Letters to the Editor

Misidentified Flying Objects

To the Editor:

Keith Basterfield (1994) pointed out that while near-death experiencers (NDErs) have no physical evidence to show for their experience, some of those who claim to have been abducted by unidentified flying objects (UFOs) have reported unusual scars on their bodies with no known cause. Actually, some NDErs have been found to bear physical marks on their bodies that they believe to have resulted from injuries sustained in a postmortem world. For example, one experiencer reported by Satwant Pasricha and Ian Stevenson (1986), who said that the god of death Yama’s messengers cut off his legs at the knees, had deep fissures in the skin on the front of the knees. However, x-ray photographs of his legs showed no abnormality below the surface of the skin. Such instances recall the well-authenticated reproduction of bruise marks in the abreactive reliving, under hypnosis, of traumatic experiences, and are not indisputable evidence for the objectivity of the NDEs or UFO abductions.

This phenomenon, however, merits serious study because of its bearing, among other matters, on the aftereffects of NDEs. For example, if a frightening experience like the feeling that the legs were chopped off can produce appropriate marks on the skin, it is pertinent to ask whether pleasant experiences might not sometimes have healing or other beneficial effects on the state of health. There are hints in the NDE accounts of some experiencers, who were ill before their near-death crisis, having felt better or having been cured on recovery from the crisis (Krishnan, 1995). Future investigators would do well to verify such claims of healing and try to find out the underlying mechanisms, which could have practical applications.

Fowler Jones seems to approve of Michael Schuster’s view that “the origins of physical reality lie in the nonphysical worlds” (Jones, 1994, p. 236). What exactly is meant by the word “nonphysical”? Few, if any, who use it care to explain. To say that a nonphysical entity has none of the qualities of a physical object, that it is an entirely
different order of reality, is no help at all; examples of nonphysical items should be named and proved to exist. Assuming for the present that there is such a thing as a “nonphysical world,” as Schuster proposed, how can it give rise to another order of reality of stuff—the physical—that has absolutely nothing in common with it? This is not a matter of qualitative or irreversible change; though a piece of paper, when burned, turns into ashes irreversibly, both the paper and the ashes are still the same order of stuff, usually called matter. Where would a “nonphysical” world exist? How can we verify whether or not it exists? Do those who invoke a nonphysical order know all the properties of the physical order, so they can judge that the latter cannot account for the phenomena they attribute to the former? These are but a few of the numerous questions that dualists have so far not been able to answer.

I suggest considering whether a dualist approach is necessary to understand any phenomenon known to us. Something cannot be made, or emerge, from nothing. (By “nothing” I mean “absolute emptiness,” not just empty space, which, according to physics as well as Hindu and Buddhist traditions, is a plenum.) It is also a fact that no object, not even a single subatomic entity, can be wiped out of existence. Whatever the process to which a thing is subjected, it will only undergo transformation in various respects; the physicist would say that matter is indestructible. It follows from these facts that everything that exists now came from pre-existing stuff or materials; things existing now will be the basis of entities that may come into being in the future; and birth, growth, decay, and death are our descriptions of certain aspects of the continuous process of change. It may be asked what causes the ceaseless change. It is not necessary here to go into the answers attempted in various branches of inquiry such as metaphysics, physics, chemistry, etc.; the important point to note is that the cause cannot be of an order of reality different from that of the things that undergo change. This is so because there cannot be any interaction between orders or entities that have nothing in common; if they have anything in common, obviously, they cannot be said to be of different orders. In short, the universe is monistic, and it should be possible to explain all phenomena related to its constituents in terms of a single order of reality. What we call it—matter or something else—is immaterial, for the criteria for making such classifications are laid down by us and are not unalterable. The concept of matter in dialectical materialism, for example, extends...
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...to all discovered and not yet discovered objects as well as their prop-
erties (Gribanov, 1987).

The above view of the universe is not my original formulation; it is
largely based on some of the ancient Indian speculations about it. As I see it,
physicists are trying to restate it in greater detail and more precision in the language of physics with the support of experi-
mental proof.

Regarding the proposal, cited by Jones (1994), that consciousness
can influence matter, again we are not told what precisely its pro-
ponents mean by the word "consciousness." If they mean that con-
sciousness is some kind of stuff in its own right capable of acting
directly on an object, then the usage is questionable. The dictionary
definition of the word "consciousness" is "a state of being conscious"
or "awareness." It is advisable to adhere to this meaning to avoid
confusion. What is sought to be conveyed, I think, is that thoughts,
feelings, and such subjective phenomena, commonly called mental
phenomena, can produce observable or measurable effects not only
in the body but also on objects at a distance from it. Effects of the
first kind, such as increased heart rate while angry, are not difficult
to understand if we do not forget the fact, pointed out by Jack Orn-
stein (1972), that mental phenomena and accompanying physiological
effects are different aspects of certain patterns of electrochemical ac-
tivity in the brain.

As for effects on objects outside the body, the so-called psychoki-
netic effects that Stuart Twemlow mentioned (1994), it is useful to
bear in mind that since physical objects are influenced, whatever me-
diates the influence must have something in common with them.
That is, the mediator must also be physical in nature and therefore
amenable to empirical investigation.

Jones asked how out-of-body experiencers (OBErs) can make ac-
curate reports of events in their vicinity if the experience is only a
defense mechanism in the service of the ego. There seems to be more
to the OBE than is suggested by the psychoanalytic view, and I have
proposed that it may be a compensatory device involving body-based
perceptual processes that come into operation when the input of in-
formation to the brain deviates from the level normal for the exper-
iencer (Krishnan, 1985). I have also indicated some ways to
investigate the underlying mechanism of out-of-body sight (Krishnan,

Lastly, those who are inclined to a psychological interpretation of
UFO sighting may be interested to read Carl Jung's (1964) views...
about the phenomenon. It came as a surprise to me that they were not even touched on in any of the discussions of Twemlow’s paper. Jung also mentioned the case of a person who claimed to have boarded a UFO willingly and went for a flight through cosmic space. On returning he felt a burning sensation on his chest, which left a circular stigma. The experience was pleasant otherwise.

References


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