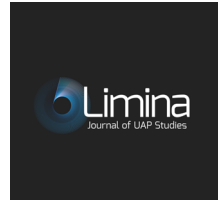




# Limina — The Journal of UAP Studies

<http://limina.uapstudies.org/> | <https://limina.scholasticahq.com/>



## James D. Madden, *Unidentified Flying Hyperobject: UFOs, Philosophy, and the End of the World* (Ontocalypse Press, 2023), 141 pages. ISBN: 9798865867425. Paperback: \$21.73.

Travis Dumsday, Ph.D.\*  
Concordia University of Edmonton

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3374-0323>

### ARTICLE INFO

Received: 07 February 2024

Received in revised form: 02 April 2024

Accepted: 02 April 2024

\*Author contact: [travis.dumsday@concordia.ab.ca](mailto:travis.dumsday@concordia.ab.ca)

© Travis Dumsday. Published by the Society for UAP Studies. This is an open access article under the CC license. (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

Among the academic disciplines that have contributed to ufology / UAP studies over the years, philosophy can hardly be named a major player. Religious studies scholars, folklorists, and even pop culture specialists have been more prominent in their contributions to the humanities-oriented sectors of the field. The dearth of philosophical engagement with ufology is unfortunate, insofar as there are questions in the area which could benefit from the application of distinctively philosophical tools of inquiry. That fact is made clear in James Madden’s thought-provoking and well-written new monograph.

Madden is probably best-known for his first book *Mind, Matter, and Nature: A Thomistic Proposal for the Philosophy of Mind* (CUA Press, 2013), which remains one of the better efforts at bridge-building between analytic philosophy of mind and Scholastic approaches to human nature. His new book is similarly eclectic and broad-minded, drawing on a deep knowledge both of historical sources (though Plato, Aristotle, Nietzsche, and Heidegger figure much more frequently in the present work than does Thomas Aquinas) and of more recent analytic and continental literatures. These are brought to bear on the questions of what we may be dealing with when it comes to UFOs, and of what our prospects may be for figuring that out.

Metaphysical and epistemological propositions are thus intertwined throughout, though the latter are especially central. That is evident from the opening lines of Madden’s introductory chapter: “This book is mostly a cautionary tale, aimed in particular at counselling humility. The UFO stretches us to—and maybe even beyond—the limits of what humans can understand. Thus, as we approach the Phenomenon, we should mistrust ourselves simultaneously as we try to make sense of it” (*UFH*, p. 6). His reasons for advocating epistemic humility are gradually laid out and will

be summarized below, but it is worth highlighting the fact that right from the start Madden is signalling that he views the UFO phenomenon as veridical—i.e., not all UFO encounters are the product of perceptual error, mental illness, or hoax. (Such prosaic factors hardly press up against the boundaries of human understanding.)

In a bit of intellectual autobiography, he states that he began engaging with the ufological literature only after the 2017 revelation in the mainstream media that the US government had been clandestinely engaging in UFO

research for years (despite continual public assertions to the contrary). That revelation, and subsequent events (such as the Pentagon briefing of June 2021), prompted him to look into the phenomenon more closely. In the course of doing so he drew conceptual connections to his other areas of expertise:

I was deeply moved first by how good the evidence really is for the UFO phenomenon. As someone trained in the philosophy of religion, I was struck, in particular, by the fact that the evidence for the reality of the UFO (whatever it is) *is at least* as good as the evidence supporting the founding miracles of the major religious traditions. Whatever you think about those particular claims, I don't believe they completely lack evidential support, i.e., the traditional miracle claims have enough going for themselves evidentially that they cannot be ruled out. If that is the case, then it seems like we can't rule out UFOs either—and given the continued frequency and quality of UFO reports there are very good grounds to rule them in (*UFH*, p. 7, emphases in original).

He prudently refrains from delving into those grounds here; such an effort would distract from his chief concerns (which are philosophical) and would anyway be redundant, as there is no shortage of accessible introductions along those lines available already. Thus, for any readers who remain agnostic as to the reality of the phenomenon, Madden's work is best engaged with as part of a conditional exercise: *if* the phenomenon were real, what would be the likely metaphysical and epistemological implications? Such an exercise is interesting on its own account, and retains value for the agnostic inquirer as well. (I.e., if some of those implications prove to be highly implausible, then that will itself be a further mark against the reality of the phenomenon.)

Working from the assumption of the existence of UFOs, it is easy to see how a philosopher might make productive interventions into ufology, for instance by assessing common ontological claims or critiquing methodological assumptions or otherwise engaging in the sorts of analysis typical of philosophical engagement with the special sciences. And that is certainly part of what Madden proceeds to do, as we shall see presently. However, he also thinks that ufology has something to contribute to philosophy; historically, one of the tasks assigned philosophers has been that of developing a rationally defensible worldview that synthesizes discoveries

from across the academic disciplines:

We have various disciplines...each of which makes discoveries within certain recesses of the world. Notice, however, the more the chemist, the religious studies scholar, and the historian start to ask what chemistry, religion, and history have to do with each other, the less they are thinking specifically as chemists, religious scholars, or historians....The idealized version of this thinking of all the disciplines together is philosophy. That is, the philosopher attempts to put all the pieces of our various modes of understanding into a coherent picture of the world (*UFH*, p. 10).

Any genuine insights of ufology ought ultimately to be integrated into that overarching, comprehensive worldview; indeed to ignore ufology would be to risk leaving out something significant, perhaps even a linchpin of a completed philosophical system: "I believe the time has come that academic philosophy cannot ignore that the UFO is a significant piece to the puzzle, and we will fail in our role as the synthesizer of the disciplines as long as we continue to set it aside" (*UFH*, p. 11). Thus the potential benefits of a philosophical engagement with ufology work both ways: ufology may come to a better understanding of the phenomenon (and of the limits to our understanding of it), while philosophy may make better progress towards a truly comprehensive worldview.

Having spent most of his introductory chapter explaining the reasons for his engagement with ufology, Madden proceeds in chapter 1 to develop further his argument on behalf of epistemic humility in the face of the phenomenon. Drawing on recent work in cognitive science and psychology, he discusses three sources of cognitive limitation that are especially salient in this context: *relevance sorting*, *social conformity*, and *techno-cognitive extension*. The first refers to the innate human tendency to concentrate our attention on those aspects of our environment that are most relevant to us, and by extension to filter out what isn't. E.g., when having coffee with a friend your cognitive apparatus automatically homes in on the conversation more than on the whirring of the ceiling fan, or the feel of the hardback chair on your spine, etc. We cannot be equally aware of all of those factors (and others) simultaneously, such that there are facts about the environment that necessarily tend to remain opaque to us. Relatedly, the very structure of our five senses functions as

part of that filtering process. Thus we cannot see microwave radiation, or smell what a cat smells, etc. As Madden puts it, “we have to have prior projects, commitments, emotional attachments, cultural framings, and biological grounding before we can have a coherent experience. All of these factors narrow down the myriad of possibilities for thought and experience into a package that we can work with” (*UFH*, p. 20). This limit is closely related to another notion Madden will put to work later on, namely that of the *umwelt* (i.e., the environmental factors to which an organism’s cognitive and perceptual faculties are sensitive—for instance the colour spectrum is part of the human *umwelt*, whereas microwave radiation is not). The second source of cognitive limitation, *social conformity*, is fairly self-explanatory: we humans are social beings and inevitably take many cues about what to believe (or even what to *see*) from our social context. This has its advantages, but can also be constraining. The third, *techno-cognitive extension*, refers to the way in which our cognition is bound up with our ability to manipulate our environment using social and material tools (whether language or notebooks or crowbars). Our ability to think about certain things (and not others) is facilitated by the technology at our disposal.

All three of those factors play a role both in enabling and in limiting our cognitive potential, but it is the latter which Madden emphasizes here. For who knows what we may fail to pick up on in consequence of these (and other) cognitive limitations, what larger or deeper realities we may be mostly cut off from simply because we didn’t evolve to pay attention to them? In reflecting further on that last question, Madden brings in the notion of the cave:

We might think of this in terms of a *cave* as a metaphor and play on the fact that it seems many of our ancestors spent some time dwelling in caves. In fact, in this metaphorical sense, we are all still *cave-dwellers*. Human cognition works by and through carving out caves of relevance, social organization, and technological operation. We mine caves for ourselves, and those are the spaces of meaning and rationality we need in order to survive. Of course, the cave is real, and what goes on in it is important. Nevertheless, the caves we make for ourselves are convenient selections, caricatures of the fullness of reality (*UFH*, p. 27, emphases in original).

Naturally this also calls to mind Plato’s allegory of

the cave, and Madden spends time reflecting on its many meanings. One aspect of the allegory he seizes upon is the fact that Plato’s underground prisoner is liberated and gets out into the light in large part because someone or something (Plato doesn’t tell us what) drags him to the surface; i.e., some agency outside his normal experience and ordinary cognition intervenes in order to liberate him and to reveal to him the vastly larger world outside the cave—or rather, reveal to him as much of that world as his bleary eyes, unused to sunshine, can take in.

How does all that link back up to UFOs? Madden’s larger suggestion is that if the phenomenon is indeed real and *isn’t* extraterrestrial (and he will shortly review some of the reasons for rejecting the ET hypothesis), then it may well be a breach into our ordinary reality of something wholly other, something our cognitive apparatus has not evolved to take in properly. This may explain why the phenomenon is so elusive, and its manifestations so various and often so utterly bizarre. Our minds aren’t equipped to absorb fully what is being encountered, and so the object of perception may be distorted, misinterpreted, or misremembered (or, for a time, not remembered at all). This may help to explain the puzzling fact (long a subject of speculation in the wider literature on religious and paranormal experiences) that in cases where anomalous events are undergone intersubjectively, the reported details can vary from one percipient to the next, and in ways not easily explicable by reference to ordinary perceptual factors. E.g., Sally and Bill and Kareem may be looking at the same patch of sky at the same time, and Sally and Kareem see the anomalous glowing orb while Bill sees nothing (or sees *something* but with much less detail/definition, or *sees* nothing but instead hears a voice, etc.). To Madden, these features of human interaction with the phenomenon indicate that we are probably dealing with something our minds did not evolve to engage with, and by extension that we are *not* dealing with a mundane physical reality (like nuts and bolts craft from another galaxy). He sums up a key takeaway:

If we are going to start on the path of making some sense of the UFO phenomenon (supposing that is a path we can even begin to travel), *we must discipline ourselves against being too quick to trust any of our intuitions about what we are encountering*. What we are getting from our attempts to describe these encounters are as much expressions of our own presuppositions, self-images, and human limitations (and likely manipulations of these human limitations by those

among us particularly interested in maintaining a nicely managed cave) as they are accurate depictions of what triggered the events. There may be no final and complete way of teasing out what in the experience is really there from what is the product of how we happen to think about things (*UFH*, p. 33, emphases in original).

The reader may at this point be wondering whether Madden intends to defend a wholly transcendent, supernatural account of the phenomenon (for instance that we are dealing with contemporary manifestations of angels and demons), but by way of dispelling that notion he devotes chapter 2 to outlining the foundations of an ontological middle ground, one on which the phenomenon is understood as neither mundane nor supernatural but rather (borrowing a label from Jeffrey Kripal and Whitley Strieber) as *super natural*. On this view, the UFO (or whatever is sourcing it) may be an *immanent* entity dwelling within (or perhaps helping to constitute) the natural realm, but which is nevertheless *supernormal*, having a mode of being and/or range of causal powers radically different from what we are familiar with from ordinary life. Here Madden draws on Aristotelian cosmology to provide a historical example of the sort of model he is referring to, insofar as Aristotle defends the reality of thoroughly immanent gods (i.e., imperceptible intelligent divinities that are not themselves strictly physical, but which exist within the physical cosmos and play key explanatory roles in its lawful ordering).

With the requisite conceptual groundwork now in place, chapter 3 is where Madden outlines in greater detail his own account of what the UFO phenomenon likely is (emphasis on the *likely*—he stresses that his arguments are probabilistic and that we must continually bear in mind our epistemic limitations). First he argues against the extraterrestrial hypothesis, drawing on Jacques Vallée’s well-known five-point critique. Madden devotes particular attention to a biological worry surrounding the ETH, namely that the humanoid physiology commonly reported in close encounters cases is difficult to credit if what is being encountered are literal space aliens: “[T]he notion of an entirely separate evolutionary process producing bipedal, forward looking, oxygen breathing, featherless, rational animals is so improbable as to strain credulity. Maybe there are as-yet unknown principles of evolution that pipeline things toward bipedal, featherless, and very smart animals....[B]ut I do worry that without some independent evidence for these claims we are coming close

to rendering the ETH unfalsifiable” (*UFH*, p. 53). Problems of this sort lead some to entertain what Madden terms the *ultraterrestrial hypothesis* (UTH)—actually more commonly known in ufology as the *cryptoterrestrial hypothesis*—namely the idea that UFOs are an advanced physical technology deployed by earthlings (whether strictly human or some sort of humanoid offshoot) who are members of a long-hidden breakaway civilization dwelling underground or in the oceans. That hypothesis might help account for the biological convergences, but it raises many unanswered questions of its own (like how or why these alternative earthlings have remained hidden for so long, why they are acting as they are today, etc.). And the more bizarre aspects of ufology (so-called ‘high strangeness’ events) may also be a poor fit with this hypothesis. Having already dismissed conventional supernatural explanations (e.g., positing angelic/demonic origins for UFOs), Madden then proposes the *Uber-Umwelt Terrestrial Hypothesis* (UUTH), the key claim of which is that “we are bumping into something real and *sui generis* with respect to our other ontological categories when we encounter the phenomenon—the UFO is something from outside our cave” (*UFH*, pp. 54-55). In other words, the phenomenon is not transcendent in the physical sense of ‘transcendence’ (again, it is in some way a part of or partially constitutive of the natural realm) and yet it belongs to an ontological category beyond those we are familiar with both from ordinary life and much standard philosophical reflection. It is real but radically Other.

Madden thinks his UUTH hypothesis more likely than either the ETH or UTH, as it sidesteps the aforementioned criticisms of both while readily fitting in with the high strangeness data (we would expect something so different from us to manifest itself to us in bizarre ways we have difficulty comprehending), and also accords with the vagaries of intersubjective experiences noted above (where different people come away from the same encounter with quite different subjective perceptions of what happened). The UUTH also has the virtue of encouraging continued epistemic humility, recognizing as it does the limits placed on our randomly-evolved, socially conditioned human cognitive faculties. “In short, the UFO realist adopting the UUTH is employing a type of explanation that already has some good evidential support. Moreover, we would expect our encounter with these *Uber-Umwelt* beings to be uncanny. UFOs are indeed beyond *our world*, not our planet but our *Umwelt*.... Thus, our marginal encounters with the beings from the *Uber-Umwelt* don’t make much sense to us. In fact, our unconscious

sense-making systems likely distort more than they reveal about the beings encroaching on our cave” (*UFH*, pp. 58-59, emphases in original).

Madden concludes his third chapter by suggesting that the UUTH might have broader application, functioning as a kind of theory-of-everything for the paranormal: “This proposal allows us to bring all orders of supernatural and paranormal phenomena into the mix, and explanatory unification is a good sign for a model. What are ghosts, fairies, DMT elves, etc.?...We might do well to investigate all well-evidenced ‘paranormal’ phenomena (UFOs and otherwise) as irruptions of the *Uber-Umwelt* into our *Umwelt*” (*UFH*, p. 59).

Chapter 4 is also metaphysical in orientation and further fleshes out the UUTH. After some initial scene setting in which he summarizes broadly Aristotelian common-sense ontological categories (especially the distinctions between substance versus accident, and natural versus artificial substance), Madden introduces some metaphysical ideas from contemporary continental thought, drawing in particular on Graham Harman’s work concerning ‘object oriented ontology.’ One of Harman’s accusations against traditional metaphysics (including the Aristotelian variety) is that it has unjustifiably privileged the analysis of ordinary objects (like boulders and tables and people) and micro-objects (like the elementary particles) over and against larger natural and social entities, or what he terms *hyperobjects* (like solar systems, cities, businesses, economies, etc.). Hyperobjects may initially seem like odd, spatially and/or temporally disjointed entities, but the claim is that they nevertheless are irreducibly causally relevant, and that causal relevance is a reliable criterion of genuine existence. Madden appropriates this idea of a hyperobject and incorporates it into his UUTH, suggesting that “hyperobjects mostly exist in the *Uber-Umwelt* with respect to us. The *Umwelt* is the perceptual environment an organism selects out of the fabulously rich set of possible framings of things based on its perceptual capacities and strategies for coping. Our human *Umwelt* is tuned for dealing with moderate-sized dried goods (relative to us!)...Beings far surpassing that scale in size, time, or complexity exist almost entirely or completely in the *Uber-Umwelt* relative to us, outside the cave” (*UFH*, p. 70). This implies that whatever experiential contact we have with a hyperobject will always constitute an incomplete exposure; we cannot directly encounter the entire hyperobject, but only a part or aspect or manifestation of it. As a prosaic example, Madden references the hyperobject that is Pizza Hut: no single individual ever encounters the corporate hyperobject

*Pizza Hut* in its full reality, but only parts of it (e.g., by entering particular franchise locations) or aspects of it (e.g., by reading shareholders’ correspondence) or manifestations of it (e.g., seeing its logo/symbology). This example also goes to show how a single hyperobject may be encountered in many distinct objects or events—Pizza Hut is a unified (hyper-) reality lying behind its diverse manifestations. Madden then links all of this back to ufology: “What if the UFOs aren’t many, but one? Suppose we’re not dealing with the UFOs, but THE UFO. Maybe THE UFO is a singular hyperobject that we can only encounter at its edges, just like we can only encounter the economy or the environment at its edges. That is not to deny the existence of the individual craft or what have you. Nobody denies the reality of your local Pizza Hut...We might make better progress in understanding THE UFO if we conceptualized the ‘individual craft’ less like discrete individuals, and more like manifestations of a single hyperobject” (*UFH*, p. 72).

Reflecting further on the relationship of the ‘hyperobject’ category to the aforementioned natural versus artificial distinction of ordinary ontology, Madden notes that while some hyperobjects appear to be wholly natural (the solar system) and others wholly artificial (Pizza Hut), there are still others that appear to be hybrids (like climate change)—products both of natural processes and human intervention. He further suggests that the UFO could theoretically belong to any of these three classes. In other words, perhaps the UFO is wholly independent of human beings, pre-existing us, or perhaps we somehow collectively called it into being, or perhaps it is some complex combination of both independent and humanly conditioned factors. Commenting on that third, hybrid option, Madden writes: “Just because we don’t know what’s going on outside our cave does not entail that our activities cannot have profound effects on what is going on, or even exists, out there beyond our pale. In short, we might do well to consider whether we unwittingly contributed to the inception of THE UFO, though now we are forced to share our environment with this new-fangled hyperobject” (*UFH*, p. 73).

Modelling the intellectual humility he preaches, Madden concludes his fourth chapter by noting again that he has no decisive argument in favour either of the truth of the UUTH or of the reality of hyperobjects. He also concedes that these ideas are liable to seem strange and counter-intuitive to some. But he thinks that the present state of ufology warrants the consideration of out-of-the-box (or cave) options: “When our questioning keeps ending up in dead ends, we need

to examine our fundamental assumptions, especially the dichotomies that seem to be giving us the most trouble” (*UFH*, 73). In this case, that means re-examining widely assumed splits between natural versus supernatural, and natural versus artificial.

In chapter 5 Madden brings his UUTH / hyperobject proposal into more direct dialogue with the thought of Jacques Vallée, in particular the latter’s *control hypothesis*: essentially, the claim that the UFO phenomenon, for all its oddness, is meaningful—it is intended to communicate something to us or affect us in some specific way. On this view then, one of the paths to insight into the phenomenon is to pay attention to how it influences us, both those of us who directly encounter it and those of us impacted by its wider socio-cultural (even religious?) influence.

What might that message or communication ultimately consist in? Here Madden declines to speculate. He is more concerned that at this point the language of ‘meaning’ and ‘communication’ and ‘intention’ is liable to mislead, perhaps giving the impression that we are dealing with something like a single conscious mind lying behind the phenomenon. While Madden does not wholly rule out that suggestion, his own preference is for a more organic model. The hyperobject that is THE UFO or that lies behind the phenomenon needn’t be a consciousness in our sense of ‘consciousness.’ As he puts it, things “can have lives of their own without being conscious, and the temptation to think otherwise is part of our humanistic tendency, i.e., we assume that *being* is primarily *to be like us*” (*UFH*, p. 85, emphases in original). A bit later he adds (now using Vallée’s old label of Magonia in place of his own hyperobject): “Maybe Magonia is cognitive, but that is something for which we would need an additional line of argumentation, and the risk of anthropocentrism in these matters is grave. On this view, we (and much in our world) are constituents of Magonia, which maintains itself by regulating our cognitive function (and the behaviours that follows thereupon), but beyond that we don’t get insights into the inner life of this hyperobjective entity” (*UFH*, p. 86).

By way of further clarifying what sort of thing we might be talking about here, Madden goes on to suggest that “we might do well to revisit Plato’s notion of a world soul in the *Timaeus*, according to which the universe is a living organism composed of a hierarchy of lower-level living beings” (*UFH*, 87). In this Madden is likely influenced by the work of Jeffrey Kripal, whom he frequently quotes and who has himself suggested the possible utility of a world-soul cosmology for thinking through the ontology of the paranormal. Madden

adds that such a perspective on the UFO phenomenon would contribute towards a salutary re-enchantment of the natural world whereby the cosmos is viewed as inherently a realm of life and intelligibility. Ufology might thus help to lead us away from the dead mechanism of outdated (but still wildly influential) early modern physics and back towards those aspects of the Platonic worldview that retain both an inherent appeal and a resonance with contemporary science. Madden concludes the chapter with some tentative gestures towards ontological optimism: if the UFO is a hyperobject, and that hyperobject is akin to a Platonic world-soul that is in some way rational (if far beyond our mode of rationality), then the very fact that it apparently seeks to engage with us experientially is promising. Apparently we matter to it: “[W]hatever Magonia’s intentions, it takes us as worth managing (talking to!)” (*UFH*, p. 89).

The 6th chapter is a philosophical reflection on Diana Walsh Pasulka’s work at the intersection of ufology and religious studies. The overarching question pursued in the chapter is whether or to what extent the phenomenon challenges the truth status of orthodox religious ideas. For ufology seems to supply the ingredients necessary for a Nietzsche-style genealogical critique of religion—i.e., maybe the foundational narratives of faith traditions take their origin from contact with the hyperobject lying behind the UFO phenomenon (rather than from God or the Buddha etc.). More broadly, recognition of the limits of human cognition in the face of the phenomenon, and the resulting call for epistemic humility, may itself be seen as undermining a rationally confident religious faith. Madden seems to grant some force to these worries, while pointing out that Pasulka and scholars like her are not seeking to undermine religion deliberately. Indeed, to the extent we take UFO reports seriously, we should take seriously the miracles and revelatory encounters associated with the founding events of the major religions. It is just that we must maintain a degree of epistemic humility regarding the ultimate meaning and import of such events, recognizing that as finite human beings with imperfect cognitive faculties we are ill-suited to grasp the larger realities underlying them. Madden, following Pasulka here, cautions both the religious believer and “the UFO believer that he or she, as a human, is subject to epistemic vulnerabilities....We are natural cave-dwellers, and our current technological situation leaves us more vulnerable to put-ons than ever before in our history....We can ask dark questions about our most closely cherished beliefs, admitting that they might be, to some degree, *put-ons*. That is merely to

admit the epistemic vulnerability of the human condition. This...however, if far from conceding that our beliefs are *just* put-ons, for they are occasioned by the experience of something real, memories of something uncanny that really did show up here” (*UFH*, p. 106).

Chapter 7 makes use of Heidegger’s philosophy of technology to draw out some further epistemological difficulties that might need to be worked through in pondering the phenomenon. This is a significant chapter for grasping Madden’s overall perspective, in particular for getting some hints as to how he might see the UFO phenomenon as tying into normative questions of societal import. It also underscores the major influence Pasulka’s work has had on his thinking (something he happily acknowledges).

Recall that the preface to Pasulka’s first book in this area, *American Cosmic*, speaks of Heidegger’s well-known essay ‘The Question Concerning Technology.’ With reference to that preface (and some unpublished material), Madden draws attention to Pasulka’s interpretation of Heidegger, whereby the latter’s warnings concerning technology can be linked to past traditions of thought, traditions which view technology (and its risks) as bound up with the sacred (e.g., the myth of Prometheus) and/or mystical. Technology, in other words, has existential implications. Madden writes: “On this reading, which is most certainly central to what Heidegger was really doing, technology is not understood in terms of just the devices we use to structure or manipulate our environment, but as a way of *being-in-the-world*, an implicit attitude or cognitive background that frames all of our explicit understandings of things. For Heidegger, technology is not a collection of beings we happen to have possessed or mastered, but an attitude toward Being, which partly determines the beings to which we are attuned...” (*UFH*, p. 110). Of course this ties back to Madden’s claim in chapter 1 to the effect that among the key sources of our cognitive framings (and thus intellectual limits) is techno-cognitive extension. Our thinking abilities are substantially impacted by our technologies (and, in recent decades especially, the *intensification* of our engagement with those technologies).

The remainder of his seventh chapter consists in Madden’s attempt to build on and expand Pasulka’s reflections concerning Heidegger. Part of this consists in careful exegesis of Heidegger’s essay and some related works by him and by Jacques Ellul. I won’t try to summarize all that here, as I am no Heidegger scholar (and in fact am beset by an allergic distaste for the man and his work); moreover what is more significant for present purposes are the upshots

Madden takes from him.

A key upshot is, again, epistemic. Technology often seems to be getting away from us and in a way *manipulating* us even as we (ironically) seek to use it to gain greater mastery over our environment and ourselves. This tends to circumscribe our cognitive horizons in a negative, materialist manner: “Maybe there is more that can be in our *Umwelt* than what can be manipulated and controlled (or understood in terms amenable in those ways), but we have closed ourselves off to it by our recent technological obsessions. Maybe there are things from outside our cave that are subtly trying to awaken us to their ambiguous presence” (*UFH*, p. 123). Madden goes on to suggest that this technologically-imposed self-limitation of our own thinking might explain why the Hyperobject is often manifesting itself in ways that appear to many (for the moment) as technological in nature, as literal nuts-and-bolts saucers (or massive black triangles or whatnot). In our technology-obsessed age, maybe that would be the best (only?) way to engage with many of us. And indeed some are interested in the phenomenon principally on grounds of the (essentially Promethean) prospect that from it we will be able to glean technological insights. (This notion has of course figured prominently in recent public debates, sparked by the David Grusch whistleblower claims.)

At the same time our tech-informed cognition may yet be blocking us from interacting with other aspects of that same Hyperobject (or other Hyperobjects, if we are dealing with more than one). Madden thinks that this particular epistemic limitation has practical and normative implications, something Vallée is also keenly aware of: “Unless we take up that arduous burden of re-thinking our thinking, we will remain ignorant of a vast world, the *Uber-Umwelt*, that is trying to make itself available to us. Such a cognitive reorientation is our only chance to save ourselves from ourselves. Vallée, along with Heidegger, worries that the essence of technology has made us oblivious to Being, and we need to learn to listen again” (*UFH*, p. 128).

Madden’s concise concluding chapter offers up some final remarks, re-emphasizing the importance of philosophical engagement with ufology: “The value of our philosophical encounter with the UFO is then the revelation of our own limitations; it shows us that a completed philosophy is an ideal, and not a concrete reality, because there is something lurking just outside our cave that defies our comprehension” (*UFH*, p. 132).

The preceding summary has of course skipped over a good many details, but hopefully it suffices to give the reader

a decent idea of Madden's core claims and central lines of reasoning. I will now offer some brief evaluative comments.

To repeat what I said at the beginning, this is a thought-provoking and well-written book. It deserves a wide readership both among philosophers and those working in ufology. Moreover, Madden's modesty is refreshing—he is offering his arguments as probabilistic, tentative first stabs at the truth. Still, I have some reservations, both with Madden's UUTH and with the general approach he takes to the phenomenon.

Let me start with the latter worry. Madden never quite clarifies what sorts of events he thinks fall under the rubric 'the UFO phenomenon'—in other words, it's never clear what data set he is asking us to work with in theorizing about UFOs. While he is right not to spend a lot of time reviewing empirical evidence for the reality of UFOs (as that would have been redundant), the book would have benefited from more engagement with actual case studies. The only UFO encounters that figure in the book are one of the more bizarre events relayed to Whitley Strieber by his correspondents (*UFH*, pp. 30-32), and an alleged craft retrieval recently written about by Vallée (*UFH*, pp. 128-129). That's it, and they are not especially representative reports. Madden spends no time discussing Hynek's close encounters (CE) hierarchy, or the distinctions drawn between contactees and abductees, or the issues involved in discerning what sorts of evidence regarding the latter should be included in theoretical speculations as to the nature of the phenomenon (e.g., should hypnotically retrieved memories ever be counted as reliable evidence?). We simply don't know what data set Madden is employing in developing the UUTH.

Though one does get the sense that he means it to be a *very* wide data set; as we've seen, he intends his UUTH to be a generic theory of the paranormal, covering not only UFOs but any well-evidenced anomalous phenomena. And he makes substantive reference to the works of Strieber, Pasulka, Kripal, and Vallée, each of whom tends to oppose the ETH in favour of more broadly paranormal or interdimensional theories in ufology (though Strieber has been circling back and forth on the ET question for decades); correspondingly, each tends to see the UFO phenomenon as in some way continuous with a broader range of paranormal entities and events.

The thing to notice here is that *inevitably* such a syncretic, all-encompassing view of the phenomenon will encourage epistemic pessimism: all this bizarre stuff, taken seriously and run together, is surely going to seem beyond our ken.

Pair a massive and chaotic data set with the (highly selective) findings of cognitive science marshalled by Madden, and indeed it is liable to seem as though we are to be numbered among Plato's imprisoned cave dwellers.

The obvious risk is that Madden is making the task more difficult than it needs to be by allowing items into the data set (and hence the set of things demanding explanation) that really oughtn't to be there. It's hardly surprising that the task of developing a plausible unified theory of UFO contactee cases (e.g. psychic mediums channeling messages from beings claiming to be space aliens), abductee cases, military sightings of glowing orbs moving at anomalous speeds, the Loch Ness monster, poltergeists, and werewolf sightings will seem an overwhelming one demanding great epistemic humility. But what if, for instance, we opt to drop most of the contactee cases (say, we either don't buy the reality of psychic mediumship or we think it is real but fits within an existing explanatory paradigm), exclude the Loch Ness monster (maybe real but merely exotic fodder for future National Geographic documentaries), leave out poltergeists (can be shoehorned in with the psychic mediums as part of an existing paradigm), cut out werewolves (alas), and include only the military sightings of glowing orbs plus a tiny percentage of abductee cases? Well then we might have something more manageable, and less apt to require a resort to hyperobjects or Magonia or (as Jerome Clark wryly used to put it) the goblin universe. Madden's general approach to the UFO phenomenon (and is it even a *single* phenomenon?) is tailor-made to lead to a high degree of epistemic pessimism; but it is a pessimism that may not be strictly necessary.

Now, Madden might reply that even a more carefully narrowed focus (say, just on the best military sightings of a CE1 and CE2 variety plus a selection of the most compelling UFO-with-humanoid-occupant encounters, whether CE3 or abduction cases) will still suffice to indicate a reality so strange as to call out for a radically new paradigm. Combine that recognition with the rejection of the ETH and cryptoterrestrial theories (on account of their longstanding problems) and a rejection of spiritual/religious models (too supernatural), and we again find ourselves in need of the UUTH or something like it.

That reply seems to me too quick, in part because the dismissal of supernatural models is too quick (more on that momentarily), and in part because the vagueness of the UUTH renders it a problematic alternative—in particular, it makes it difficult to make predictions on the basis of the hypothesis. Essentially what the UUTH is saying is that



behind UFOs there is a Something or Somethings that break the mould of our standard ontological categories, such that the nature and intents (if any) of the Something or Somethings can scarcely be known by us (except by reference to their effects on us, and even that will be perennially sketchy). What exactly are we to do with this hypothesis? How can it help us address concrete questions about the UFO phenomenon?

Consider for example the fact that entities in well-evidenced CE1 and CE2 reports move in ways that appear to violate the known laws of physics. Assuming the accuracy of such reports (and I agree with Madden that at this point we can reasonably make that assumption), we are left with at least three alternatives: (a) The known laws of physics do not represent the complete, *actual* laws of nature, which are not being violated—this tends to be the approach taken by advocates of the ETH and the cryptoterrestrial hypothesis, who hold out hope that future science will confirm the physical possibility of UFO behaviour (e.g., discovering wormhole networks will show that teleportation of macro-level objects is perfectly feasible); or, (b) the known laws of physics are correct and we are dealing with physical entities that can somehow violate them; or, (c) we are not dealing with physical entities at all, and so their behaviour needn't be thought of as violating natural laws (because they are not covered by those laws in the first place).

The UUTH is consistent with (a), (b), and (c), and so can contribute nothing to the effort to decide between them. The reason is that the UUTH does not of itself tell us whether the hyperobject and/or its individual manifestations are subject to the laws of physics. The hyperobject is supposed to be part of the natural realm (or partly constitutive of it, especially on the Platonic world-soul reading of the UUTH entertained by Madden); but where it falls on the physical versus non-physical divide, or whether that division is just another categorial dichotomy the UUTH is intended to overcome, we are not told. If the latter, then it remains unclear whether or to what extent UFOs (manifestations of the hyper-object) are subject to natural laws, and again we are left unable to make testable predictions (e.g., that UFO behaviour will eventually be found compatible with a mostly-completed physics).

There are various theoretical virtues and deficiencies to be considered when assessing a hypothesis. I don't deny that Madden's UUTH boasts some of the former (e.g., sidestepping notable problems facing some existing models and accounting for some of the data not easily accommodated by those competing models, etc.). But its high

degree of vagueness must be counted a deficiency.

To return for a moment to Madden's dismissal of supernatural models of the UFO: since Madden's core overarching abductive argument for the UUTH amounts to an argument from elimination (i.e., UFOs are real but the ETH and cryptoterrestrial and supernatural models are probably unworkable, so we should entertain the UUTH as the only remaining viable option), it is important to ask whether the eliminated options have in fact been convincingly cast out. In the case of supernatural models, the answer is no.

To clarify, by 'supernatural' one needn't intend just the specifically Christian theories that have long persisted at the periphery of ufology (e.g., UFOs are mostly demonic and genuine alien abduction is simply demonic oppression under a new guise). For one might also speculate on other supernaturalist options, including: (i) the animist UFOs-as-nature-spirits hypothesis (entertained at least for a time by John Mack, particularly as his interest in shamanism and indigenous faiths grew in the latter years of his involvement in ufology); or, (ii) the related view of some western esotericists that UFOs are manifestations of elemental spirits or the products of ceremonial magic (as per the fevered conjectures on the doings of Jack Parsons and a youthful pre-Scientology L. Ron Hubbard); or (iii) the Taoist or Shinto or Neopagan (etc.) idea that UFOs are gods or their lower-level spirit messengers; or (iv) the New Age idea that UFOs are higher-level spiritual beings or the representatives of ascended masters; or indeed (v) one might run with a more thoroughly developed (less vague) 'UFOs as emanations of the Platonic world-soul' hypothesis that Madden himself considers as one possible reading of the UUTH, etc. Or one might go eclectic, and accept multiple spiritual explanations. E.g., Christianity is not incompatible with a belief in some forms of animism (indeed animism has in recent years been the subject of respectful discussion within theology and Biblical studies). Moreover, historically many important Christian scholars have entertained the idea of a non-divine roughly Platonic world-soul, among them St. Augustine, Isaac Newton, and Sergius Bulgakov (one of the most important Russian Orthodox theologians of the twentieth century). Maybe a complete account of anomalous phenomena would have to reference God, angels, demons, nature spirits, and a world-soul? Or just the first and the last? Or just the last two?

It is not my goal to defend any of these supernatural hypotheses regarding the UFO phenomenon; I simply wish to point out that Madden's argument from elimination is not as compelling as it could be, insofar as he has not done enough

to rule them out of contention. And whatever their (many) faults, supernatural hypotheses at least have the advantage of being less scientifically revisionist and thus a better fit with existing background knowledge (an important theoretical virtue), insofar as their view of UFOs need involve no clash with our best current physics. (Non-physical entities aren't governed by natural laws and so can't violate those laws.)

A further worry for the UUTH's dismissal of supernaturalist options is that its epistemic pessimism ends up begging the question against some of those options. Madden seems to be assuming (at least for the sake of argument) that the human cognitive apparatus is the product of purely naturalistic Darwinian processes. But to those already sympathetic to non-naturalist worldviews (including religious worldviews), that assumption will not be granted. If instead the human mind is held to be the product of design by benevolent intelligence(s), and design specifically with a view to higher-level cognitive abilities and spiritual insight, then it is rational to have faith in the human ability to gain some sort of cognitive access (however incomplete) to higher-level realities. If we were created in the image and likeness of such realities and designed to know them, then we needn't fear having to blunder about in Plato's cave forever. (Indeed Plato himself seems to have accepted just such a creation story—at least if one reads key passages of his *Timaeus* and *Laws* literally—and the ultimate epistemic optimism accompanying it.) At times, Madden's tentative descriptions of the UFO hyperobject inevitably remind one of the ineffably transcendent conceptions of the divine adopted by some religious traditions (e.g., it exists beyond our standard ontological categories, its manifestations can never adequately unveil its nature, etc.). But those traditions often combine apophatic theology with an equal emphasis on divine grace and the humble condescension involved in revelation to humanity (revelation enabled in part by a human nature created with a view to receiving it). The *goodness* of the transcendent thus matters a great deal, epistemically. Madden is noncommittal with respect to the moral status of the UFO hyperobject (or even whether moral terms can properly be predicated of it), and this too feeds into his epistemic pessimism. (Though he seems cautiously optimistic that the hyperobject is at least interested in engaging with humanity.)

A final observation on a moral matter: it is interesting that Madden's philosophical engagement with ufology is almost entirely via the sub-disciplines of metaphysics and

epistemology. He says little about ethics (though some normative issues are broached in the Heidegger chapter). But surely if the UFO hyperobject is engaging us in a control system (to use Vallée's terminology again), such that the *meaning* of the phenomenon (even if not its *nature*) might be partly discernible by analyzing its effects on us, then we ought to be worried—or at least, we ought to be worried if we include the alien abduction phenomenon within our UFO data set. Perhaps we shouldn't, as the abduction phenomenon is highly questionable on multiple fronts. Still, if we do—and I take it that Madden does, given his approving citations of Strieber—then we ought to take note of the fact that much of what is reported within the abduction literature is horrifying. I do wonder whether Madden has delved into Strieber's full corpus, or only his most recent books. Strieber started his literary career as a horror novelist, and for better or worse his skills in that genre carry over into his recounting of abduction experiences, which are frequently terrifying and disturbing (the anal rape he reports in *Communion* being among the milder incidents). And Strieber is not an outlier on this front; the abduction literature is loaded with comparably disconcerting narratives. If abductions are properly included in the UFO data set, and thereby serve to convey a meaning or message from the hyperobject (or whatever might be behind the phenomenon), the message I take is that the hyperobject is unambiguously evil.

Much more could be said about Madden's important and engaging book, which I enjoyed very much and will continue to reflect upon. But, ethics being the most important branch of philosophy, it seems fitting to end this review essay on a note of moral reflection (if a potentially discomfiting one).<sup>1</sup>

1 I would like to extend my sincere thanks to two anonymous referees for *Limina*, insightful comments from whom have certainly improved the final product.