



Think Tanks!

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World War Z

The Tenth Man

The movie "World War Z" is one of my favorite movies. First of all because I happen to like zombie movies, but also for philosophical and practical reasons that are germane to the current SARS-Cov-2 outbreak.

In the movie, only one country was prepared for the virus that turned people into zombies - Israel. Why?

Because, in the movie, the Israelis adopted a page from the Catholic Church's position of applying a "Devil's Advocate" to ensure that a single, possibly erroneous, "herd mentality" does not proceed to an injustice. In the movie, they call it "The Tenth Man."

According to the story, the government of Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir missed critical signs that war was imminent because everyone agreed on interpreting the zeitgeist in exactly the same way; the result was devastating. Afterward, they created "The Tenth Man" to prevent this from happening again:

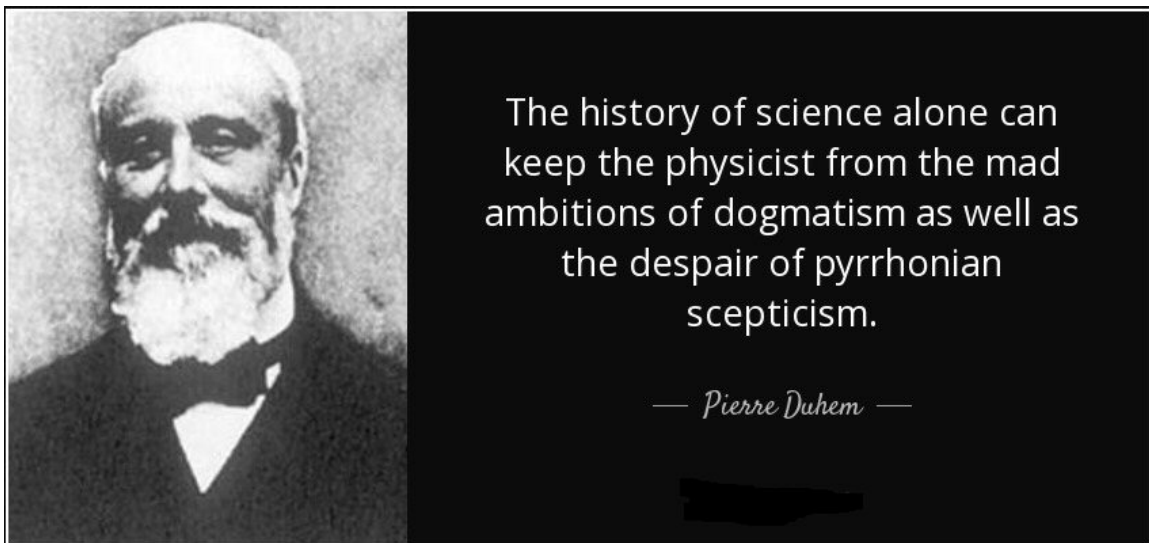
*"Following the recommendation of the Agranat Commission in 1973-1974, Military Intelligence established a Control Unit that was expected to play this role of the devil's advocate. Its responsibility was to produce a range of explanations and assessments of events that avoided relying on a single concept, as happened in 1973. Brooks puts it a bit more dramatically: if ten people are in a room, and nine agree on how to interpret and respond to a situation, the tenth man must disagree. His duty is to find the best possible argument for why the decision of the group is flawed."*¹

¹ Joustra, R.J. *The Tenth Man*, Capital Commentary, 11/01/2013

The idea is certainly not new as the already mentioned "Devil's Advocate" demonstrates, BUT, the application of the idea is relatively new to science, and its abdication in science has led to some real disasters in scientific development. Good examples would be in the "Global Warming" debate and the "Darwinian" debates where the loudest voices are heard to the exclusion of evidence-based contrary discussions, even when the loudest voices are just flat wrong.

S.P. Langley² understood "herd mentality" in the progress of science and used a metaphor:

... not wholly unlike a pack of hounds, which, in the long-run, perhaps catches its game, but where, nevertheless, when at fault, each individual goes his own way, by scent, not by sight, some running back and some forward; where the louder-voiced bring many to follow them, nearly as often in a wrong path as in a right one; where the entire pack even has been known to move off bodily on a false scent.



In the movie, it was The Tenth Man who, being a contrarian, sought the alternative answer in a think tank full of agreement.

A Chink in the Armor

Another reason I like the movie is because it addresses the concept that nature may disguise her weakness as her greatest strength. The fictitious virus of the movie avoids sick people, and the sick become the camouflage to fool the virus and reduce the incident rate.

This has a direct link to real-life wherein following pinocytosis, the Ebola virus engages the endosomal cholesterol transporter Niemann-Pick C1 protein which is indispensable for infection.³ Thus, patients with homozygous mutations in NPC1 are resistant to EBOV infection. Unfortunately, the prognosis of children with Niemann-Pick disease is otherwise poor, and often death occurs before the age of 12.

² Langley, S.P. *The History of a Doctrine*, SCIENCE, 12, p.74 (1888)

³ McElroy A.K., Mühlberger, E. Muñoz-Fontela C. Immune barriers of Ebola virus infection *Curr Opin Virol.* 2018 Feb; 28: 152–160. Published online 2018 Feb 16. doi: 10.1016/j.coviro.2018.01.010

Think Tanks

But the point here, is the failure of many "think tanks" to tolerate the gadfly, the odd-ball, The Tenth Man.

Anyone who has been a member of a Think Tank knows of that one guy, the pain in the neck, the one who just refuses to get on board with everyone else (why doesn't the Chair just remove him, anyway?)

The answer is because maybe, just maybe, the oddball gadfly, the iconoclast who can't seem to agree with the mainstream progression of ideas, may have an insight that leads to a better understanding of a current situation. Agreeing with the gadfly is not an imperative, but the group fails to listening to the gadfly at their own peril.

Molecular biologist Michael Syvanen pointed out that the homology trees produced by cladist algorithms based on DNA, or protein characteristics always draw phylogenetic trees,⁴ not because the branching icons are real but because that is the nature of the algorithm - to draw homology trees.⁵ The algorithm NEVER asks if the tree exists in the first place. As Aristotle put it "The nature of a ship is not in the timber." If you are in a room full of cladists, and you questions the validity of the iconic tree as even being a reasonable representation of evolutionary lineage, you are not likely to gain many friends - however, the evolutionary cladists are losing the philosophical (and evidence-based) battle.

When one enters a Think Tank, one is usually humbled by the vast array of controls, and switches, and pathways, as represented by the participants. Many of the controls may even be contradictory - there's a switch for "forward" a switch for "stop" and even a switch for "reverse"! All of these potential competing switches are out on the table and, given the situation, they are not all given equal weight, but they all remain viable possibilities in the network of thinking and strategizing. And you're going to get some annoying squeaky wheel in the background that just won't stop - before you remove the squeaker, you better listen to it, it may be the harbinger of a pending disaster - The Tenth Man.

What if you get into a tank and there is not a vast array of controls, but instead just one control marked "FORWARD" in an otherwise empty space? Yep, everyone in the room is in agreement. That's not a Think Tank, that's an "Echo Chamber" and that's why you can hear the same thing from every part of the room.

"Think Tanks" across the country are jumping on the "social distancing" bandwagon at the moment with regard to the SARS CoV-2 virus. They all agree that "social distancing" is an effective (indeed, the ONLY effective" immediate response. Where's the gadfly in the room, The Tenth Man, to question the mainstream and point out the very simply fact that the evidence in support of "social distancing" is not there - and indeed, the evidence is trying to point the tank in a different direction?

⁴ Syvanen, M. *Evolutionary Implication of Horizontal Gene Transfer*, Annual review of Genetics Vol. 46:341-358 (Volume publication date December 2012), First published online as a Review in Advance on August 29, 2012 <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-genet-110711-155529>

⁵ Sober E, Steel M, *Testing the Hypothesis of Common Ancestry*, J. Theor. Biol. (2002) 218, 395–408