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BOOK REVIEWS

The UFO Enigma: A New Review of the Physical Evidence by Peter A. Sturrock. New York: Warner Books, 1999. 404 pp. $23.95. ISBN 0-446-52565-0.

Are UFOs *real?* What a silly question that is! UFOs are at least as real as unicorns, and maybe as real as protons. (Now, don't ask me whether protons are real!) Everyone knows what a unicorn is, but as far as I know—which isn't very far—even in our Society there are no claims that there are, or even were, actually existing unicorns anywhere. But UFOs are another story; there is no question at all that they are real. Unidentified Flying Objects. They are deeply ingrained in the common culture, and images of their supposed occupants are everywhere. Indeed, Unidentified Flying Objects have been companions of humans for probably as long as dogs. Phil Klass makes money off of them! It doesn't get more real than that.

But are they visitors from extraterrestrial civilizations? That is another question. And it is a question like no other! It is a question that has intrigued me since I was a graduate student at Princeton in the 1960s. What appealed to me about it then, and what appeals to me about it now, is that with no violation of scientific laws whatsoever, we are placed in a position where the impossible is possible. That is a direct consequence of the simple point, made most eloquently by Sir Arthur C. Clarke, that sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. If there are civilizations out there in our galaxy, then those civilizations are hundreds of millions of years in advance of our own, and their technology will be such that we are entirely at their mercy: They can run rings around us. And furthermore, if they exist at all, they should be here. A no-brainer. And furthermore, it is hard to believe that they don't exist, although equally clearly that is possible.

Once I realized all of that, I was hooked. The situation was (and is) an intellectual delight. Totally impossible to disprove, yet entirely possible from a scientific perspective. As I have gotten older, I have gotten more interested in UFOs, and my views on the likelihood of their "actual" reality have changed. I have realized more and more deeply that while the conservative position scientifically is of course that they should be assumed to be *not* extraterrestrial visitors—and that extraordinary claims *do* require extraordinary proofs—the *conservative* position, culturally and militarily, is that UFOs *probably are* actually extraterrestrial visitors, and that we would be well advised to assume that they do not wish us well. Any other opinion is liberal foolishness.

So, what do we do next? Well, all the while that I have been having my self-indulgent intellectual fun, Professor Peter A. Sturrock, in contrast, has been

walking the walk. He has proceeded, behaving as the quintessential scientist, and has actually started a journal—the present one, of course—to allow people to treat UFOs (and other non-standard phenomena) via the standard scientific method. Now it may be true—in fact I think it is—that the standard scientific method is not applicable to phenomena such as UFOs, but the fact remains that it is the best tool that we have for systematic inquiry of any kind, and we are better off using it, rather than instead, say, just sitting back and enjoying intellectual games, as I have admitted is unfortunately my own predilection.

But Peter Sturrock has taken other steps as well, always staying within the strict confines of ordinary, mundane, scientific procedure. He long ago took a poll of members of the American Astronomical Society as to their views on UFOs (with surprising results, which are briefly reviewed in the present volume). And he engineered a study of the UFO physical evidence, with a view to determining the nature of UFOs. It is this most recent activity that forms the focus of the book that I review.

Sturrock caused a panel to be formed (with the help of the sponsorship of Laurance S. Rockefeller, who provides a brief foreword to the book), before which some of the physical evidence regarding UFOs was exhibited over a period of days in 1997. The panel was composed of nine distinguished scientists who did not have extensive prior involvement with UFOs.

The panel concluded that if evidence of extraordinary things is examined and considered, there is the possibility that new scientific knowledge will result. And Sturrock points to that conclusion as the success of the panel's work. And it *is* a success, because generally such evidence has *not* been examined and considered in the past. For example, today scientists under NSF sponsorship scour Antarctica for meteorites from Mars, while in Thomas Jefferson's time, scientists declined to look at stones that were alleged to have fallen from the sky (of all absurd things!).

Some panel members drew an important contrast between UFOs (not respectable, let's face it) and SETI (the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence), which is now widely regarded as a highly respectable activity for the professional scientist. In the case of UFOs, the researchers are usually dedicated amateurs; in the case of SETI, they are overwhelmingly professional astronomers. Those panel members implied that UFO research should be professionalized. To do that takes money. How did that (the appearance of money) occur with SETI, which not so long ago was widely regarded as being in much the same category as is UFO research today? Well, not through federal funding! I myself had the pleasure of visiting Capitol Hill, back when I was Deputy Director of NASA's Astrophysics Division, to report to Senator Proxmire's aide in anticipation of the award (which duly followed), of the Golden Fleece to NASA's proposed SETI program. Federal funding, despite this, did occur for a while, but then ceased. Private funding supervened, and continues today.

I expect that private funding for full-blown UFO research would be quite possible, viewed simply financially. The money is there. I suspect that what

we have here is a classic chicken-and-egg situation. Private donors do not want to be regarded as suckers, providing the wherewithal such that hobbyists can gallivant around the country "interviewing witnesses." On the other hand, I suspect that if a truly professional effort to elucidate UFOs could be mounted and run in a disciplined and coherent fashion, the funding would be there to sustain it. And the effort would not demand rapid success, any more than the failure of SETI, thus far, to return the prize, has dampened *that* effort. No, it would merely demand clear professionalism, fiscal transparency, and a coherent plan. *Such an effort would be a wise activity for the human race to undertake.*

Wise, because we are so young. Wise, because it is a *conservative* policy. Wise because we need to know all we can about who we are and what is going on. I am sometimes almost terrified at the utter naiveté of *us;* you, me, and all those others, our happy little gang of six billion nitwits. We are so self-assured in our petty knowledge. We always know, of course, that we were wrong *before,* but are sure that we are not wrong *now.* Again, the *conservative* tack is to assume that we are dead wrong about all of our fundamental assumptions until proven otherwise. Inexpensive insurance policies, such as mapping the tracks of the Earth-crossing asteroids, and relentlessly tracking down bizarre stories of aliens, should be a very high priority, if only because such efforts are so inexpensive compared with the potential consequences of *not* doing them. Insurance is cheap; in contrast, failure to pay small insurance premiums can be, sometimes, utterly deadly.

Should you buy this book? No. Members of the general public should buy this book, and scientists who know nothing of UFOs should certainly buy this book, but subscribers to the present journal probably do not need to buy, or even to read, this book. That of course follows from the nature of the book, which describes a presentation of old evidence to naïve scientists, and which does a few other things, including yet another rehash of the profoundly flawed Condon report on UFOs. Probably most readers of this journal are already thoroughly familiar with most of the material presented, and will not be surprised at the scientists' reception of it. Did I learn anything myself through reading this book? Actually, one thing that did strike me rather forcibly: I quote, "After twenty-one years of activity, the GEPAN/SEPRA files now contain about 3,000 UFO reports supplied by the gendarmerie. About 100 of these reports were found to justify specific investigations. Of this number, only a few cases remain unexplained today." This long-term and serious French effort impressed members of the panel, and it impresses me, as perhaps the most professional effort ever undertaken to treat UFOs seriously. If the result ended up so thin, why should I continue to be interested in the subject? I would have appreciated more detail on how few is few, and on how solid those few are.

The second half of the book contains some of the "Case Material" that was presented to the panel, including GEPAN/SEPRA material, and this material does reassure me that there is indeed a mystery. I do not know the answer to UFOs, but it is clear that one should not simply dismiss them. I conclude that

Professor Peter A. Sturrock has performed a signal service in creating the review panel and in preparing this book.

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The UFO Enigma: A New Review of the Physical Evidence by Peter A. Sturrock.

This valuable overview of the technical aspects of UFO investigation and debate (historically the two words are all but synonymous) grows out of a conference held at the Pocantico Conference Center in Tarrytown, New York, from September 29 to October 3, 1997, and a follow-up, smaller gathering between November 27 and 30 in San Francisco. In the first, scientifically trained UFO proponents presented their case to a panel of skeptical but curious scientists. An initially tense confrontation gave way to a degree of mutual understanding and, a month and a half later when the panel met without the ufologists, a cautiously worded public statement endorsing further scientific research and—perhaps most interestingly—explicitly (albeit briefly) criticizing Edward U. Condon (of the 1966–69 Air Force–sponsored University of Colorado UFO Project) and his infamous conclusion that "further extensive study of UFOs probably cannot be justified in the expectation that science will be advanced thereby."

When the statement was released to news media, the result was a burst of surprisingly positive coverage (for example a front-page story in the *Washington Post*). Perhaps unprepared for the attendant publicity and controversy, those panel members who consented to interviews subtly or not so subtly hastened to distance themselves from the subject and effectively to deny that they had said anything of consequence. By the time the affair had run its course, UFOs remained where they were to start with: out in a wilderness toward which, as far as elite opinion is concerned, only fools would rush. It will be left to a later generation of scientists to do the collective head-shaking about how a question of such manifest interest and potential importance engaged so very few scientists of the latter twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Fortunately, this book, with its useful summaries of evidential cases and attendant evidence, will remain to enlighten those who will take up the finally unavoidable discipline of UFO science—no doubt, sad to say, long after all who participated in the two conferences are gone.

Neglect of the UFO phenomenon by science probably owes as much to the late Harvard astronomer Donald H. Menzel (1901–1976) as to any other single individual. Menzel became the first major American scientist not only to express a firm, consistent, relentlessly negative opinion of "flying saucers" but to devote a whole book (with the imprint of a major university press [Harvard]