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Against messaging extraterrestrial intelligence (METI)

For some years a small minority within the SETI community has aggressively and persistently proselytized in favor of mankind initiating communication with putative extraterrestrials by broadcasting our desire for contact with them using the U.S.'s largest radio telescope, Arecibo, as a very high power radio transmitter [1].

Let me not mince words. METI ("messaging extraterrestrial intelligence"), as it is called, is about the worst quasi-scientific idea since eugenics, with an even greater capacity for harm. METI deserves the pejorative descriptive of "quasi-science" because it wraps itself in a thin veneer of science while actually misleading the general public.

METIists claim upon their own authority that ET must know that we are a technological civilization from our electromagnetic leakage, such as from our terrestrial TV broadcasts and radar. Therefore they would give themselves permission to proactively send signals from Arecibo (or some other high power transmitter). They neglect to mention that their intentional signal would be some 10,000 times stronger than the leakage; and that whereas the leakage in its sum would resemble broadband background noise and would not likely be recognized as having been derived from an intelligent source even if did not fall below ET's detection threshold, the signal METIist propose to send would be narrow band and explicitly designed to be detectable.

METIists claim that signaling ET is harmless because they know for a fact that ET is altruistic and benign. They reason that only altruistic civilizations would not self-destruct. However, they have yet to show anyone the database upon which they base this conclusion (obviously, no such database of ETs exists). Sharks don't self-destruct. Are dogs always benign just because they are man's best friend? Ask a rabbit if it thinks so. Every species is benign toward some species, and yet life threatening to others. If there are 10,000 ET civilizations out there (a number Frank Drake often uses), would each and every one be peacefully inclined toward Earth? If, as METIist would have it, they are able to tune into our newscasts already, then they must also know what miserable creatures we can be.

METIlist then counter that even if there are some bad galactic actors, who cares? What could go wrong? After all they are too far away, right? Even the greatest geniuses of old, such as Newton, Aristotle, Di Vinci, Franklin, could never imagine nuclear or biological weapons. With SETI we seek to learn what actually resides peacefully or lurks threateningly out there. METIlist would simply act upon their religious belief and impose it on the rest of us.

Like the religious fanatics that they are at their core, METIlist try to convert us if possible. But intent on saving our souls even if we decline their offer, their central organization, METI International has boldly proclaimed that given the keys to Arecibo, or some similar facility, they will broadcast with or without permission from the rest of us, as perhaps best expressed through a resolution of the UN Security Council.

J. Gertz

Reference

1. J. Gertz, Reviewing METI: A critical analysis of the arguments, *J. British Interpl. Soc.* **69**, 31-36 (2016).