

Probable Human Reactions to Extraterrestrial Encounter

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Abstract

What we understand of human psychology points to our race's tendency to project its unacknowledged or denied qualities and its un-lived impulses and fantasies upon the unknown. The persuasive power of projection must be taken into account if we are to anticipate how mankind would likely respond – both individually and collectively – to contact with extraterrestrial intelligence (hereafter referred to as ETI).

Key Words: extraterrestrial intelligence, Drake Equation, ETI

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Introduction

The psychological dynamic involving the discovery of ETI can be further explored if one examines how projections differ amongst those who feel alienated by modern society as opposed to those who derive fulfillment and a sense of satisfaction from the status quo. The former will be more likely to romanticize ETI, projecting their longing for a freer existence and perhaps for a world unburdened by the mass problems that currently plague us. The latter, being more emotionally invested in the existing social order, are more likely to feel threatened by any influences that might disrupt it.

What the Past Can Tell Us

Taking into consideration the ways in which human beings have reacted to various cultural upheavals in the past, we can anticipate the psychic and social disturbances – both potentially creative and potentially destructive – that would likely be provoked by a broad-scale ETI encounter. The process of assimilation would have to take place within our species as our values, beliefs, longings, and fears are examined and transformed in the face of our new cosmic situation. Reactions could range from loving acceptance, optimism, and excitement to distrust and violence, depending upon the individual choices that humanity makes during this tumultuous integration process.

Many people insist that it would be absurd to suppose that our planet is the sole bastion and nurturer of conscious life in the universe. In 1961, astronomer and astrophysicist Dr. Frank Drake devised *the Drake Equation* - which has since been expanded upon – to calculate the probable number of planets in our universe that are capable of sustaining not only life but also communicative civilizations. Drake estimated that there were at least 10,000 such worlds. Others have sought evidence in the ancient world, citing the scientific and architectural marvels of vanished civilizations that (according to our particular modern understanding) should not have been possible for the peoples of those times. We can't explain or account for the great pyramids in Egypt, for example, or for some of the peculiar metallurgy, mathematics, and architecture employed by other cultures that existed during roughly the same historical period.

Some scientists and archaeologists have hypothesized that such anomalies are the handiwork of alien races. Writers such as Zecharia Sitchin, with his *Earth Chronicles* series, which began with *The Twelfth Planet*, have further backed up this view by citing ancient documents (including certain books of the Old Testament) that contain what seem to be elaborate descriptions of extraterrestrial technology. Ezekiel's wheel of fire in the sky is one such example.

The people who created such inexplicable wonders may have employed abilities, understanding, and systems of belief so foreign to our way of reckoning that we may as well consider them alien. After all, we can translate writings from ancient days and decipher names, customs, and events of historical significance from the clues that they give us, but we cannot know how these people *thought*. A simple word like "sun" has a different set of particular connotations for one person than it does for another, even if the two people are contemporaries. We can use the same words,

but we're never communicating *precisely* the same concepts. How much bigger might this discrepancy be when we're considering representatives of cultures that disappeared thousands of years ago?

Our world is rife with mystery, regardless of whether or not it was ever visited upon by ETI from other physical worlds. Our system of science cannot account for space travel in any kind of practical way because even the speed of light can't deliver us to most other galaxies within our lifetimes. Yet many people believe that ETI may possess the means to bridge the unfathomable gulfs of space.

Such a conviction begs this question: How we would react – individually and collectively – if we were ever to communicate with such beings? Such an encounter would provoke drastic upheavals within the collective human psyche. Our conception of ourselves, and our place in the universe, would be forced to evolve dramatically in order to assimilate such an unprecedented event. We must therefore examine this hypothetical situation from several angles to gauge the myriad levels of reaction that would likely occur. A good place to start is within the realm of human psychology.

Projection and the Shadow

“[The] shadow... is a product of the split which comes about through establishing a center of awareness.... It approximately coincides with what has been regarded as the unconscious...namely, elements repressed from consciousness” (Whitmont, 1991, p. 15).

Edward Whitmont, a former founding member and chairman at the C. G. Jung Training Center in New York, elaborated greatly upon Carl Jung's exploration of the unconscious and its darker undercurrents. *Projection*, a psychological theory first developed by Sigmund Freud, refers to how people can be blind to – or deny - certain aspects of themselves and mistakenly attribute those qualities to others. This concept aids us in understanding encounters between strangers who have little real knowledge of each other – particularly humans and ETI.

Swiss psychologist Carl Jung coined the term *shadow* to denote those unacknowledged qualities and impulses. Jung maintained that there are two types of shadow projection: the personal and the collective. Personal shadow projection occurs when individuals mistakenly perceive their own unconscious and un-lived lives in others. The collective shadow is a projection of the collective unconscious upon an entire group of people. This is the psychological mechanism that often underlies humanity's wars. The concept of projection implies that we'd be prone to envision ETI as possessing those traits and tendencies that we're unaware of in ourselves.

These can be positive attributes, such as untapped mental abilities and psychic capacities. The Western mind cuts itself off from much of the magic and mystery of existence –opting for a highly rational world-view - and then, paradoxically, grasps for what it lost (the New Age movement being one example of such a counter-reaction). Our definitions of “reality” and “unreality” are narrow, casting distrust and superstition upon abilities within our race that are not only natural but also advantageous if given due respect. These can include telepathy, precognition, clairvoyance, out-of-body experiences, and nearly any kind of deepened/ altered/

ecstatic state of consciousness that one can experience. Many people are afraid to admit that such perceptions are a part of their normal lives. In the popular imagination, these traits have often been attributed to extraterrestrials.

Negative, unknown aspects of ourselves that we're likely to project upon ETI could include repressed aggressions and any socially unacceptable impulses that we may experience, but fear acting upon or even admitting to. Whatever it is that exists inside us and beneath our awareness will color our reactions to any encounter with hitherto unknown forms of life. This is how entire populations, possessing little real knowledge of one another, can become implacable enemies. Shadow projection fuels racial, religious, and ethnic hatred – and xenophobia. A person who is convinced that his or her group is superior to another one is caught up in shadow projection.

We are, therefore, psychologically predisposed to both deify and demonize the extraterrestrial; and our various reactions to contact with ETI would likely vacillate dramatically between the poles of love and fear.

Choosing Between Love and Fear

“Every moment of your life you are offered the opportunity to choose – Love or fear, to tread the earth or to soar the heavens... Why would fear want to oppose truth? Because truth has the power to transform fear, fear believes it is fighting for its life” (Rodegast, 1989, p. 4-5).

Love and fear, according to the channeled entity “Emmanuel,” are the two main poles of the human experience here on Earth. As souls, we come from a place of perfect love, and then choose, as a grand adventure, to enter into a camouflage system of reality where love seems to be absent. In the face of this seeming loss, we feel fear.

Facing into the dark regions of the psyche is a crucial part of growing up if we're to feel our real strength, completeness, and sense of identity. This is a rite of passage that people have to work out for themselves. The culture into which we're born warns us not to open that door in the floor. The road is bound to be risky because we have no one to guide us. Even our own beliefs may tell us that the journey is perilous, if not suicidal.

Maybe the unknown, the unconscious, is not really dark, but instead luminous. If we were to discover this, then what we found would no longer be *unknown*, but rather would become a part of the *known*. It would be assimilated. Collectively, we have done this throughout our history as new landscapes, cultures, species of life, and scientific insights have been discovered and eventually accepted into our typical ways of thinking. Individually, this is a big part of growing up, of individuation, of maturing.

Our collective psychological predilection makes any possible encounter with ETIs a very delicate situation. Those among us who might wish to manipulate such a moment to our advantage would have a lot of underlying collective fear with which to work.

That such manipulation has already occurred is a conviction that dominates much of our folklore regarding encounters with ETIs. On December 26, 1980, in Bentwaters, England, landed alien craft was allegedly witnessed and then touched and sketched by three U.S. Air Force personnel. These individuals were thereafter told not to speak of what they had seen. More than 800 eyewitnesses in Phoenix, Arizona beheld a string of giant spherical lights in the sky the night of March 14, 1997. This event created tumult within the community – and the press – that bordered on hysteria.

Probably the most popular story relates to a crashed disk in Roswell, NM. This incident, along with so many others, vanished into the information limbo that surrounds the most highly classified subject in the U.S. – UFOs. Despite all the eyewitness accounts, often offered up by people who hold respected places in society, these incidents have typically been explained away as weather balloons, misidentified aircraft, atmospheric phenomenon, light aberrations, or swamp gas (the landed craft in Bentwaters was dismissed as a lighthouse flash).

Those Who Feel Alienated Are Prone to Romanticize

“People who feel that their lives lack sufficient meaning may imbue the message [from ETI] with meaning, hoping that the senders are benevolent, or that their message might provide comfort and wisdom. . . more alienated individuals from both countries [USA and China] were more likely to see ETI as being malevolent. But for the Chinese participants, there is also an indication that alienated individuals may look to ETI for a sense of meaning that they are currently lacking” (Vakoch and Lee, 2000, p. 738, 741).

Many people fantasize about extraterrestrial contact from a place of frustration and need. The reasoning goes like this: If such beings are more highly evolved than we are, then they have probably already grappled with – and surmounted – the difficulties that plague us in our present world situation. Surely they could point the way out for us?

Vakoch and Lee (2000) concluded that, of the people involved in their study group, those most inclined to view extraterrestrial encounters as benevolent and beneficial were those who felt particularly alienated by normal society. For someone profoundly dissatisfied with the status quo, it's tempting to think of any kind of sweeping change as being a harbinger of happier and freer times ahead. As Carl Jung stated in *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, “About a third of my cases are suffering from no clinically definable neurosis, but from the senselessness and emptiness of their lives. It seems to me, however, that this can well be described as the general neurosis of our time” (1933, p. 62).

Contrarily, those who thrive within the status quo are more deeply invested in it and, therefore, are bound to feel threatened by any developments that disturb it. Such people would be most wary of extraterrestrial encounters, and also have the most to gain from controlling and/or manipulating such a scenario if it did, in fact, develop.

How do individuals react when their sense of reality is not supported - or even recognized - by the status quo? One reason why there is such enduring speculation and interest surrounding UFO phenomenon is that many people are aware - more often than not, on a subliminal level - that we

share Creation with many more varieties of conscious life than the ones that our physical senses, our instruments, and our schools of scientific thought have revealed to us.

Why Are We Looking for Them?

It's probably wise first to ask: Why are we searching? Do we hope to commune with extraterrestrial life from a place of dependence and need, hoping that they'll have the answers to the problems that plague our race - those problems that sometimes seem beyond our ability to cope with? Or, is it our desire to share with them from a place of knowing ourselves and what we have to offer, in a symbiotic sort of give-and-take? In other words, is this encounter going to be reciprocal? After all, this would be a relationship; and relationships can be founded on dependency or they can be founded upon the desire to share from a place of understanding and for the sake of mutual benefit.

“...[W]e would expect anthropocentric individuals to be more skeptical about the existence of ETI, because this would demonstrate that humankind is, in certain respects, not unique and does not occupy a privileged place in the universe” (Vakoch and Lee, 2000, p. 738).

Our center of awareness has been, for most of humanity and for much of our history, *anthropocentric*. We form our ideas about the world and the greater cosmos based upon our understanding of ourselves. For this reason, we long believed that our Earth was the center of the solar system until scientists like Nicolaus Copernicus proved this theory false during the Renaissance.

During less civilized eras of our Earth's history, tribal peoples projected upon other tribes living outside their boundaries, often existing in perpetual wariness of these “strangers.” Projection came to the fore as cultures commingled in the New World during the Age of Discovery. Throughout the golden age of the American West, the frontier was a powerful symbol of the unknown (the unconscious) within the collective psyche. Meriwether Lewis' journals immortalize the famous Lewis and Clark expedition to the Pacific Ocean and back from 1803-1806 (Lewis, 1997). What emerges in the pages of Lewis' account is a sense of awe in the face of new environments, the surprise and wonder accompanying his early contact with natives of the land, fears for their personal safety, the desire for personal profit and a certain homesickness (Lewis, 1997). A similarly multi-faceted picture is evoked by Francis Parkman's *The Oregon Trail*. Within its pages, two cultures collide, each viewing the other as alien, and reactions spread across the full spectrum of human emotion: Attraction, fear, wariness, excitement, greed, violence, etc. (2010).

If history is a reliable teacher, we may experience our own personal versions of all of these reactions in the event that our race establishes contact with extraterrestrials. The disruption of our anthropocentric worldview would evoke both wonder and fear. Excitement in the face of the unknown would be balanced by personal trepidation. We would anticipate what we might stand to gain from such a relationship while at the same time longing for life as it had been before.

Eventually, the frontier lands were explored and the mystery surrounding them evaporated. Henceforth, mankind would require new fields for its imaginative projections. It's revealing that science fiction first became prominent during the early to middle decades of the twentieth century, just as our technological progress – particularly, our means of communication and new forms of evolving media – was making our world seem like one big village. The collective imagination began to seed its fantasies in deep space, and upon worlds beyond our own. The *alien* became the new recipient of mass projection.

This was made frightfully evident during the famous airing of Orson Welles' reading of H.G. Well's *War of the Worlds*. On Sunday, October 30, 1938, millions of radio listeners were shocked by what they mistook for radio news alerts announcing a Martian invasion. The dramatization of the Martians' ferocious assault upon Earth created pandemonium. Many people were hysterical, believing that the end was nigh.

Progressing Beyond the Anthropocentric View

“Fundamental to dismantling anthropocentrism is to acknowledge that we humans are part of a web of life, rather than superior to it. ... As psychotherapists, we are still entirely concerned with human relationships, not acknowledging the part that the other-than-human world may play in our lives” (Rust, 2004, pg. 4).

Modern society's tendency towards anthropocentrism – viewing the manifest world in human terms and judging experience according to human values - has created a strange dichotomy within us with regards to any encounters that we may have with the *exotic*. To the extent to which we *identify* with anthropocentric thinking, we fear change – particularly, any brush with the unknown. On the other hand, the suffering and distress that this particular philosophy has wrought for us has made many of us long for precisely those kinds of encounters. If the *known* approaches have failed to solve our problems, on both personal and global levels, then perhaps our salvation may come from the *unknown*.

The question of identity is never settled and finished for any of us. We are in a state of constant flux, not only on an individual level, but also as a society. The more attached we remain to our self-image, to our own conceptions of identity, the more fear and suffering will be provoked by this evolutionary process. Throughout history, cultures that failed to adapt and assimilate new concepts inevitably fell by the wayside. The Roman Empire is a notable example.

In the modern day, we live in the aftermath of the major New Age/shamanic/metaphysical revival of the 20th century and of serious revamping of many branches of organized religion (in their attempts to keep up with science - which itself can be seen as a form of religion). Perhaps more people experience *spiritual thirst* than at any time in history. The crises that we're facing as a species are inspiring us to question the larger entities of existence and to seek answers.

Many people dream of a planet-wide spiritual awakening, or some similar phenomenon. Aside from this, there is the popular conviction that human activity cannot go on in its business-as-usual way for much longer.

To be "a seeker" of any sort implies that something is missing from one's life, something that must be sought. To be a spiritual seeker implies that one's surroundings do not, to some extent or another, nourish one's soul. And so, whatever it is that might fill the holes must be quested after. The event of communication with ETI would become a focal point for this collective human quest, bringing to the fore both our most cherished hopes and our darkest fears regarding where we stand at this crucial point in our evolution.

“Alien” Consciousness Different From Our Own

“Now dolphins deal with an entirely different dimension of reality. There is as yet no method of communication that can allow you to perceive their concepts of selfhood, or their vision of existence. They are sensitive, self-aware individuals... They are not higher or lower than your own species. They simply represent a different kind of selfhood” (Roberts, 1979, p. 531).

Anthropocentrism encourages us to interpret any phenomenon we experience in terms of our own motives, values, and ways of thinking. For instance, mankind typically envisions ETI as being very technologically advanced and adept because modern man has chosen to focus upon this path. Nonetheless, anomalies persist even in our known world. Some examples include dolphins, whales, and elephants, whose keen intelligence cannot be disputed even though it isn't expressed in such manifestations as skyscrapers, nuclear energy, or computer technology. These creatures are involved in adventures of consciousness that differ greatly from our own.

How invested are we in the notion that the *form* and *focus* of ETI consciousness must resemble our own? The research cited so far suggests that encounters with extraterrestrial life would be mutually beneficial to the extent to which we prove able to shed our anthropocentric center of reasoning while allowing unfamiliar life forms to express themselves in their own idioms.

“A human being is part of the whole, called by us ‘universe,’ limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest - a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a prison, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons close to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from our prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all humanity and the whole of nature in its beauty” (Einstein, 1950).

Conclusions

In the event of contact with ETI, the crucial challenge for us would be to widen the “circle of compassion” that Einstein wrote about to encompass extraterrestrial life and intelligence and to welcome it into our conception of “the whole of nature.” Feelings of superiority (anthropocentrism) or inferiority (alienation) would muddle and confound any fruits of that communication and probably rob us of its potential benefit.

We would each have to rise to such an occasion with something akin to heroism. This would require us to be self-aware, and to resist the temptation to lose ourselves in those unconscious forces that have swept humanity away in past ages (such as during the Salem witch trials, or the

rise of the Third Reich). Considering both the evidence of humanity's past and our psychological attitudes towards the unknown, we can expect that contact with ETI on a mass scale would provoke considerable mental and emotional unrest. The intensity of individual reactions would then feed into upheaval on the collective level.

Whether this upheaval ultimately proves destructive or creative depends upon the critical mass generated by our individual choices. If the greater part of humanity succumbs to the darker side of projection – the same fear and distrust of the unknown that fuels racism, sexism, and other social ills – then resistance, suppression of the truth, and even violent reactions will likely occur. Even if conflicts are averted, communication with ETI would likely be manipulated by political powers for personal gain, rather than for the common good of mankind. To the extent to which we overcome our history of anthropocentrism and exercise mental flexibility as we work to redefine ourselves, and our place in the universe, a relationship with a highly evolved extraterrestrial species could be advantageous on every level of human endeavor. It may teach us to share the cosmos, just as we are now learning to share the Earth.

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