard Wiseman, Senior Research Fellow  
Direct tel: 01707-284628, Direct fax: 01707-285073, E-mail: psyqrw@herts.ac.uk  
WWW site: [http://phoenix.herts.ac.uk/PsyDocs/PW\\_Research\\_unit/PW\\_Homepage.html](http://phoenix.herts.ac.uk/PsyDocs/PW_Research_unit/PW_Homepage.html)

*Masters of limitation and masters of divination use the same creative force to manifest their realities, however, one moves in a downward spiral and the latter moves in an upward spiral, each increasing the resonant vibration inherent in them.*

How's that again? I have no idea what this means, but it has the language components of a physics experiment: "higher energy frequencies," "downward and upward spirals," and "resonant vibration." These things mean nothing without precise and operational definitions. How do you measure the planet's higher energy frequencies, or the resonant vibration of these masters of divination? For that matter, what is a master of divination?

### **Bold Statements Do Not Make True Claims**

A red flag that something is pseudoscientific is when outrageous claims are made for its power and veracity, especially

when supportive evidence is lacking.

L. Ron Hubbard, for example, opens his book, *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health*, with this statement: "The creation of Dianetics is a milestone for man comparable to his discovery of fire and superior to his invention of the wheel and arch." Wilhelm Reich called his theory of Orgonomy "a revolution in biology and psychology comparable to the Copernican Revolution." I have a file filled with papers and letters from obscure authors filled with such outlandish claims (I call it the "Theories of Everything" file).

Scientists sometimes make this mistake, and when they are wrong they pay a high price, as we saw at 1:00 p.m., March 23, 1989, when Stanley Pons and Martin Fleischmann announced to the world through a press conference that they had discovered cold nuclear fusion.

The proper procedure in science is to hold the press conference after the claim has been tested and corroborated by other scientists in other labs, and after it appears in a peer-reviewed publication. The more extraordinary the claim, the more extraordinary the evidence must be before making such pronouncements. Gary Taubes excellent narrative of the cold fusion debacle, appropriately named *Bad Science* (1993), well demonstrates the implications of this problem.

### **Martyrdom Does Not Equal Correctness**

They laughed at Copernicus. They laughed at the Wright Brothers. Yes, well, they laughed at the Marx Brothers. So what? Becoming a martyr does not mean you are right.

Wilhelm Reich compared himself to Peer Gynt, the unconventional genius out of step with society, and misunderstood and ridiculed until proven right:

*"Whatever you have done to me or will do to me in the future, whether you glorify me as a genius or put me in a mental institution, whether you adore me as your saviour or hang me as a spy, sooner or later necessity will force you to comprehend that I have discovered the laws of the living."*

History is replete with chronicles and tales of the lone and martyred scientist working against his peers, and in the face of opposition from the known doctrine of his own field of study. Most of them turned out to be wrong and we do not remember their names. For every Galileo shown the instruments of torture for exclaiming the truth, there are a thousand (or ten thousand) Walter Wanabees

whose "truths" never cut muster with the powers that be.

Can Walter really expect scientists to take the necessary time to test every fantastic claim that comes down the pike? No. If you want to do science you have to learn to play the game of science. This involves getting to know the scientists in your field, exchanging letters, calls, faxes, and (now) email with your colleagues, presenting papers at conferences, publishing in peer-reviewed journals, and the like. Galileo paid his dues and learned to play the game. Walter Wanabee must do the same.

### **Rumours Do Not Equal Reality**

A classic fallacy of thinking is "I read somewhere that..." or "I heard from someone that..." Before long the rumour becomes reality as it is passed from person to person, usually by word of mouth, without the necessity of supportive evidence. Rumours, like "urban legends," may be right, of course, but they usually are not, even if they do make for great tales.

What teenage boy did not tell his date on Lover's Lane the "true" story of the escaped maniac with a prosthetic hook who haunted that very parking spot, with the addendum that one couple, when they returned home, found a hook dangling from the passenger door handle? Or the "Vanishing Hitchhiker" story where a hitchhiking woman vanishes from the car in which she was picked up, whereupon the driver, who had lent her his jacket, discovers that she had died that same day the year before; he then discovers his jacket on her grave. (There are many modified versions of these stories, but the core remains the same.)

At a dinner I once hosted for Stephen Jay Gould, the Caltech historian of science, Dan Kevles, related a story he suspected was apocryphal about two students who took a ski trip before their final exam but did not get back in time because the evening activities extended well into the night. They told their professor that they got a flat tire so he gave them the final the next day. Placing the two students in separate rooms he asked them just two questions: (1) "For 5 points, what is the chemical formula for water?" (2) For 95 points, which tire?

Both Gould and Carol Tavris, also at the dinner, suspected it was an urban legend because they had heard a vaguely similar story. The next day I repeated the story to my students, three of whom simultaneously blurted out "which tire?" before I could give the punch line. They had heard the story in high school. Urban legends spread far, wide, and fast.

The following are examples of rumours, that, in fact, have no basis in truth:

- ❖ The secret ingredient in Dr. Pepper is prune juice.
- ❖ A woman accidentally killed her poodle by drying it in a microwave oven.
- ❖ Paul McCartney died and was replaced by a look-alike.
- ❖ Giant alligators live in the sewers of New York City.
- ❖ The moon landing was faked and filmed in a Hollywood studio.
- ❖ George Washington had wooden teeth (false teeth were made of ivory or walrus tusk).
- ❖ The number of stars inside the "P" on Playboy magazine's cover indicates how

many times publisher Hugh Hefner had sex with the centrefold (it was actually just a distribution code).

- ❖ A flying saucer crashed in New Mexico and the bodies of the E.T.s are being kept by the Air Force in a secret warehouse.

There are a thousand more like these that are titillating to consider but should not be taken seriously without confirming evidence.

### **Unexplained Is Not Inexplicable**

Most people are overconfident enough to think that if they cannot explain something, it must be inexplicable and therefore a true mystery of the paranormal. There is nothing more amusing than an amateur archaeologist declaring that because he cannot figure out how the pyramids were built, that they must have been constructed by space aliens.

Even those who are more reasonable at least think that if the experts cannot explain something it must be inexplicable. This is often seen in the performance of seemingly impossible feats, such as the bending of spoons, firewalking, or mental telepathy, which are thought to be of a paranormal or mystical nature because most people cannot explain them. And when they are explained most people respond with a "yes, of course," or "that's obvious once you see it."

Firewalking is a case in point: people speculate about supernatural powers over pain and heat, or mysterious brain chemicals secreted to block the pain and prevent burning. The simple explanation is that the capacity of light and fluffy coals to contain heat is very low, and the conductivity of the



heat from the light and fluffy coals to your feet is very poor. As long as you don't stand around on the coals you will not get burned. (Think of a cake in a 450-degree heated oven. The air, cake, and pan are all 450 degrees. Only the metal pan will burn your hand, because air and cake are light and fluffy and have a low heat capacity and conductivity.)

This is why magicians do not tell their secrets. Most of their tricks are extremely simple and knowing them takes the magic out of the trick.

There are many genuine unsolved mysteries in the universe and it is okay to say "We do not yet know but someday perhaps we will."

### Coincidences Are Not Causation

Coincidences are a type of contingency - a conjuncture of two or more events without apparent design. When the connection is made in a manner that seems impossible by our intuition of the laws of probability, there is a tendency to think something mysterious or paranormal is at work.

You go to the phone to call your friend Bob. The phone rings and it is Bob. You think, "Wow, what are the chances? This could not have been a mere coincidence. Maybe Bob and I are communicating telepathically."

Most people have a very poor understanding of the laws of probability. Gamblers will win six in a row and think they are on a "hot streak." Or they will think they are "due to lose." They have just predicted both possible outcomes, a fairly safe bet! The probability of two people having the same birth date in a room of 30 people is 71%, yet most would be shocked to find such a "coincidence" and think something mysterious was at work.

As B.F. Skinner proved in the laboratory, the human mind seeks relationships between events and often finds them even when they are not present. Slot-machines are based on Skinnerian principles of intermittent reinforcement. The dumb human, like the dumb rat, only needs an occasional reinforcement to keep pulling the

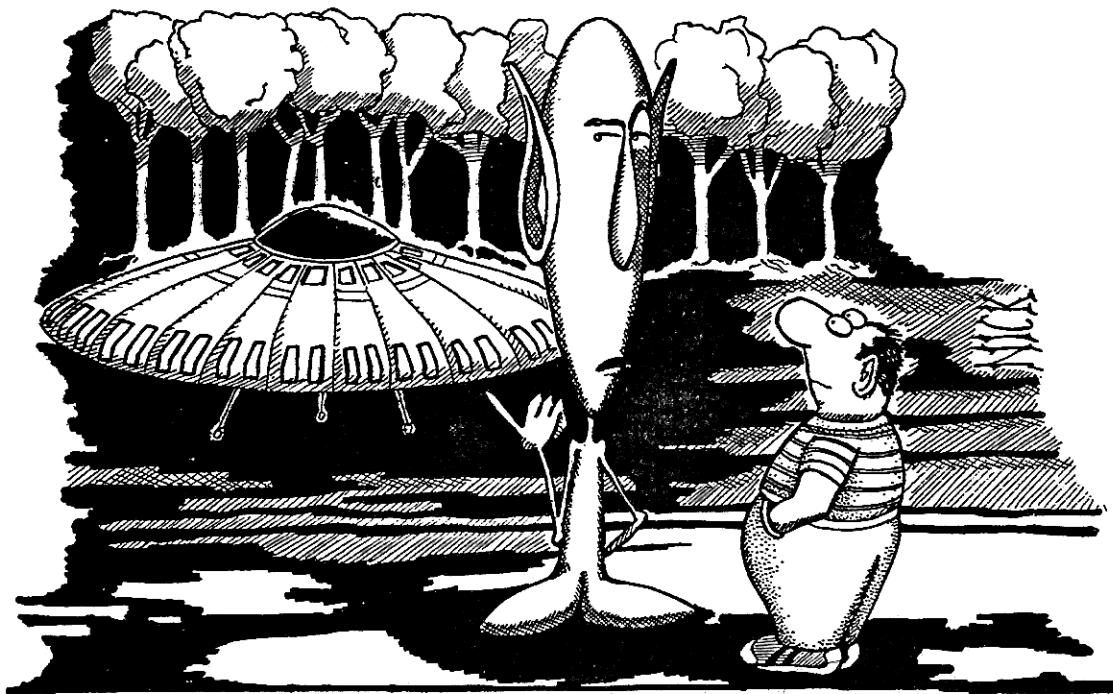
handle. The mind will do the rest.

I believe that one of the reasons paranormal beliefs and pseudoscientific claims flourish in market economies is because of the uncertainty of the marketplace. According to James Randi, once communism collapsed in Russia there was a significant increase in such beliefs.

Not only are the people freer to try to swindle each other with scams and rackets, many truly believe they have discovered something significant about the nature of the world. Capitalism is a lot less stable a social structure. These uncertainties lead the mind to look for explanations for the vagaries and contingencies of the market (and life in general), and these often take a turn toward the supernatural and paranormal.

### Continued Next Issue

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*"This...? No, this isn't a U.F.O. It's on the ground now. And you've identified it. That makes it an I.G.O."*

# Eternal Life — Courtesy Time/Life

Mike Houlding

When I received through the mail a coloured brochure from Time/Life advertising a series of videos and cassettes titled "Growing Younger", I was surprised to see that I could learn from Time/Life via their series how to develop an "ageless body". In addition I could learn to "help reverse ageing" and that the series could "open the door to a life free from the effects of aging" (sic).

When I read Time/Life's promises I was reminded once again of the shysters' creed that "no-one ever got rich overestimating the intelligence of the general public".

I was similarly reminded of a newspaper advertisement advising readers of the presence of the Advertising Standards Authority.

The Authority is a body that is set up to maintain ethical advertising standards. In their words the Authority "...is dedicated to ensure that not only does advertising comply with the law but is also truthful and not misleading or deceptive, and that it is socially responsible."

Surely, I thought, Time/Life must be in breach of The Authority's regulations. I therefore requested and received the Advertising Codes of Practice. In it I found The Code of Ethics containing the following:

## **Rule 2 Truthful Presentation**

*Advertisements must not contain any statement or visual presentation which directly or by implication, omission, ambiguity or ex-*

*aggerated claim is misleading or deceptive, is likely to mislead or deceive the consumer...*

I therefore laid a formal complaint to the Complaints Board, mentioning Rule 2 of the Advertising Code of Ethics, and Time/Life's promises of "an ageless body", "a life free from the effects of aging" (sic), and the claim to "help reverse ageing".

To my astonishment, after deliberating the Board ruled not to uphold the complaint.

The Board were apparently entirely in agreement with Time/Life who said in defence of the brochure, that the guru concerned with the series, Dr Deepak Chopra, was not speaking in "chronological" terms with regard to ageing, but rather in "biological" and "psychological" terms. In addition, said Time/Life, Dr Chopra had a "worldwide reputation in both traditional and alternative medicine"... "with great demand for his products." Furthermore, said Time/Life "...I am satisfied with the integrity with which we have represented "Growing Younger" to our New Zealand customers."

Yes, but what about claims of an "ageless body", "a life free from the effects of aging" (sic)?

Mere "puffery" said the Board, "as opposed to claims that were capable of substantiation". In addition they were of the opinion "...that the advertisement would not mislead consumers ...rather the statements were the advertiser's hy-

perbole about the perceived benefit of the product."

Time/Life and Dr Deepak Chopra, are presumably wealthy and influential. It would be interesting to read how many millions of dollars are spent advertising their publications. It is, (to my mind anyway) quite impossible to publish such outlandish claims without being in breach of the Advertising Code of Ethics. Surely this is a classic "exaggerated claim" likely to "deceive or mislead the consumer".

I have written to the Board formally objecting to the decision and requesting a review. To my mind the decision raises a precedent that invites advertisers to treat the consumer (and the Board) with disdain. The decision similarly downgrades the Board as a consumer watchdog.

The time is well past that claims made by health care providers of all shapes and hues must be examined. Any cursory glance in a "health store" or new age crystal merchant's premises will reveal a mass of laughable gibberish masquerading as "health advice". Most of it is aberrant nonsense, not likely to be taken seriously. Some of it though defrauds the gullible, and endangers health. Why on earth do we have statutory bodies such as the Advertising Standards Authority if we cannot rely on them to uphold their own Code of Ethics?

Mike Houlding is a Tauranga skeptic who's growing old along with the rest of us...

# Advice to police in abuse case queried

## Criticism of recovered-memory issue

A Christchurch psychiatrist's advice to the police about the reliability of two complainants who claimed to have recovered memories of sexual abuse was criticised in the Christchurch High Court yesterday.

The police used the advice in deciding in 1993 to charge an elderly Rangiora man with sexually abusing his two daughters during their childhood.

One daughter pulled out of the prosecution and the man was acquitted by a jury of all charges relating to the remaining daughter last year.

In an application for costs against the police, Les Atkins QC for the man, said the psychiatrist, Dr Karen Zelas, should have advised the police to investigate fully how and in what circumstances the memories on which the charges were based had emerged.

In asserting the complainants' credibility, she had relied essentially on statements they made to her and did not advocate the degree of caution that was appropriate, he said. The police should also have been more careful and conducted a fuller inquiry into the origin of the memories.

The psychiatrist had failed to warn police that one of the women appeared

to have undergone rebirthing, which would have eventually revealed that the memories of abuse had emerged in that process.

Mr Atkins said Dr Zelas had reported that both daughters denied receiving hypnotherapy and dismissed the issue despite statements from other members of the family relating to at least one daughter undergoing hypnotherapy. She had not made the police aware of the controversy about recovered memories within her profession.

Mr Brent Stanaway, for the Crown, said the criticisms of Dr Zelas were based on the benefit of hindsight, advances in the psychiatric community's knowledge, and argument concerning recovered memories. Police activity showed they had taken a cautious approach to the case and had not charged the man until 14 months after the complaints were made.

The police had provided the accused with every opportunity to put his version of events in writing, but nothing was received. Professional debate about recovered memories did not develop until after Dr Zelas interviewed the complainants, he said.

Justice Fraser reserved his decision.

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# Another UFO sighting in NT

DARWIN. - A claim by a cigar-shaped flying object (UFO) in Northern Territory is the latest in a season of sightings over Australia, say scientists.

"Over the past few years we have been getting a number of calls from people seeing objects or lights in the sky ... all over the country," says Ross Dowse, spokesman for the Melbourne-based Project said.

The latest was from a man named who did not give his name but who was working on a project in the central west of the Territory. The man reported seeing a cigar-shaped or elongated egg-shaped object, battleship grey, hovering about 40m above cattle and sheep on a range at 10.50pm eastern daylight on Sunday.

The top of the object appeared to be spinning and it was stationary coffin-like underneath.

A misty gas, like helium, came from the object, he said.

He said he had taken photographs of the object with a disposable camera.

Mr Dowse said he had copies of the photographs by the end of the week. The incident was the second sighting in the territory within five days.

The Northern Territory reported on Friday that witnesses report strange-shaped light formation over Darwin.





## Shabby response

Complacent, disturbing, and badly-mannered. That is the least that can be said of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority's response to criticisms of last year's School Certificate science paper. Belatedly acknowledging that those who attacked the paper are correct, the authority has nevertheless implicitly suggested that their concerns were overblown. The latest to utter is the authority's communications co-ordinator, Kathryn Asare, who awarded "full marks" to the president of the Institute of Physics, Professor Geoff Stedman, for his detection of "an area where a problem occurred", itself a description minimising the issue. She then went on to "doubt whether it merits the hours spent polishing those elegantly penned attacks on the authority".

Professor Stedman had criticised the NZQA for several "appalling" questions in the School Certificate science exam, which he said demonstrated a complete lack of understanding of basic physical principles. The authority, having unsuccessfully tried to confine Professor Stedman's concerns so they might not become public, then suggested that his criticisms of the paper were perhaps the result of another agenda. In a futile bid to back-pedal, it now asserts that, while the questions were flawed, students sitting the exam understood what was being asked. It further contends that the meaning of the flawed questions would be unclear only to those with an advanced understanding of physics.

According to Ms Asare, "a university physicist will be aware of some aspects of physics which a fifth-former would not be, and will naturally find some questions unanswerable at an advanced level". She cannot be acquainted with too many promising fifth-form science students. These days their knowledge is not confined to what is taught in the classroom, itself far wider than the Newtonian physics to which some of the disputed questions relate. One correspondent to "The Press", B. H. Howard, put the problem succinctly: "I can easily imagine a situation where a bright candidate, who sees an error in a question or is puzzled by an ambiguity, could falter and be marked

down, while a mediocre one, blindly putting numbers into an appropriate formula, would get the 'right' answer."

Bad though it may be that the questions were not properly moderated, what is worse is the grudging manner with which the authority has acknowledged that its critics are right. That has implications for its competence, already challenged and about which few can now have confidence. Professor Stedman himself has characterised the authority's latest response as "incredible".

Ms Asare says it is not the closed, defensive agency that has been portrayed. If that is so, why the initial attempt to stop the cat getting out of the bag? Why the later ad hominem argument? Tardy attempts at public-relations gloss, themselves inept, will do nothing to repair mistakes that, if anything, now assume more significance than if the authority had come clean in the first place.

Professor David Wilkinson, of the department of civil engineering at the University of Canterbury, has on this page posed the concern of academics and others at the authority's behaviour. "The attempt by the NZQA to excuse the inexcusable only further discredits its position," he wrote. "I view with concern the fact that the NZQA is responsible for assessing the quality of education in New Zealand's secondary schools and polytechnics. Quality assurance procedures should be urgently implemented within its own organisation before it can be considered a credible body to review our colleges and schools."

The authority's apparently smug attitude goes far beyond questions in a science paper. As part of its speedy, some say over-hasty, drive towards a qualifications framework, the authority enjoys considerable scope and power. The Education Forum, for one, has suggested that it has too much. Proposals are on the table to widen the authority's embrace to include existing university degrees. Not a good idea. If the authority is as sanguine as it seems over mistakes in a fifth-form paper, what kind of mess might it make of overseeing more significant qualifications?

# Therapeutic Folie-a-Deux

Elizabeth A. Feigon, M.D

Folie-a-deux can be defined as a paranoid disorder in which the same delusion is shared by two (or more) persons. The delusion is thought to be transmitted from a dominant but paranoid person to his or her dependent intimate(s), and the latter may recover "normal" reality testing after separation from the former.

To my mind the interesting essential of this situation is that the sharing of a belief bonds and comforts its adherents; this feature may be obvious even where the belief is shared by many and would not ordinarily be regarded as delusional. For example, picture a church congregation reciting its creed in unison.

## The Comfort of Shared Belief

What is the nature of the comfort so provided? In our prototypical, pathological case, where the belief is a persecutory delusion, the acceptance of the belief by a "significant other" signifies to "the beleaguered one" that he has found an ally or a protector; contrariwise, skepticism creates the kind of anxiety that would be felt by a small child who hears a robber entering his bedroom, but can't convince a nearby parent to come to the rescue.

The delusional belief can thus function as a probe with which to test the love, loyalty and ready courage of the other. Where the belief is less persecutory (e.g., belief in God), the sharing of it is at least friendly, like sharing a meal; and the belief may seem to be validated

by the numbers subscribing to it.

In either case, if a newcomer to the "church" demands evidence, he either misses the symbolic point, or is being deliberately obtuse and distinctly unfriendly. Those of us who are skeptics at heart will hesitate at the church door, having in the past experienced conflict between that social pressure and its opposite, a desire to be the maverick whose superior science will expose the error of the herd.

Or, if we were doctors, thought we had joined another sort of church, whose members sing in unison, *credo in unum deum, Reality*; and otherwise have to agree only on the means for finding it (the scientific method).

As doctors, we still take a great deal on trust in our human relationship with patients, and find warmth in that relationship that is cemented, without our consciously considering it, by mutual and traditional assumptions (for example about the nature of the roles each is to play). Generally, we assume the patient is trying to be honest, and certainly don't demand proof for every detail of the history.

By being credulous in that way, we become the parent who will keep the robber, Death, at bay. Sometimes we come running even when we think the robber is imaginary. And after all, how can one be sure? In a case of suspected child abuse, better to call Social Services after a minimal reality check.

"Time may be of the essence."  
"Better to be safe than sorry."

Yet there are many situations in which the credulous posture becomes problematic. The simplest of these is when the patient has been identified as "delusional", which means that the doctor has decided in her heart that she does *not* believe, does not stand on common ground with her patient in regard to the delusional idea and does not wish to.

In the interests of the alliance, or out of empathy, she may still search for the grain of truth on which they can agree. Might she even disguise her belief for strategic purposes? Perhaps, after all, her patient is repeating in this doctor-patient relationship a childhood experience of being unable to summon a parent in a moment of terror.

## Believing the Fantastic: The Problem

An especially muddled situation depending on credulity in the therapist-patient alliance has been the proliferation in recent years of therapies for victims of fantastic post-traumatic syndromes.

For example hypnotherapies for people who have been contacted, abducted or violated by extraterrestrials, or who have suffered trauma in a previous existence. I assume the reader shares my automatic scepticism regarding these trauma and their treatments. In any case, do we need to concern ourselves with this phenomenon beyond perhaps noting it as an interesting example of folie-a-deux?

But if such is their church, and it comforts them, why not leave them to it? Are not all the communicants consenting adults? The phenomenon is spreading. Abduction stories are becoming epidemic and are gaining more credibility in the media.

Another example, which has been closer to home for psychiatry, is the "growth industry" of treatments and conferences pertaining to multiple personality disorder and Satanic ritual abuse.

I say "closer to home" because, according to the sociologist Jeffrey S. Victor, fifty psychiatrists (and two hundred other professionals) attended the conference on ritual abuse he describes in his article, and two-thirds of the audience at one lecture raised their hands when asked if they had treated Satanic ritual abuse. Most seemed to assume that the survivor stories were literally true and that often such abuse had been the etiology of a multiple personality disorder in the surviving adult.

Admittedly such a conference will concentrate believers, but in my everyday work for a large health plan I too have had occasion to discuss Satanic ritual abuse with credulous therapists and to interview patients who presented typical survivor stories.

The contents of a typical ritual abuse story by now are familiar to many readers: perverse sexual activities occurred at length, repeatedly over the years, between Satanic perpetrators and the child protagonist, embellished with black robes and candles and laboured misuse of Christian symbols; the child was forced to take an active role in the murder of an-

other child; blood was drunk or babies were dismembered and eaten; babies were being bred by the cult for the purpose of ritual sacrifice. Satan himself might appear on the scene.

In day-care cases, the lack of disinterested witnesses is explained by improbable transportation of children to a hidden site (by plane, by tunnels etc.), reminiscent of the "night flight" aspect of witchcraft hysteria. Enthusiasts for the theory hold that such abuse is widespread, for example that fifty thousand ritual sacrifices occur yearly, or that Satanic cults comprise a world-wide, multi-generational conspiracy.

According to Kenneth Lanning, in charge of an FBI unit investigating Satanic cult crimes, "We now have hundreds of victims alleging that thousands of offenders are murdering tens of thousands of people, and there is little or no corroborative evidence, from a law-enforcement perspective".

As therapists, should we care one way or the other about corroborative evidence? Is it not in the nature of an empathic therapeutic alliance to enter into the spirit of the patient's experience? Is it not in the nature of the therapeutic process to deal evenhandedly with material drawn from fantasy and reality alike? And when it seems that numbers of professionals are unduly impressed by such stories, perhaps it is only their empathy at work; instinctively recognising that there is no better way of forging an alliance with the patient than to endorse the patient's view of reality.

Yet, I am concerned that in pursuing this course, the therapist can lose track of how much sacrifice of her own intellectual

autonomy is being made on behalf of the therapeutic relationship. Taken to an extreme, this kind of empathy ultimately places the therapist in the position of the dependent partner in a *folie-a-deux*.

There are other possible formulations of the problem I am addressing. Some ritual-abuse patients may be diagnostically closer to having a factitious disorder than to having paranoia, in which case the involved therapists might be regarded as the susceptible targets of a fraud. For example, I interviewed one patient who had obtained disability income on the basis of her post-Satanic multiple-personality disorder, while working with a therapist who had accepted this history without corroboration.

In the case of an adult who identifies cryptic signs of ritual abuse in a child and then applies for treatment or legal action, I see a parallel with the parent enacting a Munchausen-by-proxy (in which the child is presented for treatment of an odd physical illness which has been fabricated or induced by the parent). In both cases, the parent usually appears especially devoted and concerned for the welfare of her child and compels the admiration of physicians and others involved, until the true situation is uncovered.

What factors beside empathy may have paralysed our capacity to doubt?

### **Obligatory belief**

We all realise the harm that can result from not taking a sexual abuse story seriously, particularly when it comes from a child. We now practice in a state of heightened vigilance to prevent such abuse, interrupt it, or treat its post-traumatic stress



disorder. We bend over backwards to correct Freud's underestimate of the true incidence of incest.

As a result, many of us have come to feel embarrassed to question any aspect of any story involving sexual abuse, no matter how truly fantastic. Even in the privacy of our own minds, it can seem that belief is obligatory. And when it comes to voicing doubts out loud, we anticipate a consensus to the contrary, or arguments *ad hominem* that charge our scepticism to our squeamishness, denial or insensitivity.

And here let me make a personal value explicit: that belief

ideally rests on evidence that convinces, and that scepticism is a healthy, or at very least, a permissible first response to someone else's novel hypothesis, especially when that hypothesis involves the supernatural or challenges common sense.

### Mass Hysteria

A third formulation to explain therapist credulity is favoured by Jeffrey Victor and other sceptical sociologists. They suggest that the Satanic ritual abuse phenomenon is an example of mass hysteria (a.k.a. moral panic), in which therapists, patients, clergymen,

police and others become involved according to individual vulnerability and social context. They support this theory by an analysis of the manner in which the Satanic cult rumours are spread, and by amassing the cases in which no evidence could ever be found to demonstrate a reality behind the rumour.

The content of ritual-abuse stories also lends support to this explanation. For example, some women who seek "deprogramming" claim to have been practising witches under the domination of Satan. Their scenario of an indulgence followed

## The Forest of Flying Sheep

Jim Ring

It is rare that Nelson interests the world's news media. The "sheep suspended from pine trees" story was sufficiently bizarre to get their attention.

For those who missed the story: Some people walking in a pine plantation forest near Wakefield discovered the decayed bodies of about eight or nine sheep on the ground with another five or so entangled in the trees up to ten metres from the ground. The legs of the animals were tied up with wire.

This story was widely publicised, and the local council received calls from all over the world. Although within New Zealand this was generally treated as just a funny story, those overseas quickly scented a UFO mystery and an American caller wanted to know if there were scorch marks on the ground. There were not and how any UFO could land in a pine forest defies imagination.

It was obvious that the animals must have been dropped from the air. In fact a spokesperson for the council suggested an explanation on Radio New Zealand when the story first broke. This turned out to be largely correct. A helicopter pilot gave a full explanation to the council within 24 hours.

The animals had died of sleepy sickness (a metabolic disorder associated with lambing). Number eight fencing wire was then threaded

through their hocks and they were slung from a helicopter to be flown to where they could be buried. (Hygiene regulations demand they be buried or burned.) The wire broke while the helicopter was flying over the forest. The pilot searched the area from the air and on foot but could not find the corpses. It is assumed that all the animals were originally entangled in the trees but decomposition caused some of them to fall.

The pilot apparently cleared up the mess once he knew where it was. No prosecution is likely although the law may not have been strictly obeyed. This case was clearly an accident.

It may surprise many to discover that there are several offences (such as pollution cases like this) where the police display no interest. It is up to other bodies to prosecute if they deem it necessary. They are generally more interested in getting the mess cleared up.

In spite of this I can imagine stories, some time in the future in the UFO literature, suggesting a legal "cover-up". Perhaps we shall see on television the story of how Nelson was nearly invaded by woolly aliens. We can be pretty certain that the overseas media never carried the prosaic explanation of this story.

by repudiation is an exact duplication of that sequence in the behaviour of the children at the core of the seventeenth century witchcraft hysteria in Salem Village in Massachusetts. Beliefs about blood-drinking, baby-sacrifice, perverse intercourse with demons etc. were also all represented in such earlier hysterias.

In the three hundred years of European witchcraft hysteria, ending not long after the Salem outbreak, 200,000 innocent men and women were murdered as witches. The hysteria was supported by the establishment, partly because the estates of wealthy "witches" could be confiscated by the court after they had been executed.

It is hard to imagine that three hundred years later, there is any danger of the whole social structure becoming caught up in the hysteria in the way that it was in those times. It is alarming that part of the contemporary legend is a belief that individual modern cults are part of an ancient conspiracy, whose goal is to "create international chaos in order to allow Satan to take over the world."

While believers in this theory may never succeed in creating the kind of panic that leads to sanctioned executions, "an unjustified crusade against those perceived as satanists could result in wasted resources, unwarranted damage to reputations, and disruption of civil liberties," as Kenneth Lanning wrote in 1990. It has happened. Thousands of families in the United States have been needlessly disrupted, even if one can speculate that in some cases distancing the family might have been part of the patient's agenda.

## Causes of Mass Hysteria

The phrase "mass hysteria" describes a social phenomenon not necessarily restricted to people who individually suffer from histrionic or paranoid disorders. Other factors thought to contribute to vulnerability include gender (more often female) and preexisting social ties. In the case of the Satanic cult hysteria, the "pre-existing social ties" exist within certain sub-groups of the mental-health professional communities. And, the law-enforcement contingent at the seminars shares a fundamentalist Christian perspective:

*"The most notable circular among cult-crime investigators, File 18 Newsletter, follows a Christian world-view in which police officers who claim to separate their religious views from their professional duties nevertheless maintain that salvation through Jesus Christ is the only sure antidote to Satanic involvement, whether criminal or noncriminal, and point out that no police officer can honourably and properly do his or her duty without reference to Christian standards."*

Many of the participating therapists also share this context.

Modern "local panics" about satanic cults "have almost all occurred in economically declining small towns and rural areas of the country." Similarly, an analysis of the economic and political factors favouring hysteria can be made on the basis of the location on the Salem map, in 1692, of the homes of the accusers, the accused, and their defenders.

It is interesting to speculate about other social causes of such hysterias. One possibility is that many people are interpreting the AIDS epidemic as God's punishment for sexual wrongdoing, especially as it occurred concurrently with increasing public awareness of the reality of incest. A subgroup of these people may have been conditioned, by religious upbringing or personal history, to deal with anxiety about forbidden impulses through projection and splitting, and the real existence of Satanic cults provided the seed crystal for a conspiracy theory.

Similarly to a conversion symptom, the hysteria also provides the opportunity for disguised expression of sexual and aggressive interests, as the participants can discuss the details of abductions and orgies while claiming to be traumatised or outraged.

## Relationship to Real Sexual Abuse

This brings me to the question of just what relationship the Satanic ritual-abuse hysteria bears to real instances of physical and sexual child abuse.

Obviously it can be viewed as a simple imitation of a true abuse situation, which appears cruder or gaudier than the original, as natural imitations generally do. Like the larger and more brightly spotted eggs of the cuckoo, the ritual-abuse story is a winner in the contest for nurturing behaviour.

In some cases, professionals involved in the hysteria have had personal knowledge of real cases of child pornography, incest, physical abuse, neglect, or those rare instances where the sexual molestation of a child was associated with Satanic

embellishments (such perhaps was the case of Frank and Iliana Fuster, described by Roland Summit and others). Their subsequent participation in mass hysteria could be viewed as a manifestation of professional shell-shock.

In the *New York Times* of March 3, 1991, there was a description of a case in which a couple abandoned an infant to death by starvation because of their participation in an extended crack orgy. Three years ago I was involved in a similar case (the mother had been my patient). When her crime was discovered, incredulous friends attributed it to her having been kidnapped by a Satanic cult, which forced her to kill the baby.

This colourful explanation eased vicarious guilt (mine included, at the moments I was tempted to believe it) and ex-

tracted a drop of pleasurable drama from what was, in stark reality, an unmitigated horror.

The Satanic ritual-abuse hysteria could well be, in part, the product of that amazing ability of the human mind to transmute pain into pleasure. If so, I can understand why its adherents would be tenacious. Supposing them to have had childhoods studded by such painful episodes, one can hardly begrudge them the soothing balm and spangly entertainment of hysteria; of fictionalising and dramatising their trauma at the moment of its emergence into publicity. At one remove, I am doing something similar as I now write.

Let me look a little more closely, though, at the nature of the relief provided to the ritual-abuse patient. It could go like this: if Satan and all his minions ravished her or her child, she

was *really* not to blame. Never mind if mental health professionals had been trying to tell her that for years; when it comes to ground-in guilt, nothing gets it out like a home-made remedy.

How can it hurt to let the patient go on feeling that we validate this version of her story? In some cases that might seem the best course, or is the only alliance the patient will allow. But leaving aside the potential division of a *family*, within the patient *herself*, the split is left unhealed. Somewhere deep in her heart, she could still be wondering whether Satan, penis and all, is not a piece of herself, torn like Adam from her own chest.

And to get at that question, she will have to tell the real story — more homely, sad, or embarrassing. It might be a real incest story, but more likely it will be the story of a puritanical childhood, which — as in Marion Starkey's Salem — allowed excitement only via tales of sin and punishment.

### Secondary Gain

And what of the patients who, though now in no great distress, instinctively exploit a mass hysteria? What treatment will divert them from a life of disability under a factitious diagnosis of multiple personality disorder or post-Satanic stress syndrome?

Thigpen and Cleckley, the authors of *The Three Faces of Eve*, believe that full-blown multiple-personality is extremely rare. Most patients seeking the diagnosis are histrionic personalities with a capacity for some dissociation, and a desire to promote that capacity "to ... gain attention, or maintain an acceptable self-image,

## Bear in Mind

**Skeptics will probably be interested in the following events coming up later this year:**

### Ian Plimer visit

In late April the arch-foe of Australian creationists will be visiting a number of New Zealand cities to speak on *Telling Lies for God: the truth about creation "science"*. Keep an eye open for local announcements.

### Richard Dawkins visit

Zoologist Dawkins is the author of popular books such as *The Selfish Gene* and *The Blind Watchmaker*. He is scheduled to be in New Zealand during the week of 9 September and current plans are for him to visit Christchurch, Dunedin and Wellington.

### Skeptics Conference.

See the next Skeptic for an announcement of the date and venue of our annual get-together



or accrue financial gain, or even escape responsibility for actions." Multiple personality is almost unknown in England, where sensational biographical accounts of such patients are less available.

Fahy *et al* suggest treating multiple personality and lesser degrees of dissociation as symptoms of personality disorder. "It is our contention that sanctioning the dissociative behaviour, by concentrating on symptoms or encouraging symptomatic behaviour, may lead to reinforcement and entrenchment of the relevant symptom." (The same argument applies to preoccupation with the ritual-abuse story.)

In a personal communication, Bessel VanDerKolk reframed the "attention-getting" motive I have here attributed to the multiple-personality or ritual abuse patient. He takes a therapist's sense that a patient is exhibiting or "getting off on trauma", to be a marker for the presence of narcissistic issues in that patient, such as would derive from a childhood that was lacking the minimum essential mirroring from the parents. The resulting hunger to feel important to someone is appropriately gratified by an outraged therapist, even if the trauma is mislabelled by both therapist and patient.

There is a lively dialogue on the subject of therapist scepticism regarding multiple personality in *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*. I wonder if professionals polarise over endorsing this diagnosis because of personal values regarding responsibility vs. dependency.

Physicians tend to be responsible, counterdependent stoics; as such we face a contin-

ual choice between envying the apparent ability of the dissociative patient to escape accountability, or merging with this patient in order to enjoy vicariously the gratifications he seems to achieve in that way. It is possible to shift between the two positions, but most will have a tendency toward one or the other.

### **Iatrogenic Contributions to Mass Hysteria**

We must finally confront the fourth, and least palatable form in which therapist participation has contributed to mass hysteria: case-finding therapists have been playing a role analogous to the witch-finders of earlier hysterias.

Of course then, the witches were not so much found as created, often by quite deliberate fraud with an obvious profit motive; I had presumed the therapist motivation to be more complicated, including for example the understandable pleasure of sharing in the lime-light falling on such a case.

An article on Satanic ritual abuse in the April, 1992 issue of *The Psychiatric Times* describes a case of a therapist who allegedly pressured her patient into telling the ritual abuse story. The patient explained, "It was never just enough to tell her that my grandmother had abused and tortured me. It always needed to be worse."

This was a harbinger of the flood of false-memory retractions now appearing in the United States. Such zealous therapists would be the *dominant* partners of the *folies-a-deux*, the parents in a Munchausen-by-proxy, and the driving force behind hysteria. The past year's work of the False Memory Syndrome

Foundation would suggest that numbers of recanting accusers feel they had been pressured by their therapists in just this way.

The profit motive must now be taken more seriously. It is not necessarily unethical to pursue a specialty which meets the need of fashion, even if one does so with the covert thought, "there's money to be made from this." Consider for example a hypnotist who decides that because of new anti-smoking laws, a smoking-cessation practice is likely to succeed. It is perfectly possible that he is sincere and zealous about this practice which also happens to be profitable. Yet, if somehow it turned out that hypnotism were more harmful than cigarettes, we would begin to wonder just how long the practitioner might have secretly stilled the doubts now shared by all.

### **Education or Tolerance?**

It will not be possible to eradicate this type of mass hysteria, which has such a strong appeal and is so nearly adaptive for so many. Indeed, a fifth and final reframe for the phenomenon was suggested to me by the anthropologist Sherrill Mulhern (director of the Laboratoire des Rumeurs, des Mythes du Futur et des Sectes at the University of Paris). She believes that the satanic-abuse survivors and their convert therapists comprise an American *possession cult*.

Labeling mass hysteria in this way, reminds us of the adaptive and comforting aspects of religion, and blames no one (not parent, nor patient, nor therapist) for a phenomenon that springs from some widespread cultural source.

Yet (along with Ms. Mulhern) I remain concerned about

the dangerous and counter-therapeutic aspects of cultic religions, in which vulnerable individuals may feel too much pressure to conform and to renounce family ties that might still have been a net positive resource.

And I feel bewildered to walk into my scientific church and find a significant portion of the congregation busily sacrificing a scapegoat on the altar.

Part of our role as doctors is to educate. We can make an effort to enlighten those of our colleagues who are treating factitious and conversion disorders without recognizing them as such, and to come to the aid of those who sense the symptomatic nature of the story-telling but are confused as to what "empathy" requires in that situation.

Empathy need not disable the therapist's observing ego, nor its faculty of critical thought. That is what generates the full list of diagnostic hypotheses and assesses the quality of the evidence available for choosing between them, so our empathy will be attuned to the real source of pain in a particular patient.

Institutionally, we can make more conscious choices about limiting clinical resources such as hospitalisations, especially where the relevant symptom is fully ego-syntonic or factitious. And finally, I think we need to examine the role played by ritual-abuse conferences, courses or therapies in feeding hysteria or proselytising for a new religion.

Blarg, wibble, bio stuff...

## Book Review

**THE HIPPOPOTAMUS** by  
Stephen Fry; Arrow Books  
Ltd, 1995; xi + 356 pp;  
\$19.95 pbk

Readers familiar with Stephen Fry only for his TV comic appearances (*A Bit of Fry and Laurie*, *Jeeves and Wooster*, *Blackadder*) may be surprised to meet him as author of a novel, and even more surprised that such a novel should be reviewed in *New Zealand Skeptic*. Squash your doubts — this book is full of paranormal mysteries to delight the skeptical reader.

The story is of the miraculous happenings at Swafford Hall, a country house in Norfolk; a cancer cure, a veterinary marvel, the transformation of an ugly duckling into a swan, the laying on of hands, general sorcery, and the liberal dispensing of Reichian energy, ie "healing" in its widest sense, and definitely in quotation marks, all seem to be associated with the adolescent younger son of the house.

So, why should a novel about bizarre events at an English country house, written by a comic actor, be strongly recommended to this magazine's readers?

It is impossible to be detailed without giving away the "whodunnit" aspects of the book. I can only ask you to accept my word that this is a greatly entertaining book, which at the same time has a serious message about the need for the skeptical attitude. It is a welcome contrast to the usual story of the paranormal, where the skeptic is portrayed as a head-in-the-sand ostrich, convinced of his stupidity only long after

everyone else has recognised the truly paranormal nature of what is taking place.

The biographical note in the book says of Fry "His hobbies include cooking his god-children and leaving out commas." Though surely not of a cannibalistic nature, Fry's fascination with this curious relationship enters the story, where the god-daughter and god-son of the hippopotamus are central.

And so to the beast himself, Ted Wallace, burned-out poet, drunken journalist, just dismissed, as the story opens, for writing a scurrilous review of a play by a popular dramatist. He is, therefore, available to be sent to observe the miracles at Swafford as they happen, by the aforementioned god-daughter, healed leukaemia sufferer.

Many chapters consist of letters exchanged between these two (Haha, you Eng. Lit. students will exclaim, an Epistolary Novel). Put aside your prudish sensibilities when you pick up *The Hippopotamus*; the language is strong and fruity, and there is plenty of explicit sex of not only the hetero- and homo-type, but of the bestial also. Definitely not to be put in the hands of your traditional maiden aunt.

The plot of the story is tightly constructed, and the revelations in the final scene, though cleverly prepared for earlier, come as a succession of surprises. Fry's writing is at times scatological, at others poetic, but always lively, with a writer's enormous enjoyment in the use of words.

Bernard Howard

# Forum

## Chemists aren't Pharmacists

When reading the latest issue of the *NZ Skeptic* I was somewhat dismayed to find that both our worthy Chair-Entity, and our Hokum Locum failed to appreciate the difference between a chemist and a pharmacist/druggist. Although this is common failure on the part of the general public I would have expected better from fellow Skeptics.

For example, I have a BSc in chemistry (and biochemistry) and am a Fellow of the NZ Institute of Chemistry. Thus I may rightly claim to be a chemist, yet I cannot sell drugs or dispense prescription medicines. In my experience, few pharmacists/druggists have

much knowledge of chemistry, let alone any formal qualification in chemistry, so have no right to be called "chemists" despite common misuse of the appellation.

*John R.L Walker, BSc(Hons),  
PhD, FNZIC  
Dept. of Plant & Microbial Sciences,  
University of Canterbury*

## Grovel, Grovel and a Quick Right Cross

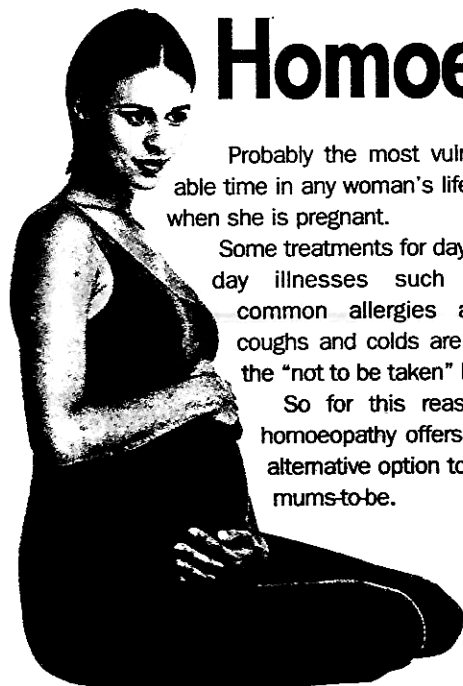
OK, mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa!

Sorry John, and all you other real chemists out there for defaming the name of the chemically competent. Yes, I was talking about pharmacists when discussing those so-called "health professionals you see most often".

(In defense, and appealing to authority — something we Skeptics never do — the dictionary does accept chemist as a synonym of pharmacist — but then it offers it as a synonym for alchemist too!)

My article in the last issue mentioned that one might want to consider avoiding using the Amcal chain because of their dubious chemistry. Here below is good reason to boycott the Unichem chain. They've got one thing right — pregnant women are vulnerable — all the more reason to campaign against those business wanting to take advantage of them in the name of pseudo-science.

*Vicki Hyde,  
Chastened Chair-entity*



# Homoeopathy for the mum-to-be

Probably the most vulnerable time in any woman's life is when she is pregnant.

Some treatments for day-to-day illnesses such as common allergies and coughs and colds are on the "not to be taken" list.

So for this reason, homoeopathy offers an alternative option to all mums-to-be.

Homoeopathic treatments are available for many illnesses that occur in pregnancy and none is a risk to either the mother or her precious baby.

Problems peculiar to pregnancy respond

well to homoeopathic treatment. For example, morning sickness often plagues many during the first few months of pregnancy. Remedies such as Nausmed Relief (containing theridion, cocculus, apomorphinum, tabaccum, petroleum and ignatia) can help relieve the feeling of nausea and stop vomiting.

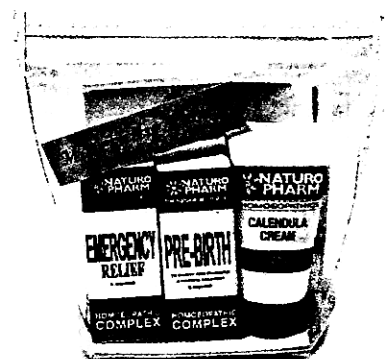
Preparing for birth is an important feature of homoeopathic treatment in the last two to three weeks of pregnancy. A product such as Pre-Birth contains Caulophyllum, used to tone and strengthen the walls of the uterus and ease those pains in the back and hips.

During delivery many women have benefited from the use of Emergency Relief. This contains Arnica, recommended by many midwives, and also combined Hypericum for pain relief and other homoeopathic preparations to help calm nerves and worry during labour.

To help prepare for breastfeeding (and

for use during the early days of feeding), Calendula cream helps to soothe and heal. Used in many maternity units, its gentle soothing action helps the nipple to heal when applied regularly following and in-between feeding.

Pre-Birth, Emergency Relief and Calendula cream are all included in a special maternity pack available from most Unichem Pharmacies.



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### **Moving Around?**

There may be psychics out there, but none of them help with the Skeptic. *If you change address, please tell us.* We want you to enjoy your magazine.

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