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Response to “The Mystery of Elusiveness” by Dr Bertrand Méheust

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One of the strengths of his analysis is his rejection of what he very aptly calls the “engineer’s paradigm” in ufological reflection. Such a paradigm is misleading, the author shows: it rests on a *petitio principii* because it *assumes as given what should rather be demonstrated*. More concretely, the “engineer’s paradigm” presupposes without ever justifying that the UFO phenomenon must be analyzed from a technical perspective precisely because it involves *vehicles* whose movement and flight performance need to be understood. In other words, the engineer’s paradigm presupposes both the *perspective* from which it is appropriate to study UFOs, and moreover the *nature* of these phenomena: they can only be vehicles whose intriguing movement can

Bertrand Méheust is one of the most relevant and stimulating authors in French ufology. He coined in French the concept of “élusivité” [*elusiveness*] in 1975 to characterize UFO¹ phenomena, a concept that has had considerable legacy, particularly with Eric Zürcher who makes it the almost universal property of all UFO phenomena.² In his article, B. Méheust details the development of this concept and the evolution of its use. He also helped to make the connection between the witnesses’ accounts and science fiction works evident, as if the latter had provided a narrative framework, or even a perceptual one, for the testimonies.

A fine connoisseur of parapsychic phenomena to which he dedicated his Doctoral thesis and from which he derived two volumes of great erudition³, Méheust seeks to establish links between the ufological question *stricto sensu* and his knowledge in the field of parapsychics. Thus, he is led to “test” the concept of elusiveness in the analysis of poltergeists, many aspects of which can be shared with the phenomenology of UFOs.

only be explained by the possession of superior technology. Such a paradigm confines the reflection to the sole “technological” perspective and considers the question only from the angle of a “super performance” that could only be explained by technology possessed by advanced civilizations. B. Méheust is correct to show how this paradigm is based on prejudices and false certainties: it transposes a technical mindset as the only method of approaching a complex phenomenon.

Another strong point of his reflection is, thanks to the concept of elusiveness, to make a mode of appearance into *content*: the UFO does not merely appear elusively, but its appearance itself is the content of elusiveness. In other

1 The author reminds in his article of the distinction between UFO and UAP. However, it does not seem to play a particular role in his argument, and he does not seem to specifically adopt the new term UAP. On the contrary, he often refers to what he calls “the UFO question,” so I will speak of UFOs here for the sake of simplicity.

2 Cf. Eric Zürcher, *Révolutions ufologiques. L’énigme de la huitième clé dévoilée* [UFO revelations. *The riddle of the eighth key revealed*], Agnières, JMG Editions, 2023.

3 Cf. Bertrand Méheust, *Somnambulisme et médiumnité* [Sleepwalking and Mediumship], deux volumes, Paris, Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond, 2003.

words, there is an *intentionality* of the UFO that *theatrically determines the content of its demonstration*, so that the author converts a characteristic of the mode of appearance into an explicit content of demonstration. The UFO is, in short, characterizable in a paradoxical or oxymoronic way as “that which shows itself as not showing itself”. In other words, with UFO phenomena, *negation* enters into the very *positivity* of a manifestation: the UFO presents its manifestation as *not* showing itself.

Finally, in ongoing discussion with the skeptical paradigm that only accepts elusiveness in a weak sense, B. Méheust shows why such a paradigm does not account for the testimonies or the objective facts that ufology has gradually developed.

Overall, B. Méheust is a key author because he allows us to perceive the flaws in two paradigms, those of the engineer and the skeptic, and he provides us with efficient concepts to think about ufology. However, several reservations can be made regarding such an approach. The first concerns the *delimitation* of the field of ufology. If the latter wants to establish itself as a rigorous, even scientific, approach, it must imperatively *circumscribe the type of phenomena it needs to study*. More precisely, it must define its field and determine the type of objects it should focus on. However, the elusiveness approach generates a double problem in this regard: first, instead of determining a specific type of objects and precisely defining a field, it considerably extends this field by introducing parapsychic phenomena such as poltergeists. One could say that Jacques Vallée, for several decades, has paved the way for such an opening⁴, but one is entitled to wonder whether this does not make it impossible to delineate what should be studied, and does not prevent ufology from establishing itself as a rigorous science. Let’s clarify this point. The entire point of B. Méheust is to make elusiveness a universal characteristic of UFO phenomena, a characteristic associated with a certain “theatricality”; but *this characteristic is not exclusive* since it is found in other phenomena, particularly in poltergeists, mentioned in the article. More generally, this allows the author to show that the general characteristics of UFO phenomena are the same as those of parapsychological phenomena. But this is methodologically unsatisfactory because if elusiveness is made the determining trait of UFO phenomena, one renounces determining their specificity and only *relates* them to a series of broader phenomena. In other words, despite appearances, *the author does not provide*

a specific characterization of UFO phenomena; rather, he offers a means to relate them to a broader range of phenomena—parapsychological phenomena. Therefore, the rigorous determination of the domain that ufology deals with—and which other areas of parapsychology do not deal with—is not delineated.

This problem is compounded with the mention of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). At the end of his analyses, B. Méheust indeed makes a connection between elusiveness and an aspect of the thought of the author of *Being and Time* [*Sein und Zeit*] (1927), namely the question of withdrawal. By this means, the author seeks to show that parapsychic phenomena, through the elusiveness that characterizes them, could be better understood—or better described—from the Heideggerian idea of a withdrawal of Being [*Sein*]. But this rapprochement, once again, does not allow for specifying what is being talked about because, for Heidegger, *all phenomena, whatever they may be, can be characterized by the withdrawal and elusiveness* of what he calls in German the *Abgrund*; more precisely, *every being* [*Seiende*] *manifests at the cost of a withdrawal of Being* [*Sein*]. Thus, the *Contributions to Philosophy* [*Beiträge zur Philosophie*], developed in the 1940s, clearly show that every being is a result of a withdrawal of Being, and that in this regard, *every phenomenon* can only be a phenomenon by virtue of the withdrawal of Being through which phenomenality is made possible. Consequently, the invocation of Heidegger exacerbates the confusion of the argument: not only does one not understand what the *specificity* of ufology is within parapsychological phenomena, but with Heidegger, one no longer understands at all what the specificity of parapsychological phenomena is since the withdrawal of being, that is to say, elusiveness, is for Heidegger the universal and necessary mark of every phenomenon. Thus, Heidegger’s invocation dissolves the specificity of the field to be studied, instead of circumscribing it.

This brings us to a second reservation: many philosophical terms are used, but very few are clearly defined, so that, *philosophically speaking*, many passages are confusing. I would like to illustrate this using the notion of “phenomenology”, a term that B. Méheust uses repeatedly. But he uses it in a non-philosophical sense since it is a synonym for “description”; indeed, not wanting to adopt the perspective of the engineer’s paradigm, he is led to *describe* what the witnesses see instead of analyzing technical data. But in this case, why use the philosophical

4 Cf. Jacques Vallée, *Passport to Magonia*, Chicago, Henry Regnery Company, 1969.

term “phenomenology” instead of “description”? It is also necessary to understand the difference between description in the common sense and description in the phenomenological sense of the term. In the common sense, description refers to facts and presence; through language, therefore, present, factual realities are described, with the description having no other claim than to say “what is happening.” In contrast, *phenomenology, in a structural manner, does not describe facts; it describes essences*. In technical terms, phenomenology describes what are called “material *a priori*”, which refer to what makes the described thing meaningful to a consciousness. But what does Bertrand Méheust do then? Does he describe *facts* or does he describe *essences*? If he describes essences, that is, “material *a priori*”, the term “phenomenology” is justified; but if he only describes facts, the term “description” is more than sufficient. Now, insofar as essences allow for the delineation of the specificity of a described phenomenon, it seems to us that the author should abandon the term “phenomenology” since, in my view, he does not capture the specificity of the phenomena he studies.

In addition, the term “phenomenon” is never defined by the author, and all the usual lexicon of phenomenology is left unaddressed. In short, in phenomenology, “*the appearing*” is not the same as the *phenomenon*, a distinction that compels one to think about the difference between “manifestation” and “the phenomenon” as such. In technical terms, the *epoché* (suspension of judgment) specific to phenomenology aims to *reveal the appearing itself*, and not just the phenomenon; however, this crucial distinction of all phenomenology is absent from Méheust’s discourse. Consequently, one does not understand what pertains to the appearing and what pertains to the phenomenon in the criteria he analyzes.

Finally, in the absence of a strict definition of phenomenology, the author means by “phenomenon” two very different things: first, it refers to the *content of a perception*, thus a description of *what is perceived*, which amounts to describing the objective content of a perception. One can accept here the idea of “phenomenon” in the phenomenological sense, as it indeed refers to a content of consciousness, the meaning of which can be described by the latter. But with the introduction of the parapsychic, the fact is that one shifts towards a description of the witnesses’ *reactions*, thus towards a description that is less thought out from its content than by the *subjective attitudes* that result from it. Does this still count as part of the “phenomenon”? Only

a much stricter definition of what the author means by “phenomenology” would allow for a conclusion.

Finally, and this is my last reservation, it seems to us that the relationship with the laws of nature (laws of physics) is excessively tied to the engineer’s paradigm; however, *independently of the engineer’s paradigm*, sudden accelerations or a release from gravity appear abnormal: it is not necessary to adopt the engineer’s paradigm to see anomalies that are simultaneously possibilities since they occur. But conversely, when a witness sees a UFO phenomenon, it is still necessary that they are not a victim of a perceptual illusion or an interpretative error. Only a rigorously physical approach can dispel a number of perceptual errors, so much so that the author’s argument seems to commit two inversions: on the one hand, it is not necessary to refer to the engineer’s paradigm to consider that certain phenomena seem to violate the laws of nature. And on the other hand, only a physical and technical approach can distinguish what falls under a perceptual error from what falls under an abnormal phenomenon.

Overall, B. Méheust’s analyses are very stimulating and thought-provoking; they are rich with several decades of reflection and enrich the reader’s mind. If intelligence is the art of making connections, B. Méheust develops a great intelligence of the UFO phenomenon and makes a major contribution to it. Despite the reservations I have expressed, I express my gratitude for such analyses which, in essence, serve less to characterize ufology than to think about a *general ontology*; perhaps the ufological phenomena tell us that *every phenomenon refers to something unseen, that every manifestation only occurs from what does not show itself*, in short, that phenomena must be rethought based on what the great French philosopher Levinas (1905-1995) called the Nocturnal Events⁵, which Raoul Moati has recently highlighted very well.

5 Cf. Raoul Moati, *Levinas and the Night of Being. A Guide to Totality and Infinity*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2017, p. 12-18.