



# *The North Texas*

# Skeptic

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<http://www.ntskeptics.org>

## Web news

by John Blanton

*The World Wide Web is a wonderful source of information and news. Some of it is true, and some of it is not.*

### Did Richardson schoolboard member Karen Holburn answer my question about teaching Creationism?

<http://richardsonblog.dallasnews.com/archives/2010/04/did-richardson-schoolboard-mem.html>

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news/2010-04-16.htm>  
#Richardson

5:59 AM Fri, Apr 16, 2010  
Jeffrey Weiss/Reporter

Jeffrey Weiss is a reporter for *The Dallas Morning News*. His coverage is the Richardson area, and he was reporting on the Richardson Independent School District board races.

Weiss got from candidate Raj Chari that “he was in favor of the teaching of Creationism in science classes.” Karen Holburn is the incumbent at that board

position, and Weiss asked her the ID question. Here is what Weiss had to say about the responses he received:

#### Holburn’s first response:

Trustees need to focus on the academic success of every child in our district and not push personal agendas. The State Board of Education sets the curriculum for our schools and it is my job as a Trustee to ensure that the teachers are provided the resources they need to teach the curriculum.

The response was not satisfactory to this *News* reporter, so he followed up, saying, in part, “[Y]ou have not answered the question.” Further, “Do you agree or disagree with your opponent that Intelligent Design (or Creationism) should be taught in science classes in the Richardson school district?”

#### Weiss received the following response from Holburn:

The State Board of Education sets the curriculum for our schools and it is my job as a Trustee to ensure that the teachers are provided the resources they need to teach the curriculum. The issue of

## EVENTS CALENDAR

### May program

Saturday, 15 May at 2 p.m.  
2900 Live Oak Street in Dallas

#### Darwin’s Dilemma

Darwin stated his greatest dilemma with the fossil evidence was the Cambrian Explosion of life forms that occurred about 530 million years ago. Creationists make much of this and consider the Cambrian Explosion to be a fatal flaw in the Darwinian theory of evolution. They have made a video called **Darwin’s Dilemma**, and at the May meeting we will critique this latest bit of creationist propaganda.

### NTS board meeting and social dinner

Saturday 22 May 2010, at 7 p.m.

**Café Express**  
5307 East Mockingbird Lane  
Dallas, TX 75206

If you plan to attend, please call. We sometimes cancel or change these events. **214-335-9248**

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 NTS functions at which admission is charged at no or  
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teaching Creationism in science classes has not been voiced  
 by our community. As Trustees, if this did become an issue  
 within our community we would collaborate with community  
 members, administrators, and teachers to study what the dis-  
 trict's position should be and proceed from there.

Weiss's take is, "To which I say: She has still not answered my ques-  
 tion. Unless the answer is that, for one of the major hot-button issues in  
 public education of the past century-plus, she has no position beyond  
 what she thinks the community wants. Which is her right. But seems  
 odd."

Darryl Smyers is a candidate for another board seat in the district,  
 and he read Weiss's post about the issue on *The Dallas Morning News*  
 blog. He contributed the following response to Weiss:

Creationism is not a scientific theory so it cannot be taught in  
 a science class.

Weiss: "How clear is that? "

How clear, indeed.

The North Texas Skeptics is a 501 (c) 3, non-profit, tax-exempt orga-  
 nization, and, as such, we do not venture into politics. However, we feel  
 it our obligation to inform members and the public whenever people  
 vying for the public trust (and dollar) are going off on a tangent and  
 placing superstition and reliance on woo-woo beliefs ahead of estab-  
 lished science and their public responsibilities.

### **Poor Results on Evolution and Big Bang Questions Omitted From NSF Report**

[http://www.ecnmag.com/News/Feeds/2010/04/blogs-the-cutting-  
 -edge-poor-results-on-evolution-and-big-bang-questions-o/](http://www.ecnmag.com/News/Feeds/2010/04/blogs-the-cutting-edge-poor-results-on-evolution-and-big-bang-questions-o/)

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2010-04-11.htm#NSF>

### **Curious Cat Science and Engineering Blog | Saturday, April 10, 2010**

### **Evolution, Big Bang Polls Omitted From NSF Report by Yudhijit Bhattacharjee**

You get older, you learn stuff. Like

... 45% of Americans in 2008 answered true to the statement,  
 "Human beings, as we know them today, developed from  
 earlier species of animals."

That was news to me. I would have thought it was closer to 15%, be-  
 cause 15% is closer to zero than 45% is.

In Japan it was 78%, Europe in general, 70%, China, 69%, and South  
 Korea 64%. What is so amazing to a person of my age is I remember

when Japan was bombed nearly back to the stone age by this country, Europe nearly became the an empire of Nazi Neanderthals and South Korea came close to becoming southern North Korea. Since then Japan dug itself out of the ashes, Europe rebuilt itself nearly block by block, South Korea held off the North with the help of thousands of United States troops to become an Asian powerhouse and China shook off a medieval economic structure. Meanwhile, the country that suffered none of these hardships sank into an intellectual backwater. Only 33% of Americans agree the universe began with the Big Bang.

Good going, guys.

Anyhow, you won't read this in a recent report from the National Science Foundation (NSF). According to an item in *Science* the NSF decided to sidestep the inconvenient truth.<sup>1</sup>

In an unusual last-minute edit that has drawn flak from the White House and science educators, a federal advisory committee omitted data on Americans' knowledge of evolution and the big bang from a key report. The data shows that Americans are far less likely than the rest of the world to accept that humans evolved from earlier species and that the universe began with a big bang.

They're not surprising findings, but the National Science Board, which oversees the National Science Foundation (NSF), says it chose to leave the section out of the 2010 edition of the biennial *Science and Engineering Indicators* because the survey questions used to measure knowledge of the two topics force respondents to choose between factual knowledge and religious beliefs.

A similar survey in 2004 showed 44% of Americans accepted the facts of human origins, and it was still 78% for Japanese, 70% for Chinese and Europeans and 60% for South Koreans. "Only in Russia did less than half (44%) of respondents answer true."

We're behind the rest of the world in basic science and also "lag in other science and mathematical education. Nearly Half of Adults in the USA Don't Know How Long it Takes the Earth to Circle the Sun." Which makes one wonder, "Does anybody really know what time it is?" (Does anybody really care?)<sup>2</sup>

A recent study of 20 years of survey data collected by NSF concluded that "many Americans accept pseudoscientific beliefs," such as astrology, lucky numbers, the existence of unidentified flying objects (UFOs), extrasensory perception (ESP), and magnetic therapy (Losh et al. 2003). Such beliefs indicate a lack of understanding of how science works and how evidence is investigated and subsequently

determined to be either valid or not. Scientists, educators, and others are concerned that people have not acquired the critical thinking skills they need to distinguish fact from fiction. The science community and those whose job it is to communicate information about science to the public have been particularly concerned about the public's susceptibility to unproven claims that could adversely affect their health, safety, and pocketbooks.

### Simon Singh wins key battle in alternative medicine libel case

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/healthnews/7544666/Simon-Singh-wins-key-battle-in-alternative-medicine-libel-case.html>

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2010-04-04.htm#Singh>

By Stephen Adams

Published: 8:00AM BST 02 Apr 2010

Science writer Simon Sing, along with Edzard Ernst, wrote *Trick or Treatment: The Undeniable Facts about Alternative Medicine*. It's a book that, as the title says, exposes the unfortunate truth about many alternative medical practices. Acupuncture, homeopathy, chiropractic and herbal medicine, among others, come in for treatment. You can get your copy from Amazon.com.<sup>3</sup>

He also managed to tick some people off.

In April 2008 Sing wrote an article that mentioned the British Chiropractic Association (BCA) was promoting bogus medical treatments. These included treatments for asthma, colic and earache. Unfortunately this was in merry old England, and not in the U.S.A.

United States libel laws are lenient to writers (freedom of the press and all that stuff). You can disparage somebody in print, and if it's true, they can go suck a goat, but the court is not going to give them relief. If it's not true, you can still escape a court challenge if you can show an honest (not egregiously careless) mistake has been made. Then you might have to apologize. In any event, the subject of your scorn has to prove your statements are false.

The BCA complained, and Singh refused to retract or to apologize. The BCA sued in British courts, which place a heavier burden on the writer.

In May British Justice Eady ruled Singh's statements were "allegations of fact" rather than opinions, forcing him to prove his statements were true. His projected legal costs exceeded

£100,000, but he did not back down. More recently, a three-judge panel overruled Justice Eady and agreed that Sing's statements amounted to opinion, considerably lessening his burden of proof.

The judges did more.

In a judgement that was highly critical of both the BCA and Mr Justice Eady, they said: "This litigation has almost certainly had a chilling effect on public debate which might otherwise have assisted potential patients to make informed choices about the possible use of chiropractic."

By rejecting the newspaper's offer to print a reply from the association, and by suing Dr Singh personally, the Appeal Court judges said "the unhappy impression has been created that this is an endeavour by the BCA to silence one of its critics".

They were scathing of the ruling by Mr Justice Eady, who has previously been accused of trying to single-handedly bring in a privacy law by the back door.

They said: "His approach marginalised or underrated the value now placed by the law on public debate on issues of public concern."

In treating Dr Singh's words as an assertion of fact rather than comment, he had "erred in his approach", they said.

"However one represents or paraphrases their meaning," they said of Dr Singh's words, they "are in our judgement expressions of opinion."

If the case were allowed to continue on the track Mr Justice Eady's decision had set in motion – with the BCA attempting to prove its treatments worked for those ailments named, and Dr Singh attempting to prove such evidence was flawed – that would "invite the court to become an Orwellian ministry of truth", they said.

The judges called for scientific debates to be resolved using science, not libel writs.

They also recommended that fair comment be renamed "honest opinion" as this "would lend greater emphasis to its importance as an essential ingredient of the right to free expression".

Singh is not out of the woods yet, but BCA faces a steeper hill to climb than before. They are reconsidering their position. BCA president Richard Brown said:

"Our original argument remains that our reputation has been damaged. To reiterate, the BCA brought

this claim only to uphold its good name and protect its reputation, honesty and integrity."

Such as it is.

Simon Singh has also written:

*The Code Book: The Science of Secrecy from Ancient Egypt to Quantum Cryptography*<sup>4</sup>

*Fermat's Last Theorem*<sup>5</sup>

*Big Bang: The Origin of the Universe*<sup>6</sup>

## Latest Prize Bolsters Templeton's Shift to Mainstream

<http://www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/summary/327/5973/1565>

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2010-03-28.htm#Ayala>

Financier John Templeton pioneered mutual funds and made a great fortune. From Wikipedia "As a member of the Presbyterian Church, Templeton was dedicated to his faith. However, Templeton remained open to the benefits and values of other faiths."

The Templeton Foundation awards a prize to "proliferate the monetary support of spiritual discoveries."

According to Templeton:

We are trying to persuade people that no human has yet grasped 1% of what can be known about spiritual realities. So we are encouraging people to start using the same methods of science that have been so productive in other areas, in order to discover spiritual realities.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Templeton](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Templeton)

The Templeton Prize now exceeds the value of any single Nobel Prize.

**Science 26 March 2010:**  
**Vol. 327, no. 5973, p. 1565**  
**DOI: 10.1126/science.327.5973.1565**

**News of the Week**  
**Science and Religion:**  
**Yudhijit Bhattacharjee**

... In the past, Templeton has supported conferences and projects linked to the Discovery Institute, an ID think tank. But it subsequently disavowed support for the ID movement, allaying the fears of many

critics. This week, the foundation took another step in that direction by awarding its annual \$1.5 million Templeton Prize to Francisco Ayala, a priest-turned-biologist who for decades has campaigned against the teaching of creationism and ID in the science classroom.

The 76-year-old Ayala, a professor at the University of California, Irvine, has sought to foster mutual respect between science and religion through lectures and writings on topics such as morality. "If they are properly understood, they cannot be in contradiction because science and religion concern different matters," says Ayala, a former president of AAAS (publisher of *Science*). He says the conflict has grown less intense since Templeton funds helped to launch a program in the mid-1990s called Dialogue on Science, Ethics, and Religion at AAAS, which continues to be supported by the foundation. Some scientists objected at the time, he recalls. "They said, 'What business does science have talking to religion?' I don't think there are many thoughtful scientists who would make that point today."

Scientists have generally been at odds with the Templeton Prize.

They are using the prestige and authority of science to improve the prestige and credibility of theology,' says Daniel Dennett, a philosopher at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts. In his opinion, Templeton-funded discussions between scientists and religious figures do for religion what debates between ID proponents and evolutionary biologists would do for ID: "They create the perception that scientists and theologians are academic co-equals, which they are not."

Ayala is a long time supporter of the National Center for Science Education (NCSE). The NCSE is the premier organization opposing the teaching of creationism in public schools.

From the NCSE at <http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news/2010-03-28.htm#NCSE>

**For the Templeton Foundation's press release, visit:**

<http://www.templetonprize.org/currentwinner.html>

**For the story in the *Los Angeles Times*, visit:**

<http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-templeton-prize26-2010mar26,0,1500604.story>

**For Ayala's essay in the *Washington Post's* On Faith blog, visit:**

<http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith>

[/guestvoices/2010/03/science\\_and\\_religion\\_conflict\\_or\\_dialogue.html](/guestvoices/2010/03/science_and_religion_conflict_or_dialogue.html)

**For information about Darwin's Gift, visit:**

[http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record\\_id=11732](http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=11732)

**For information about Science, Creationism, and Evolution, visit:**

[http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record\\_id=11876](http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=11876)



## References

- 1 <http://news.sciencemag.org/scienceinsider/2010/04/evolution-big-bang-polls-omitted.html>
- 2 Ask *The Chicago Transit Authority*.
- 3 <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0393337782/thenorthtexaske>
- 4 <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0385495323/thenorthtexaske>
- 5 <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1841157910/thenorthtexaske>
- 6 <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0007162219/thenorthtexaske>

## Sheldrake revisited

by John Blanton

**O**ops!

Back in 1998 we took a look at the amazing ideas of Rupert Sheldrake. We said

[Rupert] Sheldrake, Ph.D., is a former Research Fellow of the Royal Society and was a scholar of Clare College, Cambridge, and a Frank Knox Fellow at Harvard University. He has been making waves in the world of New Age ever since his first book *A New Science of Life* on the scene in 1981. What the world of science says he's been making is another matter.<sup>1</sup>

We also mentioned Sheldrake's book *Seven Experiments That Could Change the World*. The seven experiments test some interesting conjectures of Sheldrake's:

1. Pets who know when their owners are returning

2. How do pigeons home?
3. The organization of termites
4. The sense of being stared at
5. The reality of phantom limbs
6. The variability of the “fundamental constants”
7. The effects of experimenters’ expectations

That was over twelve years ago. We thought it was about time we took a shot at one of Sheldrake’s challenges.

I was not hankering to get a bunch of homing pigeons and release them over the countryside. Neither did I want to dredge up a bunch of termites and organize them into a committee. (Secretly, I wished them all dead.)

The sense of being stared at seemed to be about our speed. For our April program we would test whether any of us could tell when we were being stared at.

Rupert Sheldrake is on the Internet, and wondrously he has arranged for readers to run tests of their own on his Web site.<sup>2</sup>

Sheldrake’s on-line test has a straight-forward protocol:<sup>3</sup>

1. Fill in the User information (all entries **MUST** be completed). As part of this registration process there is a sound test. If your computer does not make a sound when you press the test button, you will need to signal the beginning of each trial to the subject by means of a mechanical click or beep. (Note: there may be a delay of several seconds between pressing the sound test button and the beep.)
2. Click on the **Begin Experiment** button
3. Follow the Instructions for Staring and/or Not Staring. If your computer does not give a sound signal, signal the beginning of the trial to the subject by means of a mechanical click or beep
4. Ask the subject to respond ‘Looking’ or ‘Not looking’. It is best to guess quite quickly, within 5-10 seconds.
5. If the subject’s response is correct, enter Correct, and if it is incorrect, enter Incorrect.
6. You can do the experiment with or without feedback. If you decide to give trial-by-trial feedback to the subject, tell him or her if the guess is right or wrong
7. When all 20 trials are complete, submit the data for permanent storage

8. You can then either log off, do the test again with the same subject and looker, or switch roles

This was particularly gratifying, so the big demonstration was started at the April meeting. All present watched intently as I brought up the Web page and projected it on the official NTS Flat Screen Display (NTSFSD).

I clicked on the link that said **Begin the Staring Experiment** at the bottom of the page. Up came a form for me to fill out. I entered all the information and clicked **Begin Experiment**.

Oops! What was supposed to happen when I clicked the link was this: On Sheldrake’s Web server the link was supposed to activate a Perl CGI script that would engage me in a dialog and compose appropriate Web pages to lead me through the test. What happened, instead, is the Sheldrake server didn’t execute the script. Instead, it just sent the page to my browser, and my audience suddenly saw all the Perl script code displayed on the screen. And that was the end of the test. Not what we had hoped for.

Fortunately we didn’t go into the meeting relying only on the on-line test for entertainment. Prior to the meeting I prepared a PowerPoint presentation that recapitulated our previous review of Sheldrake’s amazing world view. For those who skipped the April meeting I have placed the PowerPoint on-line. There is also a copy of the CGI script for those of you who want to dissect it and recreate the test for themselves. Give me a few more days, and I will have this done and will place the test on the NTS Web site.<sup>4</sup>

### Future Meeting Dates

- 15 May (NTS program meeting)
- 22 May (NTS social dinner at Café Express)
- 19 June (NTS program meeting)
- 26 June (NTS social dinner at Vapiano International)
- 17 July (NTS program meeting)
- 24 July (NTS social dinner)
- 21 August (NTS program meeting)
- 28 August (NTS social dinner)
- 18 September (NTS program meeting)
- 25 September (NTS social dinner)
- 16 October (NTS program meeting)
- 23 October (NTS social dinner)
- 13 November (NTS program meeting)
- 20 November (NTS social dinner)

## Skeptic Ink — by Prasad Golla and John Blanton. © 2010. Free, non-commercial reuse permitted.



When you read the script you will notice it was written by Charles Overby. A quick check on the Internet shows the following: **The Sense of Being Stared At - An Automated Test on the Internet**, *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, (2008) 72, 86-97, Rupert Sheldrake, Charles Overby and Ashwin Beeharee.<sup>5</sup>

The abstract reads as follows:<sup>6</sup>

*In previous research on the sense of being stared at, participants worked in pairs, with the starrer behind the staree. In a series of 20 randomized trials, the starrer looked or did not look at the staree, who had to guess 'looking' or 'not looking'. We here describe an exploratory automated, internet-based version of this standard staring experiment. In 498 tests, each with 20 trials, the computer gave an automatic sound signal to indicate when each trial began. The average hit rate was 53.0% ( $p < 1 \cdot 10^{-6}$ ); 268 participants scored above the chance level of 10 out of 20, 150 below, and 80 at the chance level. There was no significant difference between male and female starees, and little effect of starees' age. The highest hit rates were with parent-child participants. Hit rates were significantly higher when starees received trial-by-trial feedback, but there was no increase in the second half of the test compared with the first. Although these tests were unsupervised, the results replicated many of the features of previous tests and illustrate the potential for carrying out research through the internet, enabling widespread participation.*

The results appear impressive, except... Except with psychological research science takes a slightly different slant. One difference is the concept of "artificial conditions." I take this to mean "scientifically rigorous conditions." In *Seven Experiments* Sheldrake says, after some preamble:<sup>7</sup>

...[T]hey also confirm that most people do not perform very impressively under artificial conditions. The overall results are better than chance, but not much better.

In other words, it doesn't work so well when you look closely. It's a dodge that we have long seen in this field of study.



### References

- 1 <http://www.ntskeptics.org/1998/1998january/january1998.htm#sheldrake>
- 2 <http://www.sheldrake.org/homepage.html>
- 3 <http://www.sheldrake.org/Onlineexp/portal/staring.html>
- 4 See the presentation at <http://ntskeptics.org/programs/Sheldrake.ppt>. The CGI script is at <http://ntskeptics.org/programs/ExpBuilderForm.cgi>.
- 5 See [http://www.sheldrake.org/Articles&Papers/papers/staring/internettest\\_abs.html](http://www.sheldrake.org/Articles&Papers/papers/staring/internettest_abs.html).
- 6 <http://www.spr.ac.uk/main/page/jspr-abstracts-2008#Apr>
- 7 Rupert Sheldrake, *Seven Experiments That Could Change the World*, p. 119. New York, Riverhead Books. 1995.

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**FIRST CLASS**

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