

THE "ALIEN ABDUCTION" PHENOMENON

FORBIDDEN KNOWLEDGE OF HIDDEN EVENTS

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In this essay, I examine a peculiar, disturbing, and widely reported phenomenon: "alien abduction." Although at first discussed primarily in supermarket tabloids, in recent years this topic has been featured in many books, films, and television programs. Thousands of people, apparently sane and otherwise reliable, report that they are being captured by intelligent, non-human beings, taken on board strange craft, physically examined (often with special interest paid to sexual organs), and returned to the places from which they were taken. Despite the fact that postwar popular culture has been saturated with images and accounts of UFOs and ETs, most people are understandably reluctant to conclude that accounts of alien abduction are veridical. Even though attempting to retain the skepticism that colored my initial assessment of alien abduction several years ago, I now find myself in the uncomfortable position of thinking that there may be "something" to this weird phenomenon. Just what this "something" is, however, I am unable to say with any assurance, since the phenomenon itself seems to defy most attempts to categorize it in terms either as a subjective event of "inner space" or as an objective event of "outer space."

Of one thing I am sure: even if this phenomenon does not involve literal physical abduction of humans by non-human aliens, it merits careful scrutiny not only because thousands of people are suffering in connection with repeated abduction experiences, and not only because of the difficulties involved in providing an adequate alternative explanation (i.e., an explanation that takes into account all the complexities of abduction narratives), but also because of the potentially important cultural implications posed by the fact that so many evidently rational people are reporting that "aliens" are dramatically interfering in their lives.¹ That the abduction phenomenon is frequently discussed in popular culture, but is largely ignored by establishment sources is not socially healthy. By generally refusing even to acknowledge the fact that many people are suf-

fering from the abduction phenomenon, much less to fund research to reveal its cause, establishment leaders invite the paranoid fringe to conclude that the "government" is not only covering up an alien presence, but worse still is somehow in league with it. Even the non-paranoid may ask why this phenomenon is not examined more closely by those in a position to provide a satisfactory explanation of it. The present essay is in part an attempt to answer that question.

I say "in part" because in an earlier version of this essay, I suggested that alien abduction was merely an instance of the social tendency to proscribe attempts to gain knowledge about hidden events. An event is hidden when it conflicts so sharply with accepted views about "reality," that the event can scarcely be brought up in polite society, much less made into an object for publicly funded research. By foregrounding a critical analysis of the social tendency to forbid knowledge about hidden events in general, I had hoped to deflect attention from my choice of alien abduction as an example of a hidden event. At the time, I did not want to be viewed as taking the abduction phenomenon too seriously. As its title demonstrates, the present essay continues to examine the more general issue of forbidden knowledge of hidden events. Nevertheless, I decided that it was unfair to leave the reader wondering about my own attitude toward the abduction phenomenon. The fact is that I do regard it as worthy of investigation by people from many different fields. By deciding to foreground the abduction phenomenon in this essay, I hope that readers will look into it for themselves, so that I may find philosophical interlocutors willing to discuss this striking phenomenon.

In the first part of this essay, I argue that the tendency to forbid knowledge about hidden events helps to preserve the prevailing "social ontology," i.e., a society's predominant view about what counts as truth and reality. Elites generally have the most to gain from defending the social ontology. In addition to believing that the phe-

nomenon must be explicable as psychopathology, many elites may identify sufficiently with anthropocentric humanism, a major feature of the prevailing social ontology, that they resist the very idea that non-human aliens may be interacting with human beings. In the next part, I argue that even though alien abduction is no longer an entirely hidden phenomenon, it has not yet become a scientific controversy, either because too many scientists lack interest in it, or because they conclude that it is not a "new" phenomenon, or because they are legitimately concerned that investigating it seriously might adversely affect their careers, or because they prefer to avoid taking seriously a phenomenon that would drastically alter the anthropocentric humanism of modern social ontology. In part three, I examine whether existing evidence about the abduction phenomenon is sufficient to suggest that it is a genuinely new phenomenon that is worthy of becoming a scientific controversy.

Social Ontology: Truth and Reality as Defined by Social Elites

By "social ontology," I mean a society's basic belief system, the generally accepted categories that define what counts as "truth" and what constitutes "reality." Because knowledge purports to involve understanding the way things really are, those who control what counts as knowledge also define social ontology, i.e., what counts as the truth about reality. It is a commonplace to say that the interests of the powerful are served by controlling the generation and dissemination of knowledge. In traditional societies, which are smaller, more homogeneous, and less complex than modern industrial societies like the United States, social ontology is fairly cohesively defined by ritual, myth, and social station. In the development of modern societies, science took over the role once played by religion and myth in defining the true and the real. Even though criticized from many perspectives, science continues to play a central role in the social ontology of multicultural postmodern societies.

For the purposes of this essay, I assert that knowledge is "forbidden" when someone in authority decrees that someone else either ought neither to investigate nor to affirm nonconformist concepts that threaten the social ontology. The powerful assert that knowledge is prohibited ei-

ther for the "good" of the ignorant person, or for the good of society at large. Assuming that elites possess the true knowledge needed to provide protection from known and unknown forces, people usually adopt some version of the social ontology of their leaders. Hence, as revolutionaries know all too well, ordinary folk often resist their call for radical social change, for such heresy threatens the folk's sense of security, order, and personal identity.

Largely motivated by concerns about their children's future social prospects, parents usually teach children to conform to the prevailing belief system. In authoritarian societies, social elites play the role of protective parents who know what is best for the ordinary folk. Whether in the former Soviet Union or in eighteenth century Spain, ruling elites prohibit people from acquiring truths that might challenge the existing social ontology. Modern democracy arose in connection with modern science, which affirmed that empirical investigation, not received tradition or biblical revelation, should define what counts as true and real. Proponents of modernity asserted that much of "official knowledge" was composed of distortions, half-truths, or lies that served the interests of those in power.

In part because of the problematic ecological, military, and social consequences of modern science and technology, however, many contemporary critics (such as Michel Foucault) warn that the supposedly "universally valid truths" of science conceal power interests not only of the scientists, but of the funding agencies (government and corporate) that support their research. In fact, scientists are not disinterested intellectuals, but human beings with biases that reflect their own personal interests, those of their social class, and those of the prevailing social ontology. No society can function without some measure of consensus about the boundaries of "reality," however. Hence, despite criticism, science's continuing success in many realms lets it play a crucial role in defining and defending major aspects of social ontology, because we live in an era that has so few consensual sources of authority. In an essay like the present one, however, which examines critically those who resist challenges to the dominant social ontology, it is important to add the following caveat. Those who contest that ontology are not innocents; they have power in-

terests of their own, which must be subjected to scrutiny.

The glory of modern science rests upon the willingness of its practitioners to investigate any reported phenomenon, no matter how inconsistent it may be with respect to existing theories. Even in democratic societies in which science plays a leading role in shaping social ontology, however, elites—including those who generate, disseminate, and defend the accepted social ontology—often dissuade people from exploring phenomena or from adopting ideas that challenge too dramatically the status quo. Suppressing non-conformist ideas may be achieved in at least two ways. First, state apparatus may be used to stifle such ideas, but in countenancing such heavy-handed intervention, elites in purportedly democratic societies invite internal criticism, and admit to the failure of the second, more indirect, but often most effective way of suppressing heterodox ideas: peer pressure.

People in responsible positions, including and perhaps especially scientists, know that their professional standing can be impaired by exploring concepts, phenomena, and practices that are inconsistent with the achieved consensus about what sorts of things can possibly “be.” Although not completely separable from official sanctions, peer pressure is applied by individuals who have internalized the prevailing social ontology and who defend it in part because their own identity depends upon it. These individuals, including myself on some occasions, disparage those seeking to investigate what seems kooky, dotty, or impossible. If derision, ridicule, and sarcasm prove insufficient to dissuade the one challenging taken-for-granted reality, some individuals resort to other methods, including ostracism, denial of funding and publication, and dismissal from positions. In such practices, of course, the distinction between unofficial and official sanctions becomes difficult to discern.

Ron Westrum maintains that even if people perceive a phenomenon that their culture deems impossible, their tendency is to pretend it didn’t happen, and thus not to report it to others, since the phenomenon is literally “so implausible that ... they do not expect to be believed. The implausibility may cause the observer to doubt his own perceptions, leading to the event’s denial or misidentification.”² Westrum uses the term hidden events to describe such “impossible” phenom-

ena,” which are the non-objects of what I am calling “forbidden knowledge.” Fears about loss of professional standing often dissuade scientists from exploring phenomena that are considered too anomalous. Scientists are properly conservative and skeptical in reviewing observations that contradict widely held beliefs, but it is well known that methodological conservatism can sometimes become hard-headed stubbornness and professional jealousy.

Even though the judgment of individual scientists is inevitably influenced by prejudice, I believe that knowledge claims generated by scientific method are more readily correctable than those made by ecclesiastical authorities or political regimes. In asserting that science advances at funerals, Max Planck’s point was that science does generate new knowledge, but often only after the old guard has given way, and only if someone is daring enough to investigate anomalous phenomena that are ignored or unnoticed by others. If scientific dissenters produce a sufficient number of well-documented observations in support of a heterodox hypothesis, eventually (at least in many cases) people accepting the new hypothesis will become so numerous that stubborn opponents will be marginalized by the newly emerging orthodoxy.

In addition to being disinclined to investigate an anomalous phenomenon because it threatens a leading theoretical framework, scientists are usually even less willing to investigate an anomalous phenomenon that challenges a theory which is central to the predominant social ontology. Dramatic alteration to the prevailing belief system would have profound psychological, professional, and cultural consequences for scientists and for everyone else. Hence, as psychiatrist John Mack has argued, scientists and other academic researchers have personal, professional, and cultural reasons for supporting the conventional wisdom in “the politics of ontology.”³ Such politics involve the sometimes subterranean, sometimes overt, but always important cultural struggles regarding what counts as truth and reality. The outcome of such struggles decides the future of a culture, the fate of its institutions, and the psychological structure of its members. Of course, to conclude that cultural politics explains the refusal to examine the abduction phenomenon, one also has to conclude that the abduction phenomenon is a genuinely new phenomenon.

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Many people are unwilling to draw that conclusion, however.

The social ontology of modern democracies is usually an aggregate of naturalistic materialism and anthropocentric humanism. According to such materialism, "reality" is wholly constituted by natural phenomena that can be detected or at least plausibly inferred by sensory apparatus. Ruled out is any attempt to explain phenomena by referring to undetectable "spiritual" forces (including angels, demons, ghosts, gods). Materialism presupposes that the universe lacks any inherent meaning, purpose, or goal. Moreover, such materialism denies that humans are anything more than intelligent animals on a planet in the middle of nowhere. Such a worldview, however, is scarcely tolerable even by many scientists. Hence, materialistic naturalism is often tempered (not always self-consciously) by an anthropocentric humanism, according to which human beings are at the top of the cosmic heap. Many scientists believe that intelligent life may have developed elsewhere, but lacking evidence for such life they generally conclude that humans alone are the source of all meaning, value, and purpose. Influenced by the early Hebrews and Greeks, many scientists posit that superior intelligence grants exalted status to humankind, even though—paradoxically—the scientific revolutions of Copernicus and Darwin supposedly displaced both planet Earth and the hairless ape from their central positions in earlier cosmologies.

One can think of many examples of anomalous phenomena that were initially ignored because they challenged the social ontology of science, i.e., prevailing scientific theory, but which were eventually accepted because they proved superior to such theory. Consider the fate of Alfred Wegener's theory of "plate tectonics" or "continental drift," which in the 1920s was rejected by geologists who were certain that continents were firmly anchored to the Earth's surface. Discouraged, Wegener died in near-obscurity in the 1930s. Only after World War II did cross-disciplinary teams of scientists begin to make and correlate observations that eventually brought acceptance of a revised theory of plate tectonics, which is now so firmly entrenched that it discourages research into anomalies that the theory cannot currently explain.

In the following two cases, research into anomalous phenomena was initially forbidden because they were inconsistent with received scientific opinion and threatened the larger social ontology. In the first case, botanists such as Linnaeus began to argue that plant reproduction involved a sexual dimension. Given that this idea simultaneously contradicted prevailing scientific views about plants, and sought to extend sexuality to plants in an era that regarded sex with suspicion, scientists and clergy alike condemned the idea.⁴ Only gradually did scientists and society at large accept the idea that plants reproduce sexually. In the second case, described by Ron Westrum, a lengthy process was required before physicians and the general public could admit that child battering existed. Starting in the late 1940s, a few physicians began noticing in several young children a pattern of injuries for which parents could not adequately account. Attempts to interpret and to report these anomalous phenomena as instances of child battering met with resistance for two intertwined reasons. First,

In many cases the injuries may be visible only on X-ray photographs, a factor that contributed to delay the initial recognition of the [Battered Child Syndrome—BCS], and also contributed to the skepticism of pediatricians that the injuries had really occurred or were the result of parental assault.⁵

Second, skeptical pediatricians were hindered from accepting BCS because they were motivated to ignore evidence that would undermine two aspects of their social ontology: 1) that parents could not be so cruel as to batter small children, and 2) that such vile practices could not exist in a liberal democracy. Well-meaning, but misguided pediatricians followed the unspoken slogan of all social ontologies: "If it can't be, it isn't."⁶ By the early 1960s, however, physicians had gathered, correlated, and presented so much reliable evidence, drawn from sites across the nation, that other pediatricians, state legislators, and the general public finally began to take notice of the distressing phenomenon of child battering.⁷

Equally interesting as the fact that scientists sometimes forbid acquiring knowledge about hidden events, is the process by which such prohibitions may be overcome. According to

Westrum, the perceived implausibility of an anomalous phenomenon can change over time according to the following sequence. First, scattered but uncorrelated reports begin to emerge that people are experiencing an inexplicable anomalous phenomenon. Second, "The experiences are brought to public attention, but their reality is questioned."⁸ The phenomenon, whose boundaries remain blurred, remains taboo for mainstream scientists.⁹ According to Westrum, in these first two stages, the academic "experts" are usually "a) ignorant [about the phenomenon], b) unaware of their ignorance, and c) contributing to the inhibition of reporting."¹⁰ Meteorites and ball lightning are good examples of phenomena that are now accepted as real, but about which mainstream scientists were at one time incredulous.

In the third and final stage in the career of a hidden event, scientists begin to study the phenomenon, which by now has been relatively narrowly defined and about which experts have a significant amount of information that can be collated and compared. This sometimes lengthy stage of scientific controversy leads either to acceptance of the phenomenon as something new, or to unequivocal social rejection of it. In the case of particularly disturbing phenomena, scientists sometimes reject it without having explored it carefully. In such cases, the phenomenon either goes into hiding once again, or else remains of interest to some members of society. In a successful sequence of the process whereby a formerly hidden phenomenon is ratified as a novel aspect of "reality," evidence offered in favor of it must be sufficiently robust to win widespread scientific assent.

Alien Abduction: From Hidden Phenomenon to Scientific Controversy?

Alien abduction was a hidden phenomenon for so long, and has remained largely taboo to mainstream scientists, for a number of reasons. For one thing, abductions are associated with UFOs, which themselves are "off limits" to mainstream researchers, in part because the U.S. Air Force encouraged journalists to ridicule those who made UFO reports. By studying alien abductions, a person invites being labeled as just another UFO nut. Further, if people really are being abducted by alien beings, especially if they are technologically superior to and possibly more

intelligent than humans, modern humankind's assumptions about its place in the cosmos would be challenged. Deciding among the competing interpretations of the cause of alien abduction is important, but so is the insight that this phenomenon provides about the predominant social paradigm. Examining the abduction phenomenon reveals two important aspects of forbidden knowledge. First, many scientists initially refuse even to acknowledge a hidden or anomalous phenomenon, much less to examine it. Second, the process by which a hidden phenomenon may become an object of scientific controversy and investigation is often difficult.

For many years, alien abduction was a classic example of a hidden event. At first, those who experienced abduction not only refused to discuss it with others, but even denied to themselves that such a bizarre thing could ever have happened.¹¹ Gradually, some abductees began to reveal their experiences to stunned friends and a disbelieving public. Thousands of people have now reported memories of being abducted, often at night, by non-human entities who take them into strange aircraft.¹² Researchers, primarily non-scientists and therapists, correlated and published enough abduction reports to bring phenomenon out of hiding. Books, movies, and TV programs have turned the phenomenon into a public controversy. The abduction phenomenon has reached the stage of being a public controversy and may eventually become a scientific controversy, although for reasons offered above many scientists simply avoid talking about it.

Braving personal and professional dangers, some researchers have attempted to make the phenomenon a legitimate scientific controversy, by establishing their own research journals, and by holding conferences in which research findings can be presented and discussed.¹¹ In 1992 at M.I.T., for example, a group of researchers held a widely-publicized, but closed conference, whose Proceedings have recently been published.¹⁴ Despite such efforts, alien abductions may never become a scientific controversy, but instead may join a host of other paranormal phenomena that remain semi-hidden either because they are the products of hoax or self-deception, because they are explicable in terms of existing knowledge, or because they involve factors that cannot be accommodated within current scientific theory, which is usually a proper part of social ontology.

Before going further, let me describe a report of alien abduction. This report, particularly interesting because it involves the simultaneous abduction of two women, was written by John S. Carpenter, a therapist to whom the two abductees were referred once they began to remember portions what had happened to them.¹⁵ On November 7, 1989, two middle-aged professional acquaintances, "Susan" and "Jennifer" (pseudonyms), were driving at night through Kansas on their way to their homes in St. Louis after attending a conference in Colorado. In the sky, they spotted a UFO that exhibited colored, flashing lights and that (unlike the moon) seemed to remain stationary for about an hour, despite the speed (75–80mph) at which they were traveling. Venus is a very bright source of light that is commonly mistaken for a UFO, but in November, 1989, it was low in the sky and setting in the southwest a few hours after sunset, but the women reported their UFO as high in the sky to the east late at night. Moreover, the UFO behaved in ways that were inconsistent with the behavior of meteors. Although bright celestial lights can at times seem to move by virtue of "autokinesis" (unnoticed tiny movements of the head), and can seem to exhibit flashing colored lights, Susan and Jennifer were later to "remain adamant that the bright UFO was not a star. . ."¹⁶

Pulling over to get a better view of the strange light, and noticing that the car clock indicated a time of 12:40 a.m., Susan and Jennifer suddenly saw the light moving rapidly downward, becoming a brightly illuminated ball that began hovering within 100 feet of their parked car. From beneath this ball of light there appeared a V-shaped "cone" of "fluffy" white light, which contained colored rays that seemed to outline the "cone" and crisscrossed near the bottom. Astonished and excited, the women performed a "reality check" by describing to each other what they were seeing. The next thing they remember was "pulling back onto the road and feeling strikingly different. Now they felt similar feelings of exhaustion, irritability, and a preference for silence and solitude—quite an amazing and sudden transition in a matter of what seemed to be only seconds of time."¹⁷ They continued seeing the bright light until they arrived a short time later, at 2:30am, at the motel in the town in which they had intended to stay the night. Looking into the motel mirror, they each noticed dramatic deviations from

their normal appearance. Jennifer was shocked to see that her cheeks were "very red, flushed," while Susan noted that her face was devoid of color, "like death warmed over."¹⁸

The next morning, when examining the car's gas gauge and their careful trip log, they realized that two hours seemed to be "missing" during their UFO encounter. The previous evening they had filled up their car in a Flagler, Colorado, gas station, then pulled out at 11:40 p.m. on their drive to Goodland, Kansas, where they arrived at their motel at 2:30 a.m., about three hours later. But the gas gauge indicated that they had only used up about an hour's worth of gas, even though they had been driving at 75–80 mph. Goodland, Kansas, is only 72 miles from Flagler, Colorado. And the odometer indicated that they had only traveled 72 miles since leaving Flagler. Even allowing for the few brief stops they had made to look at the UFO, Susan and Jennifer could not account for almost two hours of time during the three hour travel period. After arriving home, both women reported being "irritable, jumpy, anxious, and restless," and found difficulty in sleeping.¹⁹

Determined to understand the puzzling UFO sighting and the "missing time" associated with it, Susan made inquiries that led her to Carpenter, who began his investigation within five days of the event. Working with both women individually, and strictly cautioning them against discussing their experience with one another, Carpenter used a combination of interview and hypnotic regression to obtain from Susan and Jennifer consistent accounts of the extraordinary events that occurred during their episode of "missing time." The women remembered floating up from their car toward the brightly-lit craft above them. Inside, in a circular room illuminated by a pinkish light, they were examined by short, slender, white-skinned, four-fingered, humanoids, who were either unclothed or wearing very tight fitting, skin-colored garments. The humanoids had large heads, pointed chins, and big, slanted, black eyes, which seemed to communicate telepathically.²⁰ In addition to seeing these beings, Jennifer also saw "some creatures with suction cup fingertips wearing hoods."²¹ While fully clothed, each woman was examined on a table by the white-skinned beings. Susan saw one of the beings use what looked like "a dental-instrument to place something tiny in Jennifer's nose."²² (Jenni-

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fer reports that not long after this encounter, she experienced serious nosebleeds.) Telepathically, Susan received messages that concern “genetic coding” and “mutual advancement of both races.” They were then floated back into their car, which they began driving once again. Here, their conscious memory took over.²³

Comparing the descriptions obtained while the two women were hypnotized, Carpenter notes that in regard to 45 specific recollections there was about a 90% congruence between the two women’s account. He attributes the few minor disagreements to “the expected imperfect nature of memory.”²⁴ After bringing their memories to the surface, both women reported a dramatic diminution of the anxiety, restlessness, and irritability that had bothered them ever since their encounter with the UFO.²⁵ Though most abductees recount the same basic sequence of events (including abduction, physical and psychological examination, and return), and report seeing similar types of “aliens” (for instance, grays of various sizes, browns, reptilians, insect types, tall blondes), some abductees give accounts that differ from the basic sequence, a fact that complicates attempts to make sense of the phenomenon.

Caution is in order when we are faced with the extraordinary claim that people are being abducted by non-human beings. For an extraordinary claim to be accepted, we hear, extraordinary evidence is required. If sufficiently robust evidence can be adduced in favor of this claim, however, and if such evidence cannot be explained in terms of what is already known, the possibility emerges that a different social ontology, paradigm, or conceptual scheme is needed to accommodate apparent contact with non-human intelligence. Attempts to effect such an accommodation would encounter resistance, since it challenges anthropocentric humanism, the social ontology that shapes individual psychology, legitimates institutions and social roles, and defines cultural norms, values, and ambitions.

Given how widespread reports of alien abduction have become, and given how much some abductees suffer not only in the abduction experience itself, but in anticipating future abductions (typically, an abductee is first “taken” as a child and continues to be taken periodically until around the end of his or her reproductive years), mainstream researchers might choose to examine

the phenomenon out of sheer compassion, out of intellectual curiosity about potential contact with (possibly extraterrestrial) non-human intelligence, or out of concern about the possibly psychosocial origins and cultural impact of reports that alien beings are abducting humans. Although fear of deviating from the prevailing social ontology prevents many scientists from looking into the phenomenon, scientists also ignore strange phenomena for far more prosaic reasons, including lack of time, funding, and personal interest.

Asserting that the burden of proof is on those claiming that alien abductions represent an unknown dimension of reality, skeptics usually seek either to poke holes in arguments portraying abduction as a new phenomenon, or to demonstrate that the phenomenon is something already known. Supporters of the new phenomenon hypothesis maintain that skeptics often fail to take account of all the evidence. Moreover, supporters claim that if credible evidence in favor of their hypothesis accumulates, the burden of disproof will shift to skeptics, who may then be willing to allow the phenomenon to become a scientific controversy.

Assessing the Reality Status of the Abduction Phenomenon

Mark Woodhouse argues that in order to assess whether a paranormal phenomenon, including alien abduction, constitutes something previously unknown, we can appeal to the same “checklist of reality criteria” often used by scientists to judge whether anything is real or unreal. Woodhouse’s checklist includes the following considerations:

- A) whether the phenomenon is recurring and identifiable
- B) overall reliability of reports
- C) veridical character of pertinent observations
- D) confirmability
- E) coherence of phenomenon within a larger paradigm
- F) inability of competing paradigms reasonably to explain observations of the phenomenon
- G) application of proposed explanation to other related phenomena
- H) falsifiability

I) capacity to generate further test implications

J) capacity to make a difference in shared values and goals²⁶

Following Woodhouse's reality checklist, let us see whether what has been reported about alien abduction is sufficient to legitimate it as an object of scientific controversy.

A) Recurrence and identifiability of the phenomenon. Many hundreds of case histories have been compiled, and reports of abduction continue to be made. In his analysis of 270 abduction cases, Indiana University folklorist Thomas Bullard maintains that the great majority of them involve a repeated sequence of events.²⁷ His conclusion that there is an identifiable "core" to abduction experiences is supported by the findings of a number of other researchers.²⁸ Critics charge, however, that researchers tend to ignore evidence that speaks against their own interpretation of the phenomenon, and to mold other evidence so as to fit that interpretation. For instance, before the publication of Budd Hopkins' book, *Intruders*, abductees rarely reported being the object of genetic experiments possibly aimed at creating a hybrid race.²⁹ Now the genetic experiment theme has become a common element in abduction reports.³⁰ Did Hopkins' book indirectly influence the content of subsequent reports, or did he stumble onto a new dimension of this phenomenon, whose complete profile is still unfolding? Though in some respects alien abduction appears to be a recurrent and increasingly identifiable phenomenon, more research remains to be done in this area.

Here, the question arises: Who will do this research? That amateur investigators have taken the lead in investigating this phenomenon has led many academics to dismiss reports of alien abduction as the result either of the lunatic fringe, or of a known psychological malady. Recently, a few scientists have begun to study the phenomenon. Until a critical mass of reputable scientists asserts that the phenomenon merits investigation, however, funding agencies are unlikely to favor applications to research the phenomenon. Here, as in many other cases of not-yet-officially-legitimated phenomena, a "Catch 22" is at work: How can a scientist say a phenomenon is worth researching if he or she lacks the funding needed to do the research required to make such a pronouncement? One of the aims of abduction re-

searchers has been to gather robust evidence in a methodologically rigorous way, so that mainstream researchers will eventually decide to examine the phenomenon for themselves.

Much of existing research into alien abduction has been informally "funded" by frightened abductees who have sought the professional help of therapists and counselors in order to alleviate recurring nightmares and unwanted memories about being "abducted" by strange beings. A pioneer in this area was counseling psychologist Leo Sprinkle, who took early retirement from his academic appointment because of pressure from disapproving colleagues. More recently, Harvard psychiatrist John Mack has published a controversial book on the subject.³¹ Some of his colleagues, finding the whole topic ludicrous and even dangerous, and believing that Mack's research methodology suffered from excessive credulity regarding the reality of the phenomenon, instigated an investigation of his research methods. Though ultimately exonerated, Mack concludes that he would not have been investigated by an official Harvard committee had he not emphasized the possibility that the abduction phenomenon would force us to change our ideas about reality. Insisting that he holds no final opinion about what generates the abduction experience, Mack believes that the politics of ontology prevents other clinicians from studying such an extraordinary phenomenon.³² In any event, clinicians researching the abduction phenomenon face complex ethical issues, including how to balance seeking information from a client, on the one hand, and attending to the psychological needs of the same client, on the other.³³

B) Reliability of reports. Regarding this issue, skeptics ask whether abductees may be creating hoaxes, whether they are fantasy prone, and whether they are psychologically stable. A few hoaxes have occurred, but even skeptics concede that the great majority of reports cannot be explained in this way. To discourage successful hoaxing, a number of researchers refuse to publish certain details reported by most abductees (e.g., odd symbols seen on board the craft). If the person claiming to have been abducted mentions such details in his or her report, this fact supports the presumption that the person is telling the truth. Most abductees lack motivation for creating a hoax about a matter that, if revealed, puts enormous strain on personal relationships and in-

vites public ridicule. Preferring to minimize disclosure of their experience, abductees sometimes join support groups where they can discuss their fears and concerns with others who share such experience. Many prefer that the abduction experience cease, or at least that someone offer a plausible psychological explanation for the experience, i.e., an explanation that enables abductees to retain faith in some version of anthropocentric humanism.

Psychological evaluations of a number of abductees indicates that they do not suffer from psychopathology, though they sometimes exhibit symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which suggests that they have undergone a frightening experience, one that resists being classified as a hallucination.³⁴ John Mack maintains that there is no known clinical category, or combination thereof, that can account for the emotional intensity exhibited by people recalling their abduction experience.³⁵

John Carpenter, a psychiatric social worker with twelve years of experience in assessing and helping to treat thousands of hospitalized psychiatric patients, did an initial examination of the psychological condition of the two women involved in the double abduction case. He describes Susan as a married, 42-year old businesswoman, who is “an honest, respectful, caring, strong, dependable, and candid woman with no psychological problems or history of such difficulties.” In addition, “She is a level-headed, open-minded person who seeks the truth with a calm but inquisitive persistence.”³⁶ Jennifer is a 49-year old widow, mother of two grown stepchildren, holder of an MSW degree, and a freelance photographer. Despite being “somewhat shy and reserved,” Jennifer is “independent and adventuresome.”³⁷ Attentive to small details, her careful trip log helped to verify the “missing time” that they experienced on their car journey. Neither woman reports having had any previous interest in UFOs. Not only had Susan never heard of Betty and Barney Hill’s well-chronicled “abduction experience” in 1961, but had never even “read a science fiction novel.”³⁸

Convinced after initial clinical interviews that Susan and Jennifer were psychologically stable and lacking the motivation needed to create a hoax, Carpenter asked both women to undergo three objective psychological tests. The MMPI tests indicated “no overt signs of pathology or

psychological problems.”³⁹ Both women had low to moderate scores on the ICMI, a test that measures fantasy-proneness. Finally, the test of hypnotic suggestibility showed that Susan had a moderate tendency in this direction, while Jennifer had a score near the top range, “indicating that she would be a good hypnotic subject and is potentially quite suggestible.”⁴⁰ Jennifer’s suggestibility seems cancelled out, however, by the fact that her report is so congruent with Susan’s. Since psychological testing and evaluation show that both women are stable, and since neither has made any monetary or professional gain from reporting (or fabricating) her experience, Carpenter concludes that they are giving truthful accounts of their experience of the UFO.⁴¹

Some skeptics concede that many abductees are truthfully recounting what they remember of an experience, but are such memories—especially when “recovered” by the use of hypnotic regression—trustworthy? With years of experience using hypnotic regression to work with clients reporting UFO encounters and abductions, Fowler, Carpenter, Mack, Sprinkle, Budd Hopkins, David Jacobs, and a number of other investigators believe that the method has both therapeutic and investigative value. Nevertheless, they emphasize that the method must be used cautiously, in order to minimize leading or suggestive remarks that might contaminate the client’s recollection, or that might otherwise encourage confabulation. Carpenter cites the following from a study of the forensic implications of hypnosis:

Because of the possible confabulatory influence, informational details obtained by hypnosis cannot be immediately regarded as factual; rather, such retrieved memories may be considered as leads for further investigation by qualified personnel. Only if there is verification on the basis of follow-up investigation can the professional report or testify that the memories were real. Although forensic hypnosis is a controversial method as far as certain courts are concerned, clearly its use within specified guidelines may result in important information that was not previously known.⁴²

Confident that carefully employed hypnotic regression can bring to the surface information not available to conscious memory, but wary of the dangers posed by suggestibility and confabulation, abduction researchers may check on the re-

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liability of hypnotized subject by asking intentionally misleading questions, then observing whether the subject offers resistance, or follows the suggestion. Carpenter remarks:

If the subject resists the suggestions and presents information that is not only unsolicited and unusual but also correlates with other abduction research data, this enhances the credibility of their recalled experience. It seems significant when a subject survives countless subtle but trick questions without difficulty.⁴³

Although some forensic and clinical evidence supports the claim that hypnosis can help people fairly accurately to recall details of forgotten experiences, other evidence favors the counter-assertion: that confabulation accompanies virtually all memory recall, especially under the influence of hypnosis.⁴⁴ The hypnosis issue remains hotly disputed, even among those who are engaged in abduction research.⁴⁵ Concern has been expressed that researchers (perhaps unintentionally) “lead” hypnotized abductees to say certain things. Obviously, narratives obtained under hypnosis can always be challenged.

On the other hand, one can turn the tables on the claims made by abduction researchers that their findings are resisted by people with unquestioning allegiance to the prevailing anthropocentric social ontology. If controlling what counts as knowledge and reality bestows social power, abduction researchers can be accused of seeking such power by attempting to overturn that ontology. Such hidden power-interests might influence how hypnotized abductees respond to “innocent” questions posed by researchers. Though conceding that individual researchers are partly motivated by their own personal and social power-interests, abduction researchers maintain that another interest is also at work, namely, the wider human interest in discovering the truth about the nature of “reality.”

By surrounding “reality” with scare-quotes, I emphasize that its status is usually contested along a continuum. On one pole of the continuum are those claiming that science can accurately disclose a pre-existing reality; on the other pole are those claiming that science constructs reality according to personal and social power-interests. Both realists and constructivists often presuppose that natural phenomena are relatively passive, but Donna Haraway has argued that “na-

ture” may involve an active, subjective, “trickster” dimension that scientists must learn to take into account.⁴⁶ Obviously, this trickster factor would take on far greater importance if alien abductions were really being performed by non-human intelligence, for in that case researchers would have to contend with the possibility that such intelligence intentionally conceals itself in a way that misleads human perception of the abduction phenomenon.

Moving to a different aspect of the hypnosis issue, we note that most people in our culture have encountered at least some of the numerous books, articles, TV programs, and films about UFOs and aliens. Hence, critics conclude, we should not be surprised if the content of “remembered” abduction scenarios resembles things dreamt up years earlier by science-fiction writers and screenwriters.⁴⁷ Further research into the validity of this hypothesis will have to take into account the fact that many abductee reports exhibit congruence about the sequence of events, the appearance of the abductors, the examinations to which abductees are subjected on board strange craft, the shape and lighting of the rooms in which such examinations take place, and so on. Researchers maintain that the generally consistent “core” of many (though by no means all) abduction experiences argues against the supposition that people are remembering what they saw on popular media, especially given the wide-ranging appearances of the “space aliens” portrayed in film and on TV, but this whole issue of cultural influence remains contested even among researchers.

For example, Jacques Vallee argues that whatever “reality” status UFOs and aliens may have, cultural norms and expectations inevitably shape how people perceive such phenomena.⁴⁸ For many centuries, people have been encountering strange alien “visitors,” who wear clothing and travel in craft that are consistent with the culture and technology of the era in question. Today, for example, in an age of space travel and science fiction, people who have seen UFOs often describe them as technologically advanced vehicles, perhaps capable of traveling to Earth from other star systems. In earlier eras, however, aliens reportedly traveled in different crafts, sometimes resembling ships or even chariots, with which they carried away human captives to unknown regions.

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Recently, critics have attacked the idea that traumatic experiences can be “forgotten” or “repressed,” much less subsequently “recovered” by hypnotic regression. These attacks have been largely directed at those therapists who have—again, perhaps unwittingly—encouraged patients to confabulate tales of sexual abuse that supposedly occurred during satanic rituals run by parents, relatives, or friends of the family. The lives of some innocent people have been ruined because of sexual-abuse accusations based on “memories” that are demonstrably inconsistent with provable fact, and that were later repudiated by the patients who originally fabricated them. Critics do not deny that sexual abuse does occur, but that overzealous therapists—assuming that patients with certain presenting symptoms must have been abused as children—encourage patients to generate “memories” consistent with the abuse hypothesis, even though it sometimes turns out that there is no factual basis for such memories.

Following this lead, R. A. Baker maintains that suggestible “abductees” and overzealous researchers are responsible for producing memories of events that never occurred.⁴⁹ Although paying close attention to the possibility of such fabricated memories, abduction researchers assert that there is a difference between reports of satanic sexual abuse and reports of alien abductions.⁵⁰ People making reports of alien abduction do not charge that members of their own families have abducted and tormented them, although the experience of alien abduction has reportedly triggered frightful memories on the part of individuals who were sexually abused. Abduction skeptic Philip J. Klass maintains that abduction experiences may be a “screen memory” defending a person against remembering actual childhood abuse. Kenneth Ring’s research indicates abductees report a higher incidence of sexual abuse than do persons who merely express an interest in UFOs.⁵¹ Evidently, if abduction experiences do constitute a screen against memory of sexual abuse, they are not a very good screen. Moreover, many abductees clearly distinguish between sexual abuse and abduction.

Sometimes abductions are said to occur across two or three generations. Moreover, during abductions some people report that on board the craft they see close relatives who have also been abducted. Small children may initially won-

der why their parents fail to protect them from abduction experiences, which can be both frightening and physically painful, but as they grow older, they usually conclude that their parents are utterly powerless to prevent the onset of an abduction. If abductees blame anyone, they blame the aliens who abduct them. It would seem possible, then, that intrafamilial emotional quarrels do not constitute the basis for most memories of “alien abduction” reports. More research is needed, however, about the issues involved in this complex and highly-charged debate.

Attempting to counter concerns that memories obtained by way of hypnotic regression are the product of confabulation, researchers note that in about one quarter of their cases, people remember details of their “abductions” without regressive hypnosis. Yet some psychologists maintain that abduction researchers not only underestimate the human capacity to create fantasies, but also fail to appreciate that memory, far from being something like a video tape that can simply be “played back” with great accuracy, is labile, because it is always filtered through current attitudes, beliefs, and emotional states.

The issue of the pliability of memory is important, but difficult to decide. Although evidence shows that memory of ordinary events is often contaminated by present circumstances, other evidence suggests that the memory of traumatic events may be less subject to such contamination. Eyewitnesses to fleeting events are notoriously inaccurate in their descriptions of what happened, but abduction scenarios typically take from thirty minutes to two hours, arguably enough time for details to sink in. The memories reported by Susan and Jennifer in the case described above were congruent in many cases, but differed in a few details. In concluding that such differences can be attributed to cultural and psychological differences between the two women, Carpenter indirectly calls to mind a host of other issues having to do with perception.

C) Veridical character of reports. Even assuming that people truthfully report that they underwent a traumatic experience which they describe as “alien abduction,” the question remains whether such reports are veridical. In most cases, abductees seem sincere and truthful in reports about their experiences. Most researchers join skeptics, however, in noting the following: the fact that an experience was real tells us nothing

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about the reality-status of what was experienced.⁵² Given the often elusive nature of evidence for abduction, determining whether abduction reports are veridical is a daunting process. This process becomes even more difficult if one entertains the possibility that an intentionally-deceitful alien intelligence may be responsible for abductions.

D) Confirmability of reports. Assessing the truth-status of abduction reports is related to whether such reports are confirmable by independent evidence, e.g., eyewitnesses, physical evidence, and so on. In addition to the fact that some abductions have been witnessed by spouses, family members, and friends who are often temporarily paralyzed (“turned off”) during the event, in addition to sightings (made by independent witnesses) of UFOs hovering near or over the homes of people who reported being abducted at the same time, and in addition to physical evidence (burnt circles of grass, regularly spaced indentations in the ground, etc.) that may have been left by a landed craft, many abductees report inexplicable marks, bruises, incisions, and “scoop marks” that appear on their skin after an abduction experience. Sometimes, these scars, which often first began appearing in childhood, are found in the same places on the limbs or torsos of the parents and even the grandparents of abductees. Though intense psychological stress can generate skin lesions, such phenomena are rarely permanent, unlike some of the marks left on the skin of abductees. Finally, abductees frequently report that abductors forcefully implant tiny devices into their bodies. Some of these have objects been spotted by x-rays or by other medical instruments, and a few have been extracted, but results of physical analysis are inconclusive.⁵³ Currently, then, there is insufficient physical evidence robustly to support the claim that alien abduction really occurs in ordinary space and time.

Some researchers maintain, however, that physical evidence alone cannot provide adequate understanding of the abduction phenomenon, which refuses to fit into the available pigeonholes: either a “physically real” event, or the product of “psychopathology,” or a hoax. Perhaps the phenomenon can be understood solely in terms of an alternative that somehow combines the physical and the psychical, or perhaps transcends both in ways that cannot be accounted for

by current scientific paradigms.⁵⁴ Skeptics would say that taking such an approach is a way of dealing with the fact that some abductees are known to have been in their beds throughout an entire abduction episode. For such skeptics, this fact alone justifies concluding that the phenomenon is solely a matter of “inner space.” Abduction researchers concede that an abductees are sometimes physically present, but insist that on other occasions abductees are reportedly missing during an abduction experience. Moreover, it is possible that our current understanding of consciousness may simply be insufficient to explain experiential states of a sort that may involve contact with non-physical dimensions of reality. Supporting such a claim, however, would not only be difficult, but would be of questionable value for efforts aimed to securing scientific recognition of the abduction phenomenon. Empirical scientists might not be willing to accept the sort of “evidence” that could be adduced in favor of this phenomenon, if it proves to be as strange and novel as many researchers claim it is. Mark Woodhouse argues, however, that if in the light of abundant, though imperfect evidence, a number of scientists move toward accepting the possibility that the phenomenon is unknown, currently very high standards of evidence may gradually be lowered.⁵⁵

Verifying abduction reports is difficult in part for two reasons. First, even if an abductee is willing to risk the ridicule so often associated with the assertion that one has been abducted by aliens, he or she may hesitate to describe some particularly frightening or degrading episodes. Skeptics might say that if an “abductee” is to report his or her experience to anyone, he or she should do so to a trained psychotherapist who can help get to the bottom of the matter. Others might add that the good of society demands that reports of such “ludicrous” experiences be ignored or debunked, since such tales encourage irrationalism. A number of natural scientists, gravely concerned by the potentially dark political consequences of “irrational” behavior ranging from sightings of angels and the Virgin Mary to belief in witchcraft and astrology, are now attempting to reassert the legitimacy and epistemological primacy of scientific knowledge. For such scientists, taking seriously alien abduction simply adds fuel to fires that must be extinguished for the

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sake of preserving the achievements of rational modernity.

Second, many abductees report that their captors can prevent abductees from remembering their abduction experience, and often forbid abductees from reporting it, even if they should happen to remember it. (Some abductees remember being told that “later on” they will be allowed to recall what happened.) Assuming that there are aliens, no one knows why they would forbid abductees from remembering their experiences, though human abductors typically do not want abductees to learn much about their experience. It is disturbing to contemplate the possibility that humankind is being manipulated by a non-human intelligence which regards our species with the correct, but cold indifference that human researchers adopt toward laboratory animals. Indeed, so repellent is this possibility that one can understand why people accustomed to exercising their rights and being in control, would rather not even entertain the idea of “alien abduction.”

E) Coherence of phenomenon within a larger paradigm. Many researchers maintain that alien abduction can be understood as a coherent aspect of a larger paradigm that transcends the limits of scientific materialism and anthropocentric humanism. This paradigm would presuppose not only that there is other intelligence in the universe, but that such intelligence is interacting with humankind. According to the “extraterrestrial” hypothesis, humans are being visited by intelligent beings from other solar systems. Discounting this possibility are astronomers who argue that other solar systems are simply too far away to make interstellar travel possible. Others, however, regard this as an argument from ignorance. That current technological skill and scientific understanding seem to preclude interstellar travel for humans, does not mean that such travel is impossible for more highly evolved entities. Moreover, it is possible that “aliens,” should they prove to exist, come from somewhere within our own solar system. In either case, modernity’s anthropocentric social ontology would be shaken by undeniable evidence that such alien intelligence—especially if somehow superior to our own—not only exists, but is interacting with humankind.

If we assume that alien intelligence is in our midst, we can generate a host of hypotheses to explain their behavior. Some researchers, notably

Budd Hopkins and David Jacobs, maintain that the aliens have a dark agenda in their hybrid breeding program, for which humans are abducted and subjected to painful and embarrassing physical procedures. Other researchers, such as Richard J. Boylan, maintain that the intention of the aliens is largely benevolent.⁵⁶ Because many abductees report being shown visions of an ecologically devastated Earth which their abductors are trying to save, some researchers read “abductions” not so much as the intervention of flesh-and-blood entities, but instead as a planetary-wide spiritual process that is altering human consciousness in order to avoid self-induced ecological catastrophe.⁵⁷ Carl Jung would have said that archetypes of the collective unconscious are the agents behind this transformation.⁵⁸ Michael Grosso argues that “mind at large” is attempting to correct today’s dangerous cultural imbalance.⁵⁹ Terence McKenna maintains that the agency involved is “the human oversoul,” defined as a human-generated “field” or an enormously intelligent “organism” that regulates “human culture through the release of ideas out of eternity and into the continuum of history.”⁶⁰ Carl Raschke asserts that because encounters with aliens and UFOs are remolding “entire constellations of culture and social knowledge,” UFOs are “ultraterrestrial agents of cultural deconstruction.”⁶¹ Finally, John Mack says that when abductees move beyond initial terror and “ontological shock,” they achieve personal growth and spiritual transformation.⁶²

Skeptics scoff at such claims, which recall assertions made in the 1950s by a number of apparent hoaxers, including George Adamski, a Californian who claimed to have had encounters with benevolent “space brothers” warning of the dangers of atomic war. But the culturally transformative impact of alien abductions was taken seriously by Carl Sagan, who once had a strong interest in UFOs and long retained an interest in the possibility of intelligent extraterrestrial life. Though conceding that otherwise credible people are making abduction reports, Sagan insisted that such reports have been made throughout the ages, though in previous eras the captors appeared in garb consistent with local expectations.⁶³ In early modern time, thousands of people were killed for being witches consorting with incubi and succubi, a fact that should lead to questions about the potential social consequences of

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thousands of current abduction reports. Maintaining that “abductions” are hallucinations resulting from sleep disorders, which can provoke terrifying dreams of being paralyzed while strange intruders enter one’s bedroom, Sagan concluded:

If indeed the bulk of the alien abductions are really about hallucinations, don’t we have before us a matter of supreme importance—touching on our limitations, the ease with which we may be misled, the fashioning of our beliefs and perhaps even the origins of our religions? There is genuine scientific paydirt in UFOs and alien abductions—but it is, I think, of distinctly terrestrial origin.⁶⁴

By asserting only that the “bulk” of abductions can be explained by the sleep-disorder hypothesis, Sagan admitted that some abductions may require a different, more unsettling explanation. He also conceded that UFOs and the abduction hypothesis are matters of “supreme importance,” but evidently only because they show how readily people can be taken in collective hallucinations. Sagan believed that religion originates not from encounters with the sacred, but instead from hallucinations that overwhelm gullible people. Still, by saying religion-generating hallucinations are of supreme importance, even though only as a phenomenon of “innerspace,” Sagan may have been conceding that the phenomenon is a symptom of a growing challenge to the secular religion of anthropocentric humanism. In view of the social dislocations, violence, and suffering that accompany such cultural changes, and in view of the possibility that alien abduction represents an outbreak of the irrationalism associated with reactionary European movements earlier in this century, scientists, researchers, and government officials may be wise to call for serious investigation of the abduction phenomenon.

F) Can competing paradigms explain the phenomenon? Though unable summarily to reject the possibility that the alien abduction phenomenon constitutes a new dimension of “reality,” skeptics do insist that no such conclusion can be drawn until every plausible alternative explanation is examined. In addition to the alternatives already mentioned, such as sleep disorder, I shall discuss a few others.⁶⁵ Paul Devereux maintains that electromagnetic phenomena associated with tectonic activity can affect the temporal lobe in ways that generate vivid hallucinations.⁶⁶ Fur-

ther, Michael Persinger has argued that frontal lobe epilepsy can produce bizarre hallucinations and time distortions that are consistent with aspects of abduction reports.⁶⁷ Indeed, Persinger claims that similar experiences are reported by volunteers who allow their temporal lobes to be exposed to manipulated magnetic fields.⁶⁸ Although abductees do not seem to suffer from temporal lobe problems more than does the average population, research into this area could prove fruitful.⁶⁹

Persinger’s claims can be met by the following reply, however. From the fact that “experience” of a given object can be generated by stimulating a certain portion of the brain, one cannot conclude that such an object has merely “mental” status and no “external” correlate. Just because I can stimulate a person’s brain such that he or she sees a tree, does not mean that trees are only “in our heads.” We “believe” that trees exist because we consistently corroborate our perception of them by intersubjective means. We would also come to “believe” in the reality status (whatever that may prove to be) of aliens, if evidence is generated that can produce the requisite intersubjective consensus.⁷⁰ Though meriting exploration, the hallucination alternative is sometimes promulgated as if it simply must explain the abduction phenomenon, even if supporting evidence is sometimes overlooked.

Skeptics retort that a significant percentage of abductees tend to have strikingly vivid and complex fantasies, including sadomasochistic fantasies of being dominated, which may explain their propensity for experiencing “abduction.”⁷¹ Other studies suggest, however, that abductees are not more fantasy prone than the general public.⁷² But still other studies suggest that even if most abductees do not suffer from psychopathology, they often have rather unusual personalities.⁷³

Even if a number of abductees are more likely than the general public to have reported odd experiences of various sorts, however, this fact may not indicate that those abductees are making up their experiences; instead, they may be capable of perceiving phenomena that elude the average person. Such unusual capacities may be possessed by the many otherwise “normal” people who report paranormal experiences, including clairvoyance and telepathy. In light of the controversial status of such phenomena, however, appealing to them does not offer much support for

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those seeking to legitimate scientific study of the abduction phenomenon.

Another hypothesis is that alien abduction narratives are really "urban legends" that are given personal twists by overimaginative people. Maintaining that there is significant consistency in details reported by abductees, and that even variations in the usual scenario have "a typical regularity of their own," however, Thomas Bullard contrasts such narrative stability with the protean character of folk tales, whose narrators "recombine story elements, replace them with new ones or borrowings from other stories in a ferment of creativity that no brevity, mundaneness, or close-knit structure can hinder." Compared with folktales such as Cinderella, which had as many different versions as there were narrators, abduction narratives exhibit a "recurrent stability."⁷⁴

Some people declare that abductions are a typical instance of American mass hysteria, but Robert Hall maintains that the abduction phenomenon does not fit the profile of such hysteria.⁷⁵ Though it is true that more Americans seem to have reported abductions than people from other countries, reports of the phenomenon come from other parts of the world. The first abduction in the postwar era, for example, was reported by a farmer from Argentina in the 1950s. Though abduction reports from outside the U.S. often resemble American reports, there are differences as well, a fact that may be attributed either to cultural differences that influence perception, or to a difference in whatever it is that generates the experience, or both. More research is clearly needed about the cross-cultural dimensions of the abduction phenomenon.

G) Wider applications of the proposed explanation for the phenomenon. The abduction phenomenon has the virtue of being correlated with and possibly helping to explain another widely reported phenomenon, UFOs. But the reality status of UFOs is equally controversial as that of alien abductions. Though I cannot review here the long-standing UFO controversy, suffice it to say that reliable observers have seen phenomena that cannot be understood in terms of things that are known.⁷⁶ Of all reported UFOs, 5% to 10% cannot be explained. In *The Scientific Study of Unidentified Flying Objects* (1969), sponsored by the U.S. Air Force, Edward U. Condon concluded that UFOs do not constitute a phenome-

non worthy of scientific research. Critics contend, however, that Condon's mind was made up from the very beginning, since his own research team could find no explanation for about a quarter of the cases reviewed in the study. Even if UFOs eventually turn out to constitute a new phenomenon, their current reality status remains too uncertain for them to provide a convincing point of correlation with alien abductions. Here is yet another area in which further research is needed.

H) Falsifiability. Following the recommendations of many philosophers of science, psychiatrist David Gotlib maintains that scientists will not be convinced by the compilation of more and more evidence favoring the hypothesis that alien intelligence is responsible for the abduction phenomenon.⁷⁷ Instead, researchers need to develop a predictive hypothesis that can in principle be falsified. Since alien abductions seem to be inherently unpredictable, however, and often happen to individuals when they are sleeping or when other people are absent, it is challenging to devise and carry out tests that would falsify the hypothesis that people are literally abducted. One way to falsify it might involve constantly videotaping a person who claims to be subjected to alien abduction. If that person reported an abduction experience, but if no such experience were revealed on the videotape, such a finding would count against those who claim that abductions are physically "real." Yet alternative claims, e.g., that such abductions are an aspect of a widespread, but currently inexplicable change of consciousness, would not be falsified by this experiment. It is worth remarking that videotaping efforts have been undertaken, though without success, since the cameras seem to malfunction at the crucial moment. Such equipment failure is commonly reported in connection with attempts to film or to photograph UFOs.

Another possible way to falsify at least one hypothesis about alien abduction would be to demonstrate that female abductees are mistaken when they report that their fetuses have been taken by aliens.⁷⁸ Some female abductees report that they have been impregnated by the aliens, who allegedly remove the fetus at an early stage of development. On later occasions, these abductees are sometimes shown and even asked to hold their "hybrid" offspring. Some researchers hypothesize that humans are part of some large-scale breeding program whose intention is not

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clear, but seems ominous.⁷⁹ A number of abductees report, however, that the hybrid children are needed either to save a dying race (the “aliens”) or to save humanity itself from some forthcoming calamity. Reports that abductees are giving birth to a new race of saviors tend to confirm the suspicions of skeptics, for whom the abduction experience is the product of wish-fulfillment and fantasy by people whose lives otherwise lack meaning and purpose. If it could be clearly demonstrated that a pregnancy was never initiated in an abductee who insisted that she was impregnated by aliens, such a demonstration would at least cast doubt on the “hybridization program” hypothesis, though other aspects of the abduction phenomenon would not automatically be falsified. Obviously, however, issues of falsification are difficult to negotiate when paradigms clash.

I) Can the phenomenon generate further tests and predictions? Alien abductions would take a step closer toward being accepted as a genuinely new phenomenon, if one could verify some of the information and predictions that abductees are often given by their abductors. Moreover, if future scientific breakthroughs demonstrate the possibility of achieving some of the “impossible” things accomplished in alien abductions (e.g., mental telepathy, or being floated through walls and window panes), new weight would be lent to the potential reality status of alien abductions.

J) Can the phenomenon make a difference in shared values and beliefs? Possible verification of the existence of alien beings who are interacting with humankind would have enormously important, and possibly highly positive, implications for humankind as a whole. Freeing modern humanity from the limitations of anthropocentric humanism might have beneficial results for our attitude toward and treatment of the natural world, especially those living beings that we have traditionally considered to be “inferior” to humankind. Moreover, contact with alien intelligence might provoke a momentous re-evaluation of the materialist presuppositions that currently prevent many moderns from taking seriously the great spiritual traditions. Finally, contact with aliens might generate extraordinary technological benefits that would alleviate vast amounts of human suffering. Some abduction researchers suspect, however, that aliens have dark intentions toward humankind. Since we are not certain of the ontological status of such “aliens,” we are in

no position to make pronouncements about their intentions, even if such a human psychological concept as intentionality were applicable to alien intelligence. If aliens had evil designs on humanity, however, their apparently highly advanced technological capacities would presumably have enabled them to take control of the planet long ago. Of course, for the time being, speculation about such possible ramifications must take a back seat to research into the reality status of alien abduction.

Having examined the abduction phenomenon in terms of the categories of the “reality checklist,” I draw the following conclusion. Although there is not enough evidence to state unequivocally that this phenomenon is wholly new, there is certainly sufficient evidence to say that we are confronted with a strange phenomenon that merits funded research by the scientific community. Dismissing, ridiculing, or ignoring the phenomenon are not appropriate stances, especially for scientists who in principle should be willing to investigate anything that may constitute a new phenomenon. That some academic researchers are beginning to examine the abduction phenomenon indicates that it may be making the difficult transition from being a publicly-recognized phenomenon that scientists are (in effect) forbidden to study, to becoming a scientific controversy in which such study is legitimate. Continuing official denial of this phenomenon is a good example of the public resistance that greets phenomena that do not correspond to the dominant social ontology.

Earlier in my discussion of forbidden knowledge, I emphasized the relationship between knowledge and power. At various points in the essay, I have indicated that the views of researchers, scientists, and skeptics are often motivated by (often unconscious) personal, professional, and cultural interests that deserve scrutiny. Though alien abductions have become a part of the contemporary cultural scene, they have not yet become the subject of scientific controversy. No longer hidden from view, these strange phenomena are rarely acknowledged by social elites, who have vested interests in maintaining modernity’s anthropocentric worldview. Some abduction researchers have argued that lack of interest on the part of those who wield social power is a screen concealing what appears to be a profound and long-term preoccupation with UFOs and

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alien abductions by secret government agencies.⁸⁰ In many cases, when people are denied access to information, and are given (at least in their view) unsatisfactory reasons for such denial, they suspect the motives of those who control the information. Those who control knowledge are in an excellent position to control what counts as “reality”—and thus to control major aspects of social life. Democratic social revolutions occurred, at least in part, because citizens refused to be treated paternalistically by aristocrats and priests who claimed privileged access to special knowledge. For a democratic society to function effectively, knowledge and information must be widespread and readily accessible by citizens.

Some information about alien abductions has been made available through a number of channels, even if certain social forces might have wanted to prevent such information from being disseminated. Yet mainstream scientists remain leery of the phenomenon and high-ranking political leaders ignore it. Frustrated by the unwillingness of most leading members of society even to acknowledge the phenomenon, some people have concluded that members of a shadow government have agreed to cooperate with the aliens to conceal their presence, in exchange for advanced technology that promises power and wealth. Many readers may regard such conclu-

sions as products of the lunatic fringe. In an era wracked by official deception and government betrayal, however, one would be unwise to dismiss out of hand a less extreme hypothesis, namely, that governments know more than they are willing to admit about UFOs and the alien abduction phenomenon. We may not be in a position to render a judgment about the possibility of a government cover up, even if public concern about the phenomenon grows so widespread that mainstream scientists begin to examine it forthrightly, despite the threat that it may pose to our social ontology.⁸¹

In closing, I would like to encourage open minded debate about possible explanations for this unusual phenomenon. I remain skeptical that these abductions can be understood literally as physical events, but I am also not persuaded by attempts to explain the phenomenon in terms of currently accepted psychopathological states. Instead, I regard the phenomenon as a possible challenge to received views about the nature of “experience” and “consciousness,” as well as about humanity’s place in the cosmos. To say anything further, however, would be to engage in speculation that should be reserved for another time.

ENDNOTES

1. In his skeptical discussion of alien abduction in Nova’s February 27, 1996, program about the phenomenon, astronomer Carl Sagan attempts to conceive of it in terms of this either/or. Abduction researchers John Mack and Budd Hopkins, whose work was featured in this program, have written essays that raise disturbing questions about apparent editorial displayed by the producers of this program.
2. Ron Westrum, “Social Intelligence About Hidden Events,” *Knowledge: Creation, Diffusion, Utilization* 3, No. 3 (March, 1982): 382.
3. John E. Mack, *Alien Discussions: Proceedings of the Abduction Study Conference*, ed. Andrea Pritchard, David E. Pritchard, John E. Mack, Pam Kasey, Claudia Yapp (Cambridge: North Cambridge Press, 1994), p. 19. See also Mack, *Abduction* (New York: Scribner’s, 1994).
4. Alec Bristow, *The Sex Life of Plants* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978), 3.
5. Westrum, “Social Intelligence About Hidden Events,” p. 386.
6. Astronomer J. Allen Hynek used this expression in his excellent book, *The UFO Experience: A Scientific Inquiry* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1972).
7. Westrum, “Social Intelligence About Hidden Events,” p. 386.
8. Westrum, “Social Intelligence About Hidden Events,” p. 384.
9. See Ron Westrum, “UFO Abductions as a Hidden Event,” *Alien Discussions*, pp. 532–37.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 533.
11. Whitley Strieber, *Communion* (New York: William Morrow, 1987); Strieber, *Transformation* (New York: Avon Books, 1988). See also Ed Conroy, *Report on Communion* (New York: Avon Books, 1989); Budd Hopkins, *Missing Time* (New York: Ballantine, 1979); Hopkins, *Intruders* (New York: Ballantine, 1987).

12. For a fine introduction to UFOs, see Richard Hall, *Uninvited Guests* (Santa Fe: Aurora Press, 1988). David Barclay and Therese Marie Barclay edit a good critical study in UFOs: *The Final Answer?* (London: Blandford, 1992).
13. Counseling psychologist Leo Sprinkle helped to pioneer clinical research into the phenomenon. See James S. Gordon's sympathetic treatment of Sprinkle's work in "The UFO Experience," *The Atlantic Monthly* 268 (August, 1991): 82–92. New York state psychiatrist, Rima E. Laitow, has organized a center for the Treatment and Research of Experienced Anomalous Trauma (TREAT), which holds conferences and publishes proceedings. Toronto psychiatrist, David Gotlib, founded the *Bulletin of Anomalous Experience*. In Cambridge, John Mack founded the Program for Extraordinary Experience Research (PEER).
14. See note four above. The conference has been summarized at length by a noted journalist, C. D. Bryant in *Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind: The Abduction Conference at M.I.T.* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995).
15. John S. Carpenter, "Double Abduction Case: Correlation of Hypnosis Data," *Journal of UFO Studies*, new series, 3 (1991): 91–114. See also Carpenter, "Investigating and Correlating Simultaneous Abductions," in *Alien Discussions*, pp. 246–54.
16. Carpenter, "Double Abduction Case," p. 94.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*
23. For another study of multiple abduction, see Raymond Fowler, *The Allagash Abductions* (Tigard, Oregon: Wild Flower Press, 1993).
24. Carpenter, "Double Abduction Case," p. 101.
25. Concerning an Australian multiple abduction case involving two different cars, whose occupants did not know each other, see "An Extraordinary Encounter in the Dandenong Foothills," *International UFO Reporter*, 19, No. 5 (September/October, 1994): 4–8, 18–20. For other accounts and analyses of "alien abductions," see Edith Fiore, *Encounters* (New York: Ballantine, 1989); Karla Turner, *Into the Fringe* (New York: Berkeley Books, 1992), and *ReVision's* two special issues, "Angels, Aliens, and Archetypes," 12, No. 3 (Winter, 1989) and No. 4 (Spring, 1990).
26. Mark Woodhouse, chapter four of *Worldviews in Transition* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1995).
27. Thomas E. Bullard, *Comparative Analysis of UFO Abduction Reports* (Mt. Rainier, Maryland: Fund for UFO Research, 1987); *UFO Abductions: The Measure of a Mystery*, 2 vols. (Mt. Rainier, Maryland: Fund for UFO Research, 1987).
28. See David Jacobs, *Secret Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992).
29. Budd Hopkins, *Intruders: The Incredible Visitations at Copley Woods* (New York: Ballantine, 1987).
30. See Robert Sheaffer, "A Skeptical Perspective on UFO Abductions," *Alien Discussions*, pp. 382–88.
31. John Mack, *Abduction*.
32. In his revised edition of *Abduction* (New York: Ballantine, 1995), Mack replies to charges that the first edition did not exhibit scientific objectivity regarding the "reality" status of the phenomenon.
33. On this topic, see the insightful essays in Chapter VI: Ethics, Therapy and Investigation, in *Alien Discussions*.
34. See J.P. Wilson, "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Experienced Anomalous Trauma (EAT): Similarities in Reported UFO Abductions and Exposure to Invisible Toxic Contaminants," *Journal of UFO Studies* 2 (1990): 1–17; M. Rodeghier, M. Goodpastor, and S. Blatterbauer, "Psychosocial Characteristics of Abductees: Results from the CUFOS Abduction Project," *Journal of UFO Studies* 2 (1990): 59–98; T. A. Zimmer, "Social Psychological Correlates of Possible UFO Sightings," *The Journal of Social Psychology* 128 (19XX): 199–206.
35. John E. Mack, "Why the Abduction Phenomenon Cannot be Explained Psychiatrically," *Alien Discussions*, pp. 372–74.
36. Carpenter, "Double Abduction Case," p. 91.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
40. *Ibid.*
41. A recent study indicates that people undergoing "close encounters" with UFOs are not psychologically abnormal. See N. P. Spanos, P. A. Cross, K. Dickenson, and S. C. Dubreuil, "Close Encounters: An Examination of UFO Experiences," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 192 (4).
42. *Ibid.* Cited from Melvin A. Gravitz, "A Case of Forensic Hypnosis: Implications for Use in Investigation," in E. Thomas Dowd and James M. Healy, eds., *Case Studies in*

- Hypnotherapy* (New York: Guilford, 1986), 220. Emphasis mine.
43. Carpenter, "Double Abduction Case," p. 98.
 44. For a helpful review of these issues, see Thomas E. Bullard, "Hypnosis and UFO Abductions: A Troubled Relationship," *Journal of UFO Studies*, new series, 1 (1989): 3–40.
 45. See the papers in Chapter III: Evidence, in *Alien Discussions*.
 46. Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
 47. On the possible influence of science fiction on the experiences of abductees, see Kenneth Ring, *The Omega Project: Near-Death Experiences, UFO Encounters, and Mind at Large* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1992), pp. 207–14.
 48. Jacques Vallee, *Passport to Magonia* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1993—originally published in 1969). See also Vallee's trilogy, *Dimensions* (New York: Ballantine, 1988); *Confrontations* (New York: Ballantine, 1990); *Revelations* (New York: Ballantine, 1991).
 49. R. A. Baker, *Hidden Memories* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1992).
 50. In "Comparison of Abduction Accounts with Ritual Maltreatment," *Alien Discussions*, pp. 354–66, Gwen L. Dean examines some parallels between ritual abuse and "alien abduction."
 51. Ring, *The Omega Project*.
 52. See Woodhouse, *Worldviews in Transition*.
 53. In "Physical Evidence and Abductions," *Alien Discussions*, pp. 279–95, Abduction Study Conference co-organizer David E. Pritchard gives a terrestrial explanation for an object allegedly implanted in a person by an alien. Houston UFO Network (HUFON) investigator Derrel Sims, however, maintains that other implants are more difficult to explain in terms of known objects. See Derrel Sims and Mary Jo Florey, "Evidence for, and Implication of Medically Unexplained Implants in Abductees," currently awaiting publication.
 54. See also Keith Thompson, *Angels and Aliens: UFOs and the Mythic Imagination* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1991); Kenneth Ring, *The Omega Project* (New York: William Morrow, 1992); and Peter M. Rojcewicz, "Signals of Transcendence: The Human-UFO Equation," *Journal of UFO Studies*, new series, 1 (1989): 111–26.
 55. Woodhouse, *Worldviews in Transition*.
 56. For evidence that not all abduction experiences are horrific, see Richard J. Boylan and Lee K. Boylan, *Close Extraterrestrial Encounter: Positive Encounters with Mysterious Visitors* (Tigard, Oregon: Wild Flower Press, 1994).
 57. Notably, see Ring, *The Omega Project*.
 58. Gregory L. Little, *The Archetype Experience* (Moore Haven, Florida: Rainbow Books, 1984). See Carl G. Jung's book, *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton/Bollinger, 1978).
 59. Michael Grosso, "The Symbolism of UFO Abductions," *UFO Universe* (Fall, 1988): 44–45, 62–63; Grosso, "UFOs and the Myth of the New Age," in D. Stillings, ed., *Cyberbiological Studies of the Imaginal Component in the UFO Contact Experience* (St. Paul: Archaeus Project, 1989), pp. 81–98; Grosso, *The Final Choice* (Walpole, N.H.: Stillpoint, 1985). Grosso is one of the few professional philosophers to examine the abduction phenomenon.
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 63. John Mack, "Helping Abductees," *International UFO Reporter* 17, No. 4, pp. 10–15, 20.
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 67. Michael A. Persinger, "The Visitor Experience and the Personality: The Temporal Lobe Factor," in Stillings, *Cyberbiological Studies of the Imaginal Component in the UFO Contact Experience*; Persinger, "Neuropsychologi-

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- cal Profiles of Adults Who Report 'Sudden Remembering' of Early Childhood Memories: Implications for Claims of Sexual Abuse and Alien Visitation/Abduction Experiences." *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 75, pp. 259–66.
68. *New Scientist* No. 1952 (November 19, 1994) recently had a cover story by Susan Blackmore on Persinger's hypothesis about alien abduction.
69. See Kenneth Ring's remarks in *The Omega Project*, pp. 198–205.
70. Thanks to Mark Woodhouse for suggesting this approach.
71. For example, see Leonard S. Newman and Roy F. Baumeister, "Toward an Explanation of the UFO Abduction Phenomenon: Hypnotic Elaboration, Extraterrestrial Sado-masochism, and Spurious Memories," forthcoming in *Psychological Inquiry*.
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74. Bullard, "Epistemological Totalitarianism," p. 13. See also Bullard, "The Relationship of Abduction Reports to Folklore Narratives," in *Alien Discussions*, pp. 389–94.
75. Robert Hall, "Are Abduction Reports 'Mass Hysteria'?" in *Alien Discussions*, pp. 377–81.
76. One of the best surveys on the topic is Richard Hall's *Uninvited Guests: A Documented History of UFO Sightings, Alien Encounters, and Coverups* (Santa Fe: Aurora Press, 1988).
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78. See John Miller and Richard Neal, "Lack of Proof of Missing Embryo/Fetus Syndrome," in *Alien Discussions*, pp. 262–69.
79. Hopkins, *Intruders*; David Jacobs, *Secret Life*.
80. See Timothy Good, *Above Top Secret: The Worldwide UFO Cover-Up* (New York: Quill/William Morrow, 1988); Lawrence Fawcett and Barry J. Greenwood, *The UFO Cover-Up: What the Government Won't Say* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1984); Kevin D. Randle and Donald R. Schmitt, *UFO Crash at Roswell* (New York: Avon Books, 1991).
81. For helpful critical advice on this essay, my thanks go to Alan AtKisson, Caroline McCloud, Dale Musser, David Pellauer, and Mark Woodhouse. In an essay on this sort of topic, I am doubly obliged to emphasize that the opinions expressed herein are my own.

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