

Alfred Russel Wallace Notes 23: The Jersey Devil, and Friends.

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Summary: For nearly three hundred years reports have surfaced of a purported cryptid form known as the 'Jersey devil.' In this work an interpretation of the goals of biogeography is given, and how this field can be related to such alleged phenomena, as well as to some of the ideas of Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913) that seem to find their origin in the writings of Benedict de Spinoza (1632-1677). *Key words:* Alfred Russel Wallace, biogeography, UFOs, Spinoza, New Jersey devil, paranormal, alien beings, cryptids

Introduction

It will immediately be asked by the well-intended reader why a person with real scientific training (*i.e.*, myself) would be interested in what outwardly seems a ridiculous subject, and secondly, what this subject has to do with Alfred Russel Wallace, the co-establisher of the principle of natural selection. One reply at a time; we'll start with the first question.

My own professional science training (M.A., PhD.) is centrally in the field of biogeography, which attempts to provide scientific explanations for the 'whereness' of living (and/or once-living) creatures. Such explanations usually involve identifying how particular evolutionary, ecological and geological forces have conspired to produce the biotas we now witness, but sometimes the agencies involved also feature elements of human activity and influence. The latter kinds of forces are dwelled on by workers in the subfield known as cultural biogeography. Increasingly, human beings have come to have a major influence on the distribution of living things – a fact evident in, among other things, our introduction (both deliberate and inadvertent) of non-native forms to new areas, our impact on climate, and our unfortunate tendency to drive many indigenous forms to extinction through habitat destruction or overhunting.

I would argue that this domain of science – biogeography – deals with the most complex systems in the natural world (especially if human geography is viewed as a kind of biogeography: we are, after all, living things), and we needn't consider it a shock were the forces underlying the patterns of our existence found to extend to some very subtle kinds of influence.

Indeed, at a certain level biogeography even extends, potentially, to the paranormal: in particular, to the study of cryptid forms. To be sure, most cryptozoology involves conventional methods and objectives, especially as related to documenting the real existence of species only theorized or alleged to exist. Such efforts often lead to simple acts of discovery; a good example is Wallace's prediction that a Madagascan hawkmoth with an unusually long tongue would eventually be discovered: "That such a moth exists in Madagascar may be safely predicted, and naturalists who visit that island should search for it with as much confidence as astronomers searched for the planet Neptune,

and they will be equally successful” (Wallace 1867, p. 477n). Wallace (and earlier, Darwin) had noticed that one species of Madagascan orchid had an especially long nectary, and, putting two and two together, deduced that a pollinator moth with a tongue long enough to reach the nectar at the end of it also must exist. Some decades later, the discovery of such a moth was actually made. There are also investigations into ongoing reports of animals that most suppose are now extinct, such as the Tasmanian tiger (thylacine), and the ivory-billed woodpecker. But beyond these more straightforward cases, there are the many instances of mysterious animals that have allegedly been sighted in the wild, but of which no fossil or living specimen or deceased remains have ever been produced: creatures such as the Loch Ness monster, the Yeti, and the Mokele-mbembe. UFOs (or ‘UAPs’, as they are now frequently called, especially in official circles), actually, also fit into this category – if, at least, we think of them as possibly being directed by conscious beings.

All of these forms display at least some characteristics that allow them to be thought of in terms applied to any conventional being: for example, when and where they are seen, and how often. Further, they may be viewed in the context of whether they can be connected to other characteristics of living things: for example, whether they are known to exist in a place that might be able to support them as an ecological and evolutionary entity. The Loch Ness monster, for instance, is supposed to have maintained an evolutionarily-viable population for eons in a rather small lake that appears not to support enough prey species for it to live on: not a good sign. The alleged Yeti and Sasquatch fair a little better in this regard, as a few other primate species (most notably the monkey *Rhinopithecus roxellana*, in China) live in high and/or cold environments, and the habitats involved are remote enough that it is barely conceivable they might have avoided verified detection for all these years.

But then there are the cryptids whose existence seems to defy all reasonable credulity. Two good examples are the flying creatures known as ‘Mothman’ and the ‘Jersey devil.’ The Mothman is described as a winged humanoid creature with glowing red eyes; it is most famously connected to the 1967 collapse of the Silver Bridge in Point Pleasant, West Virginia, where it was spotted nearby and came to be regarded as a harbinger of doom. It has been variously treated as an unsubstantiated legend, an alien being, or some kind of paranormal manifestation. Enough said.

The Jersey devil, meanwhile, has been reported for going on three hundred years, predominantly in the Pine Barrens region of southern New Jersey. Its Wikipedia entry describes it as “bipedal kangaroo-like or wyvern-like creature with a horse- or goat-like head, leathery bat-like wings, horns, small arms with clawed hands, legs with cloven hooves, and a forked tail,” though apparently the many hundreds of those who have claimed sightings have projected many variations. The Wikipedia entry provides a good summary of the growth of the Jersey devil legend (see *also* Regal & Esposito 2018), preferring to view it in strictly mythical terms, as opposed to an actual cryptid beast of some kind.

We can see from this variation in the perceived ‘reality’ of a cryptid form that any serious investigator of such phenomena must be able to sort through a sea of hoaxes, hallucinations, and mis-identifications to arrive at an understanding of what is really going on. Further, the average citizen will have little to steer them toward any valid con-

clusions about such phenomena, as these have been grossly sensationalized in all the media – to a degree that one can never trust any related reporting as being more than someone trying to make a buck. The deception is so pervasive that one can be excused for feeling *a priori* that the whole of it is just low-brow fiction.

Yet the volume of reports of this kind of phenomenon, especially when one takes into account the huge number of serious multiple-person sightings of UFOs, argues against this. Clearly, forces unusual seem to be operating out there, so ultimately the questions of interest are: (1) how much is 'real' and how much is misunderstood or faked, and (2) what are the most likely explanatory options. It is time to turn to Wallace and Spinoza.

Wallace and Spinoza

There are a number of similarities between the ideas of these two great figures; I am still trying to figure out how much of this is a matter of independent invention, and how much represents an instance of direct or indirect influence of the earlier man on the later one. In any case, we will start with Benedict de Spinoza.

Spinoza contended that God and nature are one and the same: that is, that all of existence is a single entity/reality, and that there is nothing 'outside' of it. There are thus no 'first causes' in the sense of a God operating against natural law to create new, unpredictable results. Among the implications of this position is that there is no such thing as the 'supernatural,' a term that, obviously, describes a departure from natural law. This also means that there are no such things as 'miracles,' if one interprets the latter concept to signify events that are brought about through an independent God's (or some other) aberrant influence on the natural state of things. What, then, did Spinoza think of the 'miraculous' events that have been witnessed and described over history by seemingly sane and reliable sources? Simply, that these are instances of the emergence of causalities that are not yet appreciated in objective terms – that is to say, that are 'natural,' but merely so odd and rarely witnessed as to require new appreciations of the underlying physical reality.

This is exactly what Wallace argues in two of his early treatments of spiritualism (see Wallace 1866, 1870). Wallace wanted us to accept that the phenomena of spiritualism are a part of the natural order, and that such things as the medium Daniel Home allegedly levitating in the air are not 'miraculous' events, but instead a not-yet understood aspect of the potentialities inherent in the natural order.

This Spinoza/Wallace position also effectively eliminates such notions as heaven and hell, which in conventional religious belief operate outside of nature; further, so too the Devil, demons from hell, etc. etc. Of course, this does not say that what *seems* like a demon from hell might not be something 'real' after all, to the extent that it comes about 'naturally' but through causes remote from mundane appreciation: for example, as connected to some kind of psychological disorder producing hallucinations. Hallucinations are 'real' enough, actually, though largely unconnected to the events making up extended space. Ordinary dreams fall into a similar category; one cannot argue that a dreamscape is 'nonexistent,' only that it is not part of our worldly physical milieu. And, it should be noted, both dreams and hallucinations not only have causes, but themselves cause physiological and behavioral responses in the physical world: e.g., elevated heartbeat and respiratory effects, feelings of fear or panic, etc.

I would contend that this line of reasoning contains clues that can help us understand the likely basis of many 'paranormal' phenomena, and especially the less 'natural' sorts of cryptid beings.

Some Characteristics of 'Paranormal' Cryptid Forms

Here is a lion's share list of the most commonly identified aspects of paranormal phenomena, particularly as related to purported cryptids and UFOs:

1. UFOs are often reported to fly at speeds far exceeding those possible to obtain through known existing Earthly technologies.
2. UFOs are often reported to exhibit levels of maneuverability far exceeding any possible to obtain through known existing Earthly technologies, including abrupt stops and changes of direction, and instant accelerations.
3. Per 1 and 2 above, it is difficult to understand how any living things inside such vehicles could withstand the g forces produced by such movements.
4. Oftentimes, UFOs seem to exhibit no visible means or mechanisms of propulsion.
5. Despite rumors, there is no solid (public) evidence of crashed or captured UFOs or their parts.
6. Despite rumors, there is no solid (public) evidence of the existence of dead or captured alien beings.
7. Despite rumors, there is no solid (public) evidence of the existence of dead or captured animal forms not known to have existed on earth.
8. Some alleged cryptid forms (e.g. the Jersey devil and Mothman) are so morphologically unlike known animal forms that it is difficult to believe they could have evolved through conventional (or possibly even guided) biological processes.
9. Many reportings of alleged cryptid forms portray them as having strangely glowing eyes.
10. Reportings of UFOs and cryptids often describe them as undergoing rapid changes in size and/or shape.
11. Some kinds of cryptid forms (e.g., the so-called 'big hairy men,' like the Yeti and Sasquatch) have been reported from almost all corners of the terrestrial earth, a distinctly unnatural distribution pattern among non-flying mammals (or even whole families thereof, such as the Felidae or Bovidae).
12. The apparent density of populations of such (biological?) cryptid forms is so low as to make it difficult to understand how they could be genetically maintained.
13. Many reportings of UFOs and cryptid beings describe them as having suddenly appeared out of nowhere, and, likewise, later just disappearing.
14. Many reportings of UFOs and cryptid beings describe their sudden appearances and/or disappearances as being accompanied by a flash of light.
15. Some reportings of cryptids exist in which they are said to have been shot by firearms, but display no reaction to the wound.
16. UFOs are sometimes tracked by radar, and sometimes not.
17. Individual cryptids are sometimes credited as having existed for multiple generations, an unlikely reality in a world where living things other than humans only rarely reach even twenty years of age.

This puzzling list of characteristics has led to suggestions of various kinds of ‘interventions’ upon our world – through time travel, interdimensional penetrations, devilry, or other ‘unnatural’ or yet-to-be demonstrated processes – as being responsible for the alleged sightings. Perhaps; but until such classes of causality are demonstrated to *actually* exist, I remain highly skeptical. But there is a simple, more mundane, explanation that would account for all the characteristics listed above: holography.

Let us suppose for the moment that the phenomena reported have been, at least some of the time, genuine *sightings*. Regarding the UFO phenomena, this would likely mean the presence of advanced and truly alien visitors, an advanced but secreted Earthly population of humans or human-like beings, or time-travelling beings (Masters 2019). Any of these would likely be, at the very least, hundreds of years ahead of us technologically, and might be expected to have developed forms of holographic projection more sophisticated than those we can now produce.

Importantly, however, we at least *know* at the present that holographic projection *is* possible, because we have begun to develop this kind of technology, and have some initial understanding of what it might lead to. Advanced versions of holography, which produces forms not having the same physical characteristics as corporeal bodies, could satisfactorily explain all the phenomena listed above, including the fact that strange cryptid animal forms are frequently reported in association with UFO sightings. It would also account for the manifest strangeness of some cryptids (*e.g.*, the Jersey devil): such projections can be made to appear however as wished.

It seems to me that this interpretation is so obvious – at least as a *possible* explanation – that the fact that it is only rarely entertained is *itself* suspicious. Is someone deliberately promoting other – red herring – explanations as a way of concealing their awareness of the operation of such technology? If so, why?

In any case, if these sightings of UFOs and cryptid forms really mean that alien beings *are* here, just why so? I cannot believe they are here to destroy us, out of fear of our military capabilities, to steal our resources, or even out of some kind of curiosity about us. Surely a society thousands of years in advance of us would have passed beyond actions related to such motives. Although some would say these are naïve impressions, I would argue that if this were *not* the case, we would almost certainly have been annihilated or annexed long before now, for the very reasons that are often brought up.

I prefer to think that their presence might be facilitating a more essential mission: that as advanced evolutionary forms it is part of their fundamental role in the universe to help guide the maturation of less evolved worlds. As I have discussed in another essay (Smith 2022), there seems to be a battle going on here at the human level of social advance – one in which two basic elements of our nature are in conflict, and are slowly working things out. The degree to which an alien presence might be implicit in that resolution is no more than conjectural, of course (that is, even assuming that the notion of alien involvement is correct at all!). At one extreme, they could be here merely as patient observers, having decided to formally introduce themselves to us only once we have emerged as a fully self-respecting society. Or, perhaps they prefer to remain a

vague but deliberate force on the sidelines, making themselves known to us only to an extent serving to scare or lead us toward better appreciations of our own nature. Of course, it could even be that those ‘Ancient Aliens’ spokespeople are right: that the influence of aliens in our evolution extends to their ‘seeding’ our immediate biological progenitors with DNA capable of physically supporting our departure into more advanced levels of mental function to begin with. Who knows, this ‘seeding’ could even extend to an *ongoing* influence on current mental processes such as guided dreams, as some spiritualists believe. This brings us back to Wallace.

Conclusion

Wallace, as is well known, was an avid spiritualist, and I have argued (e.g., Smith 2008, 2019a) that his attraction to the belief lay mainly at the level of how ‘the spirits’ allegedly relay advice to the living through mental interventions such as dreams, premonitions, and feelings of conscience. Note, importantly, that such interventions would not have been directed as a deliberate erosion of our free will, but instead to get us to ‘review’ our actions in a manner possibly leading to changes – sometimes, even, and on the balance, improvements – in our behavior. In this way we would be better able to identify ‘what works’ in our society in a manner paralleling Wallace’s approach to natural selection. In his model of natural selection, gene pools sort out – *i.e.*, probabilistically identify – *whatever* adaptations that by chance produce some (that is, *any kind of*) competitive advantage. The result is: ‘evolution.’ One can thus understand how in his 1858 paper he came to accept the concept of necessary utility, whereas earlier he had shunned it as seeming only to serve teleological agendas (Smith 2019b). A pair of quite ingenious notions, actually, if not so easy to prove...

What would Wallace have thought about the idea of *alien* intervention? In his own time, not very much, probably, as he had convinced himself of the unlikelihood that other worlds had evolved advanced lifeforms similar to human beings (largely for ‘Goldilocks zone’ kinds of reasoning: Wallace 1903, 1907). But that was then, in a time of less information about the extent of the universe, and this is now. Still, Wallace was a very strong believer in the need to continually reassess. Though he was in his own time the strongest advocate of permanently placed continents, for example, he was also quite capable of changing his mind (Smith 2021) as new kinds of information surfaced, and one imagines he would have been one of the first to adopt the new world biogeographical order as suggested by plate tectonics.

So, on re-considering the possible large-scale evolutionary dynamics of consciousness, might Wallace have thrown in with today’s ‘Ancient Aliens’ ranks in suspecting alien influence on the process? Perhaps he was basically correct that the feedback from dreams, premonitions, etc. actually *is* helping us to productively modify our future behaviors, but identified the wrong causal agent – and note that even a more traditional Darwinian interpretation (*i.e.*, through an orthodox psychological process) of the origin of the supposed feedback flow also works in this context. Ockham’s razor favors Darwin at the moment, but this need not mean it always will. The ‘facts’ in this whole realm are rather slippery, and we need to continually remind ourselves of this.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Rosemary Meszaros, Michael Nahm, and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on an earlier manuscript version of this essay.

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