

Finding Aliens: SETI, Talking Lions and Wittgenstein

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“Nothing is so difficult as not deceiving oneself.” – Ludwig Wittgenstein

US philosopher Thomas Nagel’s 1974 piece, “What is it like to be a bat?” still maintains a strong relevance in current discussions about mind.^[1] It remains the weapon of choice for those unsatisfied with various reductionist theories on the subject, including the notion of “scientism” – that human understanding remains the captain and commander of what occurs in the universe and what can be said about it. What counts, for Nagel, is the “subjective character of experience”.

The central point here is that the organism in question possesses that experience, what it is like, essentially, to be that living entity. The bat’s subjective experience, characterised by echolocation and the tactical use of high-frequency sounds, is beyond the human sense of experience.

As Nagel himself suggests, imagining such things as “webbing on one’s arms”, possessing poor vision, assessing receiving reflected high-frequency sounds signals for location and communication purposes, and spending “the day hanging upside down by one’s feet in an attic” only ever relays what “it would be like *forme* to behave as a bat behaves.” How then, can we know what it would be like for a bat to be one, rather than an anthropomorphised bat, stacked with human imprints?

The question was hardly novel, and was one that had already done the philosophical rounds in different dress. Those familiar with Ludwig Wittgenstein’s withering logical analysis on communication would remember his fabled lion.

If a lion could speak, he stated unreservedly in his *Philosophical Investigations*, we would not understand him. He would have his own language games, with constructions specific to being a lion. Even if we could gather that the lion can talk, we are not necessarily capable of gathering what the generated meaning would be. There might be rudimentary hints: One roar might suggest a zebra, two a lame one, but delving deeply into concepts of ethics, aesthetics and humour would be quite something else.^[2] We would only think, like Nagel’s bats, that we really understood what it would be saying. Context is the perennially limiting break on inquiry.

All of this suddenly comes into the forefront with the announcement of some \$100 million to be footed by Russian venture capitalist Yuri Milner for the search for intelligent alien life through his Breakthrough Prize Foundation. Milner is famed for his financial stabs, notably on Facebook Inc. and Twitter Inc. But he wishes to add succour to an extraterrestrial project that will involve a team based at the University of California, Berkeley to gather more data from outer space in a single day than what was previously possible in a single year (*Wall Street Journal*, Jul 20).

Two radio telescopes will be utilised for the task: the Green Bank Telescope (100 metres) in West Virginia and the 64 metre Parkes Telescope in New South Wales, Australia.

To get a sense of scale, Geoff Marcy of the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) suggests that the search “will be 100 times better than any previous search for intelligent life in the universe.” To date, signals from the outer rim have been meagre since 1960, when astronomer Frank Drake pointed his 30 metre radio telescope to the stars. In August 1977, the Big Ear telescope at Ohio State University netted what seemed to be an atypical radio signal from deep space. Nothing, as yet, has come of it.

ET talk certainly captivates in a seductive, and exclusive manner. It is the talk of the gentleman’s club or the abductee’s fantasy. It reels in the big guns of the astrophysics community and the UFO spotters. In an odd way, it is the great leveller. The project does, after all, come with the blessing of the biggest gun of all, Stephen Hawking. In Milner’s glowing words, “He is the ideological leader” which immediately gets one thinking how humans are incapable of avoiding ideology in their quest for the new.

The entire project seems powered by an anthropomorphic assumption: the life forms inhabiting the outer galaxies must be “intelligent” (and our perspective of it at that), and will have a romanticised ability to send radio signals. The Queen’s astronomer Lord Martin Rees, also an advisor to Milner’s funded project, suggested in 2010 that aliens might be “staring us in the face”, a lovely suggestion that entails they would be staring in the first place, fully equipped with visual apparatus. [3]

There is a distinct bias, in fact, against the discovery in this entire enterprise of so-called “non-intelligent” life forms, a form of institutionalised scientific discrimination. We demand, if not our equals, then our challenging, even oppressing superiors. SETI’s own site emphasises the slanted question: “Are we the Universe’s only child – our thoughts its only thoughts?”[4]

Linked assumptions abound: the presence of a human language, presuming that such intelligent life forms would speak it; and a Hollywood sense that, even if the organism in question could speak, we would actually understand it. (The onus, and onerous burden, would seem to be on the alien.) Nothing illustrates this better than Milner’s contest about creating messages to send to ET figures in space.

The competition involves \$1million worth in prizes and aims to “learn about the potential languages of interstellar communication and to spur global discussion on the ethical, philosophical issues surrounding communication with intelligent life beyond Earth.” The devil lies, not even in the detail as the mirror-like projection that we are going to find ourselves. This is less a search for difference than a quest for similarity.

There is no doubt that incidental benefits will accrue from what otherwise seems to be a conceptually misplaced mission. Good science can still be done from folly-ridden premises. Astrophysicists have every reason to be thrilled about the prospects of star and planetary mapping, the gathering of even vaster amounts of cosmic data. There is also at the core of this venture, an attempt on Milner’s part to link venture capital projects to what might seem like esoteric science, a bridge he has noted is absent in the field. But as it will transpire, we won’t necessarily be any wiser than Nagal’s anthropomorphised bat or Wittgenstein’s inscrutable lion.

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