

SEEKING CONTACT: THE RELEVANCE OF HUMAN HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

When the best physical scientists study the universe around us, they report it as it is, not as they wish it would be. Yet some do not observe that standard when they predict the nature of an extraterrestrial civilization or the consequences of our coming into contact with such an alien society. Too often, we get opinions instead of systematic analyses drawing on the only data base we have – human history. Many authors have been very selective in choosing analogies from the human past, ignoring much of the evidence provided by historians. Yet, as one astronomer acknowledged, assuming ourselves to be average has the highest probability of being right. This has significant implications for the debate about Active SETI.

Our predictions about the consequences of contact are necessarily speculative. Nonetheless, we should seize the opportunities we have to introduce greater objectivity. Historians, with their knowledge of and perspective on human behavior in contact situations, can make a valuable contribution. It is time for the participants in the Active SETI debate to acknowledge the relevance of the human experience.