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Normal, Abnormal, Paranormal: Philosophical Determination of a Ufological Lexicon

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to reflect on ufological questions based on the concept of “normality” and abnormality. Aiming to delineate the field of ufology, it seeks to distinguish what is abnormal from what is impossible, while questioning the criteria by which a phenomenon can be deemed “abnormal.” Introducing etymology of many terms and the notion of “perception,” the article shows that human perception has its own norms, which are therefore relative to it; but these norms are not absolute in the sense that they can be violated, which invites us not to confuse the normative structure of human perception with impossibilities in themselves. Moreover, the reflection on perception is combined with the scientific norms conveyed by the “laws of Nature.” If the UAPs exhibit deviations from the laws of nature, it is necessary to characterize these deviations and determine whether they are “abnormal” or “anomalous”; Leibniz’s conceptual framework is then invoked to clarify what a deviation from the laws of nature means, and what the possibility of such a deviation entails.

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1. Introduction

What can philosophy bring to UFO research? This is a question whose answer is not self-evident because, on the surface, very few aspects of ufological phenomena intersect with philosophical concerns. The latter does not concern itself with what are traditionally called “UFOs” nor, even

less, with abnormal phenomena, and if it can occasionally mention humanoids or extraterrestrial entities, it can only be within the framework of heuristic¹ thought experiments, and not in the context of a precise study of the reality of the latter.

However, upon closer examination, several avenues offered by philosophy can be identified. The first, of a historical nature, consists of accounting for the speculations

¹ A good overview of what the call to the fiction of the extraterrestrial hypothesis might mean can be found in Boudou (2006), pp. 199-220.

that, for 2500 years, have been dedicated to non-human, albeit corporeal², intelligences, and presenting the very varied arguments that have advocated for the existence of such intelligences throughout the history of thought. This is what Paul Mirault and I, following Steven J. Dick³, attempted to establish in a book titled *Philosophy at the Risk of Extraterrestrial Intelligence*.⁴ But such an approach remains partly external to the ufological phenomenon, in that it investigates less the phenomena themselves reported by UFO witnesses than the intellectual possibility of conceiving other forms of intelligence within the framework of intellectual speculation.

That is why I propose to present below a number of other elements, intrinsically linked to ufological phenomena, which philosophy could seize upon and on which its discourse could be fruitful. These elements seem to us to number three:

1. A normative reflection on what the abnormality of a phenomenon means.
2. A cognitive reflection on what perception is in general, and an abnormal perception in particular.
3. An epistemological reflection on what laws in physics are and what an anomaly means in relation to a law.

Such an approach allows for circumventing the usual problem of ufology because it modifies the stakes: *it is not about determining the nature of the object in question*, but about questioning an *oddity* in a *differential* manner. More precisely, it is a matter of starting from the principle that any testimony about UFOs is based on a sense of strangeness that can be formalized from the notion of deviation; however, any deviation only makes sense in relation to a situation deemed normal. That is why I propose to conceptually specify the different forms that these deviations can take, which requires, for each case, conceptually determining what a normal situation means.

It follows from this perspective that the approach proposed in this article is not metaphysical, except for the part dedicated to the laws of nature; on the contrary, it aims to probe what experience shows and to account for the reasons *why an observation is interpreted as strange*, starting from the principle that *nothing is strange in itself*, with strangeness only appearing *relative to a perceptual or cognitive expectation that has been thwarted*. Without determining these perceptual or cognitive expectations that are challenged by UFO phenomena, that

is, without determining the structural norms of perception and knowledge, it is impossible to establish the meaning of the manifest strangeness of UFO phenomena. Therefore, this article does not aim to state *a priori* what phenomena should be to be considered as UFOs, but rather to determine *a priori* different modalities of strangeness, made manifest by deviations from perceptual or cognitive expectations.

2. Naming ufological phenomena: *homalos, norma, nomos*

2.1 Quick review of institutional acronyms

For anyone interested in UFO phenomena, the basis of the documentation remains founded on both civilian and military testimonies, to which are added detections carried out by radars sometimes accompanied by a number of physical effects on the witnesses themselves—hypersomnia, pain, etc.—or on the environment where the phenomena were observed. The first question to ask, since nothing can be conducted outside of testimonies, is therefore the *reason* why an individual deems it appropriate to provide one to the competent authorities, that is, the *reason* why what they observe seems sufficiently *abnormal* to be reported. However, the problems begin when one tries to understand *in relation to what an observation can be deemed abnormal*, and when one attempts to account for both the perceptual norms of the civilian witness and those governing scientific life, scientific norms which one can easily imagine do not coincide with those of ordinary perception.

If we examine the so-called “institutional” designations of UFO phenomena, we find that a recent evolution has manifested, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon domain. Let us recall a few well-established facts in this regard. On December 16th, 2017, the existence of an American program aimed at analyzing potential unknown aerospace threats was made public. Thanks to this announcement, everyone discovered that, from 2007 to at least 2012, there had existed an organization named AATIP, an acronym for *Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program*, which seems to have been succeeded by the UAP Task Force, with UAP being the acronym for *Unidentified Aerial Phenomena*, corresponding to what the French call PAN, *Phénomènes Aéro-spatiaux Non-identifiés*. The latter acronym tends to replace that of UFOs

² Christian theology, judging that Angels are not corporeal, specifying that they are corporeal intelligences allows us not to confuse angelic intelligence with the intelligence of non-human beings within the historical perspective we have adopted.

³ Cf. Dick (1984).

⁴ Cf. Gress and Mirault (2016).

(Unidentified Flying Objects) due to its greater neutrality—the notion of “phenomenon,” which we will revisit, is more neutral and cautious than that of “object,” which seems to commit to the reality of the observed phenomenon.

All of this would be irrelevant to the issue at hand if, recently, an inflection in the acronym UAP had not been observed since 2022 and under the impetus of NASA, with the A no longer being heard as the initial of “*Aerial*” but as that of “*Anomalous*.” Similarly, when the Department of Defense announced the creation of the AARO (*All-Domain Anomaly Resolution Office*) on July 20th, 2022, it was the term *Anomaly* that was chosen to describe the phenomena the newly established organization would address.

2.2 Etymology of the English terms *anomalous* and *Anomaly*

The recent substitution of *Anomaly* or *anomalous* for *Arial* is precious to us because the English word *anomalous* can be translated into French as both ‘*anormal*’ and ‘*anomal*,’ thus introducing a fruitful ambiguity. The English adjective *anomalous*, just like the noun *Anomaly*, is derived from the Latin *anomalus*, which itself was developed from the Greek *anomalos* meaning “irregular.” Moreover, *anomalos*, in Greek, is constructed from the term *homalos*, which can be translated as “similar” or “the same.”

Thus, what is *an-homalos* is literally the negation of “similar” or “the same,” the negation of what repeats identically, that is, fundamentally the *negation of an iteration*; therefore, *anomalous* is what is simply different, what cannot be reduced to identity, *what is not iterative*. To say that a phenomenon is *anomalous* is to indicate that it is *different*; but different from what? From what is identical, La Palice would say...

2.3 Etymology of the adjective ‘*abnormal*’

This is where an unexpected gap with French arises, which, with the adjectives ‘*anormal*’ and ‘*anomal*,’ contains a greater precision than the English term. Despite appearances, *anomalous* in English and *anomal* in French are not related, any more than *anomalous* and *anormal* in French are. Let’s start with the latter: the adjective ‘*abnormal*’ (*anormal* in French) is derived from the Latin *norma*, initially meaning square, and then, over time, its meaning expanded to signify “principle”

or “rule.” The adjective ‘*normalis*’, therefore, very logically first referred to what formed a right angle, then extended to the idea of conformity to a rule.

In this regard, what is normal in its original sense is what is determined by a square, therefore what does not lean to the right or the left, what is plumb, what is *balanced*, is also normal in its extended sense, which is compliant with a rule, which manifests regularity, in sum, what conforms to a standard. On the other hand, ‘*abnormal*’ is what deviates from a balance, a rule, and by extension, from regularity. The construction of the term ‘*abnormal*’ thus specifies *in relation to what* something is abnormal: it is abnormal in relation to *norma*, in relation to the rule, and can be translated as “irregular.”

2.4 Etymology of the noun ‘*anomaly*’

The term ‘*anomaly*,’ on the other hand, is derived from the Greek word ‘*nomos*,’ which has multiple meanings: while its translation as “law” is well-known, it should also include “custom,” “convention,” and “shared opinion.” The “*nomos*” does not adhere to the usual distinction between fact and law, since while it systematically evokes an imperative force, it can root this in fact through its customary and conventional aspect, or in law through its legislative dimension. The anomaly or the anomaly reflects this hesitation by qualifying both what deviates from conventional rules and what cannot be brought back to a known law of nature.

Overall, it appears that ‘*anomalous*’ in English, ‘*anormal*’ and ‘*anomal*’ in French, are based on three different roots, the first indicating a deviation from the same, the second a deviation from the norm, that is, from the rule, the third a deviation from the *nomos*, that is, fundamentally from an *authority having the force of law*, whether it be customary, conventional, natural, or scientific.

2.5 Etymology of the term ‘*paranormal*’

To these three terms must be added the one that, in the wake of 19th-century parapsychology, seems to have appeared in 1903 under the pen of James Maxwell⁵, namely ‘*paranormal*’. If the adjective ‘*normal*’ comes, as we have just said, from the Latin ‘*normalis*’ meaning conformity to a rule, the prefix ‘*para*’ comes from Greek and means “beside” or “parallel to,” with the noun ‘*parallel*’ itself being constructed from the prefix ‘*para*.’ It follows that *the paranormal is not against the norm*

5 Cf. Maxwell (1903). On this subject, one can read the excellent article of Leigh Penman, “The History of the Word *Paranormal*” (Penman 2015).

but rather *beside* or on the fringes of it, which is therefore at best incomplete and at worst false, since it cannot account for a series of phenomena developing outside what it claims to govern.

It follows from this initial approach, which consists of taking the characterizations seriously, that a first clarification could be made regarding what the deviation is in relation to: do ufological phenomena deviate from norms — *norma* —, laws — *nomoi* —, or iterations — *homalos*? The first case indicates a *normative* problem, the second a *legislative* problem, the third an *iterative* problem. Determining which category or categories ufological phenomena belong to would constitute a first clarification. Once this is done, it would be appropriate to ask what the deviation exhibited by such phenomena means: are they simply *different* from what the norms, laws, or iterative repetitions predict, or do they *violate* them?

3. The unusual is not the impossible: empirical norm and structural norm of perception

Let's return to the initial question of the testimony of a ufological phenomenon; is it based on the observation of a difference—*anomalous*—, a deviation from a norm (which one?) or from a scientifically established law? If it is a deviation from a norm, is that norm simply ineffective or is it violated by the observation? Finally, how do the abnormal and the anomaly relate to the paranormal?

It is true that a series of distinctions have been established by convention that can be recalled here: what is generally called *anormal* in French is what is unusual for a perception, *anomal* in French is what cannot be described according to a scientifically established rule nor predicted by a law, and *paranormal* is what relates to observable effects that could only be explained by an unknown force, which is itself unobservable. As for the English term 'anomalous,' which is very broad, it encompasses anything that shows a difference in relation to a regularity, regardless of the nature of that regularity.

One could therefore say, following these distinctions, that the civilian witness of a UFO phenomenon considers what is unusual to be abnormal, and that when he reports his testimony to the competent authorities, he does so because he is troubled by the non-customary, unprecedented nature of the observed phenomenon. But it is immediately apparent

that such a reduction of abnormality to the unusual is remarkably weak and unsatisfactory because, quite often, the phenomena in question are not only rare; they are also perceived as contrary to what should be possible. Let's illustrate this in two ways.

3.1 An unusual phenomenon is not an impossible phenomenon: the case of Valensole

Let's first recall the well-known Valensole encounter of 1965. The witness, Maurice Masse, claims to have seen an oval craft in his field and encountered two humanoids leaning over a patch of lavender, aiming some sort of "weapon" at him. Let's focus on these first: from a perceptual standpoint, we will readily acknowledge that encountering humanoids of one meter is unusual, but the encounter with a humanoid is only *disorienting from a perceptual perspective*, which itself is reduced to empirical normativity. Perceiving a humanoid does not contradict the laws of nature, does not contradict the laws of logic; *perceiving a humanoid does not fall, simply put, under what we consider logically impossible*; it is indeed a rare phenomenon, producing an empirical deviation from a perceptual habit, but it is not what a perception judges as absolutely impossible: it is merely an encounter for which we have not been empirically prepared. Even better, this could be proof of the existence of extraterrestrial beings whose existence can be anticipated through speculation, as Kant suggests in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781-1787):

If it were possible to decide the matter through some experience, I would gladly bet all my possessions that there are inhabitants [*Einwohner*] at least on some of the planets we see. That's why I say it's not just an opinion, but a strong belief (on the correctness of which I would already risk many advantages of life), that makes me think there are also inhabitants in other worlds [*Bewohner anderer Welten*]⁶.

Eventually, to put it very simply, encountering or perceiving a being with a non-human appearance on Earth is disconcerting but does not contradict logic in any way.

6 Kant (1781/1996), AK, III, 534-535, A 825/B 853.

3.2 What is an impossible phenomenon? The structural norms of perception

The case is quite different for characteristics associated with UAPs, particularly their instantaneous disappearance or the merging of multiple “objects” that initially appeared distinct. When numerous witnesses, both civilian and military, claim to have seen the observed phenomena disappear on the spot—such is the case of Ray Bowyer in the April 2007 sighting over the Channel reported by Leslie Kean⁷—something manifests that we tend to judge impossible. Jung himself reported with astonishment this phenomenon of sudden disappearance:

“According to a large number of testimonies, especially from the early days of their appearances, flying saucers suddenly appear and disappear just as suddenly. They can be detected by radar, but they remain invisible to the eye, and conversely, they can be observed by the eye without being recorded by radar!⁸”

Here, *the problem has nothing to do conceptually with small humanoids examining a field of lavender*; when a phenomenon suddenly disappears, we are not dealing merely with an issue of empirical rarity, but with something that, according to our standards, should not be possible, that is to say, something that is *contradictory*: a material phenomenon cannot suddenly disappear, elude perception, because that *contradicts* everything we understand about matter, which we always associate with permanence and continuity.

That is why many characteristics of UFOs can be understood through the concept of perceptual *impossibility*: seeing matter disappear on the spot contradicts what we consider to be its structural norms, contradicts what we know rationally and not just empirically about matter, namely that it cannot suddenly appear or suddenly disappear. The same goes for the merging of distinct phenomena into a single entity.

3.3 Perceiving an effect as “magical”: the enlightening case of the magic show

This distinction is perfectly evident through the case of the magic show. Under what conditions does a spectator judge that the effect presented to them is *magical*? Not because the effect is rare or unprecedented, but on the express condition that *something deemed absolutely impossible from a perceptual standpoint*—an instantaneous transposition of

objects, a transformation of one object into another, a body being cut and then reassembled, etc.—becomes possible in the performance, in sum, on the express condition that the structuring laws of perception seem to be violated. More precisely, it is understood that perception is associated with a certain idea of matter: thus, the laws of perception are nothing more than the considerations we all have about matter and which are not related to a problem of habit. For us, it is *inherently impossible* for matter to disappear instantly—that is, suddenly no longer be perceived—instantaneously transpose—that is, be perceived in two different places very far apart from each other in an instant—or merge with another material entity—that is, contradict the integrity of bodies.

If this is observed during a performance, then it *contradicts* what we *necessarily* conceive about matter, and it is because we all have such representations that everyone can understand, in a magic show, what is precisely *abnorma*. In short, being amazed by a magic trick is only possible if what our reasoning establishes about the material is found to be flawed and contradicted by what we see.

Hence the requirement to distinguish between what is normal by habit, and what is normal by structural necessity of what we deem possible regarding matter; by contrast, it can be determined with greater precision what *abnormal* [*anormal* in French] means depending on whether it is a flatly empirical problem of frequency or a problem of manifestation of what my perception nonetheless presents to me as impossible. A mechanical link with the paranormal would be established in that a perception of abnormal phenomena could be explained by the activation of a mental force *corrupting the structural norms of perception*, with the paranormal then being conceived as the domain of phenomena grasped in a mode parallel to that of ordinary perception.

3.4 What philosophy has to say about perception and matter

If there is one domain in which philosophy has made extensive efforts, it is that of perception. It has shown that perception is not solely constituted by our habits but also by implicit reasoning: we associate with matter the idea of a certain *permanence* coupled with *continuity*, so much so that a material element which, *instantaneously*, would come from nowhere, or disappear on the spot, or even change instantly

7 Kean (2011/2014), p. 105.

8 Jung (1958/1974), p. 68-69.

in favor of another, contradicts the very idea we have of “matter” regarding how it should manifest itself to us. Moreover, this means that through the perceptual framework, a certain relationship is established between matter and the spatio-temporal framework: it *persists* (temporality) in a *presence* (spatiality), and it seems perceptively impossible to encounter a sudden appearance—that is, an instantaneous presence—or a sudden disappearance—that is, the instantaneous end of a presence.

But if we take this observation to its conclusion, we are compelled to note that the very concept of matter only truly makes sense in relation to space⁹ and time, which can be considered the two necessary pillars of perception: to perceive is to perceive something here (space) and now (time). The question that arises then is the relationship between ufological phenomena and space and time: do witnesses report distortions of time and space when these phenomena are observed? Certainly yes, both through the well-known phenomenon of “missing time” and through the space of the apparitions, which many witnesses describe as an empty and artificial setting. These two aspects are crucial because if one considers that perception requires normal time and space, then the alteration of these should cast doubt on whether UFO phenomena fall under perception. It is not, in saying this, to deny the existence of UFO phenomena but to say that if human perception is conditioned by space and time, then an alteration of space and time should mechanically cast doubt on whether it is a perception that took place when “missing time” and/or an artificial and stationary spatial framework are reported.

Even better, this way of reasoning would allow the paranormal to be articulated with philosophy; the latter indeed allows for the establishment of the norms that authorize speaking of perception. But if the norms are violated, *if it is not a perception* that the witness is dealing with, then the paranormal can come into play, which would be nothing more than what allows us to name the type of representations available to the witness, parallel to the normal case of perception. Even better, and more speculatively, the paranormal would allow for the investigation of a force (of the mind?) that alters the normal forms of perception and establishes another framework of representation that deviates

from the ordinary perceptual experience.

3.5 Methodological consequences

Let’s take stock of what philosophy could contribute to the study of perception:

1. It is always necessary to distinguish within the “norm” what is merely the recording of an empirical habit—what we will henceforth call “empirical norm” and which can be established by an empirical perceptual psychology—from what designates a necessary structure of perception and which we will call “legislative norm,” as it dictates to our perception what, in the spatio-temporal manifestation of matter, is possible and impossible.
2. It then becomes evident that, at least from a perceptual standpoint, *the question of the appearance/disappearance and movement of UFOs is not of the same order as that of humanoids or bodies deemed extraterrestrial*, although the latter can manifest simultaneously with a UFO or as a result of it. The appearance of humanoids or non-human bodies is merely a perceptual break in habit, whereas the on-site disappearance of a supposed craft or the “fusion” of two crafts contradicts the idea of permanence associated with matter, as evidenced by the mental reflex of asking where the craft went after its disappearance, as if we immediately judged that it must persist, but elsewhere. Many intellectual elaborations around what UFOs are indeed rest on the necessity *for perception* to consider that if the craft is material, then it cannot truly disappear, and must therefore *be found elsewhere than in the usual perceptual field*, which gives rise to speculations about hidden dimensions and other possible “places” to locate an object that, for perception, must *continue* to be found *somewhere*¹⁰. Overall, it seems crucial to us to stop treating the question of UFOs and that of bodies deemed non-terrestrial together because, at least on a perceptual level, they absolutely do not belong to the same category, even though some witnesses claim to have observed humanoid bodies *in* the crafts or *next to* them.
3. However, this distinction must be nuanced as soon

9 We have extensively investigated the structural links between space and matter in Gress (2023).

10 We are merely indicating a line of thought here, but it would not be useless to ask to what extent the speculative elaborations dedicated to parallel worlds do not *simply serve to save the perceptual prejudices conveyed by the structural norms of perception*: since “matter” *must* persist, the perceptual structural norms tell us, then *another world is necessary to locate the persistent material object* when it suddenly eludes perception, or to locate its origin when it suddenly appears. However, this structural belief in the permanence of matter—in its substantiality—perhaps says nothing about the reality of things but only about *our* way of *conceiving* what *we* perceive, and it sometimes seems hasty to infer from it *physical models* that are indeed elaborate and appealing but seem only intended to satisfy perceptual prejudices.

as the observed body, whether it appears humanoid or “extraterrestrial,” behaves like a UFO, that is, disappears or appears suddenly. The reflection could here open up to the famous Men in Black, whose instant disappearances have been reported several times¹¹; in this case, there is no reason to perceptually *distinguish* such a body from a UFO, since they are linked by the same violation of perceptual impossibility and could therefore be *related*.

3.6 The dual fertility of the philosophical approach

Here, the dual utility of the philosophical approach is established. The first would summon everything that the history of philosophy since the 17th century has produced most fruitfully, namely all the reflection initiated by Descartes on what it means *to appear* for a consciousness, on what a “phenomenon¹²” is defined by the very fact that it appears for a consciousness—a field marked out by Leibniz, Lambert, and Kant—and on the intrinsic necessities of the perceptions of the latter. A strict *phenomenology* is required, aiming to delineate the norms of appearance and the impossibilities that can be inferred from it. Whether it is Descartes, Berkeley, Locke, Hume, Leibniz, Kant, or Hegel, these authors share the common endeavor of making prodigious efforts to account for perceptual structures and the universal norms that derive from them; by understanding what these legislative norms are, particularly the role played by time and space, it could be determined what deviates from them and deserves to be called abnormal. Naturally, such research is not yet complete, and a contemporary philosopher like Jocelyn Benoist is conducting very fruitful work on perceptual norms.¹³

A second would concern the link with matter: a quick historical glance first reveals that such a concept did not always exist. Matter (in Greek *hylè*) is a term originally meaning “wood,” just like the Latin *materia*. But Aristotle¹⁴ extended its meaning to make it a general concept; with the Stagirite¹⁵, the idea of “substance” combines two elements: the *form*, that gives the body its identity, and the *matter*, the

concrete substrate of the body, organized by the form. Thus, Aristotle completely invented the idea that bodies must have a kind of concrete “content” filling the form, in the same way that “wood” gave a concrete consistency to the tree. We have gradually come to consider this necessity of a “filling” of bodies through matter as obvious, and have stopped seeing that it was a concept primarily responding to the needs of Aristotle’s philosophy—allowing the *form* to have something to *inform*—and not an ontological obviousness. Worse still, we have come to believe that matter is *objective*, that is to say, *independent* of the human gaze, to such an extent that the study of matter has ended up becoming the very object of the physical sciences, as if the sciences had found an objective reality, unconditioned by human thought.

Thus, the concept of matter introduces a double intellectual trap; on the one hand, it obscures the fact that philosophers prior to Aristotle did not need this concept to think about bodies. Plato, for example, does not have a concept of matter, but he much more willingly evokes the idea of “sensible realities” without ever using the term *hylè*. There is therefore no unified content of bodies that would be matter in Plato, and when he needs to name them, he speaks of the *relationship* we have with them: bodies present themselves to us based on what we *feel*; we cannot speak of bodies other than from what our senses tell us. They are therefore realities that are first and foremost *relative* to what we feel about them, thus precisely *sensible* realities, which cannot be thought of independently of the information our senses provide us. The interest of the Platonic approach lies in not introducing objectivity where there is none, and in assuming that everything we can say about bodies will *ultimately* be relative to what we have felt about them. The Platonic approach thus proves to be fundamentally fruitful because, even if we introduce the concept of matter with Aristotle and his successors, we do not enhance our understanding of what bodies are, but rather obscure it: indeed, either we consider matter naively, and it is impossible for us to conceptually distinguish it from what is *tangible*, that is, from the *resistance* opposing touch; or we consider it scientifically, but in this case, matter presents itself in the form of measurements that,

11 The late Jean Mesnard reported astonishing cases on this subject. Thus, in July 1976, a woman traveling to Châtillon-sur-Loire (France) saw from her car a man dressed in black, wearing a black turtleneck sweater. “At the moment the light blue car passed by this man, he disappeared! On the spot, instantly!”; cf. Mesnard (2005/2016), p. 93.

12 There would be much to say, without a doubt, about the very term ‘phenomenon’ which comes from the Greek verb *phainein*, meaning to appear, and which gives the Greek noun *phainomenon*. In these terms, we have the root *pha* which will give *phos* meaning “light” and which will much later give photon. That all ufological phenomena involve a certain luminosity of unusual intensity and purity invites us to consider the link between *what appears*—the *phenomenon*—and *light*—*phos*—, a link to be established in light of what the legislative norms of perception should be.

13 Cf. in particular Benoist (2016) and (2017).

14 Cf. for example Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Z, 1039b20-34.

15 This is a term sometimes employed by scholars when referring to Aristotle; it derives from his place of birth, Stagira (near present day Thessaloniki, Greece). [Editor.]

ultimately, must be observed, that is, *seen*. The objectivity that matter seems to carry is therefore fallacious; it simulates an objective property of bodies, but its analysis reveals that, in the final instance, it can only be grasped in relation to the senses. The very idea of matter therefore seems deceptive, while the apprehension of bodies according to the conceptuality of sensible reality appears much more adequate to the relationship we maintain with them.

But from this first trap, a second one follows. Since the concept of matter exists, and it has entered common language, we tend to naively believe that its definition is clear; however, in fact, the definition of matter is so obscure that no philosopher has managed to define it for itself by giving it an immanent meaning: on the contrary, it has always been thought of *in relation to something other than itself* and *never in itself*. Aristotle himself, who nonetheless creates the concept in the *Metaphysics*, fails to provide a clear and autonomous definition, so much so that for him it is merely the *complement of the form* that the substance needs to be substance. Even in Aristotle, therefore, matter does not have intrinsic meaning, but only acquires significance from its complement, form, with which it composes substance. It will be the same, of course, in all Scholastic thought. Later, Descartes will not be able to think of matter for itself and will only be able to determine it based on its principal attribute, which is extension. In other words, matter will be defined by Descartes based on a spatial criterion, in that it will be conceived as what occupies a portion of space or, more precisely, as what *I cannot help but represent as extended*. A little later, Kant will partially return to Plato since he will make matter that which, from the thing-in-itself, affects me, and can therefore not be thought independently of what is felt.

We see from this brief reminder that an intrinsic definition of matter is unattainable, and this from the very beginning; it even seems impossible for its initial creator — Aristotle—to give it an autonomous and immanent meaning. We thus understand why Bishop Berkeley (1685-1753) was led to rethink the existence of the world without encumbering it with the concept of matter, showing that while the reality of the world was undeniable, its *materiality* contained more obscurity than clarity for the mind. In this regard, it is not forbidden to think that matter could be a *conceptual parasite* introduced by Aristotle, creating more confusion than clarity, which could be done without; one could then draw inspiration from Plato, for example, by returning to the first evidence,

namely that every perceived body presents itself as *a sensitive piece of information transmitted by the senses*, both on the naive level—tactile information of the tangible, visual information of the immediate gaze, etc.—and on the scientific level—the necessity of measuring.

4. The *nomos* of science and the status of anomaly: the anomic and the anomalous

The reflection that has just been conducted, however, only concerned perceptual abnormality, neglecting the scientific problem of anomic phenomena that cannot be reduced to any known rule or law, or even violate them, for example in the case of lightning accelerations incompatible with what we know about inertia, as Jacques Vallée and Bertrand Méheust remind us in the third round table of a famous conference¹⁶. However, the possibility that phenomena deviating from the laws manifest in physics is not self-evident; in *The Normal and the Pathological* (1966), the philosopher of medicine Georges Canguilhem recalled that Bichat (1771-1802) distinguished the biological domain from the physical and chemical domains by the fact that, in the latter, phenomena systematically observed the law, to such an extent that nothing “pathological” could occur there and, consequently, that nothing “normal” could take place either, with the normal only making sense in a pair, so to speak, meaning that if the pathological were possible.

Overall, it is understood that the deviation from a norm does not have the same significance as that observed in a physical law which, if violated, loses its universally legislative dimension and no longer deserves the name of law: there is no law in physics except by the universal constraint it exerts, the slightest exception precisely threatening its *legality*.¹⁷ That social beings can deviate from the supposed “social laws” is easily understandable, but that phenomena categorized as “physical” can free themselves from the laws of Nature introduces a discredit to the legality of said laws.

But perhaps it is appropriate to introduce a nuance here. If by *nomos* one means the authority having the force of law, then what escapes legality and appears as chaotic or disorderly—meaning: not ordered by a law or “escaping the domain governed by the law”—should be called *anomic*. On the other hand, what violates the law by taking the appearance of a phenomenon that known laws present as

¹⁶ Cf. Rault and Juste-Duits (2000), p. 142, *sq.*

¹⁷ Of course, we are speaking in ideal terms here; in actual scientific practice, things are more flexible than this Manichean approach would suggest.

impossible should be called *anomal*. The domain of anomaly is therefore not univocal, as it can equally signify a form of disorder that no law would regulate—anomic phenomenon—or a challenge to the laws themselves, which would be contested by the very occurrence of the phenomenon—anomal phenomenon—as in the case of an acceleration contradicting what the laws of inertia present as impossible. Only the second understanding of anomaly threatens the legality of the law and, to use the terminology from the beginning of this section, only the anomaly risks introducing a “pathology” of the legal, which the anomic as defined does not convey.

Let’s imagine illustrating this the generic case of a lightning-fast acceleration deemed impossible in light of inertia. It would undoubtedly be an anomalous phenomenon, violating what inertia presents as impossible and not what it does not foresee. The first question to ask is to specify under what conditions such a law would be violated, and not simply to observe its violation by the phenomenon. We know that inertia only makes sense in relation to forces acting on masses, and it is therefore scientifically incomprehensible to observe accelerations contrary to inertia unless the following belief is presupposed: the bodies observed in ufology are massive. But what proves that they are indeed massive? The displacement of the UAP is only anomalous if it is massive, but the anomaly collapses if it is not.

The issue therefore seems to be the following: whenever a law of physics appears to be violated, *one should ask what needs to be assumed about the UAP for the law to be violated*. In the case of inertia, it is its mass-like nature that should be admitted, a mass-like nature that nothing, except for marginal material recoveries, has so far allowed to be objectified; only trajectories, velocities, and luminosities have been fully established. This would invite us to consider what non-massive luminous and swift phenomena might be, to probe the implications of atomic physics predictions that elementary particles—including the photon—have no mass, and so on.

5. An author not to be overlooked: Leibniz

In the swamp of the history of philosophy, an author stands out whose intellectual scope, combined with the breadth of his reflections, would allow him to be established as a guide on these questions: it is Leibniz (1646-1716). Mathematician, physicist, philosopher, theologian, but also geologist, linguist, and historian, Leibniz combines the genius of his thought

with the breadth of his knowledge, which made him the last European polymath.

5.1 The approach to “modalities”

The first fundamental element he clarified and from which we can benefit pertains to the question of *modalities*. These concepts date back to Aristotle and concern the relationship of a proposition (affirmation or negation) to reality: such a relationship can either state a necessity, a possibility, an impossibility, or a contingency. Leibniz significantly improved its use and, above all, he showed that the question of modalities was *the central question of the nature of the world*.

Now, in the questions that concern ufology in general and the concepts of abnormality and anomaly in particular, modalities are everywhere since what falls under physical anomaly can either indicate the *possibility of the non-legal* (anomic) or *the possibility of the legally impossible* (anomal), thus *the possibility of what should necessarily be impossible*. The anomic phenomenon indeed tells us that what is not subject to a law is still possible, while the anomal phenomenon indicates that *what should not be able to happen*—therefore the impossible—*does* happen.

Even better, Leibniz showed that what happens, therefore what exists, necessarily rests on what is possible, defined as being *non-contradictory*: the possible is the foundation of the existent, which means that what exists has a certain coherence since what is contradictory cannot attain existence. Hence this crucial paradox: to say that a phenomenon deemed impossible occurs and therefore exists is to say that it is possible, so much so that we are led to a *possibility of the impossible*. Of course, from Leibniz’s perspective, phrasing things this way, that is to say speaking of a “possibility of the impossible,” would be a rhetorical trick that poorly conceals the absurdity of such a phrase: in reality, in Leibnizian logic, *nothing impossible can exist or occur*, so we are led back to the third part, which invited us to always determine the implicit element(s) and *give the impression* that a law is being violated by the displacement or appearance of a UAP.

5.2 The question of the “miracle”

Another domain of Leibnizian thought involves questioning what it means for something we deemed impossible to come to pass; this aspect may seem theological because Leibniz calls it a “miracle.” But nothing prevents us from using Leibniz’s analysis of the miracle by taking it out of theology, by taking

it out of the sphere of Christian revelation, to make it the concept naming any situation where a law that is nonetheless necessary and universal seems to be violated.

Let's first consider what the word "miracle" tells us: its etymology based on "*mirus*", meaning "mirror," refers to something that is *seen* and *astonishes*. If the miracle is therefore this *phenomenon*, that is to say this appearance that astonishes because it deviates from everything that is known and normal, it can be conceived here as *a kind of deviation from the laws of nature*. Thus, several elements of great fertility appear.

It is first possible to use what philosophy says about miracles to think about UFO phenomena. We would certainly be broadening Leibniz's intentions¹⁸, but we might also find one of Jacques Vallée's inspirations in his famous article dedicated to the "morphology of the miracle¹⁹", which compares the apparitions of Fatima to UFO phenomena; thus, a whole conceptual framework could emerge, which one might call "matrixial" and which would outline the logical structure on which we should rely whenever a phenomenon seems to deviate from, or even contradict, a supposedly known law of nature.

What would be the benefit? First and foremost, it was about not confusing the "miracle" with rarity. Against a surprisingly widespread cliché, Leibniz indeed indicates that the miracle is not governed by its *rarity* and is therefore not determined by the infrequency of an occurrence; it concerns, on the contrary, the very quality of what presents itself and not its frequency. From this arises a paradox that Leibniz himself embraced, namely that many so-called scientific theories, describing universal and permanent phenomena, are *inadvertently* conceived in a miraculous manner without this being consciously perceived, because the high frequency of the described phenomena obscures the miraculous dimension of the explanation. This is the case with the Newtonian conception of gravitation since, if Newton were right, *invisible forces would act without contact and at a distance*, and *would force* bodies at a distance to adopt certain movements—which would be truly miraculous. Leibniz, who absolutely does not believe in the Newtonian approach to gravitation, points out the sophism usually committed, which consists of making one believe that, on the grounds that the gravitational phenomenon is universally present, it would be *natural* and therefore non-miraculous, an argument used by Newtonians

to mitigate the more than speculative nature of these forces acting at a distance and without contact. But *regularity is not the measure of the natural*, just as rarity is not the measure of the miraculous, that is what Leibniz means. This brings us back to the initial discussions dedicated to the crucial distinction between what is *unusual* and what is *structurally impossible*.

Finally, and if we still refer to Leibniz, a question related to the *intentionality* of the miracle would arise: it certainly deviates from the laws of nature, but it occurs because God willed it; however, God does not act arbitrarily or randomly, His will obeys an order. As a result, Leibniz aims to show that the "laws of nature" which are assumed to be universal are of a lesser universality than the order governing divine will. To put it another way, if the miracle is performed by God and if the divine will always follows the greatest order, then the laws of nature are merely a "sub-order," an order of low generality that, in the name of a higher order, can be violated. This allows us to understand two crucial elements:

- *Intentional does not mean arbitrary*, because the will of a perfect being—God—cannot be confused with that of an individual whim. That God has intentions does not imply that He does just anything.
- When a law of nature is violated, it is not all order that is disrupted but a certain natural order that should not be confused with the ultimate and truly universal order.

This Leibnizian analysis amounts to establishing a *hierarchy within the universal*: when a universal rule seems to be violated by a miracle, it is because a rule of greater universality has imposed itself, so that what we take for a law turns out to be only a kind of particular regulation, rendered inoperative if one rises to a higher degree of universality, divine intentionality being conceived as absolute universality—what we called *the ultimate and truly universal order*. By contrast, what we take for natural laws might well only pertain to a relative universality, destined to be surpassed.

5.3 The false obviousness of the notion of "law of nature"

From this, our final point is understood: one should not believe that the notion of "law of nature" is self-evident

18 The circumstances of Leibniz's reflection are extremely technical and involve both the general problem of perception and that of causality, through Malebranche's occasionalism, which Leibniz criticizes for explaining bodily movements as a "perpetual miracle." But the latter expands his reflection far beyond the circumstantial problem from which it originated. Cf. Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics* [*Discours de Métaphysique*], § 6: "God Does Nothing Which Is Not Orderly and It Is Not Even Possible to Imagine Events That Are Not Regular."

19 Cf. Vallée (1975).

and devoid of pretenses. Like many of his contemporaries, Leibniz is somewhat reluctant to accept the idea of an “obedience” of natural phenomena to the laws, as this amounts to treating natural phenomena as beings endowed with *intention* by virtue of which they should obey the universal rules that are the laws. It should not be forgotten that the concept of “law” is of political origin and was initially used exclusively to name rules addressed to beings endowed with intentionality: humans. Transposing the term “law” into the field of natural sciences is not without difficulty because while it is very clear how a citizen can obey or disobey rules by virtue of their intentionality, it is hard to understand how a natural phenomenon can “obey” a rule in the strict sense, as obedience involves the idea of intention. For this reason, several philosophers and physicists—and not the least among them!—such as Descartes and especially Leibniz, have used the concept of “law” in physics only with caution and sparingly, as they perceived the limits and the profound implications of such a concept.

The very concept of “law of nature” is therefore much less obvious than it seems, as it borrows from the political domain the idea of *intentional obedience* to laws to transpose it to that of inert beings, which one would have to believe “obey” universal rules. The old approach, essentially Aristotelian, which explained the movement of phenomena based on the “qualities” intrinsically contained within bodies, had the immense disadvantage of being metaphysical and strictly unobservable—no “quality” has ever been subject to observation or detection—but paradoxically had the merit of not attributing to inert bodies a form of obedience to rules whose compliance we do not quite understand, unless we precisely attribute to them the *intention* to comply.

Of course, one could respond in a positivist manner that laws are merely a metaphor: they do not imply real obedience from phenomena but are a convenient term to denote regularity; in other words, they do not constrain phenomena and do not imply anything intentional. But this positivist approach is doubly mediocre because, 1) it confuses what is frequent or regular with what is “natural,” and 2) it is conceptually inept since it can, at most, only establish iterative lists of regular connections (as Hume will admirably demonstrate, drawing skeptical conclusions from it). That is why, faced with the immense problems generated by the notion of law, Leibniz tends to think about the “internal dispositions” of bodies, dispositions that may or may not be

actualized, and which mean that *natural bodies are infinitely more complex than a composition of matter subject to natural laws*; there is in the German philosopher a whole reflection on potential forces, on the *virtualities*²⁰ of bodies, from which we would benefit by probing their scope, particularly in the ufological context.

6. Conclusion

The few avenues mentioned previously can be quickly summarized as follows:

1. Like any science, ufology should *delineate* and *define* its object. Nevertheless, the present article does not seek to define *a priori* the nature of the object in question but rather establishes a series of *criteria* from which it is possible to determine in what sense the strangeness of the observed phenomena manifests; the intellectual gain from this reorientation of questioning is to understand, according to the different modalities of strangeness, which perspective should be adopted to approach the phenomenon. Three questions, opening three perspectives, have thus been retained: does ufology deal with (i) the abnormal, in which case it would be a science of deviation from the normative; (ii) the anomalous, in which case it would be a science of deviation from the legislative; or (iii) the *anomalous*, in which case it would be merely an empirical science of deviation from the iterative? It is very possible that these three modalities together characterize ufology, in which case it would be essential to establish the hierarchy of these three modalities as well as their articulation in order to construct the systematicity of the three perspectives. If indeed the abnormal, the anomaly, and the anomalous are involved in ufology, then none of the three can be conceived in isolation, each constituting a different perspective on the same reality.
2. From a perceptual point of view, in the sense of ordinary perception, if we distinguish between what is empirically abnormal and what is structurally impossible, then it is certainly appropriate not to treat together phenomena that merely break a perceptual habit and those that violate the structural norms of perception, which amounts to saying that, from a perceptual point of view, perceiving a humanoid is not of the same order as

20 There would be much to gain from Marc Parmentier’s book, *Archives du virtuel* (2023).

dealing with a sudden appearance or disappearance of a phenomenon.

3. By prioritizing the structural norms of perception, one could engage in a reflection on *what precisely cannot be normal*, namely what violates the requirement of permanence associated with the phenomenon; thus, if perception assumes a spatio-temporal framework where the phenomenon should persist, it follows by contraposition that when a phenomenon frees itself from the requirement of permanence and continuity, it may not be perception. Perhaps this is the *proper domain of the paranormal, namely the study of the forces through which a mode of capturing phenomena other than ordinary perception is activated and which therefore cannot be called “perception.”*
4. The scientific question appears as such, engaging more with the *nomos* governing natural bodies than with the norm. It is undoubtedly necessary to distinguish between the anomic and the anomal, and to limit the risk of “pathologies” of the legal to the anomal, while examining under what precise conditions it is permissible to say that a law is violated.
5. Finally, with the help of Leibniz’s conceptual framework, it could be clarified what exactly the violation of a law of nature as a “miracle” means, which would allow for a link to be established with intentionality, as there is no “miracle” for Leibniz except when God, in the name of a higher order than that of the laws of nature, frees phenomena from them. The importance of the intentionality of UFO phenomena, notably emphasized by Eric Zurcher²¹, would otherwise receive at least a conceptual and metaphysical characterization that we consider fruitful.²²

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21 Cf. Guillemant & Zurcher (2025), p. 346.

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