

*"Stripping the UFO phenomenon of its irrational layer"*

**Foreword by Professor André Lebeau, Former chairman of the Centre National d'Etudes Spatiales (CNES) [French National Center for Space Studies]**

It is not looked on highly in certain scientific circles to be preoccupied with phenomena that are deemed to come under the heading of popular mythology or that are, at any rate, outside the realm of science. Such was the case with stones falling from the sky, which was long considered in our country to be the stuff of fable. However, the day that a meteorite shower over the town of Laigle permitted a collective and indisputable observation, it entered into the domain of science. One century later NASA, no doubt hastily, elevated these stones to proof of the existence of primitive life on Mars.

Phenomena of this type pose a preliminary problem for the scientific approach: does a scientific fact exist?

When the phenomenon is a matter of experimentation, the criterion to be used is simple; the reproducibility of the experiment is the touchstone and furnishes the fact that must then be interpreted. But the situation is more difficult when the phenomenon is not open to experimentation, when repeated observation is the only basis on which one can go, as is the case in astronomy and for the most part in geophysics. However, when the fact, albeit rare, is collectively and indisputably visible, it is easy to elevate it to the status of scientific object. The existence of eclipses, comets, and novas has been recognized since ancient times, even though their interpretation long contained - and sometimes still contains - a religious dimension. Thus collective and simultaneous observation plays the same role as the reproducibility of experiments.

This is not true when the event is not only rare but discrete as well, and when there is a very small amount of evidence at each occurrence, which opens the door to various suspicions. Unidentified flying objects, or UFOs, fall into this category. One runs up against additional difficulties in the case of UFOs, firstly that of how many human activities, especially since the beginning of the space age, have generated atmospheric phenomena the origin of which is not immediately ascertainable by those who observe them. In any case, UFOs, the origin of which cannot be attributed to either a human source or a natural mechanism that has been identified by science, are mixed in with a background noise the origin of which, although difficult to identify, is not at all mysterious.

Moreover, and above all, the existence of unexplained manifestations, both in the atmosphere and occasionally on the surface of the earth, inevitably gives rise to a fundamental question: are we alone in the universe? Could some of these phenomena be the work of extraterrestrial beings? This question gives the UFO issue a sociological, media-related, and even religious dimension in a domain that is not that of science and scientific methods. And it is the very existence of this dimension that elicits reactions of rejection in the scientific community.

However, a dispassionate examination of the situation should lead those who believe in the value of scientific method to consider that the very existence of a strong irrational environment is another reason to apply the precepts of this method to the issue of UFOs.

COMETA has tried its luck at this in the report that it is presenting, supported, namely, by the work performed by GEPAN, which later became SEPRA. The significant place granted to sightings, to testimonies, and to the analysis of cases that have been explained shows the major role played here by the establishment of facts. But we also find in this