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THE DIFFERENT SENSES TO THE MEANING OF THE WORD *UNIDENTIFIED*

By

Adrian G. Rudnyk

M.A., B.A. in Philosophy

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Adrian G. Rudnyk

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ABSTRACT

This writing investigates the different senses as to the meaning of the word *unidentified*. I present two approaches to this word: the simple view and the sophisticated view. The simple view asserts that the word *unidentified* necessarily means that nothing can be known about an object that is claimed to be unidentified. I appeal to physicist Dr. Neil deGrasse Tyson as a primary example of this view. Conversely, the sophisticated view asserts that there can be knowledge about an object witnessed labeled as unidentified. I present examples from various scientific disciplines, which support the sophisticated view. Furthermore, I investigate the different senses of the meaning of the word *unidentified* within ufology, which provides additional support for the sophisticated view. The thesis in this writing is two-fold. First, the simple view is untenable, because there can be different senses to the word *unidentified*. Second, I shall demonstrate that Tyson equivocates when he argues against those who have claimed to have witnessed a UFO in the extraterrestrial sense.

INTRODUCTION

In this writing I shall examine what is meant by the term *unidentified*. Moreover, the main thesis in this writing is two-fold. First, the word *unidentified* should not be taken at face value as to its meaning as some assert. Just because an object is unidentified does not entail one cannot possess any knowledge about *that* object. This ‘face value’ kind of meaning of the word *unidentified* is what I have termed as *the simple view*. I shall counter the simple view in support of what I have termed as *the sophisticated view*, i.e., there can be different senses to the meaning of the word *unidentified*; hence, there is a possibility of having knowledge about an object despite it being labeled as *unidentified*. Second, I shall be appealing to the views of eminent physicist Dr. Neil deGrasse Tyson as a prime example of the simple view. Moreover, I shall prove that Tyson commits a fallacy of equivocation when he argues against those who have claimed to have witnessed a UFO in the extraterrestrial sense.

The main body of this writing is divided into three parts. First, I shall present the simple view. Second, I shall provide some examples from various scientific disciplines’ usage of the word *unidentified*, which supports the notion that one can possess epistemology about an object, despite it being labeled as *unidentified*, i.e., the sophisticated view. Third, I shall expand on the sophisticated view and illuminate the notion that the meaning of the word *unidentified* can have different senses in ufology as well. It is in this context that I shall argue that Tyson is committing of *fallacy of equivocation*, given his approach to the word *unidentified* within the context UFOs.

1. THE SIMPLE VIEW

In 2008 at the “Amaz!ng Meeting 6,”¹ Neil deGrasse Tyson gave a talk on various subjects. However, I am concerned with a small portion of his talk, which deals with UFOs with respect to the simple view of the word *unidentified*. Tyson stated this:

Someone says they saw a UFO. Remind them what the “U” stands for. OK? Unidentified. Because then they say:

[Person X], “I saw UFO.”

I say, “Oh, what did it look like?”

[Person X], “Oh, it was like a spaceship and it landed from another planet.”

And then I said, “You just said *you didn’t know what it was ‘cause you said it was unidentified.*”²

And so we have this urge, this irrational urge, which we all know. It’s called *argument from ignorance*,³ where, you don’t know something and then you invent something. You go from not knowing anything to knowing everything about it just by an invention of a comment or a thought. So, what I found when people claim they’ve seen a UFO, you just get them to describe it. And then you get them to the edge where they then want to say it’s an alien. And then you simply tell them, “You started out by saying you did not know what it was. End of conversation! You have no evidence to say that you know what it is.” (Tyson)

It is evident that Tyson’s sense of the word *unidentified* is suggestive of something that cannot be known on any level. According to this understanding of the word *unidentified* when an individual claims to have seen a UFO, then said individual cannot claim to know anything at all about the object witnessed. Given this sense of the word *unidentified*, then it is understandable why Tyson would assume that one would be committing a logical fallacy popularly known as the *argument from ignorance*. However, many words in the English language can have different senses as to their meaning. The word *unidentified* is no exception.

2. EXAMPLES IN SCIENCE, WHICH SUPPORT THE SOPHISTICATED VIEW

The simple view asserts that any knowledge about object cannot be possessed on any level, if it is labeled as *unidentified*. On the other hand, while the sophisticated view concedes that some objects can be *unidentified* in the sense that nothing can be known about an object, it concomitantly allows for the view in which there can be knowledge about an object witnessed that is labeled as *unidentified*. Here are four examples from various scientific disciplines, which provide support for the sophisticated view.

¹ The spelling of the word *Amaz!ng* is spelled correctly in this instance, i.e., the exclamation mark belongs.

² Italic added for emphasis.

³ Italic added for emphasis.

Example #1- Unidentified Researcher:

While I was perusing NASA's Web site, I stumbled upon a photo (below) of an individual. This individual was labeled as "Unidentified Researcher." The exact quote is:

An Unidentified Researcher Looks Over the Wiring Connecting the Airborne Precipitation Radar (APR-2) During a Flight Aboard the NASA DC-8 Aircraft. (NASA, *Unidentified Researcher*)



Figure 1. (NASA, *Unidentified Researcher*)

According to Tyson's reasoning, NASA should not assert any knowledge about the object, given that said object is labeled as *unidentified*. According to the simple view, one should not assert that one even sees a person in this photograph, since the word *unidentified* was utilized with respect to this photo. But, in fact, NASA knows quite a bit about this object. First and foremost, NASA knows it is a researcher. Furthermore, it is self-evident that the object in question is: a human being, wears blue jeans, wears glasses, Asian, holding a writing object, holding a note pad, wearing a long sleeved shirt, sitting, wearing a badge, looking over the computer and so on.

So how is it that one can possess so much knowledge about an object that is labeled as *unidentified*? It is because this word, like many other words in the English language, can have other senses as to its meaning. Hence, the person that NASA is alluding to is unidentified because they do not know the name of the person, but the things they do know, as pointed out above, suggests that the object is a researcher albeit an unidentified one. Nevertheless, the simple view would not allow us to admit we have any knowledge about the object. The simple view would have us think that all we see is a blob, i.e., something that is there, but not enough data to entertain any reasonable hypothesis about said object at all.

Example #2- Unidentified Octopus:



Figure 2. Photograph courtesy Bedford Institute of Oceanography. (National Geographic)

According to National Geographic:

An unidentified purple octopus (pictured) is one of 11 potentially new species found this month during a deep-sea expedition off Canada's Atlantic coast, scientists say.

This is yet another example in which science applies the word *unidentified* with reference to an object. How is it that these scientists refer to this object as an octopus and yet assert it is unidentified? According to the simple view this makes no sense. Moreover, one should not assert anything at all. Of course, the answer is that this object is unidentified in the sense

that scientists have never seen this particular new species of octopus. Hence, these scientists have formulated a reasonable hypothesis, given the available data. For example: it looks like an octopus, it is purple, it has tentacles, and it is underwater off Canada's Atlantic coast. These data alone provide one with all sorts of knowledge about the object—at the very least that it is an octopus. Nevertheless, the simple view encourages a view in which a scientist sees only a blob; therefore, one cannot draw any conclusion nor entertain any sort of reasonable hypothesis about what one has witnessed.

Example #3 - Unidentified F Ring Objects:

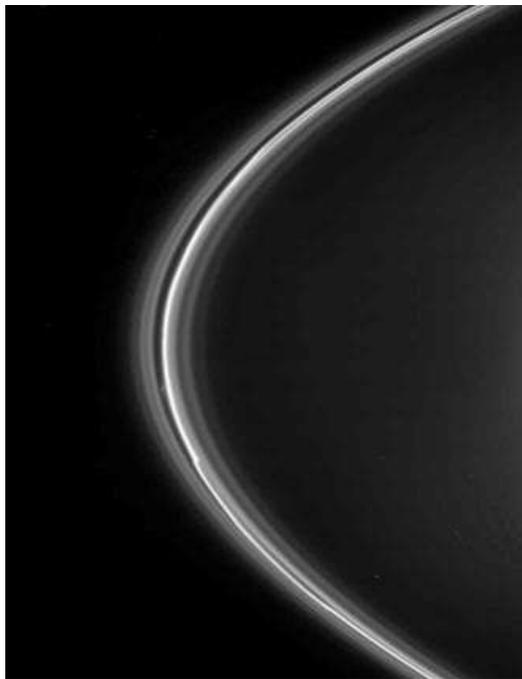


Figure 3. (NASA, *Unidentified F Ring Objects*)

The caption to this photo as presented in NASA's Web site is "Unidentified F Ring Objects." In addition, NASA states this about these objects:

Scientists are trying to determine whether these features are solid moonlets that help control the ring or just loose clumps of particles within the ring.

Hence, NASA asserts that the F Ring is composed of objects that are either "solid moonlets" or "loose clumps of particles." However, according to the simple view, scientists should not assert anything about what the F Ring is composed of. However, as with the previous examples presented above, scientists merely utilized the process of elimination. That is to say, they know what it is not, and therefore, they deduced that the F Ring is composed of either solid moonlets

or loose clumps of particles. Consequently, it is in this sense that the “F Ring objects” are *unidentified*. Moreover, given this sense of the word *unidentified*, scientists can entertain a reasonable hypothesis, given the available data.

Example #4 - Unidentified Russala:



Figure 4. Fruitbody of an unidentified *Russula* species growing under pines and showing pale pink coloration of the cap and the stipe. [© Jim Deacon]. (University of Edinburgh)

The caption reads that this mushroom is an *unidentified* *Russula*. How can this be? How can the object be unidentified, yet, simultaneously be asserted as being a “*Russula* species growing in the pines and showing pale pink coloration of the cap and the stipe” (University of Edinburgh). It is unidentified in the sense that the scientists have not yet identified this particular mushroom as to the particular kind of *Russula* it belongs to. Nevertheless, given the available data, it is reasonable to hypothesize that it is a mushroom of the *Russula* species, albeit an unidentified one. Nevertheless, the simple view asserts that no reasonable inference or hypothesis should be made from this image, not even that it is a mushroom.

3. THE SOPHISTICATED VIEW AND UFOs

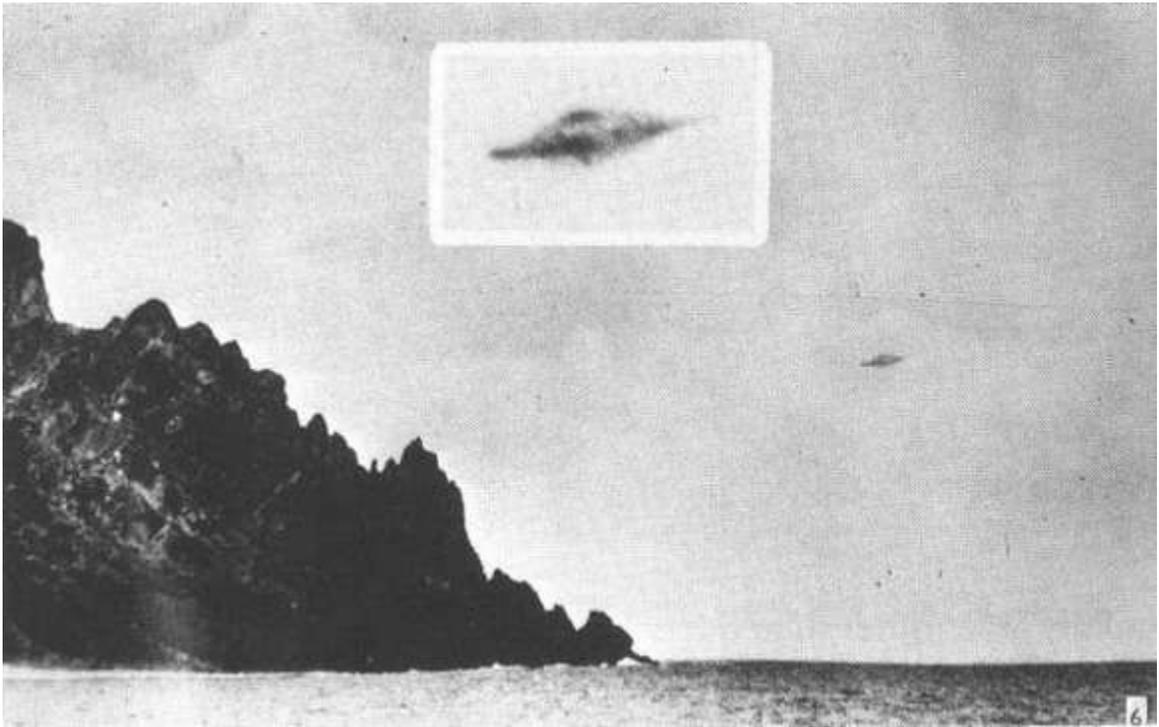


Figure 5. This photo, from a series of photos of an unidentified flying object, was taken by Almiro Barauna (an official Navy photographer) from a Brazilian Navy ship on January 16, 1958 off Trinidad Island (Brazilian Navy).

The unidentified flying object as shown above was witnessed by 48 individuals that consisted of scientists (geological survey team) and various military personnel (*UFO Evidence*). Captain Viegas stated:

The first view was that of a disc shining with a phosphorescent glow, which, even in daylight, appeared to be brighter than the moon...it followed its path across the sky, changing to a tilted position; its real shape was clearly outlined against the sky: that of a flattened sphere encircled, at the equator, by a large ring or platform.” (Kean 198-199)

The photographs were analyzed by the Brazilian Navy and released to the public by the president of Brazil, Juscelino Kubitschek. Note that this craft has no horizontal or vertical stabilizers, and no evidence of propulsion. It would seem that despite what the simple view encourages, one can still gain quite a bit of knowledge about what has been witnessed, given the testimonies and associated photographs. That is to say, given the available data and by utilizing the process of elimination along with utilizing the categories of identification that Project Blue Book Special Report 14 has provided for the investigator (these categories will be addressed shortly), then one can assert a reasonable hypothesis: It is an extraterrestrial craft. It is uniden-

tified in the sense that, although it is concluded it is extraterrestrial, it is not known what planet it is from, what species made the craft, their intentions are not known and so on (Friedman 194; Kean 198-199; *UFO's are Real*).

At this point, it should be obvious that the word *unidentified* does not necessarily entail a view in which nothing can be known about an object. Accordingly, if one is to fully appreciate the different senses of the word *unidentified* in ufology, then one must delve into the historical understanding of its usage within the context of military investigations into UFOs. It is within this context that not only did the different senses of the word *unidentified* evolve, but also the term *UFO* was born. Edward J. Ruppelt “organized and was chief of the Air Force’s Project Blue Book” from its inception up until September of 1953, and it was he who coined the term *UFO* as a replacement for the term *Flying Saucer* (Ruppelt 7).⁴ Interestingly, the Air Force designated the unofficial title to some individuals from the Foreign Technology Division as *UFO Officers*. Apparently, these UFO Officers were employed as early as 1960s to at least the 1980s.⁵ These UFO Officers’ job was to investigate any unusual sighting over an air force base (“Code Red”; Hogan).

While there were other preceding US governmental studies of UFOs, i.e., Project Sign (1948) and Project Grudge (1949-1951), I shall concentrate on Project Blue Book—established after Project Grudge—for the purposes of this writing with its Special Report No. 14, for it is a prime example of the sophisticated view. Project Blue Book Special Report No. 14 has 10 identification categories listed for the evaluation of potential UFOs:

1. Balloon
 2. Astronomical
 3. Aircraft
 4. Light Phenomenon
 5. Birds
 6. Clouds, dust, etc.
 7. Other
 8. Psychological Manifestations
 9. Insufficient Information
 10. Unknown
- (*Project 10*)⁶

While some of the identification categories need no explanation, nevertheless, I shall take the liberty of illuminating the ones, which perhaps need some clarification. For example, *light phenomenon* deals with uncommon natural phenomena such as light refractions, mirages, sun dogs, inversion-layer images, and distortions caused by airborne ice (*Project 12*). *Other* represents “[t]he less frequent but common objects, such as, kites, fireworks, rockets, contrails,

⁴ Please note that officially Project Blue Book would refer to UFOs as UAOs (Unidentified Aerial Objects). These two terms are synonymous.

⁵ I am not aware if these UFO Officers still exist at air force bases.

⁶ For the purposes of this writing I present the categories of identification in somewhat of a different order from the original Project Blue Book Special Report 14.

and meteorological phenomena like small tornadoes” (*Project 11-12*). *Psychological manifestations* is an identification category in which sightings were based on “[r]eligious fanaticism, a desire for publicity, or an over-active imagination” (*Project 11-12*). Consequently, after an investigation, these potential unidentified objects would obviously become *identified*, i.e., the first eight categories. The two key identification categories are the *insufficient information* and *unknown*. Both of these identification categories would go under the heading of *unidentified*, but in two different senses. Moreover, it is these two identification categories, which the word *unidentified* can be properly construed within ufology. Project Blue Book Special Report No. 14 defines *insufficient information* and *unknown* thusly:

INSUFFICIENT INFORMATION – This identification category was assigned to a report when, upon final consideration, there was some essential item of information missing, or there was enough doubt about what data were available to disallow identification as a common object or some natural phenomenon. *It is emphasized that this category of identification was not used as a convenient way to dispose of what might be called “poor unknowns”,⁷ but as a category for reports that, perhaps, could have been one of several known objects or natural phenomena. No reports identified as INSUFFICIENT INFORMATION contain authenticated facts or impressions concerning the sighting that would prevent its being identified as a known object or phenomenon. (Project 12)*

UNKNOWN – This designation in the identification code was assigned to those reports of sightings wherein the description of the object and its maneuvers could not be fitted to the pattern of any known object or phenomenon. (*Project 12*)

It is the identification category of *unknown* that the Air Force was only interested in. Ruppelt makes this abundantly clear:

If all the UFO reports that the Air Force has received in the past eight years could be put in this “psychological quirk” category, Project Blue Book would never have been organized. It is another class of reports that causes the Air Force to remain interested in UFO’s. This class of reports are called “Unknowns.” (Ruppelt 17)

Hence, the sophisticated view incorporates both the *insufficient information* and *unknown* as categories for identification of UFOs. However, it is the *unknown* sense of the word *unidentified*, which allows one to identify all sorts of things about an object, e.g., it being lenticular, glowing, metallic, silent, fast, maneuvers impossible by our current technology. And it is this sense of the word *unidentified*, which allows one to entertain reasonable hypothesis, given the available data, that in this case it is a UFO in the extraterrestrial sense.

⁷ Italic added for emphasis.

Does the category of unknown necessarily entail an extraterrestrial craft? The simple answer is “No.” It could be the case there is some sort of natural phenomenon that has not been identified as anything we are aware of, but enough data available to at least entertain a reasonable hypothesis that indeed it is some sort of natural phenomenon. It could also be the case that it is some animal that is not recognized as any known animal that we are aware of—not even if it is mammal, reptile, insect, etc. — but enough data in which one could at least reasonably conclude that it is some sort of lower life form, and therefore, be considered unidentified in the unknown sense of the word. However, these kinds of unknowns are not what UFO investigators such as Project Blue Book and other serious investigators (then and now) were concerned with. It was understood that “unknown” was suggestive of something that was not manufactured on planet Earth and “the description of the object and its maneuvers could not be fitted to the pattern of any known object or phenomenon” (*Project 12*). Finally, it could be the case that it is some sort of top secret craft, but unlikely given the criteria that must be met. Let me explain.

Ufologists are concerned with something, which exhibits characteristics of something that is created and controlled by something that is evidently more intelligent, technologically more advanced than our own, and extremely different—exhibiting physics that is not based on human conventional knowledge of applied physics. The various top secret air craft are not extremely different. They are fast, but loud, and generally follow the type of maneuvers, acceleration and deceleration that all human air craft exhibit in varying degrees. That is, the physics that these top secret craft follow is based on conventional human knowledge of applied physics in aerodynamics.

Conversely, if an object is lenticular, glowing, silent, fast, maneuvers in such a way that is impossible by our current technology (e.g., making right angle turns at high speeds with no vertical or horizontal stabilizers at 10,000 mph), seems to be made of some sort of metal, and is established as something that is not a “natural” phenomenon nor any lower life form, nor a top secret air craft that exhibits conventional knowledge of physics, then it is reasonable to consider a hypothesis that *this* UFO is suggestive of extraterrestrial origin, given the available data. The craft from the photo above was taken almost 60 years ago, and there are cases of these kinds of craft before we broke the sound barrier. It is not reasonable to assume that these kinds of very advanced craft would be kept secret for over half a century. Even our current craft aren’t able to achieve the level of sophisticated maneuvers coupled with high velocity in the context of extreme acceleration and deceleration as with these unknown craft from well over a half a century ago.

I would also add that an unidentified object in the unknown sense could display other capabilities that human technology could not replicate, e.g., a tractor beam as in the Coyne case in which a green beam of light pulled a helicopter up from an altitude of 1,700 feet to about 3,800 feet. This occurred in 1973(cf. *UFO’s are Real; UFOs - It Has Begun; Zeidman; Haines and Weinstein; Kean 212*). Is there a chance of being in error when drawing up a hypothesis? Of course there is. But knowledge cannot advance if a hypothesis is not tested in some fashion. This is how knowledge is gained, and therefore, not by standing in the sidelines “making proclamations without investigation” as nuclear physicist Stanton Friedman asserts in many of his talks and interviews. It is reasonable to assume, given the available data that some of these

UFOs are of extraterrestrial origin, and yet, are unidentified because we do not know: their exact origin, what kind of species they are, etc.

Consequently, the word *unidentified* can have different senses in its meaning, i.e., insufficient information and unknown.

In addition, Tyson commits a *fallacy of equivocation*, when he ‘attacks’ individuals who assert that they have seen a UFO in the extraterrestrial sense. The fallacy of equivocation is when a word or phrase is used in different senses or meanings within the same argument purposefully or accidentally (Copi and Cohen 163-165,178). Tyson assumes that when an individual utilizes a word *unidentified* in the context of seeing a UFO, then that individual is claiming to have no knowledge at all of what was witnessed by said individual, i.e., “You just said you didn’t know what it was ‘cause you said it was unidentified” (Tyson). Accordingly, Tyson bases his argument from this perspective. However, all things being equal, when an individual claims to have witnessed a UFO in the extraterrestrial sense, s/he is not claiming that there can be no knowledge of the object witnessed nor is the individual arguing from ignorance. The witness is utilizing the word *unidentified* from the unknown sense of the word, whether s/he consciously realizes it or not. Hence, it is in this sense that Tyson commits the fallacy of equivocation when he constructs his arguments against UFO witnesses and ufologists alike.

CONCLUSION

This writing has demonstrated that there can be two senses of the word *unidentified*, i.e., insufficient information and unknown—the sophisticated view. In addition, this writing also demonstrated that Tyson equivocates when he argues against those who have claimed to have witnessed a UFO in the extraterrestrial sense.

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