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in Page Titles

Location: [Mothership](#) -> [UFO](#) -> [Updates](#) -> [1999](#) -> [Nov](#) -> **Re: Are We Alone?**

UFO UpDates Mailing List

Re: Are We Alone?

From: **Dennis Stacy** <dstacy@texas.net>
Date: Sat, 13 Nov 1999 13:10:52 -0600
Fwd Date: Sun, 14 Nov 1999 08:05:50 -0500
Subject: Re: Are We Alone?

>From: David Rudiak <DRudiak@aol.com>
>Date: Fri, 12 Nov 1999 20:02:08 EST
>Subject: Re: Are We Alone?
>To: updates@globalserve.net

>>From: Dennis Stacy <dstacy@texas.net>
>>Date: Thu, 11 Nov 1999 10:20:33 -0600
>>Fwd Date: Fri, 12 Nov 1999 09:45:26 -0500
>>Subject: Re: British Ufology Has Been Reborn!

<large snip>

>Truisms, Dennis, truisms. Just about EVERYTHING, everywhere is
>a culmination of a long series of utter accidents -- you, me,
>the rock you kick on the street, my delapidated Volvo. That's
>not the point. The question remains whether only one unique
>sequence leads to intelligent life or whether a vast multitude
>of sequences can get you there. I think the former position is
>unbelievably parochial. There isn't just my delapidated Volvo.
>There are delapidated Volvos everywhere, each with its own
>unique history.

I'll type real slow.

Of course your delapidated Volvo has a unique history (and congratulations on your choice of car, too), but it has a shared history as well. It went in one end of the manufacturing plant as a bunch of raw materials and came out the other end as a finished product. Up to that point, all Volvos shared (more or less) the same history. What happened inbetween the iron ore, the silicon that went into the windows, and the chemicals that became the seat covers is that someone designed same, someone manufactured same, and someone assembled same, all non-contingent factors, btw, although it wasn't always so with American cars.

Now think of the universe as a giant car factory, with raw materials going in one end, and finished product coming out the other. The question is, how many Volvos (that is Earth-sized planets capable of sustaining primitive life forms through their evolution into higher lifeforms) will the plant assemble, and how many of those will ultimately "run" or live long enough to reach the cosmic equivalent of, say, 300,000 highway miles?

Neither of us knows. No one on the surface of the planet knows. We can be pretty sure, though, that the number of eventual lottery winners is a smaller number than the beginning number. Drake and other astronomers have approached the problem

by the Very Large Number argument. In effect, the argument says that start with a Very Large Number, discount a Large Number, and you're still left with a Pretty Big Darn Big number. Talk about your truisms!

Metaphorically, the history of your individual Volvo begins the moment you drive it out of the relative safety of the dealer's lot and onto the Interstate Highway. To make matters interesting, let's say that your car came equipped with a small aquarium in the trunk in which you're trying to raise, nurture and evolve algae. And you run headon into an 18-wheeler (can you say supernova, etc?) in the first few blocks. Oops! Your Volvo just had a unique history moment, but one that will be ultimately shared to some degree by some number of other "unique" Volvos, like the one with the coffee stain on the front seat.

I have never said that you have to repeat the Earth's unique history at every stage in order to produce intelligent life. What I've said is that there are also very large numbers arrayed against Drake's very large numbers, and no one has any way of knowing who's right.

But to continue the metaphor. Once all the Volvos have reached 300,000 miles on their odometers or already stopped running altogether due to their unfortunate, unique, individual histories, we open their hoods and look inside, or their trunks, rather. The question now is: How many of those aquariums contain life, or more importantly, intelligent life?

Oops, here one developed a crack in the glass and is all dried up. Oops, there carbon monoxide leaked in from the exhaust pipe and killed everything off. Maybe another has really good algae in it. Maybe a flying saucer flies out of one (there, are you happy now?).

The point is, the end product is entirely dependent on a contingent history. There is no planetary "driver" who can pull into a gas station every few thousand miles, check the oil in the crankcase, and, if needed, add water (or air) to the aquarium.

So how many Volvos finished the race and won the lottery? The number could be very large, but there is no rule that says it has to be. Sturgeon, I think it is, lay hundreds of thousands of eggs in the "hope" or expectation that one will survive. There are probably any number of examples of nature beginning with very large numbers and ending with very small ones. We simply don't know what the planetary production and survival rates of the universe are.

At the moment I've got an oak tree outside dropping acorns by the bushel. I haven't had the heart to tell it that it's surrounded by a concrete driveway, never mind a small army of surly squirrels, and a yardman that periodically comes around and sweeps them up.

In the abstract, each one of those acorns has the potential to become a mighty oak (if I may wax poetic for a moment). But potential is just that -- an abstract concept incapable of shaping or determining events. Potential is only realized after the fact. Chaos and contingency have a nasty way of turning large numbers into small ones without much reflection.

In fact, I suppose, you could argue, if one were so inclined, that the presence of so many stars (and presumably Earth-sized planets in a favorable neighborhood) is necessary precisely because the survival rate is so low. Think of it as an insurance policy against contingency.

>>Unless, of course, you want to invoke a Creator. But that's >>another post.

>No need. The law of large numbers and rolling the dice seems to >do pretty much the same thing. Eventually somebody always wins >the lottery.

>David Rudiak

Well, we know the planet Earth did, don't we?

By the way, Texas has a lottery. Tickets are \$1 each. Send me a thousand dollars and I'll send you a thousand tickets. Of course if you would prefer to send me a much larger number of dollars (the more zeros after the one, the better!), thereby increasing your odds, that would be fine, too. I only ask 10% of anything you win.

Dennis Stacy
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