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UFO UpDates Mailing List

Re: Occam's Razor and UFOs

From: "Greg Sandow" <ggsandow@prodigy.net>
Date: Sat, 6 Jun 1998 18:45:41 -0400
Fwd Date: Sun, 07 Jun 1998 21:57:08 -0400
Subject: Re: Occam's Razor and UFOs

> From: RobIrving@aol.com
> Date: Sat, 6 Jun 1998 13:48:43 EDT
> To: updates@globalserve.net
> Subject: Re: UFO UpDate: Re: Occam's Razor and UFOs

I'd better de-escalate, since I've also written quite a long screed on the -- to me -- baffling misunderstanding here.

Rob, I know you agreed with me on my main point, and I should have acknowledged that.

But when you brought Michael Hesemann into the discussion, you lost me. And when you say:

> I essentially agreed with you. As you went on to say,
> conventional explanations may only be of limited use as more
> information arrives.

> My point was that this is dependant upon the quality of
> information; I don't think that in populist ufology we get much
> quality information.

> If we did, I think that more people - including the so-called
> scientific establishment - would take it more seriously. That's
> the challenge... all the time ufology yearns for scientific
> credibility, that is, which, by the way, I don't see that it
> necessarily has to (but evidently leading ufologists think so or
> they wouldn't keep harping on in those terms).

I think in all this you're responding to my thought that ufology exemplifies the proper use of Occam. But what strikes me is that you talk here about "populist" ufology. I remember saying in my original post that I was talking about "responsible" ufology. I didn't specify exactly what I meant, but if I were going to, I'd start with Hynek, McDonald, Vallee's first books, Richard Hall, Jerry Clark, and (on this list) Mark Cashman and Jerry Cohen. I'm not including Kevin Randle, much as I respect his work and his honest attitude, because he's best known for Roswell, and the very subject seems to get people angry. So to keep things "responsible" -- even "classical" -- I'm restricting my list to people who talk about old-fashioned sightings. (I'm sure I've forgotten a few obvious names.)

Where does "populist" ufology fit in what I was talking about? In any case, I'm not very concerned with it. (Elsewhere I've explained my belief that popular culture, despite its excesses, will probably do more to bring scientists to UFOs than all the responsible investigation we've ever done. It spreads new

paradigms, and a more open attitude toward things unknown, particularly if they seem to touch on space and aliens. A scientist who grew up on Star Trek and watches the X-Files will be, on the average, more open to UFOs than an older generation that grew up in the '50s, when science fiction was widely thought to be childish. In any case, if Hynek and McDonald couldn't pull the scientific community into the debate, what luck are scientific ufologists now likely to have?)

As for the poor old ETH.....

> > Which is why belief in it is called The Extraterrestrial [note
> > the word that follows] Hypothesis.

> As you've drawn attention to it I should point out that
> 'hypothesis' usually implies some effort on the part of its
> proponents to show that it can make testable predictions. Mere
> belief, of course, does not carry that requirement. It's a small
> point, but as we're working through the scientific terms used
> and abused in ufology it may be worth mentioning.

It's a small point, but a good one. So let me offer my three cents or so. If UFOs are extraterrestrial craft, I'd expect them to behave like physical objects. They should show up on radar, leave traces when they reportedly land, and affect the physical world in consistent ways (a line of thinking James McCampbell has pursued). I wouldn't, though, expect them to behave "logically," or in other words as we imagine we would if we were scouting an inhabited world. They'd be alien, after all, and we'd be foolish to make that kind of assumption.

I guess I'd also think it likely that they'd be detectable in space, though that's not a necessary deduction from the ETH.

Now, even if these criteria I'm tossing off here (somewhat off the top of my head) are met, we wouldn't prove that UFOs are extraterrestrial.

To completely prove that, I suppose we'd need lots of known UFO hardware or debris, or (hey, it's time for the alien autopsy!) biological samples of some of their occupants. And then we could argue about what, even if we had stuff we could take to a lab, would constitute proof.

Anyhow, this IS an interesting line of thought. Rather than toss out combative bon mots (John Rimmer, this means you), why don't we roll up our sleeves and -- following Rob's very helpful lead -- specify what testable predictions each UFO hypothesis might suggest?

Greg Sandow

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