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Encounters with Aliens (the Local Kind)

A strange army of paranormalists has infested the Internet. We need an understanding of the ethics and practicalities of dealing with people whose thinking seems to come from another planet.

MARTIN BRIDGSTOCK

Hundreds of science-fiction stories have dealt with the moment at which humanity encounters aliens. It's a fascinating concept. What, we wonder, will the aliens look like? How will they communicate? Will we grasp their thought processes, or will they be incomprehensible?

As any active skeptic knows, however, aliens have already been encountered. They look human, but their thought processes are from beyond Alpha Centauri. They are the endless army of people with oddball ideas who seem to zero in on anyone supporting skepticism. Their missives are often strangely phrased, sprinkled with capitals and multiple exclamation marks. And, usually, they strongly disagree with your viewpoint. Skeptics have many names for these people,[1] but I will simply term them "dissenters."

Let's take a few examples from my own experience. As we shall see, although dissenters are quite varied, there are a few clear identifying signals. Once we've established what characterizes dissenters, we can work out what ethical obligations you have toward them and what practical methods exist for dealing with them. Here are my examples, culled from a longer list.

1) An Australian man noticed that I had written a paper on what scientists think is misconduct and what isn't (Bridgstock 1993). So he sent me a bale of material arguing that he had been denied proper recognition on some research into frogs. He wanted me to obtain for him the recognition that, in his view, he deserved.
2) An American noticed in a recent article of mine that I'd said that science wasn't always right (Bridgstock 2008, 38). He wanted to divert this into a discussion of the origins of life. When I wouldn't cooperate, he erupted into abuse.
3) After I'd appeared on television arguing against creationism, a woman phoned me. She'd done a tealeaf reading, which showed an ape changing into a man, and thought I should rush round and see it—er, I did know about psychic vibrations, didn't I?
4) A man was angered by my recent statement that Phil Plait "resoundingly refuted" claims that the Apollo missions were hoaxes (Bridgstock 2008, 37). Apparently the only thing I could do now was to produce proof that the Apollo astronauts went to the moon or else apologize. And proof, he said, was impossible.
5) A fundamentalist who wrote to some prominent Australian skeptics began his missive with "What fools you are!" and went on to produce some fairly standard creationist arguments. The skeptics replied to his tirade, whereupon the fundamentalist consulted prominent creationists, regurgitated their arguments, and fiercely denounced the skeptics for their alleged ignorance.

This is a pretty varied bunch of people. Do they have anything in common? I think they do. The first task is to point out some danger signs that can help us to recognize the dissenter. Then I want to address how we should respond to dissenters' messages—what our ethical obligations are—and what the best practical ways of doing so are.

The Three H's of Dissent: Howlers, Hijacking, and Hurtfulness

All of these dissenters show at least one of three danger signs, all beginning with the letter H: howlers, hijacking, and hurtfulness.

It is amazing how many dissenters commit the most elementary errors of reasoning and understanding, known as howlers. My tealeaf reader is a good example. She probably meant well, but she couldn't see that evolution is an accepted scientific theory because of a vast mass of evidence. Science seeks to explain the natural world in natural terms. To adduce paranormal "evidence" for a scientific theory is to undermine the basic nature of science.

The Apollo hoax theorist produced a whole complex of howlers. For example, he claimed that the only justification I could possibly produce for my statement was to prove that the Apollo astronauts had been to the Moon. Nonsense. My statement was simply that Plait had "resoundingly refuted" the Apollo hoaxers' claims. And he did. I heard him.[2]

Now, skepticism often involves tough, clear thinking. If dissenters show that they cannot handle elementary logic or if they display profound ignorance of evidence, it would seem clear that they cannot handle skepticism. Therefore, the existence of howlers in your dissenter's messages is a clear sign that dialogue is likely to be fruitless (see Harriet Hall, "Playing by the Rules," SI, May/June 2009). How can you use reason or evidence with someone who has no grasp of either?

Second, there is hijacking. This has nothing to do with aircraft or terrorism. A hijacker in this sense is a person who takes any topic under discussion and whisks it away to talk about what interests them. Normal conversation, in the sense of talking and listening, does not occur. It's unpleasant, and I usually find I want to terminate the non-conversation as soon as possible.

Many dissenters practice hijacking. They do not take any notice of your thinking but use your words as a "hook" upon which to hang their own ideas. Your contribution is simply a means to their end. Indeed, they often seem to be unaware of what you are actually saying.

Dissenter 2 is a good example. In a recent article in SI (Bridgstock 2008, 38), I made a passing remark about science not always being correct. Dissenter 2 seized on this and wanted me to discuss the origins of life on earth.[3] The obvious point is that my paper had nothing to do with the origins of life, and I was under no obligation to be dragged into a dialogue on that topic. The hijacker failed, and he didn't like it.

The frog gentleman in example 1 is similar. My article reported on some research I'd done in which I found that scientists disagree—sometimes strongly—about what constitutes misconduct. This man, it turned out, *hadn't read the article* but decided from the title that I might serve his purpose.

Finally, there is hurtfulness, by which I mean readiness to abuse or denigrate. Many dissenters do not hesitate to insult. Indeed, my suspicion is that many of them gain some kind of pleasure from it. After all, if their ideas have been so completely rejected that nobody takes them seriously, why not strike at those who are so stupid as not to accept their wisdom?

I've already described how dissenter 2 lashed out at me when I wouldn't discuss his topic of choice. Number 4 also became angry when I would not produce the apology he wanted. His line of abuse was to describe me as one of the "DELUSIONAL robotic acquiescent Toadies."[4]

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Number 5 combined two of these signals together. He actually began his first letter with an insult, then hijacked the discussion to make it a debate between professional creationists and skeptics *with himself as referee and scorekeeper*. Needless to say, the skeptics lost—at least in the estimation of dissident 5!

Other Skeptics' Views

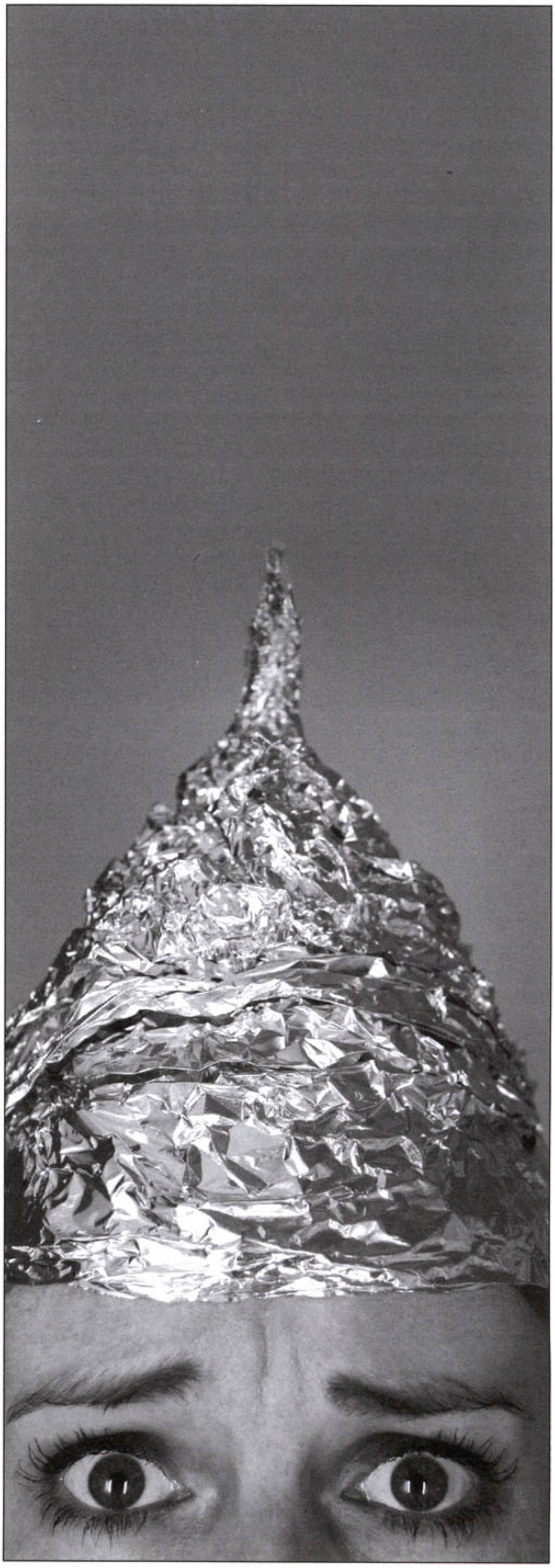
Skeptics have been aware of these danger signals for a long time. James Randi's description of claimants for his million-dollar prize, for instance, is essentially a catalog of howlers (Randi 2005). One of the rules for Randi's prize is that the claimant must state, in two paragraphs, what paranormal activity they can perform. Randi has found that ". . . a good 80 percent of the people who apply can't make that statement" (Randi 2005, 46). Clearly, there is a deep-seated logical incapacity in people who believe they have an important psychic talent but cannot explain what it is.

She'd done a tealeaf reading, which showed an ape changing into a man, and thought I should rush round and see it—er, I did know about psychic vibrations, didn't I?

Veteran skeptic Ralph Estling described the oddball National Philosophical Association in terms that clearly show the mindset that leads to hijacking: ". . . all their energy is engrossed in preaching their various notions, declaiming their *idees fixes* to each other and to any other listeners, willing or otherwise. This is the mark of the obsessive, the dead giveaway of the crank and the crackpot. . . . They have too many points that need too much scoring, too many axes that require too much grinding. They have no sense of humor and therefore no sense of perspective" (Estling 2000, 57).

Finally Martin Gardner, a half-century ago, described the dissenter's willingness to hurt: "Frequently he insults his opponents by accusing them of stupidity, dishonesty, or other base motives. If they ignore him, he takes this to mean his arguments are unanswerable. If they retaliate in kind, this strengthens his delusion that he is battling scoundrels" (Gardner 1957, 12).

These three characteristics—or any one of them—should set danger signals flashing in our minds. After all, is there



much point in entering into a dialogue on logical or evidential matters with someone who has no grasp of basic principles, who disregards your side of the issue, or who esteems you so little that they will hurl abuse at you? Clearly, the chances are not good. But what *should* you do? Is there an ethical dimension to the issue?

What *Should* You Do?

Ethically, what are your obligations when approached by dissenters? You might have published an article in a skeptical journal or appeared on television or radio defending the skeptical viewpoint. Your reward is an approach from a dissenter or even several. He or she plainly wants a reply. What should you do?

It is tempting to regard dialogue with the dissenter as an extension of your skeptical work. After all, if a lost traveller asked you for directions, you'd be polite and helpful, right? Doesn't this poor confused dissenter need your help more than most people?

It is normal and natural to reply to anyone who approaches us—especially when we have something of value to say—but where skepticism is concerned, our priority should be to propagate the message as widely as we can.

Let's begin with a key point. Remember that there are literally hundreds or thousands of paranormal believers for every skeptic. As Paul Kurtz put it, "There are literally thousands of [paranormal] claims pouring forth each year. One cannot possibly deal with them all. We receive a goodly number of calls and letters every week at the offices of CSICOP from people who claim that they have prophetic powers, are reincarnated, or have been abducted aboard UFOs" (Kurtz 1984, 242).

Presumably you believe—as I do—that the world would be a better place if more people thought skeptically, that is, if the general response to strange and outlandish claims were to ask for evidence and to see if the evidence was sufficient to justify the claim. From a consequentialist viewpoint,[5] you owe it to the world to use your time in the most beneficial way possible.

It follows that if we are believers in skepticism, we should accept an ethical imperative to focus our efforts as effectively as possible to develop and extend skeptical thought. We know that we are a tiny minority and we need our message to reach as many people as possible. So if we want to make the most of our limited time, probably the worst thing we could do is engage in lengthy one-on-one dialogues with dissenters. As we have already seen, the chances of success are pretty minimal.

What could you do instead, with the time saved from arguing with a dissenter? Any item from the list compiled by Andrew Mayne (2004) would suffice. Far better to write an article for a college or high school magazine. Give a talk somewhere. Develop a piece of research on some new piece of nuttiness. Write a skeptical blog. Anything that enables you to improve the position of skepticism in the world.

But, you may argue, don't I owe the dissenter a reply? Didn't I publicly state my position and wouldn't it be rude not to offer counterarguments to criticism? It is normal and natural to reply to anyone who approaches us—especially when we have something of value to say—but where skepticism is concerned, our priority should be to propagate the message as widely as we can.

I hope two points are clear now. First, the presence of any of the three H's—howlers, hijacking or hurtfulness—in a dissenter's message should alert skeptics to the likelihood that engagement in discussion will be a waste of time. If more than one appears, my strong advice is not to engage; you have better things to do. Second, there is no ethical obligation upon a skeptic to engage in debate with a dissenter. From a consequentialist viewpoint, it is likely that far more can be accomplished by concentrating on other skeptical activities.

There are some obvious limitations to this argument. Some skeptics pursue dialogue with dissenters simply because they enjoy it. They do not expect to win the argument but gain amusement from the logical contortions into which they can force their opponent. This is a perfectly legitimate approach, though personally I find much of the dissenters' behavior distressing. They seem to be prisoners locked in their own irrational little worlds.

What *Can* You Do?

Now let us move to practicalities. You have received a message from a dissenter. It contains one or more of the H's, and you do not wish to become involved. What should you do? I know of several stratagems and invite other skeptics to contribute their ideas.

First, you can simply decline to reply. It doesn't matter how much the dissenter abuses you or peppers you with aggravating messages. If you don't reply, you have declined to waste your time, and you are ahead. As you work on skeptical research or prepare a magazine article, you can think, "This is time that could have been wasted!"

Still, silence is not a very satisfying tactic. It is not pleasant to sit quietly while someone heaps abuse and denigration upon you. As Gardner pointed out, it leaves the dissenter free to conclude that you cannot address the arguments. What alternatives are there?

Physicist and science-fiction writer Gregory Benford described a useful method of choking off dissidents in his award-winning 1982 novel *Timescape*. Benford's protagonist, Gordon Bernstein, has made a sensational discovery and is plagued with assorted cranks and oddballs. Finally, he hits upon a solution for the strange letters he is receiving: "He wrote a note saying that while the person's ideas were 'interesting' (a suitably non-judgmental term) they were beyond his competence, so he was unable to comment on them." Benford notes, "This worked; they never replied." Einstein used a similar approach, stating his incompetence in the area of extrasensory perception (Gardner 1978, 83). Why would such a modest tactic be successful? It seems to relate to a characteristic of the dissenter's mind. As Gardner (1957, 13) has pointed out, the dissenter ". . . has strong compulsions to focus his attacks on the greatest scientists and the best-established theories." Therefore, Benford's stratagem provides an excellent escape mechanism. The skeptic disappears from the dissenter's radar and can get back to work.

A veteran teacher I knew had a third method. He would refer the inquirer to a forbidding equation and explain that once this was understood, it would be possible to discuss the matter in appropriate detail. Even more, referring to a fearsome mass of equations in a research paper would deter most dissenters—it is too much like hard work, and they are likely to abandon the effort.

Closely related to this is recommending a couple of textbooks—fat ones are the best—and implying that only if the dissenter can master the works listed, a useful dialogue could take place (don't promise that it will, just imply that it might). Since most dissenters regard themselves already as supreme authorities, this is likely to be too much work. With both these methods, I would add a note of ethical caution. The recommended works must actually be relevant to the dissenter's claims. In my view, it would be wrong to send anyone off on a wild goose chase that has nothing to do with the topic.

A fourth method is most useful in mail correspondence but could probably be adapted to e-mail without too much trouble. At one stage in the 1980s battle against creationists in Australia, I was being inundated with silly mail from fundamentalists. I developed a form letter that listed four or five of the most common fundamentalist howlers—plus abusiveness—and this enabled me to explain with a tick in a box why I was not prepared to reply to them.[6] A form e-mail—using cut and paste—would probably have similar effects. I found that my form letter almost always stopped the attacks dead, and in one case it gained me an apology!

If you cannot resist the temptation to engage with the dissenter, then a few tips may be useful. Resist the temptation to fire off a mass of your best arguments larded with denunciations. Denigration is language that dissenters understand, and they have had much more practice at it than you. As Paul Kurtz (2001, 45) put it, the "unsinkable rubber duck" will not be submerged by your message. Further, why waste good arguments on a single committed opponent? You are simply alerting them to your key points and may send them looking for replies. Why not publish your arguments in a magazine or journal or reserve them for a public event, when you can put them to uncommitted people?

I often find that pointing out elementary errors of fact and logic disconcerts dissenters—they tend not to be much good at that kind of thing—and pointing out errors of grammar and spelling seems to cause considerable distress. It can, of course, be done gently. One can use Benford's stratagem and then list the errors, asking gently whether they expect anyone to take seriously such poorly expressed ideas. I suspect you will hear little more.

I have argued here that merely because you are a skeptic, you are under no obligation to engage with the aggressive army of dissenters who infest the Internet and the mail system. You can identify most of them with the three-H strategy,[7] and your skeptical activity will probably be more effective if you focus on larger-scale activities, especially those that communicate with people who are uncommitted. In this way, you are likely to do far more good than becoming tied down by a few unproductive dialogues. You have limited time; don't waste it. □

Notes

1. Weirdos, nut-cases, cranks, and oddballs are among the milder terms.

2. My own assessment is that the evidence for authenticity is extremely strong and the case for the hoax appallingly weak. However, if there were serious evidence to support the idea of an Apollo Moon hoax I would be bound by my skepticism to consider it and to acknowledge its force. So far I haven't seen such evidence.

3. Presumably he thought that science was wrong on this matter. I didn't let the discussion get that far.

4. Exactly how he can describe someone he has never met, or heard from, in these terms I don't know.

5. Consequentialism is an approach to ethics that assesses actions on the basis of the desirability or otherwise of their consequences. It is not the only approach, but I find it consistently valuable in my thinking.

6. The alternatives were: a false assumption about me or my viewpoint; abuse; a false assumption about facts; an elementary logical error; incomprehensibility; and an unreasonable demand. Of course, the list can be adapted to circumstances.

7. Some dissenters try to be subtle and only reveal their true nature later. One woman wrote a friendly letter to me about creationism. I replied, and it was only on the third exchange that she began ranting about "God's word" and I stopped replying. I am not too concerned about dissenters learning to write consistently rational letters. If they could learn that, they would not be dissenters!

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