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UFO UpDates Mailing List

Re: Philosophy of Science and UFOs

From: "Steven J. Powell" <sjpowell@access.digex.net>
Date: Tue, 31 Dec 1996 11:30:44 -0500
Fwd Date: Tue, 31 Dec 1996 13:59:06 -0500
Subject: Re: Philosophy of Science and UFOs

> From: Greg Sandow <GSANDOW@prodigy.net>
> Subject: Re: UFO Update: Re: Philosophy of Science and UFOs

> 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?

More like 5,000 years.

I think its an open question as to whether science can (and how it can) answer the question, which I think is really the point of Jan's philosophy of science series of discussions.

There are examples of science trying in earnest and failing to explain the problem and there are plenty of examples of science being made to dance to someone else's tune and failing to answer the questions.

Personally, I don't think pure science has had an unencumbered chance to try to study UFOs so the jury's out.

> 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 don't know if we should ignore the gov't involvement/coverup angle as it relates to the philosophy of science (as that relates to the scientific study of UFOs) or not.

First, let's dispense with the "tens of thousands of people" issue because there's no such thing. Just about everybody makes this mistake from time to time, I'm sure I've done it once or twice too, even Keel made this mistake in one of his recent books, but we have to always separate out of the total data population that which is really important versus raw uninvestigated data. There are tens and tens of thousands of UFO sightings reported over the last 50 or so years and that is our raw uninvestigated data population. That is also the most useless number in all of ufology. Of the uninvestigated total we know that easily from 80% (being very generous) to 95% are IFOs (and some, a small percentage) are hoaxes. We know statistically that 80% to 95% will be retired as IFOs. IFOs may be of interest to ifology and the social sciences but they shouldn't concern us in this discussion.

The UFOs, the ones that are UFO after having been investigated, are the only initial dataset we are concerned with here. This is the dataset that we need to explain, need to understand, need to have science take an unencumbered look at, etc. If we average 10,000 sightings worldwide per year that leaves from 250,000 (being extremely generous) to 5,000 total sightings. Most of the folks who have been doing for decades prefer 90% to 95% which would give us a nice and easily to handle dataset.

As regards gov't involvement/coverup I admit to being completely wishy-washy on that. Obviously, when we were dealing with the useless pre-investigation sighting total, then one can instantly surmise that the gov't had to have seen a few (or more <grin>) on missile tracking radar or space-based tracking over the past few decades. But when we're dealing with the real investigated number of unknowns then that surmising becomes illogical and impossible. After all, the misidentified bird, or lenticular cloud, or mylar ballon, or Venus DON'T lend themselves to being picked up on missile-tracking radar or space-based tracking.

Taking the (assumptive) 5,000 investigated unknowns as a baseline worldwide for 50 years we can probably drop that to half (2,500) for alleged objects that could be picked up on our tracking and we could probably drop that another 50% (1,250) for objects reported during the latter period when we had such tracking capabilities.

Of that lower total how many are UFOs to us and IFOs to the folks who build and test next-generation aircraft?

I think a truly scientific study of UFOs, completely unencumbered by politics, has to ignore the gov't involvement/coverup angle to be unbiased and objective. Alternatively, perhaps the gov't would assist that scientific effort and provide a log of every single flight of every single classified R&D project plus a log of all post-production classified flights?

Not gonna happen you say? And that's why it has to be ignored for an unbiased study.

> 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.

I'm not sure how this relates to a discussion on the philosophy of science as it relates to a scientific study of UFOs?

I don't think the likliness or unlikliness is particulary relevant to the process of science. It was considered impossible or at best extraordinarily unlikely that any prehistoric creature would survive to present day. Yet, we have such creatures, completely identical to their prehistoric relatives, alive and well today - and we still properly consider it unlikely simply because we only have a few such specimens.

> A classic example is Donald Menzel's "explanation" of the famous
> New Guinea case.

It was apparent then and its very apparent today that Menzel relied on science only rarely when trying to explain (away) UFO sightings. It wasn't known then and it is known now that Menzel worked for the CIA at the time and was almost certainly doing what he did to assist the goals expressed by the Robertson Panel.

> 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 antrhopomorphic 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.

Paraphrasing Dennis from an article he wrote years ago: You can't use one mystery to explain another. Scientists work with the physics that they know, not the physics they don't know or the physics they wish they knew. The physics that we know today tells us that FTL travel is impossible. Impossible in the past, impossible now, and impossible in the future as well. This type of strict scientific conservatism is part of the scientific process. It doesn't mean that we know FTL will be impossible forever, it just means that based on just what we know today its impossible.

We don't have to make assumptions about what the core UFOs are, or why they are, or how they got where they were when they were (allegedly) observed.

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Thanks, take care.
John.

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