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UFO UpDates Mailing List

Re: Philosophy of Science and UFOs

From: Greg Sandow <GSANDOW@prodigy.net>
Date: Mon, 30 Dec 1996 02:14:14 -0500
Fwd Date: Mon, 30 Dec 1996 10:44:33 -0500
Subject: Re: Philosophy of Science and UFOs

Many thanks to Jan Aldrich for discussing the philosophy of science, as it relates to UFOs. (And also for his informative posts about everything else!)

Call me radical, if you like, but the greatest mystery to me is why there <is> any UFO mystery. UFOs have been regularly reported -- and talked about, and talked about, and talked about -- for nearly 50 years. You'd think that by now we'd have arrived at some consensus. The problem doesn't seem all that difficult. Is anything flying around up there? Why can't science answer it?

Skeptics have a solution. They'd say that science <has> answered the question. There's nothing mysterious flying around. The supposed mystery only persists because -- incited by credulous believers and by the media -- people keep thinking they're seeing something.

I find that answer very interesting. Not for its content; what I like is its structure. "Believers" (I hate the term, but I'm using it anyway) don't have as much clarity. If we think there clearly are unknown craft flying through our skies -- and that these craft have been seen by tens of thousands of people -- what's our elegant, parsimonious explanation for why the world at large doesn't acknowledge that? Is there a coverup? That's not a philosophically satisfying explanation at all. It introduces an extraneous element -- a whole layer of government involvement -- and raises extra questions of its own. Why is there a coverup? And why does the coverup work?

I'm reminded here of a science fiction story I read many years ago. Science discovers a chemical that stops people from lying. The chemical is introduced into the water supply, the way fluorine is now. After a number of years, nobody lies any more. But UFOs are still seen, leading everyone to believe that they've got to be real.

I know...the situation is more complex than that, since even if nobody lied, everyday objects would still be mistaken for something mysterious, just as they are now. But what's instructive -- and a little wistful -- about the story is its UFO-related premise. There's a kind of haze in our minds where UFOs are concerned, the story seems to say. If that haze could somehow be removed, we'd find the answer very quickly.

>From a believer's point of view, what could that haze be? My theory is that it's denial. Or maybe I shouldn't put it so aggressively. The presence of mysterious flying craft (very likely from other planets) is presumed to be extraordinary. It's also presumed to be unlikely. So when somebody says they saw one, you don't quite know what to think. It's not quite the same as an everyday extraordinary event, the kind of thing that doesn't happen much, but doesn't strain our credibility -- like, say, your friend coming back from the bowling alley, and saying he almost bowled 300, except he missed a strike in the last frame. Even if

one of your closest relatives says he saw a flying disk in the sky, you don't quite know what to make of it. "Jeez, Joshua wouldn't lie," you might mutter. "But does that mean I think aliens are here? I just don't know."

There's plenty of evidence that this sort of haze really does exist. You find signs of it, I think, in the nonsense some skeptics write about UFOs. A classic example is Donald Menzel's "explanation" of the famous New Guinea case. In order to dispose of an Anglican priest who'd inconveniently had a long, close, detailed, and corroborated UFO sighting, Menzel -- with no evidence -- decided the guy had a visual problem that turned the planet Venus into a flying saucer-like oval. Did the priest think he saw beings on the saucer? Those were his own eyelashes, Menzel said! As I've remarked here before, I think, you have to read Menzel's own words to fully appreciate how demented his theory was. It belonged in Mad magazine. When we see a competent scientist descend so far into the pit of irrationality, that ought to set off alarm bells for us. What made him suddenly act like he'd lost his mind? Why should UFOs drive him so crazy? Is he, for some reason, internally compelled to believe that UFOs aren't real?

The place to find this mental haze at its most pronounced is, I think, in the SETI literature. Here you have what I believe is the only (semi-) organized group of scientists who think or write much about aliens. And they've reached a definite consensus. There are alien races all over the galaxy, possibly millions of them, some a billion years more advanced than we are. But none of them can visit each other, because interstellar travel just isn't possible.

I just smile when I read that stuff. Interstellar travel on any regular basis would be hard to imagine for us, right now -- there's no doubt about that. But for beings a billion years ahead of us? Who could possibly say? It's the height of anthropomorphic arrogance to imagine we can say anything at all about beings a billion years ahead of us. So I'm not going to say they <do> travel between the stars. I have no idea. But neither does Frank Drake -- the leader of the SETI forces -- have any business thinking he knows, either.

If you read Drake's book ("Is Anyone Out There?", coauthored with Dava Sobel), you can see his rationality collapse as he talks about these things. When he limits himself to the reasons <we> can't travel to other stars, he's at least on solid scientific ground. The speed of light, according to our science, is an absolute limit. And even approaching the speed of light is difficult, because doing it would take such vast amounts of energy.

Drake's sense of fairness, however, leads him to consider objections to these views, coming from a few of his own scientific colleagues. One of these scientists points out that, as technology advances, the cost of energy drops drastically. Ah, yes, Drake says...but what about cosmic rays? Maybe they'll fry astronauts in interstellar space! Do you see what he's doing here? He's just making things up. When he talks about the speed of light, he has real data to back him up. When he talks about cosmic rays, he's just speculating. There's not a shred of data to support him. He <>wants> to believe interstellar travel isn't possible, and when solid scientific reasons fail him, he'll try to pull a rabbit out of any hat that comes along.

Now, why would he want to believe we'll never travel to the stars? I don't want to insist on this point too strongly, but I suspect it's because his belief protects him against thinking that the stars would ever travel here. The SETI scientists are united on their view of UFOs. We have <not> had alien visitors, they all say. And sure, they go through the usual rigamarole about the evidence not being solid, but behind that lies their explicitly stated belief that we <can't> have visitors, because interstellar travel has been proved to be impossible. One of these scientists, Jill Tarter, very boldly (and honestly, I think) declared that she had "a closed mind" about alien visits and UFOs.

I find it very touching that scientists burning with eagerness to find evidence of alien life would make it matter almost of religious principle to believe no alien life will ever come here. Somehow, I suspect, that belief comforts them, and makes them feel powerful. It allows them to face the unknown cosmos, and still be certain that they themselves know something. There's no chance, you see, that their search of the universe will be disturbed by alien folks who fly on down and tell them what's <really> going on.

Which leads me to my last evidence of UFO-induced mental haze -- the idea (quite apart from the rigid SETI reasoning) that alien visits are

unlikely. How could anyone know that? I've said it here before, and I'll say it again: We're not in a position to make such a statement, because we don't know enough about the universe. Nor are we in a position to say alien visits <are> likely; we don't have any information that supports that belief, either. Maybe if he had a complete registry of intelligent races in our galaxy...then we could see if there were any near us, with interstellar capabilities. If there weren't, we could conclude that visits were unlikely. If there were, and especially if there were many such races, we could think "Sure, since they're busily travelling scant light years from us, it's only a matter of time before they come here."

Here's a specific, even (in a speculative way) practical example of what I mean. Since we don't know anything about alien life, not even whether it exists, UFO abductions seem really mysterious. How can we possibly judge if such things could be real? They're certainly not very likely, are they?

Enter now a member of, God help me, the Galactic Federation. I'm assuming her (or his, or its) existence, just as a way of personifying the kind of knowledge of the universe that we don't have. Someone from this list, maybe someone unruffled and rational like Rebecca or Jerry Cohen, is talking to this galactic ambassador, and says: "You know, we've got people saying they're abducted by little gray humanoids with big eyes. Does that ring any bells with you?"

And our galactic envoy sighs (or shimmers its tentacles), and answers: "Jeez, you're infested with Zorphs! They sneak around everywhere, performing their idiot medical experiments. So you've got 'em, too, huh? Don't blame you for being confused -- they've got that trick of clouding peoples' minds." In one stroke, a great mystery is explained, and revealed -- in a frame of reference we don't yet have -- to be a commonplace event.

Our problem with UFOs might simply be that we don't have the frame of reference yet. From our point of view, an alien visit is a departure from ordinary life, a breach of our sense of ourselves, a bracing shock. Maybe, if we had accurate information about what really goes on in our galaxy, we'd understand that alien visits are really an everyday affair, something we should take for granted, rather than debate. Remember that I'm not saying this <is> true; I'm only saying that it's possible. I'm also saying that we don't have any information at all about whether alien visits are likely, so, from a strictly logical point of view, we have no business being surprised if one occurs. Our feeling that we <would> be surprised is evidence -- along with the prevailing a priori belief that alien visits are <not> very likely -- that, as a species, we haven't begun to think about these things clearly.

Respectfully submitted,

Greg Sandow

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