

# Heroes & villains of psychology



Andrew Newton

# Contents

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In praise of Carl Rogers 3

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In praise of Irving Kirsch 4

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In praise of Stanley Milgram 8

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In ridicule of Deepak Chopra 10

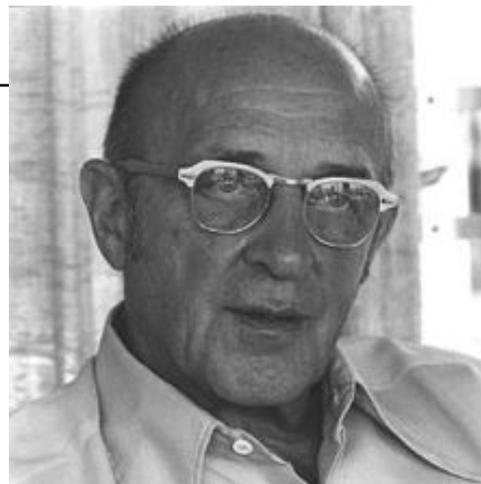
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In disbelief of Rhonda Byrne 11

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## In praise of Carl Rogers

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It was Carl Rogers that first recognised that the patient dictates the direction and pace of the session, not the therapist. I imagine that this great man, a true giant among psychologists, came to this conclusion after long experience. Allowing the client to take charge of their own session may sound revolutionary, but it is empowering, and it gives the therapist a much clearer idea of what needs to be done. After all, no one understands the problem as well as the client, and therapy is all about listening to the client.

People like talking about themselves... and the cosy environment of the therapy room gives them the perfect opportunity. It also provides the perfect opportunity for the client to 'talk out' their problems and gain a sense of perspective.

Carl Rogers is the man who simplified talking therapy and made it work so well. The concept is brilliant in its simplicity and Rogers far outstrips his predecessors – especially Freud – in the genius stakes.

Carl Rogers was the inventor of the best, most incisive, most effective kind of common-sense client-centred therapy, without the baggage of Freud's sexual repression. Rogers understood that people are at their best when they view matters from the vantage point of their own unique experience, perceptions and feelings. Each person's distinctive outlook is the major determining factor affecting behaviour.

Rogers understood that healthy people are aware, or can easily become aware, of the reasons for their behaviour and that healthy people are innately good and effective – and therefore able to achieve their goals. The only thing stopping them is faulty learning.

Nor are healthy people merely passive respondents to their environment, rather, they are self-directed. Therapists can and should, create conditions that will facilitate independent decision making. The ability to make one's own decisions is a deep rooted part of the survival strategy. People who are able to make their own decisions are invariably healthier and on the whole, more civilised – especially when they are not concerned with the demands, evaluations and preferences of others. Once a person reaches a state of 'self-actualisation' they are well on their way to fulfilling their potential as human beings.

Rogers always avoided the imposition of goals – he always allowed clients to take the lead and direct the course of the conversation and this is something I have found works best. Their own intrinsic qualities of self determination always surface in the end.

Such is my regard for Rogers – without him I would not have become much of an effective therapist.

## In praise of Irving Kirsch

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It is not often I am impressed by psychologists, after all, most of the time psychology just proves what deep down, we all knew to be the truth in the first place. Carl Rogers reduced the process of therapy to its most simple and effective form.

Professor Irving Kirsch, is the greatest psychologist, thinker and scientist of the present age. Kirsch – who at the time of writing is resident at the University of Hull in the UK – has made the single most valuable contribution to mental health in the last three decades, even though the rest of the medical community aren't aware of this fact. But the pharmaceutical companies are, and Kirsch has seriously pissed them off.

Kirsch is an expert on suggestion. I first came across him in 1993 when he conducted experiments in how to make people who actively resisted hypnosis, hypnotisable. Having watched him conduct one of these experiments, I knew then that he had an impressive understanding of hypnosis, all the more so because it neatly coincided with my own hard-learned thinking.

Kirsch has had the courage to repeat the heretical idea that in most cases, placebos work just as well as drugs. Suggestions are cheaper and they have no side effects.

In 1998, Kirsch and his colleague Guy Sapirstein conducted an examination of 38 manufacturer sponsored studies which involved over 3,000 patients suffering from depression. Their results revealed that patients did often improve after being prescribed the relevant antidepressants. But when Kirsch and Sapirstein compared the results with the improvements in control groups who had been given the placebo, there was hardly any difference at all!

Kirsch points out that these manufacturer studies were the basis of the FDA's approval of the drugs. That leaves us with the inescapable conclusion that the drug works only slightly better than the placebo! The placebo has no side effects and neither is it addictive.

Tens of millions of people in the world routinely take antidepressants. So maybe the cure really does lie in the healing power of our own brains. (I think it does by the way – always have – always will.) It has long been accepted that psychotherapy, in all its guises, also works very well with people who suffer from moderate or even severe depression. But there's a problem – psychotherapy is time consuming and therefore expensive.

Kirsch published a paper entitled *Listening to Prozac but Hearing Placebo*. That rather direct approach may have lost him some friends. Mesmer had the same problem, although Mesmer had mistakenly put his faith in the powers of magnetism, rather than suggestion.

Kirsch decided to extend his study so he looked at trials of Prozac, Paxil, Zoloft, Effexor, Serzone and Celexa – all well known brand-name drugs.

About 40% of the trials had never been published and Kirsch had to use the Freedom of Information Act to get his hands on them. One of the first things he noticed was that more often than not, the unpublished trials ‘were those that failed to show a significant benefit from taking the actual drug.’ In just over half of the unpublished *and* published studies, the drugs performed no better than the humble placebo.

Irving Kirsch’s book *The Emperor’s New Drugs: Exploding the Antidepressant Myth* is one of the most brilliantly researched and reasoned pieces of work I have ever read.

Antidepressants are a triumph of marketing over science. Antidepressants are a multi-billion dollar industry and even defenders of antidepressants are forced to admit that the benefits are relatively small compared with the hype. The actual difference between the treatment and the control group is totally unimpressive. Psychology researcher Steven Hollon of Vanderbilt University, together with a good many of his colleagues refer to this fact as ‘our dirty little secret.’

Astonishingly, very few doctors know of all this – they keep dishing out prescription antidepressants because it’s quicker than engaging in any meaningful exploration of a patient’s real problems. Who can blame them? Doctors are overworked enough.

Defenders of the drugs industry cannot seem to get their heads round the fact that the FDA approves these drugs after only two clinical trials. Doctors who prescribe them can see if a drug is effective when the patient returns for a follow up visit. What they don’t take into account is the power of the placebo effect and the underlying power of suggestion.

Depression is an extremely personal problem. Everyone’s depression is different, just as every individual’s view of the world is set against their own unique reality. So it begs the question, how can a uniform drug be effective with unique issues? The answer, as unpalatable as it may seem, is that the patient’s expectation of a result is the real key.

The indifference between the drug and the placebo is apparently well known to the FDA and to Pfizer, the manufacturer of Zoloft.

Counselling and lifestyle changes would be more useful.

In fairness, Kirsch agrees that antidepressants are a tiny bit more effective than a mere placebo. But even this could be a dangerous assumption because of the way drug trials are carried out.

Volunteers for drug trials are not told at the outset whether they will receive the real drug or the placebo. In other words, neither they, nor the scientists know who is getting what. A couple of weeks into the test, some of the volunteers may start to experience side effects. This is a clue that they are getting the real thing and not the placebo, so straight away, their judgement as to the drug’s effectiveness is influenced. Approximately 80% of test subjects guess right. Studies have shown that the more pronounced the side effect, the more effective the drug appears to be.

The perverse logic is ‘this drug makes me feel sick and hate food, so it must be relieving my depression’. In clinical trials, patients who realise they are receiving the real thing get their expectations boosted and hey presto! a better result. Belief in the power of medicine is often self-fulfilling.

The same can be said of the patients who figure out they are getting the placebo – no side effects, so therefore we're getting the placebo, so no improvement.

Kirsch is well aware that he is regarded as a trouble-maker, even a pariah, in certain circles. Some academics and institutions will have nothing to do with him, but in the academic world, that's not unusual when people come along with new and revolutionary ideas that contradict established belief.

Remember... not so long ago everyone believed the earth was flat and both Copernicus and Galileo were imprisoned for heresy.

True, patients with extremely severe depression do benefit from the drugs more than they would from the placebo, but that is almost certainly because they are on higher doses and quite often a cocktail of antidepressants.

There is a catch though here too: research shows that patients who are given higher doses also have their expectations raised and some patients are told they are being given a higher dose even though they are not. The results are the same.

So what about the drug companies' claim that their products work by raising the levels of serotonin in the brain? Surely that must have some effect?

The problem is, there are drugs that lower serotonin too, and yet patients who take both kinds of drug report the same levels of improvement. Iproniazid raises levels of serotonin and Tianeptine lowers levels of serotonin. Logic dictates that you simply can't have it both ways.

Psychotherapy has much lower relapse rates so it might also be logical to conclude that the talking therapies are better than popping pills. But the real problem is the mind set of doctors and the public at large. We are so used to going to the quack for a quick fix when we're feeling down, that we too often forget our own humanity. Depression can be treated without drugs. In fact, depression is best treated without drugs.

## **Postscript**

In 2003, *Prevention and Treatment* magazine reported on tests of Diazepam in Turin.

Half the subjects were given the wonder drug, but not told they were getting it. The other half were put on an inert drip and told that they were on Diazepam. The second group got all the benefit while the group that actually were taking Diazepam experienced little or no improvement. GOTCHA!

In the August 14<sup>th</sup> 2003 issue of *New Scientist*, there appeared a very interesting article on how patients recover in Intensive Care Units (ICU's).

Mervyn Singer, director of the Bloomsbury Institute Centre for Intensive Care medicine at University College London, is quoted as saying 'virtually all the advances in intensive care in the past ten years have involved doing less to the patient.' Going out of fashion are all the shiny machines that go 'beep' and coming into fashion is the argument that the best way to heal the body is to leave the body to its own devices.

The body has its own natural defensive and healing mechanisms and seems to cope much better on its own. Our bodies have evolved so that blood clots to stop us bleeding to

death, our immune system is very good at fighting off infection, tissue regenerates and bone fractures heal on their own given time. Where patients survive multiple organ failure, normal function is rapidly restored. In some cases, drug and artificial breathing intervention has made the patient worse, not better.

It appears that evolutionary biology is not only lending a hand in patient recovery, but taking responsibility too.

Multiple organ dysfunction is often only a temporary and strategic change, comparable to hibernation. Nature may well be using this temporary energy saving device as a way of preparing to recharge the whole system. Of course this is not going to be true in all cases and difficult decisions will face surgeons working with seriously injured patients in modern hospitals, but the theory that 'less is more' is catching on.

In early 2010, a conference was held at Brunel University with the catchy title of *Evolutionary Approaches to Disease and Health*. Most delegates agreed that an evolutionary minded approach might serve ICU patients better.

At the Battle of Trafalgar, in which we whipped the French 21 to 4, there were thousands of wounded (not counting fatalities) after the game.

On HMS Victory, Nelson's flagship, the ship's surgeon, William Beatty, aided by the very latest in early 19<sup>th</sup> century medical technology – a sharp knife, a saw and a needle and thread – performed ten amputations. Without the benefit of antibiotics, only six of the 102 wounded subsequently died of their injuries.

At the return match at Waterloo in 1815, only three of the 52 wounded soldiers from the 13<sup>th</sup> Light Dragoons later died of their wounds. Likewise during the American Civil War – around 75% of amputees survived to later take up careers as bit part actors or extras in spaghetti westerns.

This has to be a testimony to the remarkable resilience of the human body, but I think it goes much deeper than that. It is my belief that a determined mind also has a part to play in survival after trauma, both mental and physical.

# In praise of Stanley Milgram

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To some psychologists, Milgram's experiments with fake electric shocks were unethical.

Milgram was a genius. He proved what I already knew to be true from my schooldays, and I would sincerely enjoy the opportunity of repeating the experiments.

Actually someone already did, but they used a puppy instead of an actor and the result was that about 70% of people gave the full dose of very painful electricity.

My own gut feeling however – backed up by experience of the modern world – is that if the tests were repeated today, the results would not be nearly as high. The reason? People in 2006 are simply not as blindly obedient as they were in the 1950's – they have an increasing awareness of ethical behaviour and an increased tendency to question, and I believe volunteers would refuse to go the full way.

We have had more than 70 years to reconsider the implications of the time-honoured phrase 'I was only obeying orders.'

The famous psychologist Solomon Asch rounded up some volunteers for an experiment which was ostensibly to do with visual perception.

They were asked to judge the length of some parallel lines and say which in the set matched together. Unknown to the volunteers, all the other participants in the group were in on the joke, er... sorry, experiment, and deliberately chose the same wrong answers every time the test was run.

The result was that the genuine volunteers reported feelings of stress and embarrassment because they felt like the odd one out. They became increasingly worried about giving the 'wrong' answer and the vast majority ended up going along with whatever the rest of the group said was the right answer.

This is a great example of the Social Compliance theory much vaunted by psychologists and has shades of Stanley Milgram's fake but fun electric shock game.

Milgram's experiments have serious implications in all sorts of authority driven situations.

In the fog at Tenerife Airport, the worst air disaster in history ironically happened on the ground – the result of an overbearing senior KLM captain disregarding a question from his flight engineer as to whether or not they actually had clearance to take off.

The engineer didn't dare question him a second time. As a consequence, the KLM Jumbo jet slammed into a Pan-Am Jumbo jet at more than 170 miles an hour that *did* have clearance to taxi across the runway.

Another example from the disaster handbook is that of Captain Robert Falcon Scott's doomed expedition to the South Pole.

Scott had ignored the advice proffered by more experienced polar explorers, including that of Amundsen, who got to the pole first. He also ignored the advice of his own men, who because of the social hierarchy of the time, dared not press the point. As a result, they all froze to death.

Interesting to note also that the British were able to put a spin on the whole debacle (suggestion) and Scott emerged a hero, albeit a dead one, and not the incompetent, egotistical fuckwit he actually was.

## In ridicule of Deepak Chopra

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Millions have read his books worldwide, hanging on to his every word and lavishing uncritical and unthinking praise on his every word. Is this man the genius he wants us all to believe he is? Or is just another cheap trickster preying on the the spiritually naive?

On April 4th 2010 at 3.40pm, an earthquake registering 7.2 on the Richter scale hits Baja in Mexico. Twenty minutes later, renowned New Age guru and bullshit artist Deepak Chopra tweeted '*Had a powerful meditation just now – caused an earthquake in Southern California – was meditating about on Shiva mantra & earth began to shake. Sorry about that.*'

What a load of absolute bollocks. Anyone who actually believes this kind of stuff is terminally stupid, and yet there are tens of thousands of terminally stupid people out there. They keep buying Chopra's books and cling to his pearls of wisdom as if they were er... well, pearls of wisdom.

Chopra was a follower of the great Maharishi Mahesh Yogi – he of the Rolls Royce collection (one for every day of the year) the Beatles, a reputation for separating the *really* stupid from their money, and an unhealthy interest in young girls.

Chopra claims that his techniques, teachings, drivel, whatever you want to call it, are the real thing, based on the principle that it's all part of quantum physics. Well who could argue? Not me for a start, because I haven't the first clue about quantum physics. But neither have most people. Mention quantum physics or the Quantum Universe to most people and most people will readily admit they haven't the first clue either. It's nothing to be ashamed of.

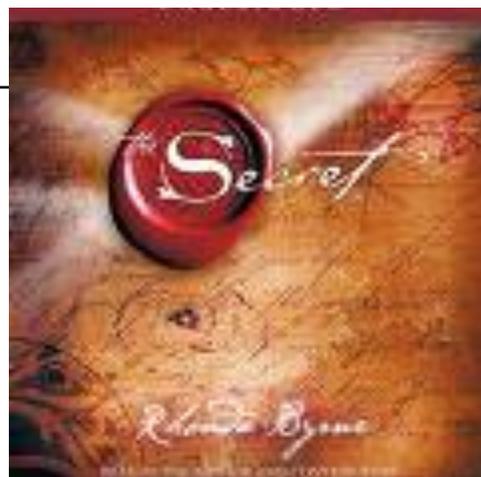
Deepak Chopra on the other hand has no such scruples when he bangs on about how quantum physics or quantum mechanics provide rationales for everything, from the existence of God, to telekenesis, to starting earthquakes... Actually it doesn't.

In *Scientific American* (October 2010) Lawrence M. Krauss, theoretical physicist, Foundation Professor and director of the Origins Initiative at Arizona State University, stated that having read numerous pieces by Chopra 'nothing I have read, however, suggests he has enough understanding of quantum mechanics to pass an undergraduate course I might teach on the subject'. Well, 'quel surprise', as the French would say.

I may not know the first thing about quantum mechanics, but I recognise bullshit when I see it. Shame Arizona State University doesn't offer a course on that... Chopra would pass with flying colours.

## In disbelief of Rhonda Byrne

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Hypnotists are very fond of reminding us that hypnotisability has nothing whatsoever to do with gullibility. This is true. But hypnotisability has *everything* to do with suggestibility.

Whichever way you cut it, the simple truth is that some of us are more suggestible than others, although there are well understood psychological techniques that can quite easily make everyone equally suggestible.

Here's one of them...

Suggestibility and gullibility have an awful lot in common. For instance, suggestibility relies on the suspension of critical faculties, mainly located in the frontal cortex – the area of the brain most responsible for planning, organisation, anticipation and overall common-sense.

Gullibility relies on the brain having no critical faculties at all. Whether it's suggestibility or gullibility that persuades normally sensible people to hand over large wads of money to wealthy Nigerian 'businessmen' who promise ridiculously large commissions in return for helping them get their \$100 million fortune out of Nigeria and into Britain via your bank account, I leave it up to you to decide.

The point is, where the opportunity to make easy money presents itself, greed is the most effective way of suspending those critical faculties we all believe we have.

In these cases, where avarice excites the brain's pleasure centres to such a degree as to actually get people to part with their money, gullibility is so closely linked to suggestibility that the two become inseparable companions.

Recent history is littered with innumerable Get-Rich-Quick schemes, ranging from books punting the secrets of the super-rich, to the more iniquitous pyramid schemes that surface every few years. Those in at the very beginning make a money, but eventually the system collapses in on itself and most lose their money. Then everyone realises how unutterably stupid they have been, learn a hard lesson, and then fall for the next one when it comes around.

Sadly, there is a never-ending supply of people suggestible and gullible enough to keep spending their hard earned money on any scheme, no matter how dubious, that promises wealth, especially any method that promises wealth without the hard work.

Amongst the literally hundreds of publications promising instant wealth is a more recent tome with the no-nonsense title '*I Can Make You Rich*' by the well-known hypnotist Paul McKenna. The manual (you can read it in about 20 minutes) plumbs the depths of good

taste with its cheesy gold lettering and (in the hardback edition) its gold-edged pages. *'You Can Make Me Rich'* even comes with a hypnotic CD which will no doubt make becoming rich an even more easily attainable goal. The equally cheesy (yet ever so earnest) McKenna peers at us with the faux-sincerity which has made him famous from the front cover. Mmm... Nice.

All these books belong on the same shelf as Professor Frotteur's Guaranteed System for Beating the Casino and other such farcical titles.

It is the latest literary offering in the genre though to which I wish to turn my attention – a best-selling piece of chicanery which befitting its status, has also been made into a DVD. This sacred tome of instant monetary gratification is tantalisingly titled *'The Secret'*.

The book is a monument to greed-blinded gullibility on a larger scale never before imagined. It has sold millions of copies worldwide and its author is Rhonda Byrne, an Australian reality TV producer.

I suspect that given Ms. Byrne's professional background, not to mention her numerous contacts within the industry, it was a relatively simple task to raise her work of stupendous fiction from simple manuscript to work of genius in a few relatively easy steps.

The underlying philosophy of this mind-boggling fabrication of deceit is to persuade the reader that *'we can have anything we want – we just have to think about it in a positive way!'* It was the fastest selling self-help book ever and a disturbing monument to mankind's credulity.

The gist of *The Secret* is that there is no problem, no goal, no wish, that cannot be fulfilled just by thinking... new car, new life, fabulous riches. Yes, it can all be yours if you read this book and follow the exceptionally simple instructions.

'Prosperity' it claims, 'is your birthright'. And millions have bought into the fantasy!

Surely, like me, you must be thinking, why aren't the world's leaders and finance ministers reading this? Why not distribute copies to the poor... the starving? Could it be because it's a load of ludicrous cynical bollocks?

Byrne claims that in a moment of enlightenment she suddenly understood the biggest secret in the entire universe, a secret that Newton (that's Sir Isaac, not me) Shakespeare, Beethoven, Hugo, Einstein, Edison, Plato, had long understood, yet had somehow managed to keep to themselves, the selfish buggers.

Byrne embarked on a mission to bring the joy of this knowledge to millions of others and no doubt bring millions to her own bank account. But this is more than the age-old exhortation to 'follow your dream'... climb every mountain, ford every stream, follow every rainbow, 'till you find your... aaarrggghh!

Getting your hands on a big house, big car, great job, great husband, hour-glass figure [a dead give away to the market *'The Secret'* is aimed at!] is all easily achievable if you visualise it, focus on it and place an order for it exactly as you would in a catalogue. All you have to do is phrase your request in the right way and that means including lots of detail.

If you want a bigger car, then the first thing to do is to get a bigger garage. If you want something that you know you can't afford, then you must start saying to yourself 'I can afford that' even though deep down, you know you can't.

There is no room whatsoever for any negative stuff in Byrne's world of delusion. According to Byrne, thinking long and hard enough about something will make it happen... No need to get out of bed earlier or put in those extra few hours a week then. According to the Gospel of St. Rhonda, a person who thinks thin thoughts cannot possibly be fat!

Coincidentally, this is the same line of thought that forms the core of McKenna's oversimplistic weight loss philosophy.

What is more incredible about *'The Secret'* is that on the surface at least, Byrne appears to believe all this herself. She is certainly an enthusiastic interviewee (but then she would be, wouldn't she?) and she has certainly attained great wealth.

Thinking about wealth creates wealth is her philosophy, and who are we to argue? It's obviously worked for her. Putting yourself before others (a novel twist on an old idea if ever there was one) is her creed and if I'm honest, something I have been advocating all my life.

Byrne falls back on the Bible (Oh Jesus!) claiming that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses and Jesus were all millionaires 'with more affluent lifestyles than many present-day millionaires could conceive of'. What??? Without electricity or a private jet? The woman's gone raving stark staring mad!

Then Byrne pulls one of the oldest tricks in the book, and one that I find particularly annoying. Like the arch looney Deepak Chopra, Byrne falls back on pseudo-science to add gravitas to her twaddle. Not even the brainiest quantum physicist really fully understands quantum physics, so how on earth can this woman possibly claim quantum physics as the basis for this bunch of puerile blather?

According to the Gospel of St. Rhonda, human beings are 'transmission towers' which emit thoughts on a particular frequency and in turn attract 'all like-things which are on the same frequency.'

Not even L. Ron Hubbard would have had the audacity to pull that one!

Nonetheless, the conclusion of this train of thought is that negative thoughts attract negative things and positive thoughts attract positive things. Yippee! Byrne has very cleverly recognised the true secret, a secret genuinely shared by relatively few. That is, a lot of people are actually stupid and lazy, and will buy into anything that promises them everything in return for minimum effort.

According to St. Rhonda of Byrne, people attract misfortune because they are on the same wavelength as misfortune and this goes for people who get cancer, are killed in motor car accidents, or terrorist attacks, or who die of hunger. 'Illness cannot exist in a body that has harmonious thoughts' she claims. People 'create' their own misfortunes because they are simply not thinking positively enough.

Next time St. Bob of Geldoff invites you to send money to starving children in Africa, don't sent them food, send them one of Rhonda's remarkable books instead – you know it makes sense!

Unfortunately, Byrne has been caught out by her lack of understanding of physics – including the quantum variety – where the electromagnetic force dictates positives repel positives and attract negatives, and vice versa.

Byrne's use of flawed science makes the whole thing even more ridiculous, and yet still the copies fly off the shelves.

It would be easy to say that the success of Byrne's book owes more to global marketing strategies than to substance. That would be true, but it's not the point.

The real point is that there is such a thirst for this kind of drivel that one must inevitably come to the conclusion that it has to be, albeit perversely, part of the survival strategy – the part where the weak get distracted from reality and give the strong a head start.

Jacob Bronowski said in *The Ascent of Man*, science and progress is a straight line. True science stands up to the most rigorous of test. Those that deviate from that straight line will be lost.

The people of Easter Island at some stage in their history became distracted from the straight line and devoted all their energies to a false belief. As a result, they were lost forever, extinct by their own hand. In the same way, members of religious cults who commit mass suicide merely ensure that their genes will not be passed on. Of course these are extreme examples, but good examples nonetheless.

The strong, and in this case that means the smart, are more likely to see their progeny survive and flourish in this modern world of ours than those who are tricked into merely daydreaming. The daydreamers are unwittingly doing their bit to ensure what nature intended all along – the extinction of the stupid gene.

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