Unidentified Anomalous Phenomenon (UAP)

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1956

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy" Shakespeare "Hamlet" (Act 1, Scene 5)

Accounts of strange objects in the sky are as old as written history. Livy recorded “phantom ships” gleaming in the heavens in 218 BCE, and a 1561 Nuremberg broadsheet described an aerial “battle” of spheres and crosses. What changes over time is the interpretation. Kenneth Arnold’s 1947 sighting of nine craft became a story of visitors from outer space (Bader, 1995). The official record is modest. Of more than 800 cases reported to the Pentagon, NASA’s 2023 study team found that all but “a small handful” could be identified (Impey, 2023). The intelligence community judged that most of the UAP it reviewed “probably do represent physical objects,” but found the data too poor for “firm conclusions” about what they are (ODNI, 2021). That uncertainty sits inside a larger one. Space, time, consciousness and the quantum behavior of matter remain only partly understood. Physicists predict quantum events with extraordinary precision yet still disagree about what those events mean, and no one can explain how a brain becomes aware of itself. A universe this strange counsels humility about what is impossible. But humility cuts both ways: not knowing what something is does not tell us what it is. Something is there, but we do not know what it is, and in that gap between observation and explanation, what people conclude says more about the psychology of belief than about the objects themselves.

As well as being a physical phenomenon, UAP are a psychological one. In his book *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies*, Carl Jung (1958/1978) argued that, whatever their physical reality, flying saucers had become a modern myth: projections of the collective unconscious that reflected anxieties about a world increasingly dominated by science, technology, political conflict and the threat of nuclear destruction. Following Jung requires an inquiry into the psychology of belief, which asks why people accept claims as true and why they hold on to them. Its central finding is that belief seldom follows evidence alone: perception, memory, emotional needs and group loyalty shape what we see and what we accept. William James (1889) observed that “the true opposites of belief… are doubt and inquiry, not disbelief.” His distinction suggests four broad stances toward UAP.

Skeptics withhold belief until physical evidence arrives, though even they are not immune to the pull of the uncanny. In Subbotsky’s (2011)

experiments, educated adults who said they did not believe in magic all refused a “bad spell” cast on their own futures. The *curious* occupy James’s territory of doubt and inquiry; about one in four people in Dewan’s (2006) sample reported seeing anomalous lights. *True believers* have settled that doubt in favor of alien visitation. That conclusion tracks social marginality more than the act of seeing something (Cowgill et al., 1971), and it draws on the reasoning shortcuts documented by Singer and Benassi (1981). *Fanatics* go further. Conspiracy theories, Douglas, Sutton and Cichocka (2017) note, are “resistant to falsification”: anyone who debunks them may be part of the plot, so every null result becomes proof of a cover-up. Yet such beliefs seem “more appealing than satisfying.” In experiments, exposure to conspiracy theories left people feeling less in control, not more.

One fall evening in 1967, I was stargazing outside my home with a small telescope borrowed from the high school science lab. Scanning the sky, I suddenly spotted two sets of four lights, each in a trapezoid, moving back and forth about 20 degrees above the northern horizon. I phoned the area air traffic control and asked whether two aircraft were flying in formation north of the city. No, they said: there were no aircraft anywhere in the vicinity and nothing on their radar. I had witnessed something, but I had no corroborating evidence. Did that make me a believer? No. The skeptic in me says a single unconfirmed sighting is not evidence. Yet, as Carl Sagan is reputed to have said, “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.”

The gap remains. NASA’s scientists, the intelligence community and a teenager with a borrowed telescope all arrived at the same place: something was observed, and no one could say what it was. What fills that gap is not evidence but belief. The skeptic files it as unexplained and waits, the curious keep asking, the believer finds visitors, and the fanatic finds a cover-up. They are not seeing different things; they are bringing different minds to the same uncertainty. Jung was right that the flying saucer became a modern myth, though not because the sky is empty. A myth forms where knowledge runs out and need rushes in. Hamlet may be right that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy. But what we dream of them is our own.


The truth is still out there.
THE X FILES
6-EPISODE EVENT
2-NIGHT PREMIERE
SUN | MON JAN 24-25 FOX

2016

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