

Speculative Realms

MONDAY, APRIL 18, 2011

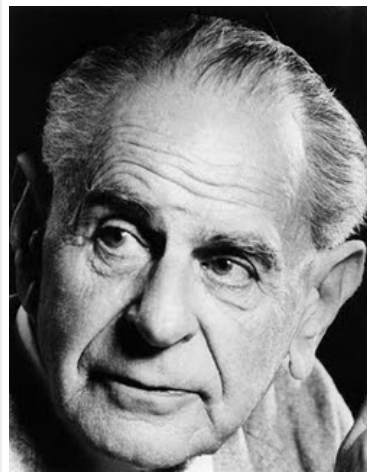
Karl Popper and Why Your Abductionist May Be An Alien

by Gary Haden

"[I]n the autumn of 1919," Karl Popper wrote many years ago. "I first began to grapple with the problem, 'When should a theory be ranked as scientific?' or 'Is there a criterion of the scientific character of a theory?'"

Popper wasn't concerned with what was true or acceptable. He "*wished to distinguish between science and pseudo-science.*" He knew science could make mistakes and pseudoscience could happen upon the truth.

Popper had problems at the time with three popular social/psychological theories: those of Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Alfred Adler. He was troubled that his friends "were impressed by a number of points common to these theories, and especially by their apparent *explanatory power.*"



Sir Karl Popper

"These theories," he wrote, "appeared to be able to explain practically everything that happened within the fields to which they referred. The study of any of them seemed to have the effect of an intellectual conversion or revelation, opening your eyes to a new truth hidden from those not yet initiated. Once your eyes were thus opened you saw confirming instances everywhere; the world was full of *verifications* of the theory."

The issue for Popper was that these theories "always" fit. "[T]hey were always confirmed – which in the eyes of . . . admirers constituted the strongest argument in favor of these theories."

"It began to dawn on me," he said, "that this apparent strength was in fact their weakness."

There was a kind of self-evidence feel to what Popper was observing. It was as though there were in actuality very little work to be done after a theory had been posited. The theory was merely a pair of sunglasses you put on and you saw the contours the glasses allowed you to see.

Evidence is not confirmatory if it hasn't been tested. The test, according to Popper, must be "genuine." The test must "be presented as a serious but unsuccessful attempt to falsify the theory."

It isn't enough to state in a paragraph or two, as do some alien-abduction theorists, possible alternative explanations and then simply perform a line-item veto one by one until there are no alternatives left. A true test would be referral of the "experiencer" to the vetoed practitioners with expertise in the vetoed alternative theories.

That, of course, would derail many potential confirmations of abduction theory. For instance, a sleep medicine referral would falsify much of what abductionists report.

"Every genuine *test* of a theory is an attempt to falsify it, or to refute it," Popper said. "Testability is falsifiability; but there are degrees of falsifiability; some theories are more testable, more exposed to refutation, than others; they take, as it were, greater risks."

Theories that can't be tested produce the impression that they're irrefutable. Much of the certitude that pervades alien-abduction theory has to do with this cloak of irrefutability thrown over the whole enterprise. Actually, the irrefutability is in essence untestability. The actual foundation of the theory is therefore tectonically unstable.

"A theory which is not refutable," Popper wrote, "by any conceivable event is nonscientific. Irrefutability is not a virtue of a theory (as people often think) but a vice."

The task for an abductionist then is to forcefully assert untestable narratives, by way of modus operandi, in order to give off a perfume smell of irrefutability. This happens not just in abduction

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theory. Paranormalists often work people unfortunate enough to come under their sway into a corner where untestable propositions are propounded as gospel truth. Alien mind control is one such corner.

The assertion is made by the paranoidist that we are not really in control of our own thoughts or our own perceptions and that in fact aliens are. Aliens create screens in our minds, masking their presence with *seeming* sleep-disorder-related phenomena like old hags and clowns. It really isn't a clown you see—generated by an interpenetrating mix-up of REM sleep and wakefulness—but an alien being come to take you away.

Well, there is no way to test that. The basis of the abductionist's claim is say-so alone.

There's not a little dab of the argument from ignorance here, as well. How do we know where our thoughts come from? How do we know they don't come from aliens? The argument from ignorance is a kind of sidestep into untestability. It is a dancestep many paranormalists perform. And they're pretty obnoxious about it. They are entitled to burp untestable nonsense into our faces.

They argue on moral grounds. After all, their critics are not omniscient. How dare we play God?? How dare we imply we know all there is to know about consciousness and the mind???

In other words, critics of alien abduction theory don't know everything. Because they don't know everything, it is easy to assume they don't know anything. One of the things they don't know, abduction proponents loudly profess, is the extent of alien mind control. (Although, how on earth could abductionists know what their critics don't know? If their critics don't know anything, how can you identify what it is they don't know? The absence of knowledge is not evidence of presence of ignorance—or something.) However, the abduction theorists are unwilling to produce the evidence our minds are being controlled by aliens. They deem the requirement that they actually produce an alien being an outrageous demand.

If I am terminally ignorant of where my thoughts come from how is it going to dawn on me that they come from aliens? The theory of alien mind control is that our mental GPS device is busted. Apparently, it undergoes magical repair when an abductionist talks about it. Either that or, by reverse analysis, the abductionist is himself an alien. Right? *Because only aliens really know where our thoughts come from.*

In actuality, any demand made of alien abduction theorists is outrageous. It doesn't dawn on them that the proof for the extraterrestrial hypothesis is in fact an extraterrestrial. If that is not the standard of proof, the so-called ETH should be renamed something else.

Something like the Extravagantly Tendentious Hypothesis. Or the lazy mind hypothesis. Or some such.

The abductionist is certainly not going to pull an alien out of his hat. He doesn't have to. He would loudly protest having to do the work. It is not in his job description. This is supposed to be his light work, after all. His real work is at University or the Museum. He just does tricks on the side. Don't bother him with the details.

All he has to do is state a claim and state entitlement to complete assent.

Source

Karl Popper, "Philosophy of Science: A Personal Report." Reprinted as Chapter 9 in Robert N. Beck, Editor, *Perspectives in Philosophy*, 3rd Edition. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975, pp. 341-347.

Posted by Gary Haden at 10:01 AM



Labels: [argument from ignorance](#), [falsifiability](#)



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