

The Hermeneutics of Ancient Astronaut Theory

Matthew E. Johnson

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“Only when I have first understood the motivating meaning of the question can I even begin to look for an answer. It is not artificial in the least to reflect upon the presuppositions implicit in our questions. On the contrary, it is artificial not to reflect upon these presuppositions. It is quite artificial to imagine that statements fall down from heaven and that they can be subjected to analytic labor without once bringing into consideration why they were stated and in what way they are responses to something. That is the first, basic, and infinitely far-reaching demand called for in any hermeneutic undertaking.”

- Hans-Georg Gadamer. “Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy.” In *The Transformation of Philosophy: Hermeneutics, Rhetoric, Narrative*: 333-334.

I recently came across an episode of Ancient Aliens on the History Channel that spent an enigmatic hour describing the ruins of Puma Punku in the highlands of Bolivia. The precise angles with which the giant granite boulders at Puma Punku were sliced into slabs is nothing short of incredible. Any way you look at it, Puma Punku is a great feat of engineering. How could an ancient primitive civilization have accomplished this?

In spite of myself, this episode had me fascinated. I think what was most captivating about it was one part their profound creativity speculating about the evidence and one part the passion that so obviously drove these “ancient astronaut theorists.” These guys were just loving this stuff. They were in their element; this is what they live for.

My first reaction was, of course, to laugh at how ridiculous these guys were with their implausible beliefs (and with their wild hair). But the more I reflected on it afterward, the more sympathetic I became, not because they’ve won me over to ancient astronaut theory but because of the daring way they’ve chosen their beliefs. These self-proclaimed “ancient astronaut theorists” seem to choose their particular hermeneutic approach based on its explanatory scope and on an aesthetic taste-based evaluation of the results of its application. In other words, they interpret the evidence as saying that aliens interfered with ancient human history because (1) it so easily explains much that we don’t understand about ancient history, and (2) it’s just really awesome. And strangely enough, I think I have now developed a soft spot in my heart for ancient alien theorists, and in a weird way I envy the strength of their convictions.

While this seems like an extreme case, I’m not sure it really is. I think that everyone forms their beliefs roughly in this way, religious or otherwise. It’s hard to deny that our beliefs serve a practical purpose in our emotional and social lives, giving us hope or explanation or passion or meaning. What makes the “ancient astronaut theorists” so absurd? I think it is simply that they choose their beliefs more explicitly and more directly in opposition to popular opinion than most of us do. To speculate, maybe their beliefs about aliens serves a purpose in the way their lives are infused with meaning. In that way, I’m not too different, except for maybe in the specifics.

I think that when we talk of presuppositional beliefs, religious or otherwise, it is important to

explore why we hold our beliefs, or as Gadamer says, to uncover the “motivating meanings.” Sometimes it’s just superficial to talk about the actual content that we can articulate and ignore our motivations that drive our attachment to it.

If we’re interested in doing honest hermeneutics with fellow hermeneuts, we need to turn the microscope on ourselves. Hermeneutics, the task of interpreting of the world in which we find ourselves already entrenched, is always one of self-discovery. Why do I believe what I believe? What motivates me to hold these beliefs? It’s a bottomless project, Gadamer reminds us, but a fruitful one (“Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy,” 334).

What I think is so remarkable about these particular ancient astronaut theorists is that, against all opposition, they have decided to interpret the world in this way. And I suspect they are able to articulate and defend exactly what most of us wish we could uncover about ourselves. They’ve played their cards and put down their chips, while the rest of us sit and wonder what mysteries our hands hold.

But at our core, I think we’re all ancient astronaut theorists with our implausible beliefs (and sometimes even wild hair), and I think that’s really okay. Our interactions with our friends and with strangers on the street often make us play cards we didn’t know we held. Our beliefs are secured in place by support structures that we can’t see, sustained by reasons we can’t articulate. So hermeneutics is archaeology. The more we interpret, the more we reinterpret and discover ourselves. And who knows; maybe in the ruins of Puma Punku, we’ll find a granite monolith inscribed with our deepest reasons.

When we’re doing formal philosophy or having a casual conversation, there is so easily a tendency to talk past each other. Our ideas are, it seems to me, often built on intuitive hunches, and we are sometimes convinced of them long before we are able to articulate why. If Gadamer is right, and self-discovery is an endless task, is it possible actually to meet someone in conversation, or will we always pass them by in one way or another? Does a common language or vocabulary secure a shared medium between two conversation partners, or is it just impossible to come to complete grammatical agreement about meanings and reasons? How do we and how should we encounter others in the task of hermeneutics?