

DIALOGUE

FORUM

Omni welcomes speculation, theories, commentary, dissent, and questions from readers in this open forum. We invite you to use this column to voice your hopes about the future and to contribute to the kind of informal dialogue that generates breakthroughs. Please note that we cannot return submissions and that the opinions expressed here are not necessarily those of the magazine.

The Problem with Prowlers

James Oberg's thought experiment, in which he suggests that the percentage of "true" UFO sightings would not diminish even if all true UFOs went away for a period of time, is amusing but irrelevant [UFO Update, May 1984]. Let us substitute prowlers for UFOs in his experiment, and instead of having true UFOs vanish for a period, let us have all "true" prowlers do so (perhaps to attend an international prowlers' convention in Patagonia).

Following Oberg's reasoning, this leaves only prowler reports from nervous old ladies and misperceptions of noises from faulty plumbing, creaking floors, and wind in the shutters. Some of these reports wouldn't be solved by the police; there would always be a residue of unsolved UFO—I mean, prowler—reports that some might hold were true prowlers.

Now the true prowlers come back from their convention, but there still remains a residue of prowler reports that the police are not able to solve. So what is the difference? One week, no prowlers but a residue of unsolved prowler reports. Next week there are prowlers but again a residue of unsolved prowler reports. Thus the thought experiment says nothing about whether true prowlers or true UFOs exist.

Ah, yes, you may say. Sometimes the police catch prowlers or find evidence of them, such as footprints. Aye, there's the rub! If the police operated on the principle that there were no legitimate prowlers and that *all* prowler reports were actually just so much nonsense, they would disregard all prowler calls and never bother to investigate.

One wonders how many UFO cases Oberg has personally investigated by going out into the field with responsible witnesses, interrogating each separately, and inquiring into their technical competence and integrity. But of course, why bother? Reports of UFOs are just a lot of rubbish, and all UFOs can be explained as misperceived Russian rockets, hoaxes, or hallucinations.

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James Oberg replies: *Hynek's attempted refutation of my thought experiment contains two major fallacies of logic.*

The first is the unstated connotation of his prowlers. We know what prowlers are, and we have an excellent model of their behavior and of the kinds of physical evidence they can be expected to leave behind. On the contrary, with UFOs, there is no existing model for what they can be expected to do. Sometimes they reportedly stall cars; sometimes they (the same they?) do not. Sometimes they

reportedly leave various kinds of physical traces; sometimes, not. I am well aware of the literature on this subject as well as the fact that it consists of catalogs, not theories or models.

Secondly, prowlers and UFOs possess two distinctly different statistical characteristics. Even the most fervent UFO believer readily admits that the vast majority of all UFO cases (including those for which there is photographic evidence and physical effects) are honest misperceptions. The opposite is true of prowler reports, the vast majority of which are caused by real prowlers. If the prowlers all "went away" (to a convention, as Hynek so neatly hypothesized), there would be an immediate change in both the quantity and the quality of the remaining reports.

Hynek's hang-up on the technical competence and integrity of UFO witnesses bespeaks perhaps a basic philosophical difference and a severe scientific failing. When discussing honest misperceptions, the technical competence and integrity of the eyewitnesses is not just irrelevant, it may even be inversely correlated! Pilots and policemen, for example, can be shown to be poorer observers of identifiable UFOs than the average citizen is. Astronomers, of which fraternity Hynek is justly proud to be a member, are hardly immune, as a recent case shows.

A famous set of UFO observations from the Soviet Union involved testimony by astronomers, but the sightings were indeed prosaic in origin. They, in fact, were misperceived Russian rockets, an explanation Hynek may sniff at because he originally endorsed those cases as being true UFOs.

Nonetheless, I consider ufology to be one of those high-risk, long-shot, high-payoff research areas where more competent attention and funding should be assigned. My cynicism is strictly of a personal nature, based on repeated instances in which I have personally investigated and solved famous cases previously endorsed by leading and responsible UFO scientists. ∞

