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UFO UpDates Mailing List

Re: Credible Witnesses Get It Wrong Again - Sandow

From: Greg Sandow <greg@gregsandow.com>
Date: Tue, 24 Oct 2000 11:51:44 -0400
Fwd Date: Wed, 25 Oct 2000 05:00:12 -0400
Subject: Re: Credible Witnesses Get It Wrong Again - Sandow

>From: Andy Roberts <AndyRoberts@ancientassociates.fsnet.co.uk>
>To: UFO UpDates - Toronto <updates@sympatico.ca>
>Subject: Credible Witnesses Get It Wrong Again
>Date: Mon, 23 Oct 2000 15:31:08 +0100

>Y'all,

>To continue the off/on thread about perception, radical
>misperception, the myth of the credible and its relevance to
>ufology here's some stuff based on an article in this Sunday's
>Observer (22/10/00 p.14)

>The article, titled 'How Phantom German Fighter Tricked
>Britain' opens.....

<snip>

This is a very unsatisfying debate. Nobody with any sense would deny that radical misperception can take place. But then, nobody with any sense would deny that often we humans perceive correctly, even when we're faced with new and unusual things. If that weren't true, life as we know it simply wouldn't be possible.

It simply won't do, then, to wave the undeniable fact that perception can be unreliable in the face of reported UFO sightings. Why not? Because we don't do it in other situations. Imagine, for instance, a murder trial. Witnesses tell the court that they saw the murder taking place. The defense lawyers don't, as a rule, get up and say, "Ah, but how do we know they really saw what they said they saw? Perception is unreliable!"

Of course, UFO skeptics might reply that we really would say such a thing if, let's say, someone testified that they'd seen a pink dinosaur emerging from the room where the murder took place. That's because we're reasonably sure no such thing could happen. But by insisting on misperception in a UFO case, the skeptics are in effect saying that real UFOs don't happen, or else are highly unlikely. And that means they're engaging in circular reasoning. The whole discussion, after all, is about whether real UFOs exist, but here we find the skeptics using an argument that only makes sense if we assume the answer is very likely "no." "Since we know there aren't any UFOs -- or at least it's highly unlikely that there are any -- we assume instead that a radical misperception is likely to have taken place, simply because such a thing is possible."

What we need here is, as in so many situations, the classic -- but all too rare -- level playing field. Someone says they've seen a UFO. Let's not debate perception itself. We all know that witnesses are sometimes right, and sometimes not. Let's concentrate on specifics of the case, in an attempt to try to figure out what really happened, with radical misperception of course being one of the possibilities. Here's an example of the absurdities we could sink to, if we don't follow this rule of thumb. Andy has supplied an example of misperception, quoting a newspaper article. Suppose, in reply, someone posted an article here recounting a case in which perception had been correct. Where would that get us? Nowhere -- but at least the absurdity of posting newspaper articles telling us things we already know would be powerfully demonstrated.

This said, Andy is right, I think, to warn us not to assume we or others know everything there is to know about a UFO witness. You never know what further investigation will uncover. My wake-up call here was an impressive New York Times article (have I mentioned it here before?), written in the wake of the school shootings that are such a disgraceful blemish on present-day America. Whenever one of these events has occurred (including random shootings outside schools), the media typically describes it as "mindless violence," with quotes from friends and neighbors describing the killer as "such a nice boy."

The Times discovered how silly this is. In an overwhelming majority of the several dozen cases their reporters studied, the killers turned out to have serious psychological problems. Not only that, but the problems had in many cases been identified, but hadn't been treated. Of course, the neighbors who said the killer was "such a nice boy" didn't know any of this, but a study of things like school and medical records clearly revealed it. The spate of school shootings, then, turns out not to be -- as it's so often depicted -- a story of a culture of violence, or about the harm caused by violent music and violent movies. It turns out to be in large part a study of untreated mental illness, for which America pays a large and so far largely unmeasured price.

Of course, the mere assertion that there might be more beneath the surface doesn't, in itself, discredit people like the Trents. Just as the Times came to its conclusion because of concrete evidence, we still need concrete evidence that the Trents engineered a hoax

Greg Sandow

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