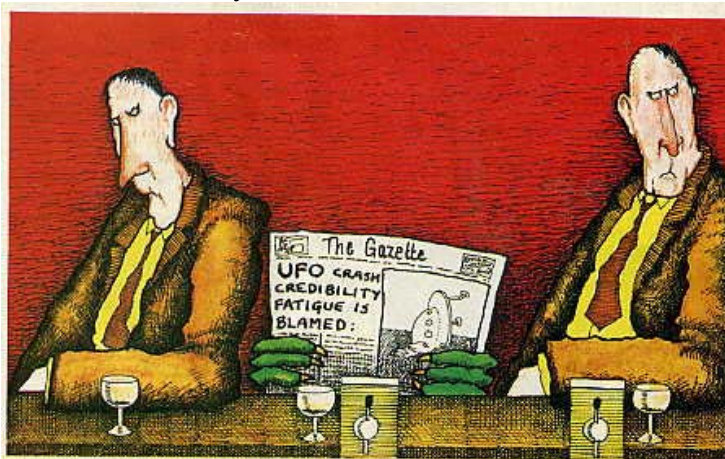


The law of conservation of oddity

We really ought to accept that not every little inconsistency has a scientific explanation, says Jon Garvey

I am one of the most sceptical people I know. When colleagues suggest to me that homeopathy can cure illness by the actions of solutions so weak that they contain no active ingredient at all, I feel constrained to comment that, if like cures like, then a solution of nothing would cure nothing, except, perhaps, water intoxication. Similarly, I had little faith in acupuncture even before Chinese doctors started to discredit it after the fall of the Gang of Four, though half the profession over here seems to have accepted it as the penicillin of the eighties. Its complete failure to relieve the half dozen patients of mine who have tried it of anything except their money has done little to convert me. Erich von Daniken, who descended from Switzerland in a flying saucer in 1967 to unravel the world's mysteries, would not survive the first critical onslaught from a reasonably well-read schoolchild, and the strange Uri Geller leaves me completely unbent, despite the supposedly scientific study of his feats, which only showed what Piltown Man had done years before: that scientists can be idiots as competently as anybody can. My general conclusion is that, with most of the "mysteries" one hears about, either someone is making a large profit, which casts doubt on the evidence, or they are already believed by a body of people emotionally committed to supporting each other's stories, thus making critical assessment difficult. This phenomenon I call "True Believerism".

And yet sometimes one encounters a little inconsistency, a hiccup in the mundane course of life, which ought to make even the most hardened cynic mellow a little. A patient came to see me in the surgery recently saying she was pregnant. She was only two weeks overdue, had irregular periods anyway, and had no particular symptoms. However, she had been phoned the previous week by her twin sister, who said she was getting breast tenderness and morning sickness, but did not think she was pregnant, so concluded that my patient must be. Although it took two



pregnancy tests to prove it ("Telepathy Gives Quickest Pregnancy Diagnosis, says GP"); my patient is now well on, and her sister remains fetus-free. Such things are well documented, it would appear. It is not unusual to find that twins separated at birth have similar tastes, and psychologists like Hans Eysenck, better known as one of the first European Jews to be hounded as a Nazi by the New Left, see this as evidence of the genetic origin of behaviour. For myself, I find the existence of a gene dictating a predilection for Chihuahuas called Maximillian, or even one producing pregnancy symptoms, even less credible than telepathy.

My own twins show no clairvoyant traits as yet, but were the subject of another curious occurrence, having been "fore-told in-a-dream" by my sister-in-law in Ireland. If this conjures visions of the seventh sons of blarney people, let me hasten to add that she is a dental nurse from Cheshire. She beat the ultrasound to a diagnosis of twins by several weeks; indeed, an earlier scan had spotted only one bump. She also managed to suggest they would be girls. Doing some crude maths, the only sort I know, and assuming that you are bound to dream about your sister-in-law's impending parturition, then there should be a 1:80 chance of being right about the twins, and a 1:3 chance of getting the sex right, making 1:240 overall.

Little anomalies

I can see I'm not going to convince anybody except myself

that there is any significance at all to these little anomalies, and that's probably a good thing, as otherwise you'd all become True Believers and we'd never prove anything. Even trying to prove such things is fraught with hazard. I once tried to test female intuition by asking a series of mothers-to-be in the maternity unit what sex baby they were expecting. The results showed a significantly greater number of them to be wrong than chance would predict. This clearly demonstrates something, but what, exactly?

The answer, of course, is that we are looking at a fundamental principle, which shall henceforth and forever be known as the "Law of Conservation of Oddity", and is a bit like Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, only bigger. Essentially it states that one plus one nearly always equals two, and when it doesn't you were out of the room.

I don't expect you to believe my anecdotes, but most people have some of their own, from family ghosts to spontaneous resolution of cancer, and they are certainly intriguing. I very much doubt that research would ever explain these things, as the data are just too inconsistent. I hope they keep trying, though. In the meantime, in an age which likes to think it's got everything cut and dried, it makes me wonder if, in the Law of Conservation of Oddity, someone isn't telling us; "You don't know the half of it."

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