

*The worst speculative Sceptic ever I knew,
was a much better Man than the best
superstitious Devotee & Bigot.*

David Hume

Communicating the nature of science

Skeptics and the environment

Self-esteem

The value of laughter

new zealand

Skeptic

number 76 - winter 2005

www.skeptics.org.nz

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ISSN - 1172-062X

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Deadline for next issue:
September 20, 2005

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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Dare to Disbelieve

Apparently mediums and the paranormal have replaced cop shows as the latest television drama genre of choice – if you are to believe TV3's marketing, whether news or promo puff pieces, there's fact behind the fiction. Yeah right....

TV3 has been heavily promoting their "Dare to Believe" (DTB) low-budget exploitation series with performer Jeanette Wilson, stating on its website that the show reunites New Zealanders with loved ones who have "passed". The channel shouldn't get a free run to exploit the grieving or recently bereaved in the name of mass entertainment and economic gain. To date, there's nothing more to it than the usual banalities, generalities and classic cold reading spiels seen time and time again.

Apologists for the industry often claim that it doesn't matter whether such performers are genuine or not, as all they are doing is simply providing "comfort". Deception and delusion, no matter how well intended, are nonetheless exploitative. That exploitation can take many forms, whether causing unnecessary heartbreak for distraught parents of missing children, fleecing little old ladies out of their retirement savings, or breaking up relationships through inappropriate advice – all of which we have seen occur here and overseas.

What can you do? Write to TV3 and ask them where's the evidence for them stating unequivocally that the spirits of dead people are lining up on demand. Challenge them to produce a real test of Wilson's capabilities. Better broadcasters and real investigative reporters overseas have done this. Tell TV3 how they look sooo last century and, frankly, ignorant, in breathlessly promoting the same old tired spiels as somehow cutting-edge. This sort of stuff was old hat to Houdini.

20/20 did a poor job last year in its initial promo item on Wilson, and got the Bent Spoon Award for it, a sad thing to see in a once well-regarded current affairs programme. Perhaps it's not surprising that an "infotainment" tabloid news show like Nightline can be used as a promotional vehicle for the debut show of "Dare to Believe"

If you have concerns about this approach to news, or the poor judgement shown by TV3 in supporting DTB as a programming choice, or what this says about TV3/CanWest as a company, by all means let TV3 know.

Or try a different tack. Write to the advertisers in the surrounding timeslots and express your disappointment that they are being seen in conjunction with this form of low quality exploitation, how it hurts their image to be associated with it, how you'll be switching to a competitor when making future purchases of their products or services.

Or just turn the TV off....

Vicki Hyde
Chair-entity

Remember Flim-Flam: How to be a Modern Skeptic

Daniel Engber

The international Skeptics' movement has changed, or at least broadened its focus over the years. American writer Daniel Engber recently attended a conference where he reflected on times past – and met a familiar face.

IN LINE to get my badge for this year's skeptics conference in Pasadena, California, I recognised the little man standing behind me. He was bald, with a full, white beard, and he looked older than I would have imagined. "Excuse me," he said, "is this the line for the skeptics meeting?" When I nodded, he looked me up and down and replied, "Oh, I doubt that."

Ladies and gentlemen, meet the world's most famous skeptic, the Amazing Randi.

I was in the seventh grade when I first came across Flim-Flam! Psychics, ESP, Unicorns, and Other Delusions, Randi's 1980 classic of the early skeptics movement. When I got on board – as a fan, if not a true believer – the group was entrenched in a slugfest with the flourishing occult business. The skeptics were a feisty group of scientists, philosophers, magicians, and atheists, united by their dedication to rational thought and their intolerance of credulity. Randi, a professional magician and escape artist who once dangled upside down in a straitjacket over Niagara Falls, joined up with Paul Kurtz, a philosophy professor in upstate New York, who had himself taken on newspaper astrologers. In

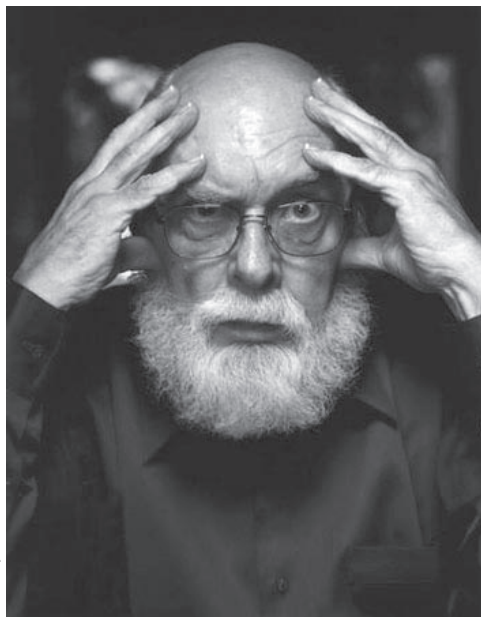
1976, Kurtz formed the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal to explain, expose, dispel, and debunk the supernatural and all its practitioners.

For decades, CSICOP's members did all of that with fierce passion. But in recent years the

the D-word. He'd rather talk about why people are fooled by supernatural hoaxes than spend his time debunking them. His group has doused the activism of CSI-COP's early days with a programme of research, lectures, and meetings.

Why have the skeptics grown so dreary? Their tactics have changed to reflect a new set of targets. What was once a movement to take down television psychics and fortune tellers now concentrates on mainstream foes like President George W Bush, Intelligent Design theorists, and opponents of stem-cell research. A tedious battle against the modern bugaboos of religion and politics demands tedious tactics and more manpower. Today the skeptics comprise an alliance of interest groups, only a subset of whom even call themselves skeptics. A recent effort to choose a common name for the movement failed miserably – perhaps because the proposed appellation managed to sound both arrogant and New Age-y.

Many of these subgroups have their own societies and annual meetings, and the Skeptics Society conference I went to is one stop



The Amazing Randi: Almost retro.

skeptics' enthusiasm for debunking has begun to subside. Kurtz now disowns the practice, instead favouring what he calls a "positive" defence of science and reason. Michael Shermer, the historian of science whose California-based Skeptics Society hosted the conference in Pasadena, also avoids

Jeffery Allan Satter/Corbis

on the circuit. In keeping with Shermer's philosophy, the meeting in Pasadena had little to do with the supernatural. A parade of invited speakers provided popular-science lectures on the workings of the human brain, without reference to the paranormal or the occult. When the Amazing Randi finally took the stage as the keynote speaker on the last night of the conference, he seemed almost retro.

Randi had for decades used his insider's knowledge of the flim-flam trade to humiliate a generation of occultists. Chief among his trophies was Uri Geller, an Israeli-born, disco-era mentalist who claimed, among other things, that he had the ability to soften metal and move a compass needle with his mind. Geller appeared on talk shows and magazine covers, and several academic researchers said they had validated his powers in the lab. Randi cleverly challenged Geller as a magician. He mimicked Geller's tricks using sleight of hand and then explained how they were done. In 1973, Randi went for the kill, conspiring with Johnny Carson (who was himself an amateur magician) to trap Geller on live TV. At Randi's instruction, producers on the Tonight Show provided all the props for Geller's act and didn't let him on the set before the cameras rolled. The plan worked, and a squirming Geller was unable to perform a single trick. The video clip of his on-air collapse remains a cherished keepsake of diehard skeptics. (Today Geller is best-known as a close personal friend to Michael Jackson.)

Since that glorious display of public humiliation, the Amazing Randi has taken on levitators, psychic surgeons, dowzers, and astrologers. In 1999, he debunked

homeopathic remedies for insomnia by swallowing an entire bottle of 'natural' sleeping pills in front of a congressional committee. His provocative and grandiose style has landed him in court more than once – Geller made several attempts to

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sue him, for example – and Randi says most of the US\$272,000 MacArthur 'genius' grant he received two decades ago was spent on legal bills.

Today, the closest thing Randi has to successors are the magician-debunkers Penn & Teller (whose half-hour TV show, *Bullshit*, tries to avoid legal liability by calling common 'assholes' instead of 'fakes'). As the man who inspired so many people to join the skeptics early on, Randi remains a principal attraction at society meetings, even as the movement officially heads in a new

direction. Before he took the stage on the last night of the conference, Shermer introduced him with the clip of Uri Geller's unmasking on *The Tonight Show*. Randi walked on to multiple standing ovations; a woman bounded up from the audience to give him a hug.

Shermer and Randi sat on chairs near the front of the stage, as if for a quiet chat. But it wasn't long before Randi began to sway with emotion. He choked up while describing a little boy who had been deceived by a charlatan faith healer. And then, in a burst of bravado, his voice surged to the last row of the auditorium: "They're fakes, they're phonies, they're scoundrels ... and they need to be behind bars!"

The skeptics in Pasadena went crazy. After days of restrained, informational talks, here was someone with a flair for theatre – a rabble-rousing activist. But if Randi's words inspired us, it wasn't clear exactly what we were inspired to do or to whom we should do it. To us, Uri Geller seemed small-time; the enemies we had in mind

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EARLY LIFE FORMS

Tied up in Cables

Hugh Young

Can stereo cables really make a difference to the way your music sounds?

BOB Metcalfe (Skeptic No 75) might have been reading New Zealand Tone magazine: Bringing Technology to Life, Sept-Oct 2004. The front cover promises “Hi-fi cables: science or hocus pocus”, and on p. 46 there is an interview with Bob Noble, “sales manager for respected cable manufacturer Chord”. On p. 47 there is a review of three Chord cables. The only science in the interview is the importance of screening to cables since cheap electronics in homes today are “leaking interference back into the same mains power ring that supplies the hi-fi. This degrades the final sound considerably. If you don’t believe me, turn all those other appliances off and see what it does to your hi-fi sound.” Nobody puts the case that there is any hocus pocus to cables.

Reviewer Paul Burgess found the sound of the first set (\$275) “big, warm and easy to listen to” but “slightly hazy when compared to the other more up-market cables” so they “would compliment [sic] a system with a bright sounding amplifier or speakers ... (This is a good example of synergy where the cable works with the system to greatly improve overall sound)”. (Me, I would rather entrust equalisation to electronics designed to handle it.)

With the second set (\$500), the reviewer Paul Burgess nearly made a big mistake:

“They are beautifully finished in red and black for left and right channel identification and have easy to read arrows showing the correct way to insert them into your system. This might sound a bit over-the-top, but attention to detail can make a big difference to the sound. At one stage I thought my system sounded a bit unfocussed and upon checking my interconnects found I had put one in with the arrows facing the wrong way.”



This claim that cables are made with a directionality is not new, but since audio is carried by a very small alternating current that spends exactly as much time going one way as the other, how this can be so remains unexplained, and I dare say, inexplicable.

The third set of cables (\$1200) is oddest of all:

“...for some strange reason, the music appeared to slow down just a tad every time I put these into my system. I put that down to the system synergy principal [sic] and got on with enjoying them. Another possible reason

could be that they may have needed more burn-in time. (Believe it or not, most cable improves in sound after the first 100 hours of use.)”

He could easily have tested this effect more thoroughly by plugging in a different cable to one channel and seeing if there was an echo. One wonders if he imagines the music backs up in the cable before being let out more slowly...

Note that this is about interconnects, between music players and amplifiers. The increasingly monstrous cables connecting amplifiers to speakers are another story.

I nominate Paul Burgess of Tone magazine for a Bent Spoon.

Oddly, the reviews don’t tell you one thing (perhaps the only thing) you might want to know about the cables – how long they are.

By the way, I have a confession. A very long time ago, when stereo was new, I wrote to the Christchurch Press denouncing it as being unnecessary for the reproduction of music: to hear the flutes on the left and bassoons on the right seemed like a gimmick. As soon as I heard good stereo I realised I was wrong – though not completely: stereo is good because more audio information is good, and hearing where the instruments are is a side-effect. I could be wrong again.

Dear Skeptics...

Occasionally, the Skeptics get correspondence from the general public. Chair-entity Vicki Hyde responds to two such inquiries.

A question I have always wanted to ask you guys: If humans are unaffected by the planetary and other cosmic influences, as I understand your society believes, then where is the impermeable membrane that cuts you off from them? And your scientific proof for this is?

Er, why do you think there has to be an impermeable membrane to do this, rather than a simple inverse-square law at work? Space is very very very big after all – and just as well!

The inverse-square law has been demonstrated so many times and under so many conditions throughout the universe that it has been given the rare honour in science of being termed a law, rather than a theory. It simply says that the energy fields which we *can* measure unequivocally (ie regardless of spiritual belief) have a limit to their influence as the distance increases.

So, to use one hoary example, the gravitational influence of the midwife has much more effect than that of Jupiter on a newborn baby. Jupiter may be massive, but it's a loooooong way away. You don't need a membrane of any sort to dilute it, just distance.

That said, there *are* planetary and cosmic influences which can affect humans – the gravitational force of the Moon is demonstrated daily in

the tides; if we're very very unlucky, we could all be wiped out by a neighbouring supernova. (Could do with an impenetrable membrane then!)

But it's a big jump to go from this sort of thing to saying that, say, a random collection of stars categorised by the human eye at a particular point in just one culture's development (aka a constellation) has a specific and real effect on, say, my career choice. This concept is a matter to do with the psychology of the human mind, not basic physics, and the former offers some

reasoning or alternative explanations which provide better answers. This is the nature of science. Its further strength is the capacity to discard an old explanation when the evidence becomes sufficient to warrant it. That's something you don't get in areas like astrology, which tend to remain very static over time with very little capacity for doubt or self-reflection.

I gave up doing horoscopes when I finally started to think about the rather nasty psychology involved – all it was doing was pandering to stereotypes. If I find



Photo: Clark Mills

very clear, simple explanations of the forces at work – and those forces originate squarely between the ears....

Many people for a long time have looked at various claims of this sort of nature and, to date, have either found major flaws in the

it ethically objectionable to classify people by skin colour (nigger!) or religion (Jew Christ-killer!), then it's just as offensive and demeaning to do it by astrological sign (Scorpio!)....

Food for thought, I hope,

Vicki

During chapel service at my school, the reader took it upon himself to close by telling a story about Darwin. Apparently, on his deathbed he told his minister he wished he had devoted his life to the pursuit of God rather than the pursuit of science.

You were right to be skeptical.

This fabrication is known as the Lady Hope story and is equally discounted by people as widely divergent in other opinions as Stephen Jay Gould and the creationist folk at Answers in Genesis!

Here is the general gist of the spread of the story and its subsequent rebuttal, taken from the book *The Survival of Charles Darwin: a Biography of a Man and an Idea* by Ronald W. Clark, published by Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1985 (p. 199).

“Shortly after [Darwin’s] death, Lady Hope addressed a gathering of young men and women at the educational establishment founded by the evangelist Dwight Lyman Moody at Northfield, Massachusetts. She had, she maintained, visited Darwin on his deathbed. He had been reading the Epistle to the Hebrews, had asked for the local Sunday school to sing in a summerhouse on the grounds, and had confessed: ‘How I wish I had not expressed my theory of evolution as I have done.’”

“He went on, she said, to say that he would like her to gather a congregation since he ‘would like to speak to them of Christ Jesus and His salvation, being in a state where he was eagerly savouring the heavenly anticipation of bliss.’” With Moody’s encouragement, Lady Hope’s story was printed in the *Boston Watchman Examiner*.

“The story spread, and the claims were republished as late as October 1955 in the *Reformation Review* and in the *Monthly Record* of the Free Church of Scotland in February 1957. These attempts to fudge Darwin’s story had already been exposed for what they were, first by his daughter Henrietta after they had been revived in 1922.

“‘I was present at his deathbed,’” she wrote in the *Christian* for February 23, 1922. “Lady Hope was not present during his last illness, or any illness. I believe he never even saw her, but in any case she had no influence over him in any department of thought or belief. He never recanted any of his scientific views, either then or earlier. We think the story of his conversion was fabricated in the U.S.A. . . . The whole story has no foundation whatever.” (Ellipsis is in the book)

Clark’s source for Lady Hope’s supposed quotations of Darwin is given as *Down, the Home of the Darwins: The Story of a House and the People Who Lived There* by Sir Hedley Atkins KBE, published by Phillimore for the Royal College of Surgeons of England, 1974. Henrietta’s rebuttal is referenced more fully as: Mrs R B Litchfield, *Charles Darwin’s Death-Bed: Story of Conversion Denied*, *The Christian*, February 23, 1922, p. 12.

If you’d like to read more on this, follow these links:

www.stephenjaygould.org/ctrl/ladyhope.html#Autobiography

www.talkorigins.org/faqs/hope.html

www.answersingenesis.org/creation/v18/i1/darwin_recant.asp

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were fundamentalist ideologues, like the ones on the Kansas school board who have tried to demote evolution in the science curriculum.

That’s the conundrum of the modern skeptics movement: Intelligent Design theorists and deniers of global warming may very well be phonies and scoundrels, but no one is going to debunk them in the classic sense. You can’t reveal their hidden microphones or mimic their tricks with sleight of hand. Intelligent Design, after all, is an attempt to recast (even to ‘rebunk’) creationism in scientific terms. The best weapon against it isn’t dramatic exposé, but scientific argument. So a change in tactics makes sense for the movement.

Still, the fervent response to Randi’s tirade suggests a deep-seated nostalgia for old-fashioned debunking. In the end, it’s just more fun to see a fake like Geller squirm than it is to hear a science lecture. Supernatural scammers may not be the most dangerous opponents of reason, but why not knock a few off every now and again to rally the troops? After all, protests from academic scientists aren’t exactly changing the world. Reports on climate change are still vetted by industry flunkies, and the federal government remains unwilling to fully support stem-cell research. With few victories to inspire us, let’s keep on debunking. If only for old-times’ sake.

Efficacy of Prayer - an Update

Since I wrote my piece based on Bruce Flamm's article in *Skeptical Inquirer* concerning a research paper on the efficacy of prayer, Dr Flamm has reported "significant development". Lest you jump to the conclusion that the authors, Journal and University have acknowledged their serious error and have retracted the paper, be at once disabused.

The significance of these developments, to my mind, is their minuscule and peripheral nature; nothing has really changed. One could reasonably grant a significant development to Wirth; he pleaded guilty to a 46-page indictment and is in jail for five years. Concerning the "lead" author, Lobo, the journal later printed, at the bottom of the back page, an Erratum, that this name had been included 'in error'.

Young researchers often complain that senior colleagues insist on their names appearing on papers unjustifiably. In the topsy-turvy world of this journal, people find their names put unknowingly on papers they have had nothing to do with!

Despite never acknowledging any enquiries about this paper, and printing no comments, the author Cha was eventually given space for an extended, and misleading, response to the criticisms (which the readers knew of only from other sources).

The University set up a committee to investigate the research, but, on Dr Lobo withdrawing his name

from the paper, disbanded the committee, saying it was no longer needed.

So, despite all the unsavoury aspects of this matter, no one is admitting their mistake, and this nonsensical paper remains in the medical literature as "evidence" of the efficacy of prayer.

Bernard Howard
Christchurch

Colour therapy – 'tis no puzzlement

Some weeks ago I met up with an old golfing friend I hadn't seen in years. He was fit and well and is

Skullduggery

Remembering the report of the chiropractor who did 'cranial manipulation' on her new born baby, it occurred to me we could call it 'Pate Tectonics'.

Bernard Howard

one of the few men I've ever met ageing better than I am. He is a retired mathematician with very good UK degrees, a solid skeptic, a fine golfer (handicap 8) down-to-earth and fun company. Another fellow, a man clearly unwell, whom I had also known as a professional colleague, accompanied us for the round.

Afterwards, Roy and I caught up on the 28 years since we had worked in the same organisation

and the topic of health arose. Our mutual friend, said Roy, had been given remission of his prostate cancer through colour therapy.

"Rubbish!" I responded. "Furthermore," Roy continued, "I've used the process myself to alleviate the continuing effects of a bout of flu or bronchitis which I couldn't shake off for months." I demanded more information.

Roy then explained how, with some cynicism, he had been connected electrically to the colour-therapist's machine for about six hours while the device operated with a strand of red-dyed material (wool?) in an electrically-charged stainless-steel cup. Afterwards, said Roy, his symptoms were gone and have not recurred. He roundly denied the placebo effect...

A short while later, on another golf course, I met an old man practising chipping. After we got talking we discovered that we were both of a mind about the game, so played together a couple of times.

Bob told me that he had recently recovered from a debilitating and life-threatening illness he'd contracted due to varnishing his house floor with a modern two-pot mixture. For two years he'd been in and out of hospital, talked to endless specialists and finally had begun to recover bodyweight when certain (unspecified) aspects of his diet were changed.

I was invited to his home a little later and to my surprise discovered his wife is a colour therapist with a roomfull of equipment and walls covered with charts. At no time did Bob suggest his wife ever was able to give him relief using her machine or techniques.

What do I take from these admittedly flimsy accounts? The overwhelming thing I see is that alternate techniques are generally tried when all else has failed, by which time it is very likely that orthodox treatment is at last working in conjunction with that great healer, time.

Clive Shaw
Thames

Greenhouse Skeptics and Creationists no comparison

I am aware that the global warming subject has been 'done to death'. However, the Keith Garratt item on skeptical environmentalism included several criticisms of my work which must be answered. In the interests of brevity, I will respond only to the most insulting (insulting to me as a skeptic).

He compares global warming skeptics to evolution skeptics. This is utter balderdash. Deniers of evolution are led by religious nutters. Global warming skepticism is led by climate scientists, and there are literally hundreds of professional climate researchers who have expressed their disquiet at the current paradigm.

Lance Kennedy

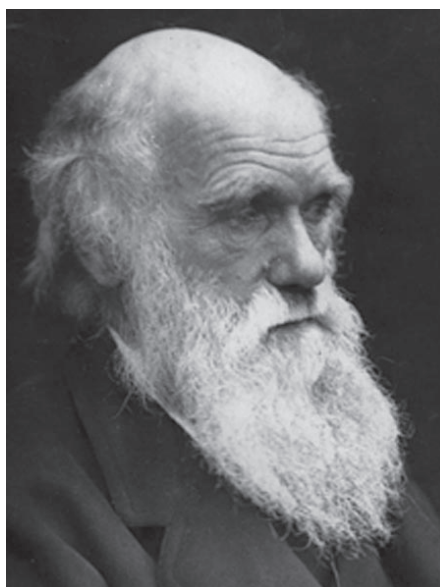
(And that really is the last word! -ed.)

Darwin and religion

Following the article by Alison Campbell in the Autumn 2005 Skeptic I got on to the Waikato University website and clicked 'Darwin and Religion' and was surprised to find a long article

which completely failed to mention Darwin's attitude to religion, or the difficulty in reconciling evolution with religious belief.

Darwin was an unusually honest scientist. He came to realise that human evolution was not essentially different from the evolution of any



other creature, and that humans could not therefore claim the exclusive privilege of a supervising deity or of an afterlife. Only one of his scientific colleagues, Joseph Hooker, was prepared to support this view, and it was opposed by his wife and family. In Charles Darwin's autobiography, published posthumously, his son Francis deleted the section on religion with the excuse:

"It will be easily understood that in a narrative of a personal and intimate kind written for his wife and children, passages should occur which must here be omitted; and I have not thought it necessary to indicate where such omissions are made."

It was only in 1958 in the uncensored edition published by his granddaughter, Nora, Lady Barlow, that we were allowed to

read Darwin's true opinions on religion, which were as follows:

"I was very unwilling to give up my belief... But I found it more and more difficult to invent evidence to convince me. Thus disbelief crept over me at a very slow rate, but was at last complete."

"...the constant inculcation in a belief in God on the minds of children producing so strong and perhaps an inherited effect on their brains not yet fully developed, that it would be as difficult for them to throw off their belief in God as for a monkey to throw off its instinctive fear and hatred of a snake."

"I for one must be content to remain an Agnostic."

In an interview with Edward Aveling in September 1881, the following retort took place:

Aveling : "'Agnostic' is but 'Atheist' writ respectable."

Darwin, "'Atheist' is but 'Agnostic' writ aggressive."

Many people have sought to distort Darwinism to remove Darwin's insistence that man is just another animal. The most influential was Julian Huxley in his 'Evolution: The Modern Synthesis' (1942) who claimed that humans were "different" and "unique"; so, presumably, qualifying them for divine guidance, life after death, and dominion over all other organisms.

Vincent Gray
Wellington

Dead money

A spiritualist group has been given \$2500 to teach people to communicate with the dead, *The Herald On Sunday* reports (15 May).

The Foundation of Spiritualist Mediums received the Auckland ratepayer money after an application to an Auckland City Council committee recently. Foundation president Natalie Huggard said it was an essential service to Auckland and was in high demand.

Many people, she said, had problems communicating with the spirit world and didn't know how to deal with it. A lot of these people, concerned about hearing voices, went to doctors who told them they were schizophrenic and prescribed medication.

The foundation ran courses teaching people how to communicate with the dead and how to heal the sick and injured. The money would fund the foundation's application to the New Zealand Qualifications Authority for recognition as a recognised training body.

She told the *Herald On Sunday* the organisation suffered from scepticism because of its 'metaphysical' focus and NZQA accreditation would strengthen its credibility.

Dunedin writer Hayden Wallis said in the *NZ Herald* (25 May) when Auckland sneezes, the rest of the country had to deal with the ectoplasm.

He noted that Telecom and other companies "had shown unseemly lethargy in exploiting this untapped

corner of the telecommunications market, but not the Auckland City Council."

Dr Cathy Casey, the chairwoman of the community development and equity committee, said some members expressed concern, resulting in a reduction of the foundation's grant from the requested \$4500 to \$2500.

Perhaps the committee saw little reason to give additional funding to Youthline to stop teen suicides when you can simply talk to them after the event?

Dr Casey defended the grant, claiming the group contributes to the city's vision of a vibrant, colourful community. "Well, vibrations are certainly involved," Wallis wrote.

"I'm worried, Auckland. Can I now expect to hear that the transport and urban linkages committee has been consulting eastern gurus for advice on using levitation to ease traffic congestion?"

The trouble with cats

The plastic bottle scourge has hit Japan homes, writes investigative reporter extraordinaire Alice Gordenker in *The Japan Times* (19 May). They are around not just homes and gardens, but cars as well. Curiosity got the better of Gordenker, who decided to investigate and found it's all about cats. First of all, she says, *petto botoru* is the generic Japanese term for drink bottles (PET stands for polyethylene tetrathalate, and has nothing to do with pets she points out.) When filled with water

and placed outside, the bottles become *nekoyoke* or scare-cats. The theory is that sunlight refracting in the water frightens away cats. (My cat sits for hours by and on fish tank, the sun refracting its heart out. The only thing that moves her away is when the fridge door is opened – ed.)

Anyway, Gordenker spent hours researching the topic and reckons it was all due to a TV show in the mid-1990s which featured a woman who said she solved her cat problems this way. Of course, we in NZ know it all started in this country, as a way to deter dogs, which as everyone knows are stupider than cats.

"The trouble is the bottles don't work. As my friend Hiroshi, a self-anointed feline expert, says, 'Those bottles are an insult to the intelligence of cats.'"

Not only do they not work, they're a fire hazard. A man in Takamatsu, Kagawa Prefecture put out a bottle. It acted like a magnifying glass, focusing sunlight on to the house, causing it to burst into flames. The resulting fire destroyed the shutters and eaves of his house, then jumped and consumed the neighbour's veranda.

Bet that kept the moggies away.

Lawsuit fired at Nasa

Hours after the Nasa probe crashed into comet Tempel 1, legal reverberations were felt in a Moscow court, according to the BBC news (5 July).

Amateur astrologer Marina Bay claims that by slamming the probe into the comet, Nasa endangered the future of civilisation.

“Nobody has yet proven that this experiment was safe,” said Ms Bay’s lawyer. “This impact could have altered the orbit of the comet, so now there is a chance that the Tempel may well destroy the earth some day.”

Even if this doesn’t happen, Ms Bay believes any variation in the orbit or the composition of the comet will certainly affect her own fate and she says she is experiencing ‘a moral trauma’ – which only a payment of \$300 million will put right.

While Moscow representatives of Nasa have ignored the court hearing, Bay’s legal team remain confident, and are looking for volunteers to join in on the claim.

“The impact changed the magnetic properties of the comet, and this could have affected mobile telephony here on Earth. If your phone went down this morning, ask yourself why? And then get in touch with us,” said the lawyer.

On that day my goldfish died. Clearly, Nasa has a lot to answer for.

No hope for enlightenment

Still on the law suit front, a former employee of the New Santana Band has accused musician Carlos Santana and wife of firing him for not being ‘closer to God’, reports the NZ Herald (29 April).

In a wrongful termination lawsuit filed in California, Bruce Kuhlman, 59, said Santana’s wife, Deborah, went on a campaign to ‘terminate’

him after her spiritual guru determined through ‘calibration’ tests that Kuhlman was too old to become enlightened. Kuhlman was fired in 2004.

Shred of doubt about Shroud

A French magazine has carried out experiments that again cast doubt on the authenticity of the Shroud of Turin. “A medieval technique helped us to make a Shroud,” *Science et Vie* said in its July issue. After carbon-14 dating, the original was declared a hoax by the then archbishop of Turin in 1988. Debate flared again this January, following tests by US chemist Raymond Rogers who suggested other parts might be thousands of years old. He reckoned the radiocarbon samples had been taken from a piece that had been sewn into the fabric by nuns who repaired the Shroud after it was damaged in a fire in 1532.

Following a method previously used by sceptics, *Science et Vie* carried out their own experiment and produced their own shroud and concluded it was easier to make a fake shroud than a real one.

Smithsonian to screen ID movie

The Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of Natural History has played host to a film intended to undercut evolution (New York Times May 28, 2005).

The Discovery Institute, a group in Seattle that supports ‘intelligent design,’ screened *The Privileged Planet: The Search for Purpose in the Universe* on June 23.

The film is a documentary based on a 2004 book by Guillermo Gonzalez, an assistant professor of astronomy at Iowa State University, and Jay W. Richards, a vice president of the Discovery Institute, that makes the case for the hand of a creator in the design of Earth and the universe.

Museum spokesman, Randall Kremer, said the event should not be taken as support for the views expressed in the film. “It is incorrect for anyone to infer that we are somehow endorsing the video or the content of the video,” he said.

The museum, he said, offers its Baird Auditorium to many organisations and corporations in return for contributions - in the case of the Discovery Institute, US\$16,000.

When the language of the Discovery Institute’s website was read to him, with its suggestion of support, Mr. Kremer said, “We’ll have to look into that.”

The president of the Discovery Institute, Bruce Chapman, said his organisation approached the museum through its public relations company and the museum staff asked to see the film. “They said that they liked it very much - and not only would they have the event at the museum, but they said they would co-sponsor it,” he recalled. “That was their suggestion. Of course we’re delighted.”

Mr. Kremer said he heard about the event only on Thursday. He added that staff members viewed the film before approving the event to make sure that it complied with the museum’s policy, which states that “events of a religious or partisan political nature” are not permitted, along with personal

events such as weddings, or fundraisers, raffles and cash bars. It also states that “all events at the National Museum of Natural History are co-sponsored by the museum.”

When asked whether the announcement on the Discovery Institute’s Web site meant to imply that the museum supports the film and the event, Mr. Chapman replied:

“We are not implying in any sense that they endorsed the content, but they are co-sponsoring it, and we are delighted. We’re not claiming anything more than that. They certainly didn’t say, ‘We’re really warming up to intelligent design, and therefore we’re going to sponsor this.’”

Dutch headmaster creates stir over evolution

Meanwhile in the Netherlands, the headmaster of a Protestant school has agreed to stay at home for a few days after causing a stir by his insistence his teachers adhere to Creationism (www.expatica.com, 12 May). Peter Boon of Augustinus College in Groningen said in an interview with newspaper Dagblad van het Noorden he could not tolerate one of his teachers telling a class he was a supporter of Evolution.

News agency ANP reported that many teachers in the school disagree with this and believe that the Theory of Evolution can go hand-in-hand with the Christian view on how life – and humans in particular – has developed.

During a staff meeting, some teachers indicated to Boon they felt offended and as if they were not being taken seriously. Boon then

said he would create a “cooling off period” by staying away from the school for a few days. He said he regretted his remarks to the paper because the subtleties of his argument had been lost, but added that a teacher cannot simply state to his or her class that humans descended from apes. “People have to explain how evolution theory relates to Christian belief,” Boon said. Apart from his position as headmaster, Boon is an active member of Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende’s Christian Democrat party (CDA).

Botanic Man bumbles

Whatever your opinion about global warming, it’s hard to excuse British botanist David Bellamy’s use of dodgy figures to argue, in a 16 April letter to *New Scientist*, that it is not occurring. George Monbiot took Bellamy to task in the *Guardian Weekly* (20 May) for his claim that many of the world’s glaciers “are not shrinking but in fact are growing. . . 555 of all the 625 glaciers under observation by the World Glacier Monitoring Service in Zürich, Switzerland, have been growing since 1980”.

Because Bellamy is president of the Conservation Foundation, the Wildlife Trusts, Plantlife International and the British Naturalists’ Association, his statements carry a great deal of weight, said Monbiot. And as a scientist, he should know you cannot credibly cite data unless it is well-sourced.

After several requests, Bellamy told Monbiot the glacier statistic was from a website, www.iceagenow.com, which was constructed by a former architect called Robert W Felix to promote his self-published book about ‘the

coming ice age’. Hardly a reliable reference. Furthermore, the site claims only that 55%, not 555, of the glaciers under observation are advancing. The discrepancy seems to be due to sloppy typing by Bellamy: ‘%’ is typed by pressing the Shift and 5 keys together.

As for the 55% figure, this was supposed to be from “a paper published in *Science* in 1989”. But searching the journal for that year, Monbiot could find no papers on glacial advance or retreat.

For the record, the World Glacier Monitoring Service has records dating back to 1980 for 30 glaciers in nine mountain ranges. These show a pronounced overall decline in glacial mass during that time.

Ghost Busters a bust

It seems TV2 has a new ‘paranormal investigation’ show, called *Ghost Hunt*, but according to Frances Grant (*NZ Herald*, 5 July) the main mission is to search for any evidence of shiver-down-the-spine entertainment.

The national skills shortage obviously applies to ghost-busting, says Grant. How one of the team passed her Paranormal Investigations qualification is a complete mystery. Before she even got in the house, and still in bright daylight, she was complaining about suffering something called the “bejiggles”.

Grant concluded that the ghost was actually rather challenged when it came to producing blow-you-away special effects. Perhaps, in the digital age, he should give up the haunting and find a day job.

Not clairvoyant enough?

Martin Craig

Psychic scammer Maria Duval failed to foresee trouble over “her” misleading advertisements. The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) is funded by the advertising and media industries, and has the stated purpose of ensuring that advertising is socially responsible and truthful. The ASA administers the Advertising Standards Complaints Board (ASCB), which is the body that hears complaints about ads, and the Advertising Standards Complaints Appeal Board.

Self-styled clairvoyant Maria Duval’s magic seems to have deserted her. Her company has pulled all its New Zealand advertising, following a complaint the Consumers’ Institute of New Zealand made to the Advertising Standards Complaints Board (ASCB).

Who or what is Maria Duval?

Maria Duval is the front-name for a scam operating all over Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand. It is listed as a scam on the Ministry of Consumer Affairs Scamwatch website and our own A-Z directory of scams.

We also published a news item on Maria Duval in February 2005, questioning why banks and credit card companies continue to profit from this scam.

The Ontario police, US Postal service, agencies in five Australian states, the New York Better Business Bureau and consumer agencies in Europe have all investigated or warned against the Maria Duval scam. We complained to the ASCB after Sunday News and Timaru Herald published large advertisements promoting Maria Duval.

The ads promised to fulfil seven wishes for no charge - “Nothing to pay, everything is FREE!” it claimed. Among other things, you could expect to “win the lottery

jackpot within a fortnight”, successfully bet on the horses, and “solve [your] financial problems once and for all”.

The underlying reason behind the ads was to build a list of potential victims, who would then be hounded to pay for dubious psychic services.

We have heard from several New Zealanders who have paid large sums to the Maria Duval scam, including some who have gone into debt. New Zealand consumers aren’t the only victims – Madame Duval has peddled her deception all over Europe, Australia and North America.

The ASCB’s decision

The ASCB upheld our complaint. It stated that the “Complaints Board was unanimously of the view that the advertisement would create unrealistic expectations of life-changing benefits”, and therefore “there was no doubt it would be likely to mislead and abuse the trust of the consumer.”

Following our complaint, Swiss ad agency Infogest suspended all Maria Duval print ads in New Zealand.

Martin Craig is an investigative writer at the Consumers’ Institute of New Zealand. See Page 17 for an abridged version of the Complaints Board deliberations on this case.

How to complain to the ASA

- Don’t complain very often. Every TV ad for alcohol generates a complaint from Kate Sheppard types who are opposed to the product rather than the ad. To the ASA’s credit, every one of these complaints is considered before rejection.

- Be specific. The ASA has set criteria for complaints. Some of the complaints it gets are very vague – eg, two males kissing (in a safe sex ad) is disgusting and shouldn’t be allowed. Read the criteria, say which criteria you think the ad breaches, and say why it breaches them.

- Be realistic. The ASA has no legal powers. It is a self-regulation tool used by the advertising industry. In fact, to have your complaint accepted you must waive your right to use legal channels. The ASA can have a specific ad pulled but it cannot order fines or damages. It can’t order retractions or apologies either.

- The advertiser gets a right to respond. One of the reasons we made this complaint was to discover who the Maria Duval advertiser is. Even if the complaint had been rejected, this information would have been useful.

Body Enhancer's benefits are Bogus

Fresh from a visit to Iraq, John Welch is ready to embark on a jihad against quackery...



THE product Body Enhancer, marketed by the Zenith Corporation, costs \$95 per bottle and is “claimed to assist fat burning, muscle growth and liver detoxification.” A judge, however, found that the product offered ‘bogus benefits’ although the couple behind the company remained defiant and claimed that they were “scapegoats for the natural remedy industry.”

Judge Lindsay Moore was reported as describing Lindsay Gallot as ‘calculatedly dishonest’ and accused his partner of making blatantly false claims. This is perfectly understandable criticism as Mr Gallot is described as an ex-Geologist and his wife as an ex-Physics teacher. One would be entitled to expect that two people with a scientific background would not get involved in such pseudo-scientific nonsense.

In their defence the couple claim that the product was tested by a Maori health provider and their clinical advisor Dr Tane Taylor was quoted as saying “he understood the results were positive.” According to the NZ Medical Council website, Dr Taylor has a medical degree from Albania and I know from my time in Auckland that he was involved with a chelation clinic,

and I think that ends any scientific credibility that he might lend to the subject. For a full report as published in the Sunday Star Times go to: www.stuff.co.nz/stuff/0,2106,3303250a10,00.html

The next website, www.zenith.co.nz/ComComm_Rebuttal07.html, describes some kind of pseudoscientific trial and then goes on to say that the results cannot be published on the web. Testimonials are called on in support, which is a hallmark of quackery. It is not a good business practice to test your own product and find that it is useless. Much better to rip off the punters who feel compelled after wasting \$95 to give it an endorsement. However, one unusually sceptical customer described the product as “the most putrid stuff I’ve ever tried”. I bet that testimonial was never used!

Guns will make us powerful; butter will only make us fat

Herman Goering obviously didn’t follow his own advice and now it seems remarkable that his huge frame ever fitted the cockpit of a World War One fighter aircraft where he was an acknowledged fighter ace. Morphine addiction must have addled his brains.

No such excuse for Kohn Keitz who weighs 283 Kg and has been bedridden since 1 August, 1998. He even cooks from his bed and this recipe gives some clue to his problem: 6 chicken breasts, a pound of butter.....need I go on? John is now in receipt of disability benefits and can be cared for in a home funded by Medicare benefits of US \$313 per day. This sort of grotesque celebration of excess is made all the worse by the excuses made by those people who specialise in medicalising human behaviour and the denial of personal responsibility. As Ivan Illich pointed out, the medical profession among others has always looked to extend its sphere of influence by “expropriating the power of the individual to heal himself.” This means that people exhibiting sick behaviour need to be allowed to suffer the consequences of such behaviour in order to make changes. Here, a parody of the American dream of “success” is looked after in such a way that he can afford to buy even more chicken breasts and even more butter. At least he had the good sense not to bother with any of the useless products from the Zenith Corporation.

Dominion Post 2 July 2005

Something is rotten in the state of Sweden (and Denmark?)

Dr Elinder was a paediatrician in New Zealand and after returning to his native Sweden he criticised the tendency of his colleagues to over-diagnose such conditions as ADHD, minimal brain dysfunction and autism spectrum disorder, as well as the excessive use of Ritalin in treating such conditions. He was supported by a colleague, Dr

Karve, who found serious flaws in the work done by a group led by a Professor Gilberg.

In 1998, Dr Elinder asked to see Professor Gilberg's research data but this request was refused and subsequently the data was destroyed with the connivance of the University of Gottenberg.. This sort of disgraceful behaviour is the antithesis of science, which depends on independent verification and reproducibility.

One tends to view the Scandinavians as somewhat placid and serious people but all that changed with the extraordinary attack on Bjorn Lomborg (The Skeptical Environmentalist) by the Danish Committee on Scientific Dishonesty. Lomborg was cleared of any wrongdoing but I sincerely hope the DCSD is going to examine the behaviour of Professor Gilberg.

NZ Doctor 18 May 2005

Remunerative Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (RPTSD)

Is there anyone in New Zealand who has suffered some traumatic experience and *not* been diagnosed with PTSD? I can think of my late father who came back from the war, handed in his Thompson submachine gun, got on with his life and never spoke of the war again. Is there anybody else? I would like to hear from you.

A woman has been denied ACC compensation after having unprotected sex with a partner who concealed his HIV status from her. She has not contracted HIV but has been diagnosed with PTSD, or more properly called RPTSD because the motivation is to obtain money. I wonder whether the

doctors or therapists who endorse this nonsense ever stop to think that they make themselves a laughing stock. I am reminded of the story told by Andrew Malleson (Need Your Doctor Be So Useless) where a Housing Authority ignored people wanting better housing because all of them had the required letters of support from their doctors.

Another woman tried to get ACC cover because she was "retraumatised" while reliving a 20 year old rape experience with a therapist. She alleged a "new injury" on top of her existing PTSD. Why on earth somebody would either want or need therapy for something that happened 20 years ago is beyond me.

Perhaps I should ask Jeanette Wilson to contact my late father and see whether he wants to file a claim for PTSD from beyond the grave.

I have never seen better examples of Welch's Law, where claims expand to take up the amount of compensation available.

Pharmacists and alternative Medicine

I went into my local Pharmacy recently and was astonished to see that products that I would describe as "fringe" medicines dominated the OTC medicine section. A full page infomercial in a local paper was clearly advertising one of these products but there is no acknowledgement that it is an advertisement. I wonder at the ethics of this. The same Pharmacy had a similar article promoting ear candling and I hope the Conference organisers are able to set up a demonstration of this bizarre practice.

One such Pharmacy product is Esberritox. It contains various herbal products such as echinacea. A Google search produced 25,000 hits and echinacea is also well covered on www.quackwatch.com

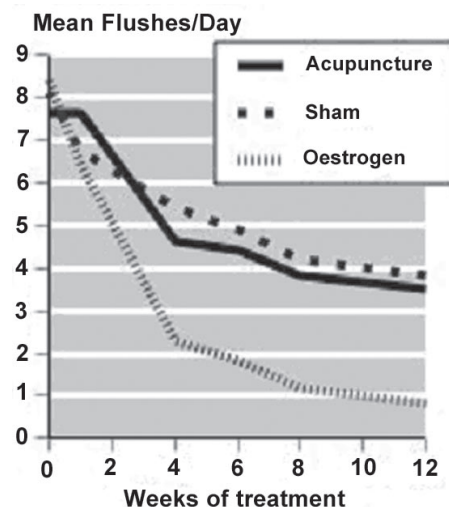
There is also a good article on that site by Dr Barrett about the unethical behaviour of pharmacists, which has them selling unproven remedies with a huge profit margin. It's rather ironic that Government policies to restrict pharmaceutical access to cheap and proven drugs has seen a parallel increase in the use of quack remedies as pharmacists stock them in order to maintain their incomes.

Acupuncture Flunks, not once but twice!

A German study found that sham acupuncture was just as effective as "real" acupuncture for migraine headaches. The study was published in the Journal of the American Medical Association. I did the same experiments over 15 years ago and satisfied myself that the needles could be stuck anywhere and the same results were obtained. It follows that acupuncture theory and training is a delusion and as I demonstrated at one of our meetings, an intelligent group of skeptics can become "trained acupuncturists" after a 1 hour lecture. It is a disgrace and a fraud that ACC continues to fund acupuncture as well as many other unproven treatments such as chiropractic and osteopathy. GP's are able to claim credits for acupuncture training. This should be stopped. It would be interesting to do a study of treating migraine with sham acupuncture versus therapeutic touch. I predict that such a study would show little or no difference in

outcome because both treatments are placebos.

Christchurch Press 5/5/05



This graph shows once again how sham acupuncture and “real” acupuncture achieve the same results. In contrast, oestrogen replacement is very effective in reducing hot flushes in post-menopausal women. I will leave the last word to the editor of *Bandolier*: “when will alternative therapies really prove that they work? While we wait, will they stop fleecing people of huge amounts of cash for doing nothing?”

Methyl Bromide and Hysteria

Workers at Port Nelson are complaining that the gas methyl bromide is responsible for ill health and has caused the deaths of former workers from motor neurone disease. A local woman who lives 300m from the fumigation facility has demanded that the Port Company notify her of fumigation work so she can evacuate herself and her children. An investigation found that the more likely cause of the workers’ complaints was not methyl bromide but chemicals used in the preservation of timber. The deaths

from motor neurone disease were due to an epidemiological effect known as clustering.

One worker is described as having symptoms of “chronic fatigue, a persistent dry cough and lack of concentration.” These are typical symptoms of the fixed illness belief of “chemical poisoning”. Note that the symptoms are all subjective and therefore

difficult to disprove. Staudenmayer (*Environmental Illness: Myth and Reality*) has shown conclusively that these symptoms are caused by personal psychological factors.

Christchurch Press 26 July 2004, 1 January 2005

John Welch lives in Picton and is a retired RNZAF medical officer.

QUACKERY ALERT

THE ACC-sponsored conference “Many Faces of Abuse” (Auckland, 10-12 August 2005) features a plenary speaker, Anne McDonald from Melbourne, who cannot talk, walk or feed herself. Her minder, Rosemary Crossley, is the inventor of Facilitated Communication - a technique whereby a facilitator supports the hand or arm of a severely disabled person and thereby enables that person point to letters of the alphabet. This technique gives severely disabled people the miraculous ability to spell out words, sentences and even whole paragraphs of astonishing, unlikely and often wildly pornographic prose.

As a result of Facilitated Communication, hundreds of families and caregivers worldwide have had their lives and careers destroyed by devastating and subsequently-discredited allegations of sexual abuse.

Among responsible organisations and individuals concerned with mental and physical disability there is now widespread agreement that Facilitated Communication is nothing more than a power-trip for manipulative therapists who prey on the vulnerability and dependence of the severely disabled.

In the US, in an unprecedented move, several major national professional bodies have adopted a formal position opposing the acceptance of Facilitated Communication as a valid mode of enhancing expression for people with disabilities. In the United Kingdom Dame Elizabeth Butler-Sloss, President of the High Court Family Division, condemned Facilitated Communication as dangerous and declared that it should not be used by British courts to support or reject allegations of abuse.

Two of the other plenary speakers at the “Many Faces of Abuse” conference, Jo Massarelli and Marc Tumeinski, are followers of Wolf Wolfensberger of Syracuse University. Wolfensberger is a Jewish Holocaust survivor turned born-again Christian who claims that the medical profession is now killing more handicapped people per year than the Nazis did between 1939 and 1945.

For conference details see:

imaginebetter.co.nz/mfoa2005_index.shtml

Lynley Hood

Climbing down the family tree

The Ancestor's Tale: A Pilgrimage to the Dawn of Life, by Richard Dawkins. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, \$79.99. Reviewed by David Riddell.

ALL life has a common ancestor. Or to put it another way, every creature alive today, including ourselves, has an unbroken chain of ancestors going back almost four billion years. At certain points along the path from then to now, lineages have split, and split again, to give rise to the millions of species alive today.

A problem with descriptions of life's history is that it's very easy to give the impression that it all culminates in us, and everything else is "off the main line of evolution". Dawkins avoids this by doing the history backwards, couching his

history in terms of a pilgrimage back through time to meet the common ancestor of all life: an evolutionary Canterbury Tale. As we head back, we meet up with other bands of pilgrims – first the chimps and bonobos, then the gorillas, and so on – the bands join, and we march on together. And as with Chaucer, some of the pilgrims have stories to tell, though Dawkins mercifully decides not to have them do it in the first person. Instead, he takes the opportunity himself to explain, for example, the genetic basis of evolutionary novelty in The Howler Monkey's Tale, or the occasionally surprising revelations

about ancestry disclosed by molecular studies, in The Hippopotamus' Tale – it turns out the closest living relatives of hippos are whales.

In the hands of a lesser writer, all this could be overwhelming. But Dawkins has had plenty of experience of this sort of thing. He has captured brilliantly what Darwin, in the final paragraph of *The Origin of Species*, called the grandeur of the evolutionary view of life.

A version of this review was originally published in the *Waikato Times*.

clairvoyant

The Maria Duval Decision - deliberations of the Advertising Standards Complaints Board (Abridged)

THE Complaints Board noted the Complainant, Consumers' Institute, was of the view that the advertisements abused the trust of the consumer by offering services they could not reasonably deliver, and as such it was misleading.

The task before the Complaints Board was to determine whether the Maria Duval advertisement would be "likely to deceive or mislead the consumer" as stated in Rule 2 and/or whether it exploited the superstitious, thereby breaching Rule 6.

The Complaints Board advised that it was obliged to confine its consideration to the content of the actual advertisement rather than considering the subsequent interaction between the advertiser

and the consumer as alleged by the Complainant. However, it did note that the advertiser had been listed on the Ministry of Consumer Affairs Scamwatch website, and this in its view indicated that the advertisement had been found to be misleading by that organisation. The Complaints Board was unanimously of the view that the advertisement would create unrealistic expectations of life changing benefits, and thereby it effected a serious breach of Rule 2 of the Code, as there was no doubt that it would be likely to mislead and abuse the trust of the consumer.

The Complaints Board was not required to make a ruling under Rule 6 of the Code, as the issues

contained therein had been subsumed by Rule 2.

It noted that all Maria Duval advertisements had been suspended from publication in New Zealand by the advertiser and that legal counsel would be sought in the preparation of new advertisements to ensure they complied with the Advertising Codes of Practice. It also noted the responsible attitude taken by the media concerned with regard to future advertisements for Maria Duval, and that the Scamwatch website, having been brought to their attention, would be checked before publication of such advertisements in the future.

The Complaints Board ruled to uphold the complaint.

The Tertiary anti-Education Commission

Raymond Richards

New Zealand's tertiary institutions have some strange ways of measuring academic performance



THE Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) is gaining a reputation as a Mickey Mouse government organisation that harms the reputation and integrity of New Zealand's tertiary institutions.

In April, I called publicly for the Acting Chair of the TEC, Kaye Turner, to resign. Her defence of the teaching of homeopathy at New Zealand's tertiary institutions is an embarrassment. She insisted that the TEC would continue to support the teaching of homeopathy because students want it and there are jobs for people with qualifications in the subject. Thus, skeptics and other taxpayers are forced to support courses in mumbo-jumbo if the courses sell. Dr Turner expressed indignation that I called homeopathy nonsense, and she called it an alternative to antibiotics. The TEC thus helps to spread dangerous twaddle; quackery can be a matter of life and death.

The TEC is also responsible for another abomination afflicting our tertiary institutions: the Performance-based Research Fund (PBRF). The PBRF process ranks academic staff from "A" for world class to "R" for research-inactive. It then allocates millions of dollars to polytechnics, universities, private training establishments, wananga and colleges of education, according to their rankings.

The most important part of the PBRF round requires staff to list their Research Outputs over the previous six years. A panel of experts then examines each list and awards a grade of A, B, C or the dreaded R. There are major problems with this procedure that generate unfair and invalid results.

First, the PBRF process assumes that there is a single model of what constitutes good research. This assumption may hold true in mathematics, medicine and the hard sciences, where other scholars can replicate work. In these subjects, the process of peer-review can work well.

But there are other areas of academic endeavour, such as the Arts and Social Sciences, where there is no agreed model. Scholars who rely on empirical research clash with radical postmodernists and academics who insist that there are ways of knowing other than the rational. Politically Correct fashions come and go. A peer-reviewer rejected one of my history articles on the grounds that it did not contain "a feminist/pacifist perspective."

And on what grounds will the panellists rate the research? The history of intellectual activity is full of examples of work that was

dismissed by experts at the time, only to be recognised later as insightful. On the other hand, peer-reviewed journals have published garbage. The hoax perpetrated in 1996 by Alan Sokal is telling; he deliberately submitted a nonsensical article to the peer-reviewed journal *Social Text*, which published it. And in September 2001 the *Journal of Reproductive Medicine*, a peer-reviewed medical journal, published a paper about how a Columbia University study showed the power of Christians' prayers to help patients at a fertility clinic to conceive (see *NZ Skeptic* 75).

The PBRF process distorts research activity because it rewards academics for churning out quick projects, such as articles, at the expense of big efforts. Books in, say, history, often take years to produce. The scholar has to read first all the books and articles relevant to the field, then piles of documents that may be kept in far-flung collections. Then the writing begins, with each key assertion carefully footnoted to a reliable source. It is not uncommon for such efforts to take ten or more years, and sometimes a lifetime. But the PBRF process focuses on a six-year period. Scholars who are devoting time to long-term projects receive the inaccurate and offensive

label of “Research Inactive,” as if they spend their time snoozing in a hammock. A Waikato University senior manager pointedly urged a historian to abandon a lengthy biography because it is an unwise research choice in the PBRF environment.

The PBRF process is distorting work at universities because it pressures academics to play a game. The university tearooms are full of talk about how to work the system. Some academics team up with friends who are referees in order to publish a couple of articles each year. The PBRF discourages in-depth projects and those aspects of the job such as teaching preparation and community service that do not help PBRF scores. It frustrates academic freedom by shaping research plans to fit its arbitrary scheme.

The PBRF also encourages departments to downgrade the importance of teaching so that the trend will be for them to become like some overseas departments I have seen, where graduate students do much of the teaching while lecturers lock themselves away to turn out articles. The TEC’s latest plan, to introduce ratings for teaching, inspires no confidence. Perhaps lecturers will score well by teaching homeopathy to lots of students.

While thinking about this subject I benefited from discussions with Dr Ron Smith of the University of Waikato.

Dr Raymond Richards is a Senior Lecturer in History and American Studies at the University of Waikato. He can be reached at ray@waikato.ac.nz

The Backward March of Reason

Bernard Howard

“There’s no need for your organisation. We’re all skeptics nowadays.”

Anthroposophy in Darmstadt Children’s Hospital

The Darmstadt Children’s Hospital has acquired an “Anthroposophical Ambulance” thanks to the efforts of a fully qualified medical doctor who has extended his healing abilities by embracing Steiner principles. This hospital is a teaching hospital attached to the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Frankfurt-on-Main. The medical director has welcomed this development.

Feng Shui ritual causes apartment fire

Three Bavarian ladies tried to rid their apartment of bad spirits by opening doors and windows, and smoking them out with the aid of another spirit, that of wine (alcohol to us moderns). The fire ritual went amiss, the building was badly damaged by fire, the ladies were hospitalised, and the local authority was considering charging them with careless use of fire.

Founding of German Astrological Academy. Dr. Astrol anyone?

A group of German astrologers has founded the “German Academy for Astrology”, in the hope that it will open the way to State-recognised academic teaching of their subject. This despite the uproar in the French scientific community when notorious astrologer Elisabeth Teissier received a doctorate for her study of the sociology of the subject. There was a well grounded fear that the degree would lend

a false appearance of validity. The University of Paris forbade the teaching of astrology in 1666.

University of TCM established in Vienna

The Traditional Chinese Medicine Academy in Vienna has prevailed upon the Minister of Education to grant it the status of a private university. Though it is yet to produce any research results, the institution will teach Diploma courses in Massage, Midwifery, and Physiotherapy, and courses for Bachelor and Masters degrees in Acupuncture, Pharmacology, and Tuina-massage. This year, expect even Dr. Sin. Med. graduates.

Vortex Therapy

From that well known centre of spin, the British Prime Minister’s office, comes news that his wife, Cherie Blair, has embraced the latest ‘altmed’ fad, vortex therapy. The Scotsman reports that, “You place a hand on the part of the body from which the negative energies need to be drawn out, and point a long rod at a small block which is filled with corresponding negative energies.”

As her husband thinks President Bush can make the world safe for democracy, these two can have the satisfaction of meeting at breakfast knowing they have each already believed something impossible.

Acknowledgments. Items 1 to 4, “Skeptiker”; 5, “New Scientist”.

If undelivered, return to:

NZ Skeptics
PO Box 29-492
Christchurch

New Zealand
Permit No. 3357

Permit 

Skeptics' Book Library: It's there for you!

The NZ Skeptics have a collection of books available for members. Titles include Susan Blackmore's *Test Your Psychic Powers*, James Randi's *Flim Flam*, Lynley Hood's *A City Possessed*, and Marks and Kammann's *The Psychology of the Psychic*. The full list is available on the NZ Skeptics website (www.skeptics.org.nz). Send your name and address to the Skeptics' Librarian (Claire.LeCouteur@xtra.co.nz) with \$5 to cover postage (with a small surplus to go towards further purchases), and the book is yours for a month!

New Zealand Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (Inc.)

Chair-entity: Vicki Hyde (Christchurch), skeptics@spis.co.nz

Secretary: Claire Le Couteur (Christchurch)

Treasurer: Ian Short (Kaiapoi)

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Robert Woolf (Auckland)
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