

Phactum

The Newsletter of the Philadelphia Association for Critical Thinking
April 2006

What is on your mind?

Global warming? End Times? UFOs? Natural cures? Ghosts? Intelligent Design? Loch Ness Monster? There are zillions of possible topics in Skepticism and Critical Thinking. Why not write down what interests or is bugging you and share your thoughts in print with fellow PhACT members and others who might read this newsletter? More than likely plenty of people will be interested in what you have to say and some good lively discussion might ensue. Writing is a great way to focus your thoughts. Topics in science and pseudo-science are most desired, but many other subjects are of interest such as education in America, which is discussed later in this edition of *Phactum*.

Letters, articles, suggestions, and listings for events somewhere in a reasonable radius of Philadelphia are welcome. Book and movie reviews are welcome and if you want to do some good for the world send in your Mom's recipe for meatloaf. This is a small publication so space is an issue. Also, PhACT is not a partisan organization so we try to stick mainly to issues, not factions.

Response to articles in *Phactum* can be sent to Ray Haupt by email at:

Phactpublicity@AOL.COM



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Phactum is, in theory, printed 6 times a year and is the main propaganda organ for the Philadelphia Association for Critical Thinking.

If you are not a subscriber and supporting member we invite you to become one by sending a \$15 membership to PhACT, \$10 for students.

The Physics Department of Community College of Philadelphia will host a meeting of

PhACT

Philadelphia Association for Critical Thinking

Saturday, April 15, 2006 at 2:00 PM

**Community College of Philadelphia
17th and Spring Garden Streets**

Terrorism and Emergency Preparedness

Ralph Gumbert is the Director of Emergency Medical Services for the City of Trenton. He has lectured the FBI on the impact terrorism has and could potentially have on our system. This discussion will address such topics as initial emergency response to a large scale event, preparedness efforts at the local level, and the potential widespread impacts from various terrorism events,

*The event is free and open to the public. Bring a friend.
Executive meetings are held prior to each lecture at 1 PM. Any
member may attend. Refreshments will be served.*

Standardized Test Scores: The Red Herring in Public Education

By Matthew L. Mandel

When did public schools, teachers and teacher unions become part of a domestic Axis of Evil? A recent segment by John Stossel on ABC's 20/20 blamed America's lagging academic performance on the very people dedicated to nurturing and enriching children – teachers. U.S. schools are failing, Stossel's piece asserts, because "a lack of competition breeds mediocrity."

The education profession bears some of the blame because we have allowed a standardized test score to serve as the sole barometer for measuring a school's impact on children. Not too long ago, children learned everything from math to the arts in school. They laughed, played sports, and never worried about their safety. Today, urban public schools have become grim testing factories, forced to ignore the broader needs and interests of children. We may be spending more on education, but the dollars are being spent on test development and testing—not on improving resources for students and schools. With this singular focus, test scores better rise!

To be fair, standardized test scores are one way to measure progress, but school districts are selling the public a bill of goods by labeling schools as successes or failures based on this or any other single indicator.

In Philadelphia, a misguided attempt to apply a business model to public education has created a dog-and-pony show masquerading as education improvement. Many changes in our schools are both progressive and promising, and test scores are rising (although there is research suggesting that scores will rise with acclimation to testing, whether or not skills have improved). But will scores continue rising and are students really learning more?

Most public schools in Philadelphia are old, dirty and poorly ventilated. Their classrooms lack modern technology. (My classroom has more mice than computers.) Many are unsafe, and teachers,

students and staff are frustrated by the inability of administrators to remove disruptive and dangerous students. But our scores are rising.

The upswing in our test scores actually began well before the state takeover and the arrival of the School Reform Commission. For all its pontificating, experimenting, privatizing, ribbon-cutting and marketing, the SRC would have to admit that achievement gains would not be possible without a union contract that required the district to implement a rigorous curriculum, and without dedicated and competent teachers and other school staff.

Philly's teachers are helping to make strides amid conditions that probably would make many of their suburban counterparts shake their heads in disbelief. It's fashionable to blame teachers and their unions for problems and then deny them their due for improvement. That's unfortunate because the American Federation of Teachers is one of the nation's most successful forces for social change – fighting for equal opportunity in education, equality for women and minorities, and decent wages and benefits for low-paid workers, to name a few.

Stossel never mentions that it was the AFT that led the crusade for real school reform – for reducing class sizes, using proven programs, setting high academic standards, using standardized tests to diagnose and correct educational deficiencies, experimenting with Charter Schools, and making all education stakeholders accountable. Stossel had an obligation to be fair. (In journalism, where I began my own career, we call that balanced reporting.)

I hope that someday urban teachers and students will teach and learn in environments conducive to achieving their goals. I visited such a place in the School District of Philadelphia recently. It has excellent security and roomy, carpeted hallways. There isn't a rodent in sight. Every room has adequate seating, spacious work areas and modern equipment. There is immediate access to an abundance of technology, including LCD

projectors and laptop computers. Restrooms are clean. Drinking water is potable. The whole place shouts, "We value and appreciate you! You deserve the best, so you can do your best." The site isn't a school, however. It is the School District of Philadelphia's new headquarters. They knew how to create an environment designed to get the best from everyone. When will they work to ensure that every public school in Philadelphia is afforded the same? Perhaps when our test scores stop rising.

Matthew L. Mandel teaches eighth grade in Philadelphia.

Editors note: Standardized testing has become a hot topic in Camden, NJ where an educator claims to have been pressured to cheat on test scores. Check out this news item in the Sunday, March 26, 2006 edition of the Philadelphia Inquirer:

http://www.philly.com/mld/philly/entertainment/family_guide/14186177.htm

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David Hume on Miracles

by Bill Wisdom

David Hume's "attack" on miracles, or miracle-claims, is often referred to by skeptics as a model of responsible thinking about "claims of the paranormal". But it is more often cited than read by skeptics. I want in this brief article to analyze just what he says, and what he defends, in his essay "Of Miracles". For more detail, I urge you to read the whole *Enquiry*, which serves as an indispensable background to a thorough understanding of his position.

It is by no means clear exactly what Hume's main contention is in his essay "Of Miracles" (Section X of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 1748). He is obviously skeptical about the credibility of miracle-claims. But just what is he arguing for? There are at least five distinctly different candidates for the status of his main contention, which candidates I will arrange from the strongest (and most interesting) to the weakest (and least interesting). I shall support each

with a quotation.

(1) **Miracles are impossible.** "...What have we to oppose to such a cloud of witnesses, but the absolute impossibility or miraculous nature of the events, which they relate?"

(2) **Nothing could justify the belief that a miracle had occurred.** "...The proof against a miracle...is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined....There is [always]...a direct and full proof...against the existence of any miracle...."

(3) **Human testimony could not justify the belief that a miracle had occurred.** "...A miracle, supported by any human testimony, [is] more properly a subject of derision than of argument."

(4) **Human testimony could not justify the belief that a religious miracle had occurred.** "...No human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle, and make it a just foundation for any...system of religion."

(5) **No miracle-claim has ever in fact been justified by human testimony.** "...There never was a miraculous event established on [sufficient] evidence." And again: "...No testimony for any kind of miracle has ever amounted to a probability, much less to a proof...."

Statements (1) through (4) are conceptual or methodological or philosophical claims about what is possible. Statement (5), on the other hand, is a (merely) factual claim about what has actually happened. (1) through (4) are arranged in a strictly logical order: if any earlier one is true, so are all the later ones; if any later one is false, so are all the earlier ones. (Indeed, (5) would fit into this logical sequence if for "miracle" in (5) we put "religious miracle".)

It seems clear from the quotations that Hume believed all of the claims (1) through (5). But he does not argue for all of them. Indeed, he explicitly says that (3) is false which, we just noted, commits him to the falsehood of (1) and (2)



"Yes I can give you liposuction and a face-lift, Mrs Gribbs, but I must warn you that it won't change the fact that basically way down deep and underneath it all, you're really a duck."

as well: "...There may possibly be miracles...of such a kind as to admit of proof from human testimony...." So by the end of the essay he settles on (4) as the strongest philosophical claim that he can justify though he clearly believes the rather uninteresting factual claim (5) as well (for which most of Part II is an argument). Therefore it would (alas!) seem prudent to read the whole essay as a defense only of the relatively weak proposition (4), supported largely by his arguments for proposition (5) in Part II of Section X.

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William A. Wisdom is Philosophy Professor Emeritus at Temple University.

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How to Dispose of Junk E-mailers

By Eric Krieg

How often have you gotten an email like:

From the desk of: DR. REGINALD OBI

TEL:234-1-776 5869

FAX:234-1-759 8827

DEAR SIR,

STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL

WE ARE MEMBERS OF A SPECIAL COMMITTEE FOR BUDGET AND PLANNING OF THE NIGERIAN NATIONAL PETROLEUM CORPORATION (NNPC). THIS COMMITTEE IS PRINCIPALLY CONCERNED WITH CONTRACT AWARDS AND APPROVAL. WITH OUR POSITIONS, WE HAVE SUCCESSFULLY SECURED FOR OURSELVES THE SUM OF TWENTY-ONE MILLION, FIVE HUNDRED THOUSAND UNITED STATES DOLLARS (US \$21.5M). THIS AMOUNT WAS CAREFULLY MANIPULATED BY OVER-INVOICING OF AN OLD CONTRACT.

BASED ON INFORMATION GATHERED ABOUT YOU, WE BELIEVE YOU WOULD BE IN A POSITION TO HELP US IN TRANSFERRING THIS FUND (US \$21.5M) INTO A SAFE ACCOUNT. IT HAS BEEN AGREED THAT THE OWNER OF THE ACCOUNT WILL BE COMPENSATED WITH 20% OF THE REMITTED FUNDS, WHILE WE KEEP 70%, AND 10% WILL BE SET ASIDE TO OFFSET EXPENSES AND PAY THE NECESSARY TAXES.

ALL MODALITIES OF THIS TRANS . . . etc.

Naturally, there is no need to debunk and explain this scam to any subscriber of Phactum. Even recent converts to skepticism have at least been exposed to enough stories of Flim Flam artists to be fairly immune. That kind of scam is called 419 - after a legal code. Sure, it may be hard to picture someone dumb enough to fall for it - but being gullible isn't a crime. Maybe I'm too much of a bleeding heart liberal, but I can't help having some compassion for the many people who fall for such scams. I also dislike spammers and scammers even when not the same person. I invented a fun little game that has probably cost these people a few 10's of thousands of dollars.

I maintain a mail folder called 419 - every time I get an email like the above (and it is ironic that many of them must harvest my email address from our skeptical web pages), I stick it into a folder labeled 419. This includes both original emails like the above as well as emails to the effect of "I tried calling you at the number you gave, but you could not be found". Then every so often I fill my copy buffer with something like the following response message: "Praise Jesus for answering my prayers - yes, even though I am elderly, I think I can help you with this. Please don't use this email address of my husbands (he doesn't let me use it because I am not good with computers), but call me on this phone line _____ while I am traveling. I will try to make sure the stupid person at the desk can find me. I travel with all my important information, I am sure we each make a good deal soon, Myra".

For the phone number, I used to give home phone numbers of known spammers - now I give phone numbers of 419 scammers or phony lottery scam people in other countries. Note the important

things my message conveys: a profile of a perfect victim and motivation to keep racking up expensive long distance calls. Sometimes I throw in something to the effect that I am in this country to bury my dead missionary sister and that my health is very bad. Some of these people have called about a dozen different numbers. I try to make one general response work for both new 419ers and for older ones saying they keep trying the number and are praying for me. I have a system down where in about a minute, I can do reply-paste-send to the most recent 30 or so messages in my 419 folder. Then I have a warm feeling at the thought of two _____ who deserve each other screaming back and forth from their respective countries about where Myra Krieg could be. This action stems from an epiphany I had a few years ago that the #\$\$%! of the world don't have enough people after them so they have to waste each others time.

Sometimes I've tried to think about the ethical issues. For those who think it is wrong to jerk around these people, remember that every hour I waste of them calling other crooks is keeping them from cheating additional people all over the world. Another nice effect is the probably 5\$ they spend to make an international call from a 3rd world country is helping to build the telecommunications infrastructure in their country. I presume my efforts have a high ratio of time of theirs wasted vs. my own. Other people jerk 419ers around by pretending to be a victim who plans to fly to their country. I've tried this but find it takes too much time to feed them a flight number and an arrival in their airport. I used to sometimes give them a mailing address of a hate group to send me their rubber cashier checks too. By the way, there have been cases of people who have cashed phony checks, sent a portion to a con man accomplice and then been liable for the check up to 3 weeks later.

Of course in a better world, I'd much rather see enterprising people in 3rd world countries build businesses and infrastructure.

Eric Krieg is an Electrical Engineer and one of the founders of PhACT.

Whatever You Do, Don't Touch It!

by Bill Wisdom

As a tenured faculty member in the Philosophy Department at Temple University, I taught Formal Logic courses from the introduction through the most advanced graduate level, as well as courses in the Philosophy of Science, the Philosophy of Religion, several courses in the History of Philosophy, and a variety of other occasional courses.

One of my favorite courses was a lightweight introduction to the Philosophy of Science entitled "Science and Pseudoscience", in which we tried to get at an understanding of responsible belief by looking at what you might call scientific marginalia. We studied the arguments for and against belief in perhaps a half dozen of such things as astrology, acupuncture, parapsychological phenomena of all sorts, graphology, the Bermuda Triangle, alien abduction, the Jersey Devil and Bigfoot, creationism, miracles, and so on.

Sometimes students would research and report on a favorite topic. The best report, about the Jersey Devil, was by a believer who grew up in the Pine Barrens. She had frequently heard the Jersey Devil late at night; but she had also thorough studied the history and varieties of the story.

At other times I'd invite guest "experts" to address the class and answer questions. Around 1990 I had three of them come in during the semester. One was a well-known astrologer from Center City. One was a biologist from St. Joseph's University who, as an avid student of parapsychology, had developed some quantum-mechanical hypotheses to explain ESP.

The third was the only amateur. He headed (or

was) an organization in Berwyn that kept track of the various alien communities on earth. (I see in the phone book a "UFO Research Center" in Philadelphia. That sounds like it. Perhaps he has moved.) He had never actually met an alien. But the heart of his life's project was to get the seventeen distinct alien communities on earth in touch with each other, so that they could pool their knowledge and resources. How he knew that there were seventeen, and how they had remained ignorant of each other's existence, remained a mystery.



The point of this story is that of the three of them--the astrologer, the parapsychologist, and the UFOer--only the third gave my students any useful advice. The astrologer had nothing more helpful to say than to suggest that we visit him for an expensive reading. The parapsychologist had nothing even that practical to suggest. But the alien-tracker gave us this piece of invaluable advice. "If you ever come upon a UFO in a

field or on a golf course or in your yard or wherever...whatever you do--don't touch it! You'll be tempted to, of course. But several people have yielded to that temptation...and they've all died!" "What did they die of, sir?" a student asked. "Why, they all died of the same thing, young lady: cirrhosis of the liver. Remember: whatever you do, don't touch a UFO!"

Absolutely straight face and serious demeanor. I couldn't believe it. Well, I could believe that they died of cirrhosis of the liver all right. But I could hardly believe that he'd report it quite so matter-of-factly.

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