

Wonder and Rationality - The Dilemma of a Scientific UFO Investigator

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At the time of writing this article, I had recently completed the field report of a sighting investigation which, in my view, provides a classic microcosm of the wonder vs skepticism dilemma which confronts the UFO investigator. I call it the skeptic's dilemma: It just can't be true, yet it couldn't be anything else. More than any other issue, this dilemma has bedeviled UFO research for the past 50 years. I suspect it will continue to do so far into the foreseeable future.

I am writing this article for a publication read largely by UFO believers. However, before proceeding further, let's step back and imagine that we are part of the rational, skeptical, mainstream scientific community. We are grounded in the "reality" that one can not travel faster than light, there is no such thing as antigravity, etc. To us, interstellar or interdimensional travel is science fiction - and only that. Thus, when confronted with an account of an extraordinary experience, our goal would naturally be to find some mundane explanation which would account for it. This, then, forms the backdrop for this case.

The event in question is a close encounter (presumably of the first kind) which occurred in a remote location in western Minnesota. The witness was awakened by a noise in her yard. She looked out of her window to observe a brilliant white light hovering over a field a few blocks away. She awoke her husband, who took a look at it and dismissed it as a helicopter. He then went back to bed while she continued to observe it and several smaller companion objects for several hours. During the entire event, she experienced what she described as both extreme fascination and absolute terror. In addition, her account of the final stages of the encounter suggests that a more involved (CE4) experience might lie beneath the surface.

As a standard part of the investigation, we checked the usual mundane possibilities: lights on the clouds, yard lights, helicopters, etc. All results were negative. Her description of the object as being close did not prompt me to check for astronomical bodies. However, subsequently, when reminded of a couple of other similar sighting cases in which the moon was misidentified, I looked up the moon's position for the date/time in question. Sure enough, I found it. The rising moon was just at the location in which she described the UFO.

My first impulse as a rational skeptic would have been to dismiss this case immediately as a misidentification of the moon. However follow-up consultation with a co-investigator, who knew the witness, indicated that she was not the type to make such a basic mistake. The witness was an intelligent adult, not given to flights of fancy. Thus, the question arises as to how the witness could be as frightened by something as ordinary as the moon. In addition, the witness' descriptions of the object indicate that it hovered in the same place for a couple of hours. The rising moon would have changed position in the sky. Thus we are confronted by a tempting explanation which doesn't quite fit the facts.

Furthermore, when I asked the witness about the possibility of the object being the moon, she indicated that she had seen the moon many times rising in approximately that location. "Believe me" she emphatically added, "This was not the moon". The tone with which she said this also seemed to add the unspoken addition: "Oh come on now, I'm not stupid..."

In addition, she described several companion star-like objects which interacted with the main object. At one point in her sighting, the position and brightness of several very bright stars might conceivably have accounted for this observation. Yet, at other points in the sighting, this explanation simply does not apply. Thus, again, we are confronted with a tempting explanation which does not quite fit the facts - almost, but not quite...

The dilemma for the conservative scientific mind is this: UFO's and other extraordinary phenomena stretch the world view beyond comfort. Thus we should not jump to conclusions which invoke them if we can possibly avoid it. Yet, in this case, no other explanation than the extraordinary seems to fully fit the facts of the case. Thus the question: Do we force a mundane explanation to fit the case, as would a true debunker? Do we say that the object must have been an ET craft - as might a UFO true believer? Or do we accept - as a skeptical investigator - that no explanation has been found, and simply say that the event is unexplained? Which would you do?....

Bio:

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