

## Notes on Pseudo-Skepticism

I have just been reading Fredrick Malstrom's *Close Encounters of the Facial Kind: Are UFO Alien Faces an Inborn Facial Recognition Template?* Malstrom suggests that the big-eyed, featureless faces of the “grey aliens” and “little green men” are in fact recovered memories of mothers' faces. He employs Fourier transforms to demonstrate how an infant's visual processing might distort a happy maternal face into a grey alien: surely a usage that old Joe Fourier had not anticipated.

This sort of speculation is harmless enough, and undoubtedly has some value as a sort of prolonged brainstorming exercise. But it seems a little odd that it was published in *Skeptical Magazine*. After all, Malstrom is only a skeptic in the sense that he casts doubt on the fact that people have *met space aliens*, which seems like a pretty low admission fee. Aside from that point, Malstrom spends his article building up a new theory which we would be correct to view skeptically. There is an implied false dilemma: *if not space aliens, then inborn facial recognition templates*. Moreover, there is a strong sense that Malstrom's audience (starting with the editors of *Skeptical Magazine*) are apt to give the new idea little scrutiny, because the emotional focus is on trashing the old idea.

This reminds me of enough comparable situations that I'd like to propose a term for it: pseudo-skepticism. Numerous similar examples abound, indeed, they seem toglom onto any episode that involves the supernatural or the extraordinary. Quite often they reach a low degree of scientific publication, and since such studies are usually too vacuous to refute, they get to hold on to that scientific imprimatur uncontested. There are, for instance, three different papers published suggesting the disease cutaneous porphyria as an explanation for vampires (also werewolves), and other papers suggesting that the real culprit is tuberculosis or rabies. Linda Caporael blamed the witchcraft and/or witch trails at Salem on ergotism, which has also been suggested as a culprit for various other supernatural manifestations. *Science* saw fit to publish Caporael, giving her the top tier of scientific credibility.

Even a brief litany of this sort suggests some of the problems with this type of reasoning. Grade school children can easily discriminate between vampires and werewolves, so it seems implausible that there is a skin disease that could be capable of “causing” either or both those conditions. Moreover, there are questions of under- and over-determination. Cutaneous porphyria might make people light-sensitive, but it doesn't make you grow fangs, suck blood, or rise from the dead, all of which are signally associated with vampires. On the other hand, tuberculosis is one of the most widespread diseases in history, infecting some 80% of Europeans in the 1800s. It seems odd that anyone would arrive at the differential diagnosis of vampirism when consumption was so well-known.

If we pull on these loose strings, they unravel further.

We note first that pseudoskepticism usually focuses on a *single* exotic or supernatural element, and attempts to explain it in naturalistic terms. Malstrom is focused on the extraordinary appearance of grey aliens; he makes no mention of the UFOs themselves, or the various other elements of abductee's stories, including implants, messages, lost time or time travel, and the like. Similarly, vampirism and lycanthropy have been reduced to skin conditions. John Ferriar's influential 1819 essay on ghosts explains them as optical illusions, although *most* ghosts are described as making noises and moving objects, and many ghosts do those things without having any visible component.

To be sure, from these monomaniacal beginnings, people can build up a sort of Rube Goldberg explanation. For instance, vampires might have been people who had both porphyria *and* rabies: the porphyria made them light-sensitive and the rabies made them go around biting people.

By this point, if not sooner, pseudo-skepticism begins to play fast and loose with the facts of its own explanatory narrative. People with rabies, for instance, do not actually go around biting other people. For that matter, people with porphyria are not covered with fur. I have a copy of the *Handbook of Poisoning* beside my dinner table for some reason, and it lists the clinical findings of acute ergot poisoning:

*Vomiting, diarrhea; dizziness; rise or fall of blood pressure; slow, weak pulse; dyspnea; convulsions; loss of consciousness. The dose necessary to produce abortion may cause fatal poisoning. Bromocriptine [a derivative] causes nausea, headache, dizziness, fatigue, hypertension, pulmonary infiltration, pleural effusion, and thickening of the pleura.*

...none of which sounds to me like it could be mistaken for witchcraft. Notably, the *Handbook* does not even mention visual hallucinations, which are the go-to role for ergot in pseudoskeptical explanations.

Once we start going down this road, we quickly notice something else. The version of the supernatural phenomenon that pseudoskeptics set out to explain is *also* often incorrect, in terms of its narrative provenance. To take an example that is currently live on Wikipedia: the Porphyria article suggests the Vlad II (father of Vlad the impaler, supposedly the inspiration for Dracula) had porphyria. In the first place, there's no evidence for that claim: clearly, someone is creating new facts to suit their chosen narrative. But even more interestingly, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* isn't averse to sunlight, nor are many of the vampires in Eastern European legends. The idea that vampires can't go outside in daylight didn't become a stock attribute of the vampire mythos until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thus the supposed connection of Vlad Dracul's supposed vampirism with his supposed skin condition makes no sense whatsoever. It is just a self-referential fiction, *all invented in the name of skepticism and rationality*.

Again, if we bother to look at the facts of the Salem witch trials, which are much better recorded than many other supernatural events, it is difficult to even discern what we moderns are supposed to explain. The exotic element, which is the target of pseudoskepticism, is that many of the persons involved in the trial confessed to having witnessed supernatural events, including transformations and the like.

All we really need to know here is that the confessions occurred after torture or under threat of torture, and they were confessions of activities that the people involved believed to be possible. In a sense, there is nothing left to explain: it is well known that people will make up crazy-sounding stories to avoid or end torture. Today it would be a terrorist cell, in 1692 it was a coven of witches.

But let's keep going. Salem in 1692 was a Talibanesque compound carving out a niche in hostile territory, but it was not *just* that. It was also a town dealing with an intense, bloody internal feud between the Putnam and Porter families. It was also a town in a war zone, which is rarely mentioned. Father Baudoin's War (King William's War) had been going on for four years when the trial started, with Indian raids throughout the region. Hertel had led his men down from Quebec to within spitting distance of Salem. Into this mix, add a black-or-maybe-Indian slave woman, Tituba, who almost certainly practiced magic and probably was engaged by local women in that capacity. Add to that a distinct sexual component to Tituba's magic, in a culture that treated any hint of sexuality as kryptonite. Add to that a theocratic judicial system that was fail-deadly, since the best way to minimize the damage from an accusation was to accuse more people. Together, these conditions seem like a perfect storm for a social meltdown along the lines of the witch trials. Even if ergot *could* cause hallucinations, and even if there was some reason to believe that there had been ergot in Salem's crops that year, we would hardly need to call on that as an explanation. The only thing left to explain is how Tituba herself managed to survive.

Pseudoskepticism breeds in the space created by the supernatural. Ergotism is a poor

explanation for the events at Salem, but at least it smells like science, rather than magic. I would argue, however, that these sort of explanation fail in terms of Occam's Razor. Let's leave aside the social dynamics of a community with an untested extremist ideology whose back is against the wall in wartime and is simultaneously dealing with a deviant and suspicious newcomer. If we compare Caporalet's ergotism theory to the null hypothesis that *Tituba was in a pact with Satan*, I would argue that caution favors the latter. The ergotism theory, like all pseudoskepticism, ignores too many elements and explains too few. It offers us the instant gratification of certainty, but *real* empirical science can never traffic in certainty.

Christianity has its own specialized version of pseudoskepticism, which attempts to *affirm* the supernatural using naturalistic explanations. Thus, for instance, astronomers since at least the 1600s have been offering various suggestions for what the Star of Bethlehem “really was”: Uranus, a comet, a nova, an alignment, etc. [There are whole websites about this](#). More recently, true believers have alleged that astrophysicists have proven (via some arcane maths) that there was a “[lost day](#)” corresponding to the one in Joshua and/or 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings, and that there was an amazing tidal phenomenon that parted the Red Sea, just once. [Doron Nof](#), a professor at the University of Florida, has published a wind-based explanation for the parting of the Red Sea, and then argued that in Matthew 14, Jesus was walking on a thin, partially submerged sheet of ice—surely one of the low points for the *Journal of Paleolimnology*, which saw fit to publish the article. Meanwhile, Russian geologists are supposed to have [dug into Hell](#), and heard the screams of the damned. And so forth.

There is an interesting epistemological tension here. Non-Christians (especially atheists) have been eager consumers of naturalistic explanations for Biblical miracles. At the same time, Evangelicals have been strangely desperate to put more ink underneath the perennial headline “SCIENCE PROVES THE BIBLE!”, despite having no use for science in any other capacity. Thus when someone like Nof puts a fresh coat of science on a Biblical miracle, it becomes a prize for both sides of the argument.

What is especially interesting about these cases is the way that both sides emphasize a literalist interpretation of the Bible. For instance, I would humbly suggest that the miracles attributed to Jesus are fairly standard fare—raising the dead, curing the sick, walking on water. As Stephen Mitchell elaborates in the appendices to his translation of the Gospels, all of this is typical messianic stuff. It's what we *want* the messiah to do, the same way we want actresses to tear up at their Oscar acceptance speech. It's a script. It is at least worth contemplating the idea that Jesus never walked on water, but some of his crew thought it would sound cool if they said he had. This explanation seems, to me anyway, plausible enough that it should be allowed to compete on its merits versus the literal-miracle camp and Nof's submerged-invisible-layer-of-ice bullshit. But I don't expect there is a journal interested in publishing it.

### **Codicil:**

*In the 24 hours after posting this, I was engaged in a debate by one Thesauros (Rod Holmgren, who I have lately learned is currently battling with cancer). I reproduce that discourse here verbatim, for the historians of whatever category of discussion this is:*

### **Thesauros:**

*There is an interesting epistemological tension here. For instance, non-Christians (especially atheists) have been eager consumers of naturalistic explanations for Biblical miracles."*

Interesting indeed, since it would make more sense to simply deny that the events ever took place.

It would make more sense to categorically state that the tomb wasn't empty, that the disciples did not dramatically change in character, that hundreds of people never ever saw Jesus after His crucifixion and that the Christian movement never took place.

**Myself:**

Actually, I don't think it makes sense to argue that Gospels are not based on a set of historical events. Between the Bible itself and the Gnostic gospels, there are about a dozen effectively independent references to the life of Jesus, which places him in the same league of credibility as many other classic figures—certainly he is in a higher tier than someone like Leucippus, whose existence was doubted within a few centuries of his lifetime.

My own assumption is that Jesus was a real person, and probably established a reputation as a miracle-worker, although as many (e.g. Bernard Shaw) have suggested, I think his philosophical teachings would be more impressive if they were not tied to miracles.

**Thesauros:**

I'm thinking strictly from the position of miracles; atheists generally being those who deny the supernatural.

As to His philosophical teaching, Jesus Himself is recorded as saying, "You don't need to believe that I Am who I say I Am (Creator God) because of what I say, but you should believe because of what I do."

**Myself:**

Ummm, help me out. Are you talking about John 14:9, or what?

**Thesauros:**

No, John 10:24,25; 37;

**Myself:**

OK, that makes sense.

I guess I would not consider John a reliable source. I would agree with Shaw in saying that a teacher of Jesus' intelligence would have realized it was irrational to use miracles in order to defend a philosophy.

**Thesauros:**

*I guess I would not consider John a reliable source"*

Really? Why am I not surprised?

**Myself:**

I'm not sure what you're implying.

My own sense is that the proto-Manichean and anti-Semitic elements in John suggest a later voice. Combine that with the narrative sequence, which is completely different from the other three Gospels, and it seems unreasonable to put a lot of stock in John's account. We also know that there are elements, like the Pericope Adulterae, that were inserted into John after the fact.

**Thesauros:**

You're not sure what I'm implying? I doubt that.

There's an old saying that goes, "Reading the Bible without the Holy Spirit is like reading a Sun Dial by the light of a quarter moon." [†]

"If you don't believe Moses, it's no wonder that you don't believe Me either."

**Myself:**

Well, Thesauros, since you've already decided that I'm bereft of the Holy Spirit, let me leave you with a question.

Assuming that the Bible contains the revealed Word of God, I see no reason to think that over the last two thousand years (three thousand, for the Torah) it wouldn't have accumulated a bunch of other writing as well. Well-meant additions, or forgeries, or political propaganda. In fact, it seems like the revealed Word would be an especially ripe target for that sort of thing.

What criteria would you use to separate the two?

**Thesauros:**

*since you've already decided that I'm bereft of the Holy Spirit"*

Well, there's no need to act all offended. You know very well that you're going to end up a John Loftus or a Bart Ehrman. So why not go there directly right now and drop all this pretense of learning?

You also know that you do not believe what the Bible says that Jesus taught - both about Himself and the nature of Scripture. After all, the things you don't like about what He taught can be discarded by insinuating corruption of the text.

Right?

It's simply logic that one cannot be a follower of Jesus and be a follower of Jesus at the same time.

Finally, if you have doubts about the reliability of the text (I do not), take it up with Jesus and those His Spirit inspired to write the documents we now have compiled into what is called the Bible.

We either believe what they say about It's reliability or we don't. You don't believe what they say so move on and be done with it.

Your thoughts are neither original nor an indication of brilliance.

I understand that what I say may come across as harsh. However, I'm just trying to save you time - wasted years pretending to be one thing when you're actually another.

So, good luck on your journey.

**Myself:**

I appreciate all your goodwill, Thesauros, but I think you think I am interested in debating the merits of Biblical literalism, or my own relationship to the Bible. That doesn't interest me at all.

My question—which you seemed to echo in your first comment—is why people who deny the literal accuracy of the Bible would get so worked up about converting its stories into fake "science." As you said, it would be much simpler to deny that the events ever happened. Jesus walking on submerged ice makes less sense than either of the countervailing claims: that it was a myth, or a miracle.

† *Is this, or its variants, really a common adage? The only hits I can find via search engines are Holmgren's own use of this phrase.*