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A Case of Xenoglossy Under Hypnosis
By Ohkado Masayuki and Okamoto Satoshi

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**EdgeScience #17**
February 2014

EdgeScience is a quarterly magazine. Print copies are available from edgescience.magcloud.com. For further information, see edgescience.org

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**Why EdgeScience?** Because, contrary to public perception, scientific knowledge is still full of unknowns. What remains to be discovered — what we don’t know — very likely dwarfs what we do know. And what we think we know may not be entirely correct or fully understood. Anomalies, which researchers tend to sweep under the rug, should be actively pursued as clues to potential breakthroughs and new directions in science.

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**PUBLISHER:** The Society for Scientific Exploration  
**EDITOR:** Patrick Huyghe  
**ASSOCIATE EDITOR:** P.D. Moncreif  
**CONTRIBUTORS:** Henry H. Bauer, Etzel Cardeña, George Kenney, Ohkado Masayuki, Okamoto Satoshi, Jim B. Tucker  
**DESIGN:** Smythtype Design

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**The Society for Scientific Exploration (SSE)** is a professional organization of scientists and scholars who study unusual and unexplained phenomena. The primary goal of the Society is to provide a professional forum for presentations, criticism, and debate concerning topics which are for various reasons ignored or studied inadequately within mainstream science. A secondary goal is to promote improved understanding of those factors that unnecessarily limit the scope of scientific inquiry, such as sociological constraints, restrictive world views, hidden theoretical assumptions, and the temptation to convert prevailing theory into prevailing dogma. Topics under investigation cover a wide spectrum. At one end are apparent anomalies in well established disciplines. At the other, we find paradoxical phenomena that belong to no established discipline and therefore may offer the greatest potential for scientific advance and the expansion of human knowledge. The SSE was founded in 1982 and has approximately 800 members in 45 countries worldwide. The Society also publishes the peer-reviewed *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, and holds annual meetings in the U.S. and biennial meetings in Europe. Associate and student memberships are available to the public. To join the Society, or for more information, visit the website at scientificexploration.org.

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ISSN 2330-4545 (Print)  
ISSN 2330-4553 (Online)
When a useful activity expands without restraint, when more is not necessarily better, a collapse may occur that causes widespread harm. This phenomenon, known as a “Bubble,” is commonly associated with financial fads and crashes, as we witnessed most recently with the Mortgage Bubble that caused the Great Recession of 2008. It all began with an activity that is almost universally agreed to be socially useful, as mortgages enable people to own their residence, an activity that is believed to encourage responsible behavior. So, obviously, the more mortgages, the better! Government policies encouraged that. The greater the number and value of mortgages, the more benefit accrued to banks, insurance companies, and other sources of mortgage funding, and to the employees of those institutions. And so what was initially a socially desired means of enabling people to buy their homes became a quite different thing: a socially divisive and destructive system for bringing wealth to certain institutions and individuals and disastrous “side” effects to other individuals and institutions.

There have been quite a long series of such financial Bubbles, but excessive growth can happen in other spheres too, as it has, I will argue, in science over the last half century. “Modern” science has expanded tremendously during its lifetime of half a millennium, which comprised at least three distinguishable eras, in the last of which—the present day—“science” has become a quite different thing than it used to be.3

Science became valued for its uncovering of truths about the natural world. Those truths, coupled with insights attained by technological inventors, generated tangible, socially desired products. Credit went primarily to “Science” rather than to technology, which is generally regarded (mistakenly) as “applied science,” and so it came to be believed that ever more science would bring more socially desirable products. Those truths, coupled with insights attained by technological inventors, generated tangible, socially desired products. Credit went primarily to “Science” rather than to technology, which is generally regarded (mistakenly) as “applied science,” and so it came to be believed that ever more science would bring more socially desirable products. Thereby science became a significantly different thing: a means to practical ends instead of a search for universal truths. A crucial difference is that while socially useful products are wanted pronto, ASAP, the search for universal truths cannot be hurried along. Much of what’s wrong with contemporary Science stems from the mistaken belief that it can deliver desired products quite quickly if enough scientists with enough money are thrown at the task.

As with the typical Bubble, the expansion of “Science” was fueled by wishful thinking, unreasonable expectations, and lack of understanding of what science is. In present-day “science,” the number of individuals and groups and laboratories and businesses chasing resources exceed what society needs and is willing to support.

The result has been cutthroat internecine competition and frank dishonesty extending even to outright fraud. Too much “scientific” activity displays shoddy behavior, corner-cutting, game-playing—unsavory practices that mostly but not always manage to remain just short of provable criminality.4 In this way, today’s science is quite a different thing than it was even half a century ago. Earlier, outright fraud in basic scientific research was so extraordinarily rare that instances were treated as singular events. But beginning about in the 1980s, fraud became so troubling an aspect of contemporary science that this has itself become a field of general concern, with journals and books and institutional divisions seeking to study and to prevent it. Scientists used to be regarded as inherently honest truth-seekers; nowadays society is preoccupied with teaching scientists how to be honest.5 That’s quite a difference! Universities whose faculty receive grants from the National Institutes of Health must provide formal courses of instruction in ethical behavior in science.

How the Science Bubble Got Going

Bubbles arise from normality under the illusion that if something is good, then more of it must be better. Performing well in worthwhile enterprises tends to bring tangible rewards—salary raises, bonuses, profits. The incentives are to do more of the same. The temptation is to bend rules, cut corners, become just a little bit dishonest, to do “what everyone else does”—embarking on the proverbial slippery slope that leads toward another Bubble. There is always ample room for rationalizing uncertainty on ethical issues: Is blood doping really a different sort of thing than spending a few months training at a high altitude? And if blood doping is okay, what’s wrong with other pharmaceutical helpers?

So Bubbles eventuate through insidious exaggerations of routine behavior; and as behavior changes, so the norms of acceptable behavior change imperceptibly but eventually ad absurdum.

A plausible origin of the Science Bubble was the prestige gained from the development of the atomic bomb during World War II. Vannevar Bush’s Report to the President, Science: The Endless Frontier, is credited with stimulating an enormous infusion of government funds into science.

Academic institutions cooperated with delight. Four-year colleges and teachers’ colleges transformed themselves into more prestigious, presumptively research universities by hiring scientists who brought research grants loaded with “overhead” that paid for institutional improvements. In the 1940s, there had been 107 doctorate-granting research universities in the United States; 30 years later, there were 307.10 Fellowships encouraged students to take advanced degrees in science. Faculty were rewarded for getting more grants and turning out more graduates. The culture of science became imbued with the misguided, corrupting view that more equals better. More publications, more citations of one’s work, more students mentored, became the way to get ahead.
So “salami-slicing” became very general: publish as many separate articles as possible from a given piece of research, generating the acronym LPU for “least publishable unit.” New journals were founded. So the growing Science Bubble gathered a host of vested interests stretching quite far from the scientific community itself into a variety of influential institutions parasitic on science.

As to fraud, scientific research always involves making judgments. Is this experimental outlier invalid owing to some unknown flaw? If there are very few outliers, it seems reasonable just to discard them—and not even to mention them for fear of misleading others. Perhaps it’s not so long a step from there to “knowing” what a result ought to be and publishing that instead of what the instruments actually showed. And so on. Under pressures to produce, the temptation is to rationalize corner-cutting and set foot on the slippery slope.

**Dysfunctionality**

One sign of the increased prevalence of fraud in science is that the newsletters of the National Institutes of Health quite frequently carry notices naming individuals who have been barred from seeking grants or serving on advisory boards following some kind of dishonest behavior, usually faking experimental results. How common this has become seems astonishing. About 2% of researchers admitted fudging results at least once—but since that 2% also believed that 14% of their colleagues had done so, perhaps the 2% is too low an estimate. Beyond that, about one-third admitted to questionable practices less serious than data fudging, but they thought that nearly three-quarters of their colleagues had been guilty of such misconduct. Rather clearly, mainstream science can no longer be automatically taken as trustworthy.

Such prominent media as the *The Economist* have noted that science has gone badly astray: “modern scientists are doing too much trusting and not enough verifying—to the detriment of the whole of science, and of humanity…shoddy experiments…poor analysis…[H]alf of published research cannot be replicated…. [Only] six of 53 ‘landmark’ studies in cancer research… just a quarter of 67 similarly important papers…. three-quarters of papers in… [computer science] are bunk…. roughly 80,000 patients took part in clinical trials
based on research that was later retracted because of mistakes or improprieties.\textsuperscript{12} Competitiveness resulting from growth is one of the reasons: just after World War II, the world had a few hundred thousand scientists; now there are 6–7 million. . . . “publish or perish” . . . “Every year six freshly minted PhDs vie for every academic post.”

**How Bubbles End**

A lesson from history is that Bubbles end in crashes, not through reform. Those within the Bubble benefit from it and manage to overlook or ignore signs of internal dysfunction and external damage.

The over-production of scientists had been evident for decades. The job market for PhD scientists collapsed in the early 1970s, and though it recovered partly, it never did for physics PhDs, for example.

The ever-increasing competition led to an inescapably obvious decreasing rate of success in obtaining research grants. At the University of Kentucky in the mid-1960s, about half of the Chemistry Department’s proposals to the National Science Foundation succeeded; a decade later there was only 1 grant for every 10 applications. At the National Institutes of Health, the success rate fell from 31% to 18% between 1997 and 2011.\textsuperscript{13} The average age at which researchers receive their first award as principal or sole investigator increased from 37 in 1980 to 42 by 2007.\textsuperscript{14} In effect, biomedical scientists now begin their independent careers in middle age; surely the incentives are therefore enormous to make hay quickly, brushing scruples aside.

Scientists, then, could hardly have avoided recognizing that just about everything associated with careers in research was increasingly dysfunctional. But what could any individual do about that? So almost nothing was in fact done. The only action that comes to mind is that Harvard Medical School announced some years ago that it would henceforth evaluate only a candidate’s five most worthwhile published contributions instead of the whole padded publication list.

Outsiders recognized what was happening,\textsuperscript{6} indeed the historian Derek Price had predicted it.\textsuperscript{2} But the scientific community is not accustomed to taking advice from outsiders, especially not from those—historians, sociologists, etc.—who bring critiques rather than grant funds. And from the other side, the socially, financially, politically powerful institutions will not enact reforms to avoid the Bubble for at least two obvious reasons: First, they do not question the intellectual authority of Science; second, and partly because of that, those institutions brought today’s Big Science into being and are vested in it.

**What’s the Problem?**

Some quite prominent insiders have pointed to specific dysfunctions of the current scene, but they fail to understand that the problem resides in the whole culture of science, and even beyond that in society’s expectations and demands.

“ ‘I see a train wreck looming’, warned Daniel Kahneman, an eminent psychologist. . . . ‘There is no cost to getting things wrong. . . . The cost is not getting them published. . . . Journals must do more to enforce standards. . . . Budding scientists must be . . . imbued with skepticism towards their own results and those of others. Researchers ought to be judged on the basis of the quality, not the quantity, of their work. Funding agencies should encourage replications.’\textsuperscript{15} But journals don’t enforce standards because they’re in the business of aiding publication. Researchers are so driven to publish that new journals are continually founded\textsuperscript{24} to serve that need inherent in today’s scientific culture. Scientists are already skeptical about others’ results, but the truly ground-breaking advances have come from geniuses who were not skeptical about their own notions. Perhaps funding agencies could indeed encourage replications by offering money, but that would not cause the scientific community to award prestige: it’s originality and new discoveries that bring notice and status within and also outside science.

Randy Schekman, winner of a Nobel Prize, recognizes implicitly that the culture of research sets dysfunctional incentives: “Those of us who follow these incentives are being entirely rational—I have followed them myself—but we do not always best serve our profession’s interests, let alone those of humanity and society.”\textsuperscript{17} Schekman suggests that “the incentives offered by top journals distort science” and proposes to organize a boycott of the leading journals Nature, Science, and (in biological sciences) Cell.\textsuperscript{18} Now it’s quite true that everyone wants to publish in Nature and Science, and every biologist wants to publish in Cell, which puts those journals in the impossible dilemma of wanting to be always first but also never wrong.\textsuperscript{19} But Schekman’s suggested solution, editing an on-line, open-access journal supported by funds from prestigious institutional patrons, cannot do what he hopes for. Undermining the prestige of Cell, Nature, and Science cannot change the fact that opinions will always create a hierarchy of prestige of journals, and the same dilemmas will face whichever journals happen to be on top.

Furthermore, Schekman displays a naïve misperception quite common among distinguished scientists of high integrity: he thinks all researchers are much like him. The new journal will be “edited by working scientists, who can assess the worth of papers without regard for citations.” But only time can reveal what is sound and what is not.\textsuperscript{20, 21} The most disinterested, well informed contemporaries simply cannot judge reliably what will stand the test of time and what will not. Moreover, one can only assess what researchers write about what they did, not how honestly they described it.

The status and functions of today’s leading journals are not entirely due to attitudes within the scientific community. The mass media are continually on the lookout for news about the latest exciting advances. Media coverage of science is, by and large, in the hands of people who understand little if anything about the substance of what they are covering, so they use journals of acknowledged high status as their presumptively reliable sources.

**Scientists and Science Policy**

Critiques and suggestions from within the scientific community fall short because the insiders are familiar with the
trees, limbs, leaves, and nuts but do not realize that they are not competent to talk about the forest. And because Science is accepted universally as the ultimate unchallengeable intellectual authority, too many outsiders fail to realize that while scientists should be listened to and interrogated about matters of science, they should not take any leading—let alone decision-making—role in science policy. The difference between doing science and making science policy might be illustrated by what a friend and scientific genius once said to me about President Eisenhower’s expressed ambition to break 80 on the golf course: “What sort of ambition is that? If I were a golfer I would try to break 18!” That’s exactly the obsessive drive that brings scientific advances. God forbid that it guides science policy.

The best credentials for policy advice are in Science & Technology Studies (STS), which integrates the understandings of historians, philosophers, political scientists, economists, engineers, sociologists, and scientific researchers themselves in order to get a handle on the proper role of Science in society. STS has matured as the Science Bubble grew, perhaps because people in those various disciplines recognized that science had become so important within society that its social and political interactions need to be understood better, so that Science could be properly trained and harnessed.

How Can the Science Bubble End?

Scientists did not create the Science Bubble on their own. Influential institutions and society as a whole brought the Bubble into being through wishful thinking and misunderstanding the nature of science. Much of modern society is vested in what has become significantly dysfunctional. History suggests that powerful vested interests need to experience tangible harm before a Bubble collapses. My present guess is that deflation will most likely await a catastrophic failure of science policy on some important matter. Most likely it will come where mainstream scientific advice on issues with significant social, economic, political implications has become too dogmatic for its own good.

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5 For instance, Accountability in Research (begun in 1989) and Ethics in Science and Environmental Politics (begun in 2000).
7 For example, Office of Research Integrity in the Department of Health & Human Services, http://ori.hhs.gov/; Center for Ethics in Science and Technology at the University of California at San Diego, http://www.ethicscenter.net.
8 Committee on the Conduct of Science, On Being a Scientist: A Guide to Responsible Conduct in Research, National Academy of Sciences, 2009 (3rd ed.).
9 Vannevar Bush, Science the Endless Frontier (Report to the President), 1945.
19 P. 67 ff. in xxii.
A Case of Xenoglossy
Under Hypnosis

“Risa” is a housewife who lives in central Japan. She was born in 1958, and her native tongue is Japanese. She majored in home economics when she was a college student and had some experience working as a dietician. Due to various physical problems and difficulties in her household, she sought the help of a hypnotherapist. During a 70-minute hypnotic session conducted in June 2005, she recalled “past-life” memories as a village chief in Nepal. She provided some proper names and some information about her village life. In response to the hypnotherapist’s request to speak in Nepali, she also uttered two non-Japanese sentences, although she has no knowledge of Nepali in the waking state. But the hypnotherapist’s attempt to verify the information Risa gave during the session was not successful.

After reading a report written by the hypnotherapist,1 we borrowed the audio data of the session and examined the contents, including the two sentences, with the help of three native speakers of Nepali. The Nepali speakers judged that the two sentences were indeed Nepali and that some of the proper names given by the subject sounded familiar to them. Upon request, Risa and the hypnotherapist agreed to conduct another session.

Background
When a person is able to speak a language he or she could not have acquired by natural means, the phenomenon is known as xenoglossy. It usually occurs in a trance or altered state. Most published reports of xenoglossy contain too little information to permit a test of their validity, and the question of earlier normal learning of the language looms large in such cases. There is a narrow subset of such cases, however, in which the subject seems to be able to converse intelligently in the foreign language and is not just repeating a few phrases of a language that they may have learned casually in some way. These cases, known as responsive xenoglossy, are rare but offer true probative value. Once the possibility of fraud or early language learning is eliminated in such cases, only three solutions—all quite extraordinary—remain to potentially explain the phenomenon: (1) the subject is possessed by another personality; (2) the subject’s mind is able to extract knowledge of the language from the minds of others; or (3) the subject has learned the language in a previous lifetime, which would be proof of reincarnation.

As far as we are aware, there are only two other well-documented cases of xenoglossy occurring under hypnosis, both of which were reported by Dr. Ian Stevenson, a psychiatrist at the University of Virginia who spent decades researching what he cautiously called “Cases of the Reincarnation Type.” In the first, the subject was a woman of a physician in Philadelphia who had employed hypnosis in his medical practice from time to time, and also conducted experiments at home. In one of the experimental sessions with his wife, she started to say, “I am a man.” When asked his name, he said “Jensen Jacoby,” and spoke some Swedish words and two Swedish phrases. In eight sessions conducted in 1955–56, Jensen appeared and spoke Swedish.2

In the second case, the subject was a wife of a Methodist minister who practiced hypnosis for relieving occasional pains in members of his family or friends. One day he hypnotized his wife, attempting to remove her back pain. To his question: “Does your back hurt?” she replied: “Nein” (No). In the next and subsequent sessions, his wife identified the speaking personality as “Gretchen” who lived in Germany in the second half of the 19th century. In one of the sessions (conducted in 1971), Ian Stevenson himself had a sensible conversation with the subject in German.3

The case being described here, Risa’s case, is only the third known case of xenoglossy occurring under hypnosis. Although her case shares some of the weaknesses with the two
cases reported by Stevenson, when taking into account the physical and emotional state of the subject and the linguistic distance between the subject’s native tongue and the language spoken under hypnosis, this case can be regarded as presenting a strong piece of evidence for the survival hypothesis, stronger even than either of Stevenson’s cases for reasons that will become clear once the case has been described.

**Investigation and Analysis**

Our session with Risa took place on May 9, 2009, and was attended by a Nepali speaker, Paudel Kalpana, a graduate student at Asahi University. During the session, Risa was able to communicate in Nepali for about 24 minutes until the hypnotherapist decided to terminate the session as Risa became tired and less responsive. The conversation data was transcribed and analyzed with the help of Paudel Kalpana, who spoke with Risa during the session, and anthropologist Khanal Kishor Chandra, a visiting researcher at Chubu University. Linguist Kiryu Kazuyuki of Mimasaka University undertook detailed grammatical analysis from the point of view of Nepali linguistics.

Concerning her “past-life” as a Nepali village chief, Risa recalled his name (Rataraju), his name as a boy (Kira), his wife’s name (Rameli), his son’s name (Kujaus), his daughter’s name (Adis), his father’s name (Tamali) and his tribe (Tamang), as well as the food he ate (lentil, rice, millet), the number of villagers/households at the time (25), and what funerals involved (Himalaya, cremation).

The two Nepali speakers found that Risa did have some command of the language, although it was clearly not at the level of a native speaker. Attempting to quantify that impression, we divided the data into 81 chunks and analyzed the first 70 (chunks 71–80 being excluded because Risa was so fatigued). The Nepali speakers found that Risa clearly established conversation in 27 chunks, appropriately answering the questions 39 percent of the time. For example, in response to the question “Tapaiko nam ke ho?” (What is your name?), Risa replied “Mero nam Rataraju” (My name is Rataraju).

In another 37 percent of the cases, although Risa answered in Nepali, she might not have understood the questions. For example in response to the question “Kati barsa hunu bho?” (How old are you?), she said “Ke?” (What?), or in response to the question “Gharma shrimati hunuhuncha ki hunu-huncha?” (Is your wife at home or not at home?), she said “Bujina” (I don’t know). These responses were not as strongly evidential as those in the previous category, since one can pretend, at least for a short period of time, that he/she has some command of a language which he/she actually does not know by memorizing and using certain phrases such as “I don’t know.”

In 9 percent of the conversational chunks, Risa’s responses were judged “inappropriate,” and in another 16 percent, her responses judged “ambiguous,” when for example an utterance can be interpreted either as an answer such as “yes” or as just a gap-filler.

We then considered Risa’s vocabulary. The number of words she used was not large, only 34. However, of these 34 words, Risa first uttered 20 words herself. The fact that she uttered these words within a short conversation seems to suggest that she has at least a minimum level of vocabulary knowledge to communicate.

Anthropologist Chandra, who is quite familiar with linguistic situations in Nepal, pointed out one interesting fact about the conversation that took place. When asked for the name of his wife, Risa did not seem to understand the word _shrimati_, which is the word for “wife” the Nepali speaker first used in her question. This word is usually taught in lessons of the language, and educated people are familiar with it. When Kalpana replaced the word with _swasni_, a non-standard word meaning “wife,” Risa instantly understood the meaning and answered appropriately. This seems to indicate that the Nepali Risa used was not standard Nepali, even if she had learned the language.

It should be pointed out that Risa’s responses tended to be short, either a few words or simple sentences, and no complex structures like subordinate clauses are observed. One notable point, however, is that Risa used two forms of the same verb _hunu_, meaning “be,” as in:

- b. Mero buwa Tamang hunu-huncha. “My father is the Tamang.”

The Nepali verb _hunu_ shows a complicated conjunctional pattern depending on the properties of the subject. In (b) the high-grade form is properly used showing respect to the father of the previous personality. On the other hand, in (a), the singular low-grade form of the same verb is used. The form here is the third person singular low-grade form rather than the expected second person singular low-grade _hunchas_ or second person middle grade _hunchau_. Chandra explains that using the third person singular form in an environment where the second person form is required is quite common,
especially among speakers whose first language is not Nepali (like Rataraju, who seems to have belonged to the Tamang), and that the usage here, although “ungrammatical” from the viewpoint of the standard grammar, makes more sense than the proper form. This usage is particularly surprising in view of the fact that Japanese, Risa’s native language, lacks Subject-Verb Agreement, and that learners of languages with this property, like English, tend to have considerable difficulty in acquiring this part of the grammar.

There are some weaknesses to the present case, however: Risa rarely initiated a conversation and her responses were relatively slow. Her limited vocabulary and sentence structure, and the spotty nature of her responses, are weaknesses shared with the two cases reported by Stevenson. But Risa’s case differs from—and may be stronger than—Stevenson’s cases in two important ways. First, Risa only had two sessions in which she communicated in her past-life language, whereas in the case of Jensen, the Swedish-speaking personality Stevenson examined appeared in eight sessions, and in the case of Gretchen, the German-speaking personality Stevenson examined appeared in 19 sessions. Since in both of these cases the past life language seemed to improve over the sessions, it might be plausible to assume that “past life” personalities need to be called out a number of times for them to fully recover the language they used and in Risa’s case the number of times the previous personality was called out was not enough to exhibit some fluency with the language.

Second, Japanese, Risa’s native language, is genealogically unrelated to Nepali, which is an Indo-European language. This is in sharp contrast with the cases of Jensen and Gretchen, where the subjects’ native language, English, and the languages of their “past life” personalities, Swedish and German, are classified as Germanic languages and genealogically very close to English. Therefore, in these cases, we might suspect that the subjects were somehow able to utilize their linguistic knowledge, at least at the level of grammar, in speaking the “unknown” language. This possibility, however, can be excluded in the present case.

In addition, we might also point out the strong possibility that the Rataraju personality was not a native speaker of Nepali, since he referred to himself as belonging to the Tamang, whose native tongue, Tamang, is in the Sino-Tibetan family. This could have contributed to the lack of fluency in his speech.

Because of these differences, we might be able to say that the present case is stronger in evidential value than the cases investigated by Stevenson.

**Learned Language?**

The most important point that remained to be determined in this case is whether Risa had the opportunity to learn Nepali by normal means. She claims that she has never studied Nepali nor has she had contact with Nepali speakers. In order to confirm her claims, we first investigated the personal history of the subject, which led us to conclude that it is highly unlikely for her to have learned Nepali. We then asked Risa and her husband to sign a pledge that Risa had never learned Nepali in her entire life, which the couple did willingly. Finally, we gave Risa...
With the village of Nallu located, and since Risa under hypnosis seemed to refer to the Rana dynasty, which ruled the Kingdom of Nepal from 1846 to 1951, we hoped that we might be able to track down the past-life personality by doing some fieldwork in the village. Ohkado Masayuki undertook this task, spending a week in the village in August 2010 with Chandra, who served as guide and interpreter. We had relatively long interviews with seven people: a 38-year-old elementary school teacher; the secretary of the Village Development Committee (VDC) at Nallu (June–July 2008); the vice secretary of the VDC at the Nallu village since June 2008; the oldest man in the village (103) and his 78-year-old son; the 53-year-old, former village chief; and the 65-year-old secretary of the VDC (1980–1984, 1992–2010). The villagers interviewed gave two people, Ratnaraj Shapkota and Rana Bahadur, as possible candidates. However, the names of their wives and children are different and neither of them could have been Rataraju.

The village did not keep written records before 1950. Furthermore, all the documents in the VDC at the village
But the most intriguing discovery related to the case concerns how to express numbers. When asked about the age when he died, the Rataraju personality answered “at satori” (eight and seventy), putting the digit of one’s place before the digit of ten’s place. All the Nepali speakers we consulted in Japan commented that this was “unnatural.” In some languages such as German, the one’s digits in a number are said before the tens digits, but Nepali is not such a language. But this way of expressing numbers used to be the common in the village, especially before education became widespread. Jaya Bahadur Ghalan, who was 103 years old, unintentionally showed us this custom when we asked him how old he was. Since he can no longer speak, he communicates with gestures. In answering our question, he first showed “three” and then “100” in accordance with the old custom in the village.

**Conclusion**

There are many cases in which subjects’ “past-life” recalls are to be regarded as products of their imagination. However, although it happens rarely, hypnotic regression seems to induce a state in some people that can only be accounted for paranormally, either as (1) possession, (2) superpsi, or (3) reincarnation.

We discount the possibility of possession because the Stevenson’s two cases and our case are different from possession cases in at least three ways: (1) Personalities in possession tend to be more talkative. Basically, the subjects in the three cases spoke only when questioned. (2) The subjects seemed to understand their native languages (English in Stevenson’s cases and Japanese in our case), so the two personalities seemed to go hand in hand. (3) The personalities were evoked only under hypnosis.

We also discount the possibility of superpsi because, as philosopher Curt J. Ducasse and Stevenson have argued, one must recognize the difference Michael Polanyi drew between “knowledge that…” and “knowledge how to…” The former is information and could hypothetically be transmitted by telepathy or other psi abilities, but the latter is a skill and cannot be so transmitted. In order to converse in a language, one must practice it; it is not simply a matter of repeating a few words and phrases.

“The statements she made matched the life and customs of the place where the previous-life personality was considered to have lived…”

were burned in 2003 at the time of the People’s War. The only relevant record we found is the electoral roll of 1994 stored in the Election Commission of Nepal. Rataraju himself would not be listed in the document as a voter, as he would have long been dead, but we hoped that we might be able to find the names of his son or daughter. However, we were not able to find any of the names Risa had mentioned among the 1643 voters (plus corresponding “guardians” for women) listed in the document, although a few could be considered “close” (Ratnaraj Shapkota instead of Rataraju). But the people whose names are close to Adis or Rameli did not have husbands or fathers whose names are close to Rataraju.

So neither the interview-based nor the document-based research was able to identify the people Risa had mentioned.

On the other hand, Risa’s remarks about food and funerals turned out to be correct, or apparently correct. Lentil and millet are both principal foods in the village, and rice is also eaten on special occasions. The funeral reference to the “Himalaya,” which all the Nepalis we consulted in Japan said they did not understand, seems to indicate the funeral custom in the village, in which bodies are brought to a mountain from where the Himalaya can be seen and the body cremated.

Risa’s remarks about the number of villagers at the time of her claimed previous life are not off the mark either. According to former village chief Krishna Bhadur Tamang, the village used to be divided into 25 small groups. (But it is not the case that there were only 25 households, let alone 25 people as far as the former chief knows.)
Risa’s case falls short of a perfect confirmed case of reincarnation, however, as her past-life personality was not identified. But given that she displayed some ability to converse in a language not known to her—one that was perhaps not even that well known to her past life personality—and that the statements she made matched the life and customs of the place where the previous-life personality was considered to have lived, we conclude that this case provides some potential support for the reality of reincarnation.

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“In our constant search for meaning in this baffling and temporary existence, trapped as we are within our three pounds of neurons, it is sometimes hard to tell what is real. We often invent what isn’t there. Or ignore what is. We try to impose order, both in our minds and in our conceptions of external reality. We try to connect. We try to find truth. We dream and we hope. And underneath all of these strivings, we are haunted by the suspicion that what we see and understand of the world is only a tiny piece of the whole.”

The world is to realize that it is quite similar to another world we know very well—the world of our dreams. When we are dreaming, people only come into existence there when we interact with them. They snap into existence the instant we observe them. Otherwise, the various people from our waking lives exist only as possibilities in the backs of our minds, figures who could exist in our dream world but so far remain mere potentials. Even though we are not aware of the similarity as we experience our lives, quantum physics has shown that the physical world seems to work in the same way.

There are differences, to be sure. All sorts of nonsensical things happen in the dream world. We can suddenly fly in some dreams, but we are unlikely to do so in the physical world. It is undeniable that the possibilities are more limited in the physical world. Events that begin through observation become fixed, unable to be altered by other observations. The overall process, however, is very similar. Possibilities exist, and one of them becomes a fact when it is observed.

The analogy to dreams is so apt that the world can be thought of, not as the giant clockworks of Isaac Newton’s mechanistic universe, but as a dream that all its observers share. Its pieces only come into existence when one of its dreamers experiences them. When something is not being observed, it may as well not exist.

Becoming aware that the universe at its most basic level depends on consciousness in order to exist requires us to alter our understandings of the world. The findings in quantum mechanics are so startling and, frankly, so hard to comprehend, that many scientists in other areas have not yet incorporated them into their fields. Biologists, for example, still tend to think of consciousness as being simply a byproduct of the brain, or an epiphenomenon, as it evolved to help organisms survive in the natural world.
This view needs to change. I would argue that the universe is not a purposeless place that we came to exist in by random accident. Consciousness is the primary force of existence, and the physical universe is secondary to it. It exists because we exist, a product of our group imagination. We think of our minds existing in this world, but it’s actually the world that exists in our minds.

The possibility of children remembering past lives fits in nicely with this new understanding of existence. If the physical universe grows out of consciousness, there is no reason to think that a person’s individual consciousness ends when the physical brain dies. It may continue after death and return in a future life.

With the idea that the world exists as a shared dream, my thinking about death has changed. I no longer imagine that we go to another place when we die. Instead, we have another dream. The idea of some entity—a soul or a consciousness—moving from one world to another places too much emphasis on the physical worlds. Instead, the new experiences continue to be creations of the mind. If the shared dream model is correct, there need not be just one Afterlife. Each individual starts another dream at the point of death, and the nature of the dream can vary from person to person.

**Experiences Near Death**

Near-death experiences (or NDEs) are, as the name suggests, the events that people report having when they come very close to death before being revived. The specifics of these experiences can vary. Just as people’s nighttime dreams are affected by their previous experiences, I would expect afterlife events to be affected by experiences in life, and this seems to be the case. In particular, though there are common features of NDEs across cultures, there are also cultural differences.

Some people take the differences to mean that NDEs are not real events and that they do not provide evidence that consciousness can exist independently of the brain. Author Sam Harris recently made this argument regarding an NDE that Eben Alexander, a neurosurgeon for many years at Harvard Medical School, experienced and then wrote about in his book, *Proof of Heaven*. Harris noted that Alexander’s account differed from another recent one, that of a four-year-old boy described in the book *Heaven is for Real*, commenting that Alexander doesn’t mention that Jesus rides a rainbow-colored horse or that souls of dead children must still do homework in heaven.

The fallacy of Harris’s argument is that it’s based on the premise that, as he says, “if a nonphysical domain were truly being explored, some universal characteristics would stand out.” Some universal characteristics do stand out as a matter of fact, but beyond that, the bigger issue is that there is not just a single place where people go after they die. With the model I’m presenting, differences would be expected when people experience their next consciousness-created reality, their next dream. Just as an American Christian is unlikely to dream at night about Yama, the god of death, and an Indian Hindu is unlikely to dream about Jesus, a four-year-old’s next consciousness-created reality may have little in common with that of a neurosurgeon.

The distinct differences among the experiences of various individuals also argue against the idea that NDEs are merely the result of the firings of dying brains, which might be expected to produce more uniform images. Arguing against this as well are the reports that many of the children with past-life memories make about events between lives. About twenty percent of the children say they remember either observing earthly events such as the previous person’s funeral, going to another realm, or having experiences related to conception or gestation to begin their current life.

The dying brains idea that some people offer to explain NDEs can’t possibly work for these similar reports from healthy, young children. The intermission, or life between life, experiences and intermission reports from young children—can be seen as glimpses of the afterlife, and they are both consistent with the model of consciousness-created reality.

**The Dream Continues**

With the past-life memories they report, the children in our cases seem to be returning to this world in which they lived a previous life. A better way of describing this is to say that regardless of whether the children have an intermission experience, they fall back into the same dream they were in before—meaning this world. They have to be a new character as they continue, since the previous person has died in the dream at that point. Imagine that you are sleeping at night; you are awakened in the middle of a dream—perhaps you are startled awake by something traumatic that happens in it—but then you fall back asleep quickly and continue on in the same dream. This is completely analogous to what happens in our cases.

First, the new life usually starts very soon after the last one ended. The median interval between the death of the previous person and the birth of the child is only sixteen months. With the interval typically being so short, these cases are like waking up from a dream and then falling back asleep quickly and continuing in the same dream.

The endings of the past lives tend to be like dreams that end prematurely. In seventy percent of our cases, the previous person died by unnatural means, either by murder, suicide, or accident. The previous individuals also tend to die quite young, with the median age at death being only twenty-eight years old. Even when the previous people died from natural causes, their median age was only thirty-five, with a quarter of those deaths occurring when the person was fifteen or less.

If you look at a graph of the number of deaths in the
were complete strangers, you find that there are some statistically significant differences regarding how the previous person died. Cases involving ordinary deaths are more likely to be same-family cases. The families are more likely to be strangers when more exceptional deaths were involved, meaning when the previous person died an unnatural death, died younger, or died unexpectedly even when the death was from natural causes.

My interpretation of this is that individuals with strong or unresolved emotional connections to their families come back to the same dream to continue the story with them. In situations without those emotional issues, these other factors—the unnatural or early or unexpected deaths—cause the individual to quickly fall back into the same dream as before, but not necessarily into the same family.

Other Worlds
With our nighttime dreams, it’s unusual of course to return to the same dream. I wonder if that’s the case with our lives as well. Past-life memories, as far as anyone can tell, are not common. Only one systematic survey has been done looking at their frequency. It involved people in one section of India, and the researchers found that one case occurred for every 450 inhabitants, though they acknowledged they may have missed some cases. It’s at least conceivable that many more children come into the world with past-life memories but that they either lose the memories before they are verbal enough to convey them or that their attempts to convey them are ignored
or rebuffed strongly enough by their parents to quash them.

Nonetheless, there is no evidence that most children have such memories and thus no evidence, even if you accept our cases, that everyone is reborn back into this world. I see no reason to think that other mind-created worlds, other shared dreams, wouldn’t exist in addition to the world we know here. Just as we usually don’t return to the same dream when we sleep at night, the same pattern may well be true for our lives. Though individuals occasionally return to this shared dream, it might be more common to begin participating in a different shared dream after we die.

What might these other consciousness-created worlds be like? I suspect that depends on the experiences we’ve had in this life. Our nighttime dreams are certainly affected by our experiences during the day. The themes of your day may repeat themselves in your dreams at night. If you watch a horror movie, you may regret doing so later when you have bad dreams. Your experiences matter; they affect the dreams that follow.

Likewise, your life experiences could affect the mind-created worlds that follow after you die. Many Christians say your actions or beliefs determine whether you go to Heaven or Hell. But if I am right about existence being like a shared dream, then there might not be just one Heaven or just one Hell. There might be an infinite number of shared dreams, some heavenly, some hellish, and some like this world—heavenly at times, hellish at times, and most of the time somewhere in between. I do find it notable, however, that in this model I’m suggesting, the religions are right that the decisions and actions you make in this life help determine the kind of existence you have next. Though this would not involve a Judgment Day of any kind, you could experience a “good” afterlife or a “bad” one based on your life now, in what would be a purely naturalistic process.

This process also seems similar to karma, the Eastern concept that your actions determine your future circumstances. I don’t mean karmic retribution or any sort of orchestrated punishments or rewards, but there could be consequences that would flow naturally from your prior experiences. Tibetan Buddhists feel that in addition to how you live your life, the state of mind you are in at the moment of death—your last thoughts and emotions—are critical in determining the existence you have next. This would be consistent with this model in which what your mind creates next is affected by the thoughts that lead up to each moment.

The afterlife environment might be surprisingly similar to this one. Though we don’t typically return to the same dream at night, our dreams usually involve a fairly similar setting. There could be differences to be sure, perhaps as many as the mind can imagine, and the physics might be distinctly
different in one world compared to another. But at the very least, I think there would still be a space-time kind of experience and not purely thought or spirit. For there to be a sequence of events—for things to happen—there has to be, it seems to me, some kind of space-time world.

Mediums have provided numerous descriptions of the afterlife, but one illustration I want to share comes from Reverend C. Drayton Thomas, or more precisely from his deceased wife. Rev. Thomas wrote books about mediumship in the 1920s and ’30s. Our office has a photocopy of a rough draft manuscript he wrote at some point. It includes various corrections, some handwritten. I don’t know that it was ever published, but at the end is a three-page description that really struck me. Entitled “An account of her passing given by my wife through the mediumship of Mrs. Osborne Leonard,” it purports to be a description by Thomas’s wife of events in the afterlife. It concludes with “What I am so astonished about is the reality and substance of things here.... In the garden I... tried feeling the trees, and found that their bark felt just as solid as the trees in our garden at home. I even tried to shake the trees but could not; they were large trees and felt firm to my hand. When I touch other people their hands, too, feel firm. There is nothing vague or vapoury about us.”

I don’t think there is our world and then the real spiritual world. Our world is as real as it gets. It is created by Mind, but that is also true for all other worlds. Existence grows out of consciousness.

Who is with us in the shared dreams of the afterlife? When I dream at night, people who are meaningful to me tend to pop up repeatedly. Characters in my dreams include people who are around me a lot—my wife, of course, as well as friends or coworkers—along with people I happened to run into during the preceding day or even just had occasion to think about that day. But then there are also those I haven’t seen or even thought about for some time but with whom I still feel an emotional connection. This is particularly true for people I’ve known, or even pets I’ve had, who are deceased, some of whom I’ve dreamed about periodically for years after their deaths. I may dream about them more than I did when they were alive even, because their absence leaves an emotional tie that can no longer be fulfilled. Our consciousness-created worlds may be populated in a similar way. Certainly the initial ones are, as people who have near-death experiences often report seeing deceased relatives on the other side. (Some even report seeing deceased relatives they hadn’t known were dead before they had their NDEs, producing some very impressive cases.)

It’s unclear how time would work across mind-created worlds. It’s easiest to conceptualize lifetimes as being sequential—first I have one life, then another, then another—but I don’t know if that makes complete sense when the lives involve different dream worlds. The different worlds or different dreams—while being space-time worlds—would themselves transcend space-time. While I think any world where things happen has to involve space and time, I’m not sure they would have to follow each other sequentially. They certainly appear to in some instances, such as when people report encountering other realms in NDEs. But I suspect the process is complex. For example, perhaps individuals can be characters in more than one dream. Perhaps you will see your deceased grandmother after you die one day, while “at the same time” she has also been reborn into another life here. Things may not be linear in a way we can easily understand.

Other examples of when one dream seems to follow another occur when children say they watched events in their parents’ lives from heaven. These are a bit more challenging to explain with the dream model. They suggest individuals may occasionally be able to see across dreams or worlds, to view one dream while experiencing another one. This would be similar to reports in mediumship, where individuals in the afterlife—in a different dream—appear able to communicate with individuals in this world. At times, some people seem able to cross boundaries of consciousness. I make no claim to fully understand how they do it, but this ability may illustrate that consciousness and consciousness-created realities are more fluid and interconnected than we might think.

The Dreamer

If we can move from one dream to another when we die, then some part of us would transcend the worlds we experience. We would have a larger self existing across our lives. To go back to the dream model, I exist as a character in my nighttime dreams, usually my daytime self but occasionally someone else. Along with my character in the short-lived dream, I as a dreamer also have my real self that exists apart from the dream. Likewise, I think we each have a larger part of us that transcends the individual dream—the individual lifetime—and continues to take part in creating other dreams, other worlds, other lifetimes.

**“These reincarnation cases are like waking up from a dream and then falling back asleep quickly and continuing in the same dream.”**

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Photo Credit: Meghan Rand
When Dogma Trumps Evidence and the Scientific Method

Will Storr, journalist and novelist, has written a book about people who vociferously disregard evidence that does not fit comfortably with their dogmas. Yes, many of the usual suspects are here: the Holocaust denier, the creationist who ridicules evolutionary theory, and the past Thatcher science advisor who pooh-poohs global warming.

But Storr shows that many debunkers and critics of non-mainstream (in our culture) beliefs are equally contemptuous of the scientific method and, in some cases such as that of the “Amazing Randi,” mythologize themselves and lie in order to ridicule and frustrate their opponents. Lying is a strong word, but a refreshing virtue of Storr is that he arrives to his interviews very well-prepared and is fearless in his probes:

R: Oh, I agree. No question of that. I don’t know whether the lies are conscious lies all the time...
S: So you’ve never been wrong about anything significant?
R: In regard to the Skeptical movement and my work…
S: Nothing occurs to me at the moment.

In a note about his method at the end of the book, Storr declares that his “knowledge is broad but shallow,” yet he is an astute and vigorous synthesizer of many sources including the media and academic publications. Heretics is at its most incisive when it juxtaposes replies from opposite camps, revealing just how similar they actually are despite content divergences. A telling example is from his chapter on homeopathy. First an advocate:

S: What would your response be to a Skeptic who says it’s [the active substance in a homeopathic preparation] diluted to such an extent that there is actually nothing to it?
G: I’d say go and look it up.
S: Look it up?
G: Yeah.
S: Have you ever read any scientific studies that have looked at the efficacy of homeopathy?
G: Yes.
S: Which ones?
G: Don’t ask me that question.

And now an attendee at a Skeptic conference in which homeopathy is ridiculed:

S: Have you read any scientific studies into homeopathy?
D: Not personally… lots of people, if they take homeopathy and think it’s real medicine, they might avoid going to an actual doctor.
S: Do you know anyone that that’s happened to?
D: Not personally.

Finally, one of the organizers of the conference:

M: There is no evidence for homeopathy. The science has been done. It simply doesn’t work.

That dogmatic leaders and followers, independently of their specific beliefs, share a similar antiscientific stance is something I discussed in a paper in which I contrasted true skeptics, that is those who are skeptical even of their own preconceptions, with “skeptics.” Using the word as an acronym, I posited that the latter provide Simplistic explanations that disregard the complexity of reality; are Knowledge-averse (unless the new information confirms their beliefs); Ensure that other perspectives cannot be considered (witness the call by some scientists to forbid the scientific study of parapsychological phenomena!); are Inconsistent in the use of standards of proof, requiring standards from their foes that they do not follow themselves; and use Circular and other forms of faulty reasoning, for instance demanding that to be taken seriously research for psi should be published in scientific journals while simultaneously chastising any journal that dares to publish research on such topics.

Heretics is full of examples of the processes I described, but also proposes an explanation as to why so many people, some of them with advanced degrees, are willing to commit fervently to dogmas, ignore any challenging evidence, and, not infrequently, abuse and try to banish those they disagree with. There are many elements to Storr’s explanation: the degree to which irrational nonconscious processes determine our evaluations and judgment, how confirmation biases help us maintain a previously held belief instead of revising it when presented with contradictory information (in Piagetian terms, assimilation versus accommodation), how much humans seek to be members of an in-group that targets other groups, and what a minute amount of available information we can process at any one point in time. Storr bases many of his statements on the research of landmark psychologists (Solomon Asch, Jerome Bruner, Daniel Kahneman, Timothy Wilson, and Philip Zimbardo, among others). A paper he missed is A.G. Greenwald’s review exposing how much we distort reality and alter our perceptions, evaluations, and memories, in order to maintain a narcissistic self-image, a process that...
Greenwald compares with that of a totalitarian state. This reference would have strengthened Storr’s account of a personal narrative of the self as heroic and battling against the forces of obscurantism, evident in so many “defenders” of science who miss the point of how humbling and difficult the scientific method actually is, requiring of us the unnatural act of putting aside our most cherished (and too often emotional and not fully thought-out) beliefs and expectations and regarding all evidence and its potentially distressing implications.

Heretics covers many interesting topics including psi, homeopathy, extreme obedience to gurus, global warming, and unexplained medical illnesses. I found its discussions generally well-informed and balanced, with one exception. Chapter 10 includes interviews with a British therapist with an unfalsifiable belief in rampant satanic abuse. Dr. Sinason interprets patients saying that they “don’t know” whether they were horribly abused as “What they really mean is, ‘I can’t bear to say.’” Her account not only defies common sense (if the powerful, widespread horrible cabals she describes actually existed, they would have killed and eaten her a long time ago), but being so extreme perversely helps those who seek to deny the horrible abuses that do happen and are described in our newspapers with dizzying frequency. To counterpose Dr. Sinason’s stance, which could create or at least distort the memories of her patients, Storr relies on the opinions of two non-clinicians, Drs. French and Loftus, who go to the other extreme of questioning both the possibility of actual trauma being forgotten and remembered later and the diagnosis of dissociative identity disorder (erstwhile known as “multiple personality”), yet Storr does not challenge their perspective. The malleability of memory exemplified by possibly “implanted memories” is actually consistent with that expressed in forgotten but later “recovered memories.” There is ample experimental and clinical evidence that psychologically based (i.e. psychogenic) amnesia exists and can be reversed in therapy or spontaneously. The British Psychological Society concluded that therapy-induced beliefs do occur, but that “the ground for debate has also shifted from the question of the possibility of recovery of memory from total amnesia to the question of the prevalence of recovery of memory from total amnesia.” Furthermore, there is clinical, cross-cultural, cognitive, and neurological evidence for the validity of dissociative identity disorder. In a minor vein, Storr falls prey at times to the current neuro-babble of writing about people as if they were just brains and explaining cognitive and emotional biases exclusively in cognitive and neurological terms.

The historian of ideas Isaiah Berlin also characterized those who have “arrived at clear and unshakable convictions about what to do and what to be that brooks no possible doubt…. [T]hose who rest on such comfortable beds of dogma are victims of forms of self-induced myopia, blinkers that may make for contentment, but not for understanding of what it is to be human.” Storr’s depiction of some rather unpleasant “heretics,” however, shows that they are less content than Berlin thought.

Heretics also a tale of personal examination in which Storr reveals how much his explanations of irrationality and dogma can refer to many passages in his life and should make readers ponder whether they are taking the very easy step of assuming that it is only “others” who express these deeply irrational and at times destructive mechanisms but not themselves. This book shows how unusual beliefs and experiences (e.g., hallucinations and delusions) are not necessarily an indication of pathology and, in some cases, are but amplifications of processes present in all of us. In often uncomfortable ways, Storr updates the Roman Terence’s dictum that nothing human is alien to us.

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An Undiscovered Ligament

A couple of Belgian orthopedic surgeons have (re)discovered an unknown knee ligament. The mainstream news is treating their finding as an oddity, amusing but only potentially important if there turn out to be practical implications when performing knee surgery. That narrative does make a certain amount of sense.

But what's not being considered in the news — a really fascinating thing — is how the ligament (a big honking thing) could have remained invisible for the roughly hundred and fifty years since a Parisian surgeon first described it.

Consider what had to have happened. How many hundreds of thousands of medical students went into their anatomy classes and during dissection exercises noticed this tissue around the knee, but when they couldn't find it mentioned in their texts promptly forgot about it? How many professors of medicine never paid attention to what their eyes told them? “Gee whiz,” they all assumed, “any structure that large must have been well documented ages ago,” so they all, students and professors alike, concluded it wasn’t possible that they were seeing what they were seeing.

Such universal acculturated blindness is truly mind-boggling. What it should remind us of is that in many other areas of life the things that everybody accepts as being true, or complete, may not be. Nor are these experiences mere oddities: collectively we overlook massive (and obvious) things, even critically important things, all too often.

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**“Surgeons Discover Quirky Knee Ligament All Over Again” by Michaelleen Doucleff, NPR, November 7, 2013**