UFO UpDates Mailing List

Re: 'She Blinded Me with Science'

From: RobIrving@aol.com
Date: Sun, 28 Jun 1998 00:34:47 EDT
Fwd Date: Sun, 28 Jun 1998 03:18:22 -0400
Subject: Re: 'She Blinded Me with Science'

> Date: Thu, 25 Jun 1998 20:05:39 +0100
> To: UFO UpDates - Toronto <updates@globalserve.net>
> From: Sean Jones <Tedric@tedric.demon.co.uk>
> Subject: Re: 'She Blinded Me with Science'

Sean,

A few comments on your list of 'scientific blunders'...

As I understood your original request, it was for examples whereby conventional science has rejected or ignored novel ideas (which were later accepted) because consensus within its 'ranks' assumed it knew better at the time.

>4) Astronomer Percival Lovell draws maps of the canals on Mars.
>Better resolution of Martian surface reveals that his
>imagination had "connected the dots" of random Martian features
>into an elaborate pattern of non-existent canals.

This could also be seen as a case of science correcting itself as more information emerged, leading to better understanding - the progression of knowledge. To portray this as a trail of ignorance renders the point you wish to make to your scientist friend meaningless. You may as well castigate Ptolemy for his map, or describe Columbus's mistaken notion that he was sailing west to India as a 'blunder', rather than the process of discovery.

In any situation it's not unusual for new ideas to be regarded with healthy scepticism until it's seen how they'd fit within the wider scheme of what's already known. What I think you are looking for are examples where the progression of knowledge was thwarted by unreasonable bias towards existing facts, thus preventing them from being superceded.

As usual, belief is the problem. It is a major problem as far as the ETH is concerned, although perhaps not in the way your are thinking.

The Lowell story is essentially similar to the recent disconfirmation of the Mars Face at Cydonia. Rather than avoiding the notion of intelligent goings -on much closer to Earth than conventional wisdom tells us, scientists, in the form of NASA, met it head on. They were probably quite confident of the outcome because as scientists they understand how adept we are at imposing speculative order on what we see, as Lowell did.

The crucial difference being that Lowell accepted the new data, unlike those still pushing the 'face' theory, who provide yet

more weight to Leon Festingers observation that if we are committed enough to a particular belief, disconfirmation can make it even stronger. Festinger liked nothing better than to use 'flying saucer' enthusiasts as an example of this.

Similarly, your example of continental drift and plate tectonics. This is how science would be expected to work. As you say, when a plausible mechanism was put forward (plausible because it resisted criticism and survived experimental testing) it replaced whatever theory went before it. The case you give of Einstein rejecting his own modification is an equally good example of what we expect from the scientific process. It is not unusual for people to wrongly second-guess themselves. In fact, it should be of concern to us when they don't.

The fact that physicists were so quick to accept Einstein's revolutionary ideas rather negates the point you are making. Once natural dissonance to any idea is overcome, if the idea solves more problems than it creates we are likely to (or should) pay attention to it. All your examples show is that occasionally we don't. Physicists were uncertain about Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle for years. However, it eventually made sense... just as the ETH may one day make sense, if only its proponents would.

>1) Renee Blondlot discovers the N-Ray - named after his
>university (the University of Nancy). Many other prominent
>scientists verify and extend his work before it is revealed
that >the phenomenon is a result of self-deception.

Blondlot's N-Rays are often cited as a perfect example of 'pathological' science. Although other scientists confirmed his work, it is important to remember that their number didn't come close to a consensus, and N-Rays were never universally accepted. It is also worth considering the historical context in which they were 'discovered' - in the wake of all manner of other 'invisible' rays, such as X-Rays (these, btw, were initially rejected as a hoax by the eminent British scientist Lord Kelvin).

Also - & this is what initially inspired my comments - you can't mention Blondlot's story on a UFO list without drawing attention to the manner in which his misperception was revealed; it is an ideal example of the value of hoaxing in revealing self-delusion, or worse.

The integral tool of Blondlot's equipment for demonstrating N-Rays was a prism. With this prism surrepticiously pocketed by another scientist, Blondlot continued to see what he thought he was seeing. The hoax was a simple but highly effective method of settling the issue without the usual equivocation and ambiguity. That Blondlot accepted his error was a credit to his level of intellectual honesty, in contrast to any number of familiar names around here.

Ufology is littered with self-styled 'truthseekers' who avoid withdrawing their claims in the face of overwhelming contrary evidence. As I argued with Greg Sandow, it's little wonder why people, rightly or wrongly, are so dismissive of the subject as a science.

>2) Pons and Fleischman discover the cold fusion. Their work is
>verified at several research centers, but these verifications
>are eventually withdrawn when errors are found in each
>experimental setup.

Where is the blunder? Science has yet to properly explain how nearly a hundred research organisations in many countries achieved excess energy by the Pons-Fleischmann cells, and others. Too little is known about quantum effects for this to be dismissed so easily (and, indeed, dishonestly).

>3) The precession of Mercury's orbit is attributed to a small
>planet orbiting even closer to the sun. Several astronomers
>actually observe this planet - called Vulcan, but it is
>eventually revealed not to exist. Precession is eventually
>explained by general (not special) relativity.

Like the Aetherius Society, some physicists still believe there is a presently undiscovered planet in our solar system.

>7) Mendel's laws ignored for decades until rediscovered by
other >scientists.

It's often a matter of waiting for complimentary research to
catch up. Take, for example, the plight of Subrahmanyan
Chadrasekhar, whose ideas on what came to be known as black
holes were refused even by his own mentor, the eminent British
astronomer Sir Arthur Eddington. Mendel and Chadrasekhar only
had to wait for forty or so years for just recognition. John
Michell, who imagined the existence of black holes in 1783, had
to wait a lot longer (and you don't hear *him* moaning).

A better example of the myopic arrogance of conventionalism
concerns Goethe, who wrote a paper on the subjective nature of
our perception of colours that was immediately dismissed as
'unscientific' (due to his not being a scientist) only to be
confirmed experimentally a century later.

One problem in all this is how you expect scientists to react in
the face of big claims with little verifiable evidence. The
recent 'Best Ten cases' discussion here, typically inconclusive
as it was, should have considered a different criterion: What do
ETHers consider to be the ten (or even one) best articles of
evidence that they would feel confident in presenting to a
science-minded audience?

I suspect the answers would be the same, a list of historical
cases. What this amounts to in terms of 'logic' is inductive
reasoning: The observations (witness reports) are generalised to
form a hypothesis, then any additional observations are seen to
justify this hypothesis.

Apart from this being built, layer upon layer, of non sequiters
- Mark Cashman's comparitive categorizations of events/shapes,
etc., for example - this 'rationale' relies heavily on the
veracity of witnesses and the impartiality of investigators,
something of an unfortunate track record in ufology. Worse, it
appears that it is left up to the 'debunkers' to continually
expose the myriad 'exaggerations' made in the name of the
subject. Its proponents should be policing themselves if they
want to be taken seriously in a scientific context.
(Mythologically, it's fine.)

While Mark Cashman may argue that multiple witness reports
amount to some kind of repeatability, in scientific terms it
doesn't. In fact, this form of inductive reasoning is
demonstrably false, and often borders on the disingenuous.

If, as Mark suggests, the traditional process of scientific
discovery is "inappropriate" to phenomena such as UFOs, that's
tough. Don't expect this process to change. When myth mixes with
science, which is more likely? Will myth rise to the level of
science, or will science adapt to the level of myth?

As David Deutsch writes: 'Shoddy explanations that yield correct
predictions are two a penny, as UFO enthusiasts,
conspiracy-theorists and pseudoscientists of every variety
should (but never do) bear in mind.'

In an earlier post you (or Don Ledger) opined...

>>It never ceases to amaze me at the two-headed
>>approach that "science" takes on the pursuit of truth, which is
>>[1] their truth and [2] the great unwasheds' truth. The latter of
>>course is all of the other ignoramouses that are not those
>>shining knights of the first truth, the "scientisits".

The biggest misconception of all in this discussion is that
'Science' is some kind of body that acts as one, to the
exclusion (or suppression, as some would have it) of others.
This is bunk. Today there are more living scientists than dead
ones. Science is human construct, and its followers consist of
an energetic mix of differing opinion, just like UFO Updates.
That's the crux: people (including scientists) are fallible, and
all equally prone to the same influences. Pull back the curtain
and you will find no Wizard, only us.

Incidentally, talking of blundering British Astronomers, in 1957
the Astronomer Royal, Sir Harold Spencer Jones, offered a
journalist his opinion that "space travel is bunk" - two weeks
before Sputnik 1 was launched.

```
And good luck with your scientist friend. I have a neighbour who
is just as annoying (he thinks quantum-theoreticians are
"attention seeking").

Rob
```

[Next Message | Previous Message | This Day's Messages]
[This Month's Index | UFO UpDates Main Index | MUFON Ontario]

UFO UpDates - Toronto - updates@globalserve.net
Operated by Errol Bruce-Knapp - ++ 416-696-0304

A Hand-Operated E-Mail Subscription Service for the Study of UFO Related Phenomena.
To subscribe please send your first and last name to updates@globalserve.net
Message submissions should be sent to the same address.

[UFO Topics | People | Ufomind What's New | Ufomind Top Level]