

Is There Intelligent Life on Earth?

IN KEEPING WITH PROPER FLAG ETIQUETTE, I always try to bring the flag in before it gets too dark. But on some days it doesn't work out that way because, well, because I just forget.

Except for the unintended violation of flag etiquette I don't think my forgetfulness is anything to really worry about. Forgetting that I forget might be a cause for worry, but I obviously haven't done that. Of bigger concern to me right now is that I couldn't have spelled etiquette without the help of my spell checker ... but more on that later. Right now, this forgetfulness that will force me outside at night to retrieve the flag is merely the sign of a busy day and could happen to anyone—even you. In fact, why don't you join me, hypothetically, that is, as I open the door and head out toward the flagpole.

On this dark, unseasonably warm December night in central Pennsylvania, you and I can wander out in just our shirt sleeves and not feel too hurried by air that's too crisp or too cool. And, wonderfully, there are no clouds or bright city lights tonight to obscure the brilliant stars that draw our attention as we step out onto the porch. Since the moon hasn't yet risen, the stars are the only things lighting our way.

The flagpole is just down a short, familiar walk, and the starlight is all the light we'll need to reach it safely. Since I know the way and have often practiced the task ahead, my mind is free to focus on the stars and wonder—as I often do on nights like this—if there are other civilizations looking down on us right now. Is there intelligent life out there on some planet circling one of those stars?

You, hearing my thoughts (or perhaps my lips moved), respond with: "Is there intelligent life here?"

"Do you mean here on Earth?" I ask.

"Yes," you say, quickly adding, "present company excluded, of course."

I'm not sure you really meant that or were just being kind. But it was a nice thought and much appreciated, nevertheless.

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The Ground Rules

Aha, I think, looking from the star-bright unknown vastness of the heavens to the dirt of the earth at my feet, you've asked a far easier question to answer than I have, and I bound into it. I shall, I think, take the tried-and-true approach of substituting facts for appearances, and demonstrations for impressions.

But just as I am about to say *I think, therefore I am*, you remind me of the ground rules. You did say, after all, "present company excluded." Apparently, you didn't mean that as a compliment to my own obvious intelligence. You meant it as a ground rule. So I must search for evidence outside my own being, and it must be significant enough to overcome all evidence to the contrary. And then you begin to present a few facts and demonstrations of your own as you pull a couple of bucks out of your pocket, "just to make it interesting."

We agree we're talking about higher-level cognitive intelligence, not the dog-and-pony trick-learning kind. And its here-and-now presence, not its once-upon-a-time-ness, must be demonstrated.

"Have you ever noticed," you ask, "that everywhere you go on this planet you encounter signs and instructions? They're on street corners, doors, at the beach, inside boxes, on pay phones, and on package labels. Basically, they're instructions on how to do the simplest things.

"Why would *intelligent* creatures need such instructions? For example, your box of cornflakes provides you with the following instructions: 'To Open: Slide Finger Under Tab and Break Seal to Left and Right.' And then, once open, poor fool that you are, you need to be told: 'To Close: Insert Tab Here,' with a little arrow pointing out where the tab goes! Come on! Is it even possible to put the tab anywhere else? And that's just to help you start your day. One can only conclude you were either dumb when you bought the cornflakes or eating them will shrivel your brain. So, you must scratch from your list of possibles anyone who eats dry cereal!

"Did you ever notice that there are no labels on cans or jars of food with instructions on how to get *them* open?" you continue. "Of the three types of food containers—cardboard boxes, metal cans, and glass jars—cardboard boxes have got to be the easiest to open. Yet they're the only ones that come with any instructions. So, whoever is writing these instructions, scratch them from the list of possibles too."

Seeing you're on a roll, I don't interrupt.

"Now, the guy who invented the twist-off beer-bottle cap . . . that guy was a genius. And as a major exception to bottle labeling convention, those twist-off bottle caps come with instructions. And a good thing too."

One small inroad, I think. One small step toward making my point. Can beer drinkers be the key and a source of intellect on Earth? But you're attacking again as soon as I mention inventions like the

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cell phone, television, and computer.

"What!" you say. "It doesn't take any intelligence to turn *on* a TV set. In fact, some believe that it takes a great deal of intelligence to *not* turn one on!"

Weakly, I interject that I meant that it takes intelligence to *build* a TV set.

"Do you know anyone who has ever built one?" you retort. And suddenly, a great grin of enlightenment crosses your face and I feel as if I've walked myself into a trap. "What would you do if your TV set broke?" you snap.

"I suppose I'd replace it," I hesitantly venture in response, seeking some affirmation in your face that that was the right answer.

"Why wouldn't you have it fixed?"

Your question bites at the core of the argument and nurtures self-doubt concerning my ability to mount a proper defense of Earthly intelligence. You see, I know that my last resort would be to have some electric or electronic device fixed. First, I wouldn't know where to go, and second, I've never had much luck with that.

"And third," you say, reading my mind, "you never get the one you sent in back. You get another one just like it that works. It's the illusion of repair . . . the illusion of intelligence. Replace or repair in this world, my friend, is the same thing. There's no fixing going on!

"It's the same story with computers, except they hardly ever break. They either never work right in the first place or they get old, obsolete, and replaced. Putting one together is child's play, too. It's just a matter of connecting all the pieces properly. The cords and wires only fit together in one way, just like those toys with different-shaped blocks that on-

ly fit into the same-shaped hole. Success in that infant game, as in life in general, is only a matter of patience and persistence applied to a trial-and-error process."

Conversation Etiquette

Well, every good conversation has at least one listener. In really good conversations, listeners alternate, and by the look on your face I can see it's now your turn to listen and my turn to talk. But I take a few moments to think as I lower the flag, un-snap it, and hang it over my shoulder for the trip back to the house. I have a little experiment in mind in which you will play an important role. We head for the refrigerator in the kitchen.

Feeling the weight of the argument on your side, you patiently follow me into the kitchen and watch as I open the refrigerator and pull open the meat drawer. The bottom of the meat drawer, everyone knows, is the coldest place in the house except for the freezer compartment and the corner you're about to find yourself in.

From that stash I take two cold ones, keeping the Yuengling Lager for myself, handing you the Beck's Dark. With a practiced motion I twist off the Yuengling's cap and raise the bottle to my lips, anticipating that first cold swig—because I know that the Beck's uses a crown cap and even my callused hand would be challenged by any twist-off attempt.

I wait to see what you'll do, knowing full well there ain't no way an intelligent guy like me could lose a debate with a hypothetical character like you. Anyway, there's another reason I can't lose this argument.

The winner buys the pizza.