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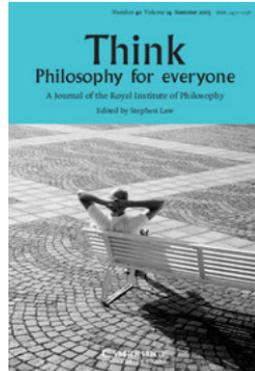
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Thinking tools 3: Flying saucers and open minds

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THINKING TOOLS
3: FLYING SAUCERS AND OPEN MINDS
Stephen Law

Thinking Tools is a regular feature that introduces pointers on thinking clearly and rigorously. Here I tell a cautionary tale about flying saucers and take a brief look at the virtues of 'open-mindedness'.

The very first flying saucer

Huge numbers of people claim to have seen flying saucers. Many believe they have been taken inside these strange craft and even met their inhabitants. There are countless eye-witness reports, as well as film footage and photographs of flying saucers. Doesn't the *sheer quantity* of evidence concerning the existence of these saucer-shaped craft show that there must be *something* to these claims?

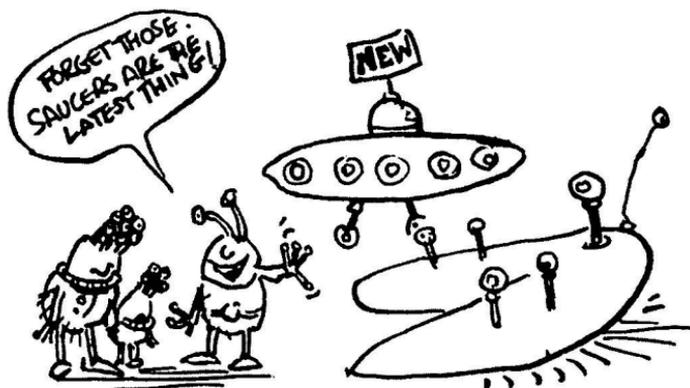
Perhaps not. Here's one reason why we should treat all this evidence with caution. The very first flying saucer report was made back in 1947. Kenneth Arnold, an American pilot, was flying his plane in daylight. It was a routine flight. Visibility was good. Then, suddenly, Arnold spotted nine strange flying objects. On returning to the airfield, Arnold described what he had seen. It wasn't long before his report of 'flying saucers' was transmitted across the country. The press went wild.

Soon, others started to see saucers in the sky, and of course the rest is history. We've been regularly spotting these mysterious, saucer-shaped vehicles ever since..

But here's the twist in the tale: *Arnold didn't see flying saucers*. In fact, he never claimed he saw saucers. Arnold said that the craft he saw looked like *boomerangs*. He merely said that they *flew* like saucers would if skipped across a lake. They bounced along. But in the excitement that followed his sighting, this particular detail was lost. Arnold was reported as having seen 'flying saucers'.

Now ask yourself: why have there been thousands of reports of flying *saucers* since 1947, if what Arnold saw were

not saucers but boomerangs? It seems extraordinarily unlikely that, immediately after Arnold's sighting, our alien visitors should just happen, by sheer chance, to change the shape of their spacecraft from boomerang to saucer.



It's surely rather more plausible that the reports of *sauces* made since 1947 have been the result of the *power of suggestion*, e.g. people have seen a distant plane or some other vague light in the sky or have simply hallucinated, and, because they *expect* alien craft to be saucer shaped, have subconsciously turned what they have seen into a saucer (either that or they have simply lied).

The moral is that even a vast amount of witness testimony concerning seemingly strange or miraculous events can quite easily turn out to be mistaken. In particular, we are highly vulnerable to the power of suggestion.

Open-mindedness

People often insist that we should be open-minded about claims concerning the weird and miraculous. Of course, we want to be open-minded. We shouldn't just *assume* that there's nothing to any of these claims and simply ignore the evidence presented in support of them.



But, on the other hand, we don't want to be *too* open-minded. We don't want minds so open that any rubbishy old idea might easily end up lodging there.

After all, there are so many ridiculous beliefs you *could* pick up: that the Moon is made out of concrete; that ice is poisonous; that humans have three legs, and so on. If you are too open-minded, your head will soon fill up with junk beliefs. So let's be open-minded. But let's also try to filter out, as best we can, silly or unreasonable ideas. That involves thinking hard about the arguments and carefully weighing up the evidence before we allow new beliefs in. That way, there's at least a fair chance that many of our beliefs will be true.

The you-can't-prove-it move

Sometimes, when people insist we should be open-minded, what they mean is that we should *suspend judgement* on an issue because there is at least some doubt either way. 'After all,' some say, 'while I admit I can't prove beyond all doubt there are flying saucers, there *might* be. And *you* haven't yet proved that there *aren't* any flying saucers. So the reasonable thing, surely, is to remain neutral

on whether or not flying saucers exist. That's what an open-minded person would do.'

This is a very common sort of move. I call it the *you-can't-prove-it-move*. It involves the following mistake.

Notice that, even if we cannot *prove beyond all doubt* that one rather than another position is true, it does not follow that the rational thing is to remain neutral between the two positions. For there may still be powerful evidence supporting one position over the other.

After all, all our scientific theories about the universe, and most of our common sense ones too (such as my belief that there are still shops standing at the end of my street), are open to *some* degree of doubt (it's *just possible* that there has been some bizarre plot to demolish the shops in my absence, and it's *just possible* that there has been a bizarre atheistic conspiracy to hush up the truth about our Earth-centred universe). It doesn't follow that the rational thing is for me to suspend judgement on whether the Earth goes round the sun and whether there are still shops standing at the end of my street.

Illustrations are by Daniel Postgate and are taken from The Outer Limits by Stephen Law (Orion, July 2003)