

# new zealand **Skeptic**

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**Evolution and Ethics**

**Medical Litigation**

**Creation/Evolution Resources**

**Book Reviews**

Should You Sue Your Doctor?	7
Creation and Evolution: Some Resources	9
Newsfront	10
Forum	12
Create Your Own Luck	13
Hokum Locum	14
Book Reviews	15
Conference Registration	19

## Contributions

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**Deadline for next issue: 10 July 2003**

Letters for the Forum may be edited as space requires - up to 250 words is preferred. Please indicate the publication and date of all clippings for the Newsfront.

Material supplied by email or IBM-compatible disk is appreciated.

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# Never Mind That White Powder, Just Pass Me a Face Mask

These are nervous times. By an astounding coincidence, as I wrote that line and paused to think of what to put next, I had a call from a friend to tell me there was a Sars case at the Waikato Hospital and to ask whether, in my other role as a subeditor at the Waikato Times, I would want to pass that on.

Astounding because I was about to add that the Sars panic seems to have taken over from the terrorism panic (although just the other day someone caused an alert after discovering "white powder" - almost certainly crystallised sugar - on his chewing gum) as the concern of the month.

True, it's early days, but Sars doesn't seem to have what it takes to be a true pandemic. It's just not contagious enough - if a country with resources as limited as Vietnam's can control and eliminate it, the rest of the world should be able to handle it too. It's hard not to conclude that there has been a substantial over-reaction to the outbreak.

Now alright, I'm not that old, but I'm sure it never used to be like this. Death and disease used to be all part of life. People got, say, tuberculosis, went to the Sanatorium, and if they were lucky they came out again a few months later. If not, the rest of the community would gather around the bereaved family. Miners died of foul lung diseases and that's just the way things were.

In one sense, then, the current panics are a good thing. They show that human life is more highly valued than it was in the past. They are perhaps also a symptom of the secularisation of society. At one time the bulk of the population would have believed that physical death was only the beginning of an immortal life in the hereafter, and therefore not a cause for prolonged grief. With that certainty gone for most of us, we are acutely aware that this life is all we have, and are terrified at the prospect of having it snatched away from us.

The sophistication of our modern, secular society, then, is only skin deep. As Carl Sagan said, "... the candle flickers, and the darkness gathers, the demons begin to stir."

No doubt some would have predicted that following the decline of religious beliefs we would enter a brave new world of rational thought as a species. The hysteria over Sars, white powder and cellphone towers show this is not the case. Human nature remains the same as it ever was.

*Annette*

# Family Obligations

Malcolm Wood

*Our acceptance of evolution brings with it moral obligations, believes geneticist Professor David Penny, who has been fighting for greater consideration to be given to the well-being of the great apes*

FROM the path we gaze down at them. From their grassed mound they turn an occasional incurious gaze back – primate watching primate. I have seen very few chimpanzees. For them we are just part of an eternal procession of their depilated, camera-toting, child-accompanying, gawping kin. Behind the idling chimps, beyond the grassed enclosure with its climbing poles, beyond the zoo, rise the hills and houses of Wellington.

As we watch, one of the smaller chimps breaks away and speed-shuffles towards us. Alongside me, Suzette Nicholson the curator of primates, tenses, then relaxes. Along the way Gombi, an adolescent chimp, has picked up a broken plastic water container, and now he dippers himself a drink from the moat that separates him from us, fastidiously avoiding the muddy margin.

No good was what Suzette thought this sweet, obviously misunderstood creature was up to. “Gombi is 9 now, which is like the terrible teens, and he’ll throw things at the public if he can. He runs round trying to be big and staunch,” she explains.

Gombi is one of 15 chimpanzees at the Wellington Zoo, or, more broadly, one of the around

30-or-so great apes in New Zealand. Not many, and nor do we have the complete set. Of the species that make up the great apes – chimpanzees, orang-utans, bonobos (once known as pigmy chimpanzees) and gorillas – we have only the first two. Yet New Zealand is often referred to as an



David Penny: The differences between their species and ours are of degree, not kind

example by those fighting for the great apes to be brought more fully within our circle of moral consideration, or even to be granted some form of rights.

The reason is the handful of lines in our 1999 Animal Welfare Act stipulating that any experiments

with the great apes must be justified on the grounds of a benefit to the apes themselves and that these experiments must have the final approval of the director-general of Agriculture.

There has never been experimentation carried out with the great apes in New Zealand. The provision is intended at least as much as an example for others as it is for domestic consumption.

Few though they are, these lines were hard fought for by the New Zealand membership of the Great Ape Project, and one of the most persuasive of advocates was Professor David Penny. An activist by disposition – he protested the Springbok tours and the Vietnam war – he says we should accord the great apes greater consideration, letting our morality be driven by the evidence presented by our science. We now know how close to us they are. In fact, viewed through the dispassionate eyes of molecular geneticist and evolutionist David Penny, we are ourselves great apes. The differences between their species and ours are of degree, not kind.

For the great apes – or more exactly the other great apes – life is generally far from great at all.



Bonobos, chimpanzees, and gorillas are native to central and western Africa; orang-utans to Sumatra and Borneo. In these developing – or in some cases undeveloping – regions, conservation is often not a leading concern. Deforestation, the trade in baby orang-utans as pets, and, in Africa, the trade in bushmeat are whittling away great ape numbers. Their species have been given at best a vulnerable and at worst a highly endangered rating by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

In captivity, whether kept as pets or as circus animals, the great apes largely live their lives at the favour of their owners. Often this means a life arbitrarily cut short at the age of 7 or 8 when the tractable youngster becomes, like Gombi, an assertive, unpredictable and physically powerful adolescent. (Bebe, the matriarch of Gombi's group at 40-plus, could live for another 20 years.)

In the US thousands of the great apes are used as laboratory animals. Animals used to roaming distances are kept in close quarters, infected with diseases such hepatitis or Aids, and subjected to medical procedures.

They are our substitute in experiments for one reason: they are so like us. Like us, some non-human primate species have naturally occurring osteoporosis and hypertension, some undergo the menopause, and they are susceptible to many of the same diseases that threaten human populations.

On the other hand, Penny believes the case for testing with the great apes is often overstated. Take Aids, for example. The

epidemiological and laboratory evidence from human populations is actually very strong, and “we have learned virtually nothing of benefit to humans from infecting many chimpanzees with HIV”.

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**In captivity, whether kept as pets or as circus animals, the great apes largely live their lives at the favour of their owners.**

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And his argument for ending experimentation with the great apes is much the same as that employed by those who want it to continue: the great apes are so like us.

Penny's office is not much more than a glass cubicle inside a laboratory in a '60s building on the Palmerston North campus. There's a clutter of papers – apologised for with some perverse pride – and students are forever wandering to the door to seek guidance on papers or theses. Now is the most exciting time ever in the molecular biosciences, he says. Eternal questions are being answered.

Using DNA and protein sequences, Penny and his colleagues have looked at the origin and dispersal of modern humans, not only confirming the likelihood that humans originated in Africa, but also, with their finding that Maori share ancestry in a group of around 50 to 100 women, lending weight to the Maori oral tradition of the seven canoes that settled New Zealand.

The chimpanzee genome has been another particular interest. Penny sees the differences between human and chimpanzee as something of a test for whether

microevolution – small changes over generations – is enough to account for macroevolution, the more major differences between species.

One estimate puts the genetic similarity between chimpanzees and humans at 98.76 per cent. (If you want to quibble you can find a smidgen more or less difference by selecting different categories of DNA.) Counterintuitively this makes us more closely related to chimpanzees than chimpanzees are related to gorillas.

DNA sequencing can also be used to put dates to our evolutionary history. The difference between chimpanzee and human DNA has come from the mistakes that are made as the DNA is copied from generation to generation. The errors occur at a reasonably constant rate in certain types of DNA. So if you know the rate, can compare the two DNA sequences, and have some sophisticated mathematics at your command, you can arrive at a date for a common ancestor.

The common ancestor of man and chimpanzee turns out to have walked the earth about 6.5 million years ago. Although this is around half a million years before the Grand Canyon started to form – and although it has to be realised that this is 6.5 million years in which chimpanzees and humans have evolved down their respective paths – in evolutionary terms it is the blink of an eye.

So close is our genetic makeup to that of the other great apes that the question for Penny and others like him is not why humans are so similar to the other great apes, but rather how to

account for the differences. Penny's answer: our species has a much longer growth period during which the brain and body are increasing in proportion.

If evolution seldom creates features out of nothing – and microevolution is sufficient to explain macroevolution – then we should expect our own attributes in the other great apes. And the more closely researchers look, the more this turns out to be so. Chimpanzees employ mental representations. They are self-aware. They are capable of deceit. They use tools. They transmit culture. They can acquire language.

In the mornings at Wellington Zoo the chimpanzees are given cups of blackcurrant drink fortified with vitamins. Overnight the female chimpanzees have been segregated – a welcome break from the attentions of the males. The status conscious males line up to be passed their drinks. The females and infants extend their hands through the bars in a prehensile tangle. The hands are rough and powerful; they look as if they have been crafted from black latex.

As the males head back outside to join the females they let loose with a rising anarchic chorus of pant-hoots.

Anatomy is destiny. The smartest of chimpanzees is still not going to be able to talk. They lack the breath control and physical equipment to do so. Nor should we expect a watchmaker chimpanzee. See how well you do at manipulating objects

if you stop using your opposable thumb.

But if “chatting to a chimp in chimpanzee” – to quote the Doctor Dolittle song – isn't going to happen, having a conversation is still possible. Beginning with Washoe the chimpanzee in the 1960s, numerous great apes have been taught Modified American Sign Language or have been shown how to communicate using the lexigrams on symbol keyboards.

At age 5 Washoe the chimpanzee was capable of using more than 100 signs and understanding hundreds more. Panbanisha, a bonobo, can produce about 250 words on a voice synthesiser and understand about 3000. Koko, a 26-year-old gorilla is claimed to understand

who have been taught American sign language, and once you look a chimp in the eye and see something there that is different from a dog, you have a different perspective,” says Massey primate expert Arnold Chamove, who has met the likes of Washoe, and Lucy, who was raised from infancy by American psychologists, the Temerlins.

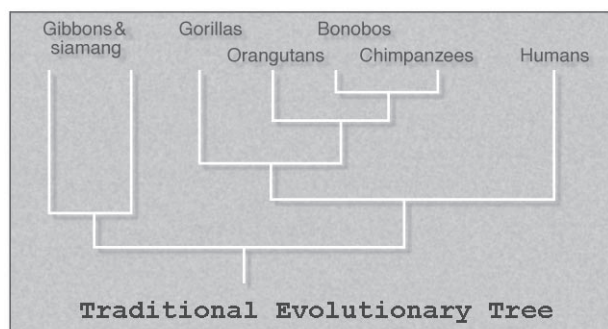
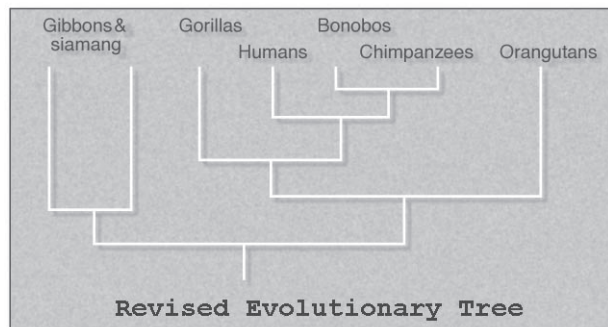
The Temerlins, who seem to have been like-totally-60s, raised Lucy as one of their own children, to the point that she had become, as primatologist Jane Goodall put it, a changeling, neither chimpanzee nor human. Lucy was accustomed to serving tea to guests, fixing her own pre-dinner cocktails, and masturbating to Playgirl centre-spreads. Eventually the Temerlins felt it best that Lucy move on, and

she was sent to Gambia for a difficult and lengthy rehabilitation back into the wild.

“She was sent away from her family to be rehabilitated and she was depressed,” says Chamove. “I had worked as a clinical psychologist, so I knew a bit about depression. It was just like someone had taken a 5-year-old out of her family and put her in a zoo with some chimpanzees. And she was thinking ‘Jesus Christ, how long is this going to last?’ No blankets, no beds, no food she was used to.”

Could it be that Chamove was over-empathising?

“I didn't see any substantive difference [between Lucy and someone in the same situation].”



about 2000 words of English and to have an IQ of between 70 and 90. These acculturated apes produce an extraordinary effect on those who meet them.

“I have been strongly influenced by some of the chimps

For Suzette Nicholson at the Wellington Zoo the chimpanzee colony has all the continuing interest of a long-running and perfectly comprehensible soap opera. Recently a palace coup ousted the dominant male. “Mahdi, the youngest of the big males wanted to take over, so he tried to beat up Boyd, the alpha male, when he had been sick. What happened was that the girls all ganged up on Mahdi and chased him around the park at full speed. Now the three males share power.”

When one of the babies died the colony went into mourning. “We let the mother keep the baby for a couple of days until it became a health hazard and we took it off her. When we did, all of the other females would sit round her, grooming her and fussing over her. They do grieve. One of our females died not long ago while under anaesthetic. After she died we let the other chimps in to see that she was dead and wasn’t coming back.”

As it becomes ever more evident that we are as much the product of evolution as any other creature, and that evolution has no higher goal, so Penny hopes the centuries-old paradigm of the Great Chain of Being (GCB) will begin to crumble. The GCB is the notion that there is a progression of living things: from creatures barely alive on the lower rungs, to sentient then rational beings, and, above that, beings that are no longer anchored to material existence. Less perfect beings are there to serve more perfect beings. The GCB is us-and-them. Animals and us.

Penny finds the quote he wants and recites with theatrical

enjoyment: “‘There is none that is more powerful in leading feeble minds astray from the straight path of virtue than the supposition that the soul of brutes is the same nature of our own.’ Isn’t that wonderful?”

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**If we extend rights to the great apes, then what about those other primates that exhibit similar attributes, if to a lesser degree?**

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This is the 17th century French philosopher René Descartes, but the GCB’s pedigree can be traced back to the ancient Greeks. Plato, for example, thought there were three different kinds of souls: the primitive, the mortal and the immortal, but that the immortal soul – the one that counted – resided strictly in humans, and even then not all of them; children and slaves, for example, were out of luck. The ancient Greek thought meshed nicely with the part of Judao-Christian teachings that put all of nature at man’s disposal, and in the fifth century Saint Augustine folded the one into the other.

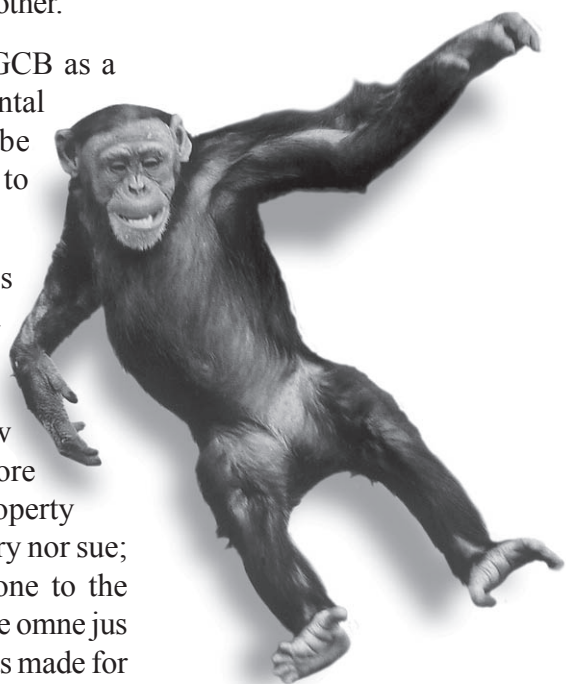
Penny sees the GCB as a licence for environmental despotism and will be pleased to see an end to it.

As for the law, this is a 3000-year old accretion of precedent which generally holds animals, no matter how intelligent, to be no more than property. And property can neither suffer injury nor sue; injury can only be done to the owner. *Hominum cause omne jus constitum* – the law was made for

men and allows no fellowship or bonds of obligation between them and the lower animals – runs a tag derived from Roman law. In his book *Rattling the Cage*, Harvard law lecturer Steven Wise puts a case for legal personhood for the great apes, but it seems unlikely that this will happen any time soon. Still, it is well to remember that it is only within relatively recent times that various groups of humanity have gained fundamental civil rights.

What Penny and his fellow members of the New Zealand Great Apes Project have wanted has been more modest. Steering clear of the contentious issue of rights, they would have liked to introduce a system of legal guardianship into the *An-imal Welfare Act* as a pragmatic way of dealing with the courts. In the end, the backlog of legislation awaiting Parliament in the lead-up to an election dictated what was achievable.

Of course if we admit the great apes within a widened circle





of moral consideration, it begs the question of where to next. If we extend rights to the great apes, then what about those other primates that exhibit similar attributes, if to a lesser degree?

Making more of a species leap, what about, say, whales? While it is easy enough to imagine oneself inhabiting the mental landscape of a primate, says Penny, the world of a whale is almost unknowable. So much of how we perceive and interact with the world

is defined by our bodies and our senses. If you put two blind people in a room they will still use hand gestures to emphasise what they are saying. Such things are hard-wired. Comprehend how the world must seem to a whale – how can we?

Questions answered with questions. If we are to discuss the issues surrounding our treatment of the great apes, then Penny seems keen that we discuss the particular issues, and not go haring off to who knows where.

Yet with the Great Chain of Being displaced by DNA's double helix it seems hard to see this debate as anything other than the harbinger of many others to come.

□ Malcolm Wood is editor of the Massey University Alumni Association magazine, from which this article is reprinted with his permission. David Penny will be speaking at the Skeptics' Conference in Wellington, September 19-21.

# SHOULD YOU SUE YOUR DOCTOR?

**Jim Ring**

*Increased litigation will do nothing to reduce the rate of medical misadventure*

**I**N A recent decision the Privy Council has ruled that a New Zealand patient dissatisfied with a diagnosis can take legal action against the doctor responsible. Without commenting on any individual case, surely such actions must make doctors more careful and overall will improve the standard of medical treatment?

Not so; litigation in medical matters has had a disastrous effect overseas. New Zealand has been largely protected by the Accident Compensation scheme (with all its faults), so many people here do not realise what a terrible step is being contemplated. In particular medical litigation will make medicine more expensive. The US has in many ways an excellent medical system,

with one major flaw; it hosts a whole branch of the legal profession as a parasite. Thus it is enormously expensive, and so unaffordable for many people.

I recommend an article originally published by the New Yorker in 1999 and reprinted in *The Best American Science Writing 2000* (ed. James Gleick): *When Doctors Make Mistakes*, by Atul Gawande. This is partly an account of how the author made a medical error and of why errors occur, but explains how litigation does nothing to improve a medical system. It also contains a lot of interesting data.

It was estimated that in the US around 120 000 patients die each year, at least partly because of errors during medical care. In

November 1999 (after the publication of this article) the National Academy of Sciences reported that medical errors caused between 44 000 and 98 000 deaths per year.

A 1995 study on hospital drug administration found that an error occurred about once per admission. Although nearly all were minor and did not cause a problem, about 1 per cent had serious consequences. In New York State another review of 30 000 admissions found that nearly 4 per cent suffered complications from treatment that prolonged their hospital stay, resulted in disability, or caused death.

Thus errors in the USA are not rare, but would they be more

frequent without the threat of litigation? The evidence suggests not and it contains some surprises. Some in the legal profession have claimed that their role is to find and expel incompetent and dangerous doctors. However most surgeons are sued at least once in their careers. Repeat offenders are not the problem, practically all make some mistakes. A study on the perpetrators of medical error found no group of dangerous doctors. Instead errors were normally distributed across the profession. This implies a single population so it is pointless to look for a subset that could be eliminated to leave behind a better performing profession.

It is hardly surprising that litigation fails to reduce medical error rates when one sees how it is applied. In the US only 2 per cent of patients who received sub-standard care ever sued, while only a small minority of those who did sue had actually been the victim of sub-standard care. Many of those who sued successfully, were not actually victims. It was found that the chances of a patient winning a suit depended primarily on how poor the outcome was, regardless of whether the outcome was caused by error or negligence.

The sums awarded as compensation are often huge; but even if a surgeon wins and so pays no compensation, his/her legal costs are still enormous. Thus doctors must carry enough insurance to cover these possibilities. Even the best surgeon must prepare for the worst as he or she can expect to be sued at least once in a career. The insurance premiums are naturally very high,

and of course these must be covered by the fees charged.

Closer to home in Australia there has recently been a crisis in the medical profession, with groups of surgeons threatening to cease work unless some Government

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**The major lesson is that everybody makes mistakes at times; the system must be organised to make it more difficult to make mistakes, and to ensure that the consequences of mistakes are made as benign as is possible.**

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action was taken. The problem grew with ever-increasing sums being awarded to successful litigants. Surgeons in particular were required to take out ever-larger insurance policies. A relatively small insurance company offered cut rate policies – but a few cases with very high awards against medical staff showed that they had miscalculated; they had set their premiums far too low. The financial collapse of this company and then the insolvency of a very large insurance company resulted in a number of medical staff being without any insurance cover. The new policies being offered them involved premiums far higher than those they had been paying. Their professional fees were too low to allow them to meet these extra charges.

The Government had to take emergency measures to ensure that surgery could continue. This example from just across the Tasman shows clearly how medical litigation has a dramatic effect on the cost of medical services.

Some recent actions suggest that people in New Zealand are already aware of the dangers they might face. In the far North, long-standing obstetrical practices were suddenly stopped resulting in public protest. But members of a hospital

board may feel they could be held liable if procedures they had allowed, resulted in misadventure. In the same district, obstetricians had allowed anaesthetic procedures by midwives after a telephone consultation; this was also stopped. Perhaps they could be liable for any unfortunate result. One can hardly blame medical staff – to be held liable for one's own action taken in good faith is bad enough; to be held liable for somebody else's mistake is a dreadful possibility.

In his essay Atul Gawande identifies how medical misadventures can be reduced. This is done not by targeting individuals but by targeting practices. One lesson is that small hospitals are the least safe – something which is known to be the case in New Zealand but has never been properly explained to the public.

The major lesson is that everybody makes mistakes at times; the system must be organised to make it more difficult to make mistakes, and to ensure that the consequences of mistakes are made as benign as is possible. Forcing medical staff to be defensive, so that they will not admit error for fear of horrendous legal consequences is the very worst method for tackling the problem of medical misadventure.

□ Jim Ring is a Nelson Skeptic



## Creation and Evolution: Some Resources

**W**ITH creationist activity on the increase both world-wide and locally, it pays to be informed on this issue. Fortunately, several recent and upcoming books on the subject are available in New Zealand libraries. This is not a complete listing, but it gives an indication of what is available.

### Soon to Be Published:

Creationism's Trojan Horse, The Wedge of Intelligent Design: Barbara Forest and Paul Gross. New York, Oxford University Press 2003. 0195157427

Battlefields of Science and Christianity Revisited: David Lindberg and Ron Numbers. Chicago, University of Chicago Press 2003. 0226482146

God, the Devil and Darwin: Niall Shanks. New York, Oxford University Press 2003. 0195161998

### Current Works of Interest

Defending Evolution in the Classroom: Brian Alters. Boston, Jones and Bartlett 2001. 076371187

Holdings: Christchurch College of Education Library, Lincoln University Library, University of Otago Science Library

Cult Archaeology and Creationism: Raymond Eve and Francis Harrold. Iowa City, University of Iowa Press 1995. 0877455139

Holdings: Dunedin Public Libraries, Whangarei Public Library

Triumph of Evolution and the Failure of Creationism: Niles Eldredge. New York, WH Freeman 2000. 0716736381

Holdings: Wellington City Libraries, Auckland City Libraries, Christchurch City Libraries, AUT, Massey, Auckland, Canterbury, Lincoln and Otago University Libraries

From Genesis to Genes: The Case of Evolution and Creationism: John Moore. Berkeley, University of California Press 2002. 0520224418

Holdings: Massey University Library

Intelligent Design Creationism and Its Critics: Philosophical, Theological and Scientific Perspectives: Robert Pennock. Cambridge, MIT Press 2001. 0262661241

Holdings: Massey University Library, Otago University Library

Denying Evolution: Creationism, Scientism and the Nature of Science: Massimo Pigliucci. Sunderland, Sinauer: 2002. 0878936599

Holdings: University of Otago Library, Victoria University Library

Where Darwin Meets the Bible: Creationists and Evolutionists in America: Larry Witham. Oxford, Oxford University Press 2002. 0195150457

Holdings: Christchurch City Libraries

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## Australians turn up the Heat on Pan

Breaking news as this issue goes to press (Waikato Times, April 30 and elsewhere) is the recall by Australia's Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) of 219 products manufactured by Pan Pharmaceuticals. This is the biggest recall of medical products in Australia's history; the TGA has also withdrawn Pan's licence for six months.

Pan is Australia's largest contract manufacturer of herbal, vitamin and nutritional supplements, representing 70 per cent of the Australian complementary medicine market and exporting to dozens of countries. It also makes some over-the-counter medicines including paracetamol, codeine, antihistamines and pseudoephedrine.

TGA principal medical adviser John McEwen said other products manufactured by Pan but sold under different brand names would be added to the list as they were discovered. Dr McEwen said Pan lost its licence following evidence of substitution of ingredients, manipulation of test results and substandard manufacturing processes.

Consumers have been warned not to take any vitamins or herbal supplements and even to check the label of headache pills.

The TGA said it was considering laying criminal charges as it continued the investigation.

Equipment at Pan's headquarters in Sydney was not cleaned between batches, potentially contaminating products.

The investigation was sparked by a travel sickness pill, Travacalm, which the TGA said had sent 19 people to hospital and caused 87 adverse reactions.

"Some people were very, very ill. They tried to jump out of planes, off ships and things like that because of the hallucinatory effect," federal parliamentary health secretary Trish Worth said. "I've been reliably informed it was fortunate nobody died."

She said Pan's vitamin A and natural remedy teething gels could be very harmful to pregnant women and children.

The Complementary Healthcare Council said the entire health industry would be hurt by a loss of public confidence. The council's technical director, Ian Crosthwaite, said manufacturers were holding crisis meetings and seeking an urgent meeting with the TGA to stop any further recalls. But the TGA's Dr McEwen, said: "There is a clear risk with these products of serious injury ... the longer we leave these products in the market the risk grows."

Pan recorded a \$A13.6 million (\$NZ15.30 million) profit last financial year, however founder James Selim saw his personal wealth of \$A210 million collapse by \$A26 million as shares plunged after the recall.

The Australian Stock Exchange is demanding answers as to why Pan failed to call for a trading halt in its shares as soon as it learned its licence had been suspended.

Sections of the market had the news of the licence suspension for 30 minutes before trading was halted.

A report by ECM Research on Pan Pharmaceuticals in September last year said about 40 per cent of its sales were exported and New Zealand was the most important destination, followed by Asia and Europe. The New Zealand market accounted for about a third of its market revenue.

The report also said Pan was supplying SAM-e, a natural antidepressant, into Australia and New Zealand. SAM-e is listed in advertisements for product recall. Other Pan products sold in New Zealand include libido enhancer Horny Goat Weed.

### Great Balls of Fire

Thai scientists are to launch a probe into a famous fireball phenomenon occurring in the Mekong River once a year in the country's north, (Sydney Morning Herald, April 14). Every year on the first full moon of the 11th lunar month, which coincides with the end of Buddhist Lent, hundreds of red, pink and orange fireballs soar up into the sky from the Mekong, drawing crowds of spectators.

The event known as Naga's Fireballs, which has been reported by locals for generations, has long mystified scientists. Now nine experts are to start collecting soil and water samples from the areas where the fireballs appear to originate, deputy permanent secretary of the Ministry of Science



and Technology, Saksit Tridech, told the Bangkok Post.

“We are quite sure the fireballs are a natural phenomena,” he reportedly said, adding that the team’s initial assumption was that the fireballs were caused by methane and nitrogen. Decomposition of accumulated plant and animal remains on the bottom of the Mekong could lead to the release of the gases, which rise to the surface of the water when the sun heats the water to a certain temperature, Saksit said.

Legend, however, says the flames come from a mythical Naga, or serpent, living in the Mekong river. “Society needs an explanation for this phenomenon,” said Saksit.

Claims by a television program last year that the fireballs were actually caused by tracer bullets fired by Laotian soldiers across the border caused uproar among locals, who called the suggestion insulting.

### **Abductees Stressed Out**

People who claim to have been abducted by aliens suffer many of the same trauma symptoms as Vietnam veterans and World Trade Centre survivors, even though their memories are not real (Dominion Post, February 19).

A Harvard University team found that when recalling experiences they show many of the physical and psychological effects normally seen in post-traumatic stress disorder, including nightmares, anxiety, racing heartbeats and sweating palms.

The team suggests most abductees are not mentally ill and

genuinely believe they have been kidnapped, but are experiencing false memories induced by sleep paralysis. This affects 30 per cent of the population at some stage in their lives, and occurs when a patient wakes during rapid eye movement sleep, when dreaming takes place and the entire body is paralysed with the exception of the eyes. It can often lead to frightening visions referred to as hypnopompic (upon awakening) hallucinations as elements of a dream impinge on wakefulness.

Sufferers usually report being unable to move while seeing shadowy figures around their beds, feeling electric currents coursing through their bodies, or levitating. The phenomenon probably explains the witch crazes of the 16th and 17th centuries, ghost sightings and other paranormal events, says Harvard psychology professor Richard McNally.

“Today, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, it’s interpreted as abduction by space aliens.”

All 10 abductees in the study recounted reasonably consistent details of their experiences, but these were almost certainly culturally determined. “Their memories were of being subjected to sexual and medical probing on spaceships. I certainly think we can say the X-Files probably helped with all that.”

### **Extraterrestrial Culture Day**

The good folk in Roswell, New Mexico, who would no doubt dismiss the above item, can now celebrate every second Tuesday in February as “Extraterrestrial Culture Day”, after a local

lawmaker’s proposal won House approval (Dominion Post, 25 March). Some scoffed at the idea, but memorial sponsor Republican Dan Foley said life on other planets - if you believe in it - surely has its own set of cultural beliefs. He claims aliens have contributed to recognition of New Mexico, and he wants a copy sent into space as a token of peace.

### **Calling All Spoon-benders**

Mind readers, telepaths and anyone who attracts ghosts have been invited to participate in a new course at Griffith University in Australia (Dominion Post, February 21). Senior lecturer Martin Bridgstock says the subject, Scepticism, Science and the Paranormal, will give students the opportunity to study areas of science made famous by television shows such as The X-Files and The Twilight Zone.

Dr Bridgstock said he decided on the subject because he was impressed by the large number of people he encountered who believed in the paranormal. Opinion polls showed a majority of the population believed in psychic healing, while substantial minorities believed in astrology, mind-reading, UFOs and ghosts.

He said he would welcome anyone who approached the university claiming paranormal powers. “I would get the class together and I would invite this person to say exactly what he or she thinks they can do. Then we would try to devise an experiment which would enable that person to show if in fact they could do it under tightly controlled conditions.”



## Sources of Poverty

Peter Hansen is confident that, "blame for the world's starving millions belongs [to] greedy corporate giants, environmental exploiters, warmongers and corrupt officials". He quotes no evidence. But consider Surjit Bhalla's opinion (he does produce evidence):

- Estimates of world poverty are grossly exaggerated
- Globalisation has been the golden age of development
- Poverty in developing countries declined from 37 per cent to 13 per cent of the population between 1985 and 2000 with the biggest advances in India and China
- Inequality of income is at its lowest level in 50 years.

All this is totally opposed to Green dogma but those who have contrary evidence (not just opinion) should produce it if they wish to convince skeptics.

Anti-globalisation protesters were in Sydney last May to oppose an international conference. The Australian Financial Review asked an interesting question. The international protest movement was obviously well funded. From where did the money come? Some Asian delegates had an answer. From World Aid organisations. According to them (and I lack the resources to investigate) much aid money never gets to those in need but goes to corrupt governments and officials. "Trade not Aid" threatens the gravy train, so these corrupt people are funding those who help to maintain the status quo. One could call it recycling.

Under socialism India was a poor country, people starved. The import of luxury goods (including colour TVs) was forbidden. Good comrades watched TV on black and white sets, if they could afford them. The idea that India could manufacture and export anything more complicated than cotton goods was laughable. (According to Gandhi only hand spinning and weaving are ethical). Under capitalism many peasants are still desperately poor, but they are not starving. India exports its food surpluses. Even better it manufactures and exports luxury goods (including colour TVs) to Europe. Most people are much more wealthy. It is claimed that:

1. There are more US\$ millionaires in India than there are people in NZ and Australia combined.
2. There are more US\$ millionaires in India than in the US.

The second proposition has been challenged, the first seems to have been accepted.

Jim Ring

## Repressed Memories

Craig Young writes "there is a wide ranging debate over questions of "false" and "recovered" memories within the mental health professions". While many clinicians may still be "debating" this, the scientific evidence is clear: belief in the theory of "memory repression" and the "memory recovery" techniques in wide-spread use in the 1990s resulted in thousands of tragic cases of false allegations of childhood incest made against bewildered parents.

Certainly some clinicians still believe in the validity of recovered memories, however the scientific community and the clinical professional bodies have clearly indicated that the complete repression of memory childhood sexual abuse subsequently "recovered" as an adult, usual in the context of psychotherapy, is a phenomenon not supported by scientific evidence.

In 1997 a Working Group on Reported Recovered Memories of Child Sexual Abuse of the Royal College of Psychiatrists in England issued a report including the following:

- "We can find no evidence that apparent memories of long forgotten and repeated child abuse have ever been proven to be true."
- "There is a good deal of evidence that patients will produce the material the therapist seeks, but it is often a product of fantasy."
- "We must conclude that, like abduction by space travelers, accounts of satanic abuse are false."
- "There is evidence that memory enhancement techniques are powerful and dangerous methods of persuasion."
- "Many of the memories relate to events in the early years which is incompatible with present knowledge of infantile amnesia."
- "The damage done to families is immense."

In 1998 the Canadian Psychological Association passed the following resolution: "The Canadian Psychological Association recognises the very serious concern of child abuse and child sexual abuse in our society.

The Canadian Psychological Association also recognizes that justice may not have been served in cases where people have been convicted of offences based solely upon “repressed” or “recovered” memories of abuse, without further corroborative evidence that the abuse in fact occurred...”

In 2000, the American Psychiatric Association made a statement including:

- “Some therapeutic approaches attempt specially to elicit memories of childhood abuse...The validity of such therapies has been challenged. Some patients...have later recanted their claims of recovered memories of abuse and accused their therapists of leading or pressuring them into such ideas.”

- “No specific unique symptom profile has been identified that necessarily correlates with abuse experiences.”

In 2001, the American Psychological Society awarded the William James Fellow Award to Elizabeth Loftus, who holds the title of Distinguished Professor of Psychology at the University of California, Irvine. In 2002, the Review of General Psychology ranked her 58th among the top 100 psychologists of the 20th century. She also ranked among the 25 psychologists most frequently cited in introductory psychology textbooks. The award citation said, in part:

“Over the past 15 years, Dr. Loftus’s attention has turned to a related but considerably more controversial issue, that of the validity of “recovered memories” of childhood abuse. As a result of her pioneering scientific work as

well as her activity within the legal system, society is gradually coming to realise that such memories, compelling though they may seem when related by a witness, are often a product of recent reconstructive memory processes rather than of past objective reality.”

It should be noted that since the professional bodies issued these statements; training for therapists mostly stopped teaching repression

theory and memory recovery techniques and the numbers of people “recovering” such memories dropped from a torrent to trickle. This also supports the premise that the phenomenon was iatrogenic – a therapeutic artifact. (Abridged)

Felicity Goodyear-Smith  
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## Create Your Own Luck

A British man considers himself unlucky because the week he won the lottery, another person did too. So he had to share the £8 million (\$NZ23 million) winnings instead of taking home all the money himself.

A woman breaks her leg falling down a flight of stairs and thinks she’s lucky because she could have broken her neck.

These are the kind of people British psychologist Richard Wiseman studies as part of his research. Wiseman has systematically evaluated 400 self-described lucky and unlucky people for the past eight years. He has made a science of it at the University of Hertfordshire.

“We found that lucky people have a completely different way of looking at the world,” Wiseman said. His new book, *The Luck Factor: Changing Your Luck, Changing Your Life: The Four Essential Principles*, is available in 20 countries.

“The key idea is, it is not that difficult to change your luck,” said Wiseman. “You can stop people from going on a downward spiral.”

Wiseman says his four principles apply to everyone. Here are his ideas for rearranging the luck in your life:

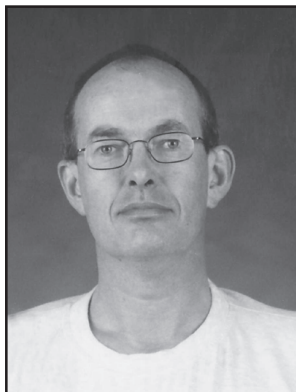
1. Maximise chance opportunities. Lucky people are skilled at creating, noticing and acting upon chance opportunities, such as a New York legal secretary who broke into the movie business because she was OK sharing a taxi with a businessman-movie producer who was running late.

2. Listen to your hunches. Lucky people tend to trust their gut feelings. Interestingly, luckier people find ways to “clear the mind” for intuition by meditating, finding a quiet place or deciding to return the problem later.

3. Expect good fortune. Lucky people expect good fortune to continue, Wiseman said, adding, “They think there is enough to go around.”

4. Turn bad luck into good. Lucky people don’t dwell on misfortune. Rather, they imagine how a situation could have been worse and find some way to take control of the situation.

“It’s just looking at the bright side of life,” Wiseman said.



## Diffidence based medicine

Some doctors see a problem and look for an answer. Others merely see a problem. The diffident doctor may do nothing from sense of despair. This, of course, may be better than doing something merely because it hurts the doctor's pride to do nothing.

New Zealand Medical Journal Vol 113  
No 1122 p479

## Maori Traditional health (Rongoa Maori)

I have received a letter dated Sep 30 2002 answering some questions I had asked on this matter. \$1,190,000 has been allocated nationwide to 12 contracted Rongoa Maori Providers. The Marlborough share amounts to \$100,000. This seemed to me a golden opportunity to have Rongoa Maori evaluated by the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Alternative Health (MACAH) but the letter tells me "The Rongoa Traditional Healing services will not be referred for evaluation by the MACAH at this time as it does not fall within their terms of reference."

It seems to me that MACAH has become a redundant quango, much like the similar body in the US

(National Institute of Health) which has also failed to make any meaningful comments on the efficacy or otherwise of any alternative medical modality. It would of course be disrespectful to Maori to test Rongoa medicine and show that it was useless.

Letter from Deputy Director-General, Maori Health, dated 30 Sep 2002.

## Nuclear Test Veterans

When people believe that their health has suffered from some experience they can become obsessional and develop all sorts of strategies for defending their delusional beliefs. A British study found that veterans of nuclear tests were no more susceptible to cancers than members of the public. Sound familiar? Just think about Gulf War Syndrome and the current fuss over the spraying of the painted apple moth in Auckland.

A spokesman for the veterans was quoted as saying that the findings would not affect the push for compensation.

I have seen claims from these people that as various tests were conducted they could see an Xray of their hand bones during the flash! This is fantasy and the whole thrust of the compensation issue is the belief that they were used as "guinea pigs". There has never been any evidence that servicemen were deliberately exposed to radiation as an experiment.

Dominion Post 26/2/03

## Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (Sids), Murder and logic

After a family had suffered four deaths from Sids, a woman's

estranged husband found her diary in which she documented how she had actually murdered the children. Post-mortem examinations at the time were inconclusive (Marlborough Express 2/4/03).

This case reminded me of another similar episode where a plausible woman murdered five children and was written up by a gullible paediatrician as a case of "familial Sids", despite the protestations of an experienced pathologist who is quoted as saying: "One unexplained infant death in a family is Sids. Two is very suspicious. Three is homicide". There is a book about this case and in my opinion it is essential reading for all Skeptics because it has so many lessons about belief, logic, flawed research and delusional thinking.

The Death of Innocents by Richard Firstman & Jamie Talan, Bantam Books

## Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome(Sars)

The media have been doing their usual excellent job of fostering panic and hysteria over a viral illness that has a mortality rate of only about 3 per cent and kills mainly old sick people. The reporting has been abysmal with no attempt to compare Sars with, say, influenza, and no intelligent discussion about mortality rates as compared to other common infectious illnesses. In my hometown of Picton there has been a run on facemasks and pharmacies are having to restock. After about 15 minutes of use facemasks become useless.

I have heard only one commentator reminding us that millions of people die every year from tuberculosis, malaria and Aids.



## Variations on a Theme

When a placebo therapy becomes commonplace, it can be a good marketing tool to introduce some subtle variation which adds novelty and appeal. Chiropractic is a placebo therapy based on a plausible but unproven theory and using the power of touch (laying on of hands). The “McTimoney is a more gentle form of chiropractic involving small fast movements to release key muscles, allowing the bones to naturally move back into place.” A new local practitioner is quoted as saying “It’s very exciting. I feel a bit like a missionary.” This is quite an appropriate metaphor because many alternative practitioners have an air of religious fervour and this type of personality enhances the placebo effect.

These subtle variations of alternative medicine are unlimited and it makes good sense to use them in combination. This maximises the placebo effect.

Marlborough Express 9/4/03

## Ambrotose

Placebos are sometimes referred to as “sugar pills.” It is rather fitting that *Ambrotose* is made from eight sugars, aloe vera and vegetable extracts. A month’s supply costs \$300 so the profit margin must be huge. It appears that New Zealand has a vast population of gullible consumers with too much money. As WC Fields said: “Never give a sucker an even break”.

I have thought of a product for such people:

“Gullitose” is made from only natural sugars and salts. It is a health supplement (insert here 20

fictitious testimonials from cripples, mother of six and Aids victims) and assists the natural healing of the body. Send \$400 to (insert PO Box number). Discovered by Professor Leiw PhD (University of Wakula Springs)(insert picture of jovial bearded man).

All joking aside, it is sad to think that people are wasting their money on sugar pills. \$300 is a week’s wages for many people.

Dominion Post 12/3/03

John Welch is a doctor with the Royal New Zealand Air Force. He is currently stationed in Saudi Arabia

## book review

## Devil’s Chaplain an Eloquent Advocate

**A DEVIL’S CHAPLAIN: Selected Essays. Richard Dawkins. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003. ISBN 0 297 82973 4. Reviewed by Bernard Howard**

We Dawkins fans have been waiting since “Unweaving the Rainbow” in 1998 for this. Unlike its predecessors, it is not written around a single theme, but is a collection of Dawkins’s comments and reviews of the past 25 years, on a variety of topics, reflecting his wide-ranging interests and passions. His editor, Latha Menon, has arranged 32 of these into six groups and a final letter to his ten-year-old daughter on “Belief”. In addition to a general Preface, Dawkins has written a short introduction to each group.

The first essay in group one, which gives its name to the title of the book, is based on a quotation from a letter of Darwin’s: “What a book a Devil’s Chaplain might write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering low and horridly cruel works of nature”. This is a mixed bag of topics, ranging from the lunacies of crystal gazing and postmodernism to an enlightened public school headmaster of 100 years ago, with, between these extremes of sense, the Great Ape Project.

In the second group, collected under the title, ‘Light Will Be Thrown’, we are back with Darwin and evolution. ‘The Infected Mind’ is a passionate denunciation of monotheism, after which Dawkins cools down by means of four eulogies for friends and heroes.

Much is made, especially by biology’s enemies, of “hostility” between Dawkins and SJ Gould. A whole section of the book is devoted to this; reviews of Gould’s books, comments on his philosophy, and correspondence between them. It is a lesson in how to combine professional disagreement over details with warm respect and friendship in personal matters. The author grieves for Gould’s early death as for a fellow fighter for truth.

The final section has a geographical flavour. “Out of Africa” applies to *Homo sapiens* in general, and to Dawkins in particular, and he relishes that. Many of us parents must wish we could write as eloquently to our children as he does in the coda to the book. Fortunate Miss Dawkins!

## Dummies Guide a Bit of a Parson's Egg

**ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE FOR DUMMIES**, by James Dillard and Terra Diane Ziporyn. **Hungry Minds, Inc.** Reviewed by Bob Metcalfe

These books are all subtitled "A Reference for the Rest of Us!". Perhaps I'm prejudiced but as far as I'm concerned, dummies is a better term for anyone who uses alternative medicine. Having said that, this book, written by a chiropractor and a science writer with a PhD in the history of medicine and science, is not as bad as I thought it was going to be.

I couldn't be bothered grinding my way through the lot, but I did read the introduction, the chapter on chiropractic (because of the author) and those on homoeopathy and naturopathy. I then skimmed through various other chapters on Chinese and Indian traditional medicines, acupuncture, osteopathy, and aromatherapy. I guess the main problem with this book is that as part of a series, the objective is to sell books rather than to inform. In an effort to avoid offending anyone, including so-called conventional medical practitioners, it has a bob each way on just about everything.

The introduction is probably the worst example of this. Controlled, randomised, double-blind clinical trials are described as the "gold standard" of evidence. It makes the point that often alternative studies rely on anecdotal evidence or other less than perfect techniques. This is repeated in all the chapters that I studied, with the caution that if you have a serious physical illness, you should see an MD. Good sensible advice, which is then undercut in almost every chapter by saying that if you

haven't got a serious physical illness by all means go with what feels good, and that double-blind trials are not the be-all and end-all of medical evidence. Of course they're not, necessarily, but in the section on acupuncture for instance; little evidence is offered other than the idea that "2500 years of History Can't Be All Wrong".

The section on chiropractic is the most interesting because one of the authors is both an MD and a chiropractor. It completely avoids the wild claims made in the past, explaining that it is only good for back pain and related problems, and then only for non-chronic types.

It goes on to explain that most back pain goes away no matter what you do, and that chiropractic is good for back pain largely because patients get "satisfaction" from it. (This satisfaction seems to be a major reason for indulging in almost any alternative therapy according to these authors, and in my mind shows one of the problems with conventional medicine, that perhaps not enough attention is paid to the emotional state of the patient.) Almost every treatment has a small section on possible complications, and in this case these are glossed over in that the problems associated with rapid neck twisting are not mentioned at all.

The authors are a little harder on most other types of treatment, for instance homoeopathy is called a science - in inverted commas.

The points are made that it may delay or prevent treatment for serious illness, and that you are in fact taking nothing. To avoid offending the homeopaths too much, however, a couple of meta-analyses from the *Lancet* and *British Medical Journal* are thrown in which allegedly show effects more powerful than a placebo.

Naturopathy fares equally badly. To be fair though, the lifestyle changes promoted by naturopaths are represented as safe and good for you, and of course a healthy diet and regular exercise probably are.

One thing I do like about this book is that it invariably recommends seeing a conventional physician first to rule out a serious condition before you see an alternative medical practitioner. Alternative medicine in these cases is used as complementary therapy, and just involves extra expense.

Readers are also told to make sure they tell their physicians and their complementary therapists just what treatment they are receiving from each to avoid complications. Again sensible advice, but one wonders if it is done out of the sense of conviction or just to avoid litigation from the American market if someone reads the book, takes the advice, and has something horrible happen to them afterwards.

I must admit to being in two minds about this sort of book. On the one hand this is a series with some clout, I myself have used some of their sister publications, particularly those on computing,

and I feel that this association gives it an authority it possibly doesn't deserve. On the other hand it's nice to see the book written by people who obviously support alternative treatments being relatively

objective about them, and if I knew any dummies who were determined to seek out alternative therapies I would prefer them to read this book rather than any other.

## Wide-ranging Review a Valuable Update

**PSEUDOSCIENCE AND THE PARANORMAL**, by Terrence Hines. 2nd edition, Prometheus. ISBN 1-57392-979-4. Reviewed by William Harwood.

This book thoroughly demolishes the pretence that laboratory experiments in ESP have produced statistical evidence for the phenomenon's reality. But like almost all writers on the subject, Hines treats telepathic communication and precognition as merely alternative forms of the same thing. ESP does not exist. But telepathy conceivably *could* exist, if there was a "fifth force" to explain it, whereas precognition would require that information travel backward in time—an absurdity that can be refuted by the *reductio ad absurdum* it would produce.

In discussing the Alice-in-Wonderland rationalization of parapsychologists for the impossibility of obtaining positive results of ESP tests under conditions that rule out non-ESP explanations, namely, that "psi is shy," Hines classifies the rationalisation as just one more non-falsifiable (and therefore unscientific) hypothesis, as indeed it is. But he might have made his point better by asking: If one force of nature, ESP, can feel insulted and refuse to manifest itself in the presence of a skeptic, how come magnetism does not refuse to do so? How come the nuclear forces

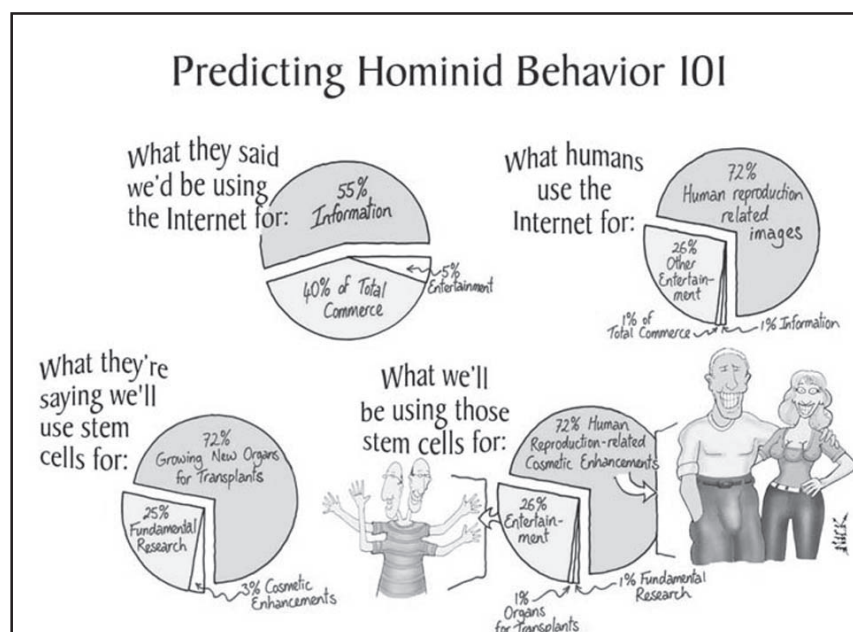
are not shy? How come gravity is not shy? How come only psi is shy?

Hines' several pages on how cold readings are accomplished are sufficiently detailed to satisfy all but the incurably gullible that the psychic scam relies on the Barnum dictum that there is a sucker born every minute. And in debunking perhaps the most widely believed claims of psychic prophecy, he shows that a passage by Nostradamus widely interpreted as a foretelling of the rise and fall of Napoleon could equally well be applied to Ferdinand II, Adolf Hitler, or any European ruler whose governance was less than beneficial.

Hines is himself not free of belief in pseudoscience. He authenticates the reality of hypnotism. According to Robert Baker, in *They Call it Hypnosis*, "Hypnotism does not exist, has not existed in the past, and will not exist in the future." Hines has, however, withdrawn his endorsement of multiple personality disorder and acupuncture, mentioned favorably in his 1992 edition.

He also continues to authenticate the claim that victims of Tourette's syndrome who engage in "uncontrolled swearing and use of racial and ethnic epithets" (p. 84) are not consciously playacting. The only reason Tourette swearing is viewed as involuntary is that the patients say so. I am not going to accuse Hines of gullibility. Ninety percent of his book proves that he is not. It is the psychotherapists who diagnosed (actually invented) imaginary illnesses who are gullible.

Hines' chapter on psychoanalysis should be mandatory reading for all persons who still believe that Freud's imbecilic fantasy differs in any way from spilling one's guts to a





bartender or a taxi driver. He ends the chapter with a debunking of hundreds of incompatible procedures lumped together as “humanistic psychology,” describing them as “all couched in layers of vacuous psychobabble and containing considerable amounts of pseudoscience.” Right on!

Hines catalogues an abundance of evidence that polygraphs are no more effective as lie detectors than tossing a coin, heads for Truth and tails for Lie. In an experiment conducted by the TV program *60 Minutes* in 1986 (p. 430): “Several polygraph firms were called by CBS and told that there had been a theft.... In fact there had been no theft and all the

‘suspects’ knew that they were taking part in an experiment. Each polygraph operator was given a hint that one particular suspect was the leading suspect, but the hint concerned a different employee for each operator. The operators in each case identified the ‘leading suspect’ as the guilty party. Not one operator failed to make this incorrect judgment.”

## Chinese Voyages Head into Realms of Fantasy

**1421: THE YEAR CHINA DISCOVERED THE WORLD, by Gavin Menzies. Bantam, \$54.95. Reviewed by David Riddell.**

Zheng He is not a name that is well known in the west. However, his seven voyages from China, through the Indian Ocean to Africa between 1405 and 1435 would place him among the world’s great explorers. Yet retired submarine captain Gavin Menzies is convinced Zheng He’s feats were even greater. He believes a massive Chinese fleet conducted four simultaneous circumnavigations of the world between 1421 and 1423, during which they discovered the Americas, Australia, New Zealand, even Antarctica. But while they were away, the Chinese emperor turned his back on the outside world and, when the ships returned, had all mention of them erased. Why the records of Zheng He’s other expeditions were kept, Menzies does not explain.

As Menzies tells it, he was set on his own personal voyage after viewing some early European maps. He claims these have details that could not have been known to Europeans at the time, and concludes only the Chinese could have mounted expeditions to map these areas. The Europeans then copied the Chinese charts. One is the Piri Reis map, which Erich von

Däniken made so much of, with different conclusions. Another, the Jean Rotz map, shows land stretching to the south and east of Australia. Menzies argues this was solid ice stretching from Tasmania to the Auckland and Campbell Islands. What appear on the map to be rivers, Menzies interprets as harbours on these islands, which were, he claims, “at the normal limit of the pack ice that links them in midwinter.” Of course, they’re actually ice-free year round.

After mapping this region, Menzies says the Chinese sailed north to New Zealand, pausing in Fjordland (sic) to drop off some giant ground sloths (which have been extinct for 10,000 years), collected in South America. A teak ship was then wrecked on Ruapuke Beach, south of Raglan, “near the mouth of the Torei Palma River”. Further evidence cited includes a brass bell found in the area which bears a Tamil inscription (a Tamil ship must have joined the fleet for trading purposes, he says), some rocks with Tamil inscriptions on them, and a carved stone duck which resembles a Chinese votive offering. European cartographers then somehow got hold of the

charts drawn by the expedition before the Chinese authorities destroyed them, and copied down the ice sheet to the south of Australia, but left out New Zealand, and, for that matter, most of China itself.

It doesn’t take much research (using the same sources that Menzies consulted) to establish that the Ruapuke wreck (which originally came to light in the 1870s) was actually made from totara, the bell was found in the central North Island, the rock inscriptions are Maori, and the duck’s provenance is dubious, but unlikely to be Chinese.

The whole book is like this. There is no logic whatever as he leaps from one piece of “incontrovertible” evidence to the next. The only mystery is how a reputable publisher could lavish such attention (the book is beautifully produced) on the kind of writing that is usually found in cheap pulp paperbacks. There’s talk of a TV series too.

A version of this review originally appeared in the Waikato Times

# 2003 Skeptics Conference

## 19-21 September, Victoria University, Wellington

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**Conference Fee** (Full / unwaged) \_\_\_\_\_ @ \$60/30 = \_\_\_\_\_

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Sat September 20th \_\_\_\_\_ @ \$12.00 = \_\_\_\_\_

Sun September 21st \_\_\_\_\_ @ \$12.00 = \_\_\_\_\_

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**Please book meals by August 12th or go hungry!**

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