

## Failed Experiment

By T. E. Stazyk

Over dinner, Dr. Jones raised his glass to Dr. Smith. "Congratulations. You win."

Smith smiled and nodded, "Thank you, my friend."

"There is no question. You were right. I admit it. The outcome was obvious from the beginning. We didn't need to let the experiment run so long."

"I agree. But it has been fascinating. Now the real work starts."

Jones and Smith were distinguished academics at PanGalactic University, a wholly-owned subsidiary of PanGalactic Corporation, the organization that controlled an empire of hundreds of planets. Academic departments at the university studied the history, culture, art and governance of the worlds that PanGalactic explorers had discovered and assimilated into the empire. The corporation maintained a vast fleet of explorer ships that scoured known space to find civilizations that might join the empire, or, preferably, uninhabited worlds whose space and resources could be used to relieve the pressures of the empire's vast population.

Both Jones and Smith were experts in the field of planetary development. They studied how civilizations rise and fall and the myriad worlds of the PanGalactic Empire were their laboratory. When they were both young lecturers they had often found themselves on the opposite sides of a debate that raged across all disciplines of the university. As PanGalactic had discovered more civilizations, they found an interesting anomaly in a small percentage of the populations. On most worlds, the sentient population had developed a scientific explanation for their existence. As civilization developed on those worlds, their scientists had identified the geological, meteorological and biological forces that combined to produce the organic compounds which after eons, became the

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building blocks of life. These civilizations were generally peaceful and technologically advanced, politically stable and economically prosperous.

However, a small percentage of planetary cultures were different. Instead of scientific explanations, they had developed complex allegorical explanations for the development of their planets and its life forms. An entire school of PanGalactic University was dedicated to studying these different belief systems. Students of allegory, as it was called, were fascinated by the variety and imaginativeness of many of the beliefs, and the huge variety of art forms that seemed to have been generated by the beliefs. While on a scientific planet, the story of how life arose could be represented graphically with chemical and mathematical notation, the people on planets with allegorical concepts would depict the cataclysmic events of world creation and destruction in stirring and imaginative art work.

Scholars at PanGalactic University had spent careers debating why only some civilizations adopted allegorical explanations for the rise of life on their planets and Jones and Smith had both specialized in the study of such worlds. Early in their careers, they had had a professional disagreement about the ramifications of what they were studying. Jones believed that the existence of allegorical beliefs on some planets was an isolated and harmless phenomenon. After all, each civilization incorporated into the PanGalactic Empire was peaceful and technologically advanced. It didn't matter what the people thought about where they came from.

Smith, on the other hand, was very concerned about allegorical worlds. He saw them as a potential time bomb, threatening the peace of the Empire. Inhabitants of scientific worlds had nothing to argue about – they might use different notation, but the concepts were the same – laws of physics and chemistry were immutable throughout known space and the mechanisms by which life forms arose were well understood and agreed upon. Allegorical worlds, however, had radically different, often inconsistent beliefs about the

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development of life. Smith feared that when civilizations merged, the differing beliefs might cause psychological or even social upheavals.

“Nonsense,” thundered Jones after Smith had presented a paper outlining his latest views. “You’re imagining things. These allegorical beliefs are simply indigenous concepts that the inhabitants of a particular planet happen to have. People may take them seriously, but they never get in the way of cooperation. Your idea that different allegorical beliefs may someday lead to conflict stretches credulity beyond the breaking point.”

“Does it?” responded the more composed Smith. “Think about it. The only contact the planets of PanGalactic have with each other is through imperial ambassadors. There is no direct communication. So of course the people of Fornax IX, for example, don’t know that the people of Laak Ar have a belief system completely inconsistent with theirs. On Fornax they worship their sun. The people of Laak Ar believe that their two suns are evil demons fighting to possess them. How would beings from those planets reconcile the differences?”

“Why would they have to?”

“It’s simple. If people learn that there are worlds with different explanations for the same things, the next question is going to be who is right.”

“An interesting intellectual exercise. Nothing more. Just what we do every day,” said Jones.

“Maybe it is an exercise for us, but for those people you are talking about a fundamental challenge to the way they think the universe works. I’m telling you, there will be problems. Such beliefs cannot be proven, and cannot be reconciled. On those planets they form the core of the way the people view themselves and their worlds. They aren’t going to sit down and discuss rationally whether the universe floats on a bed of molten rock or on the wings of mythical beasts. They’ll fight over it.”

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"You really are over reacting," said Jones. I'm your friend. And as your friend, I'm telling you that this sort of alarmist thinking is going to impair your stature as a theorist."

"I'm sorry you see it that way. But you have no idea how strongly I feel about this. I wish I could prove it to you."

"Impossible"

Smith continued to publish papers and make presentations and, as Jones had predicted, his credibility suffered among his colleagues. However, the military and government took a different view. They were continually looking for risks to the security of the Empire. They heard what Smith was saying and they were alarmed. They urged him to find a way to test his theory so that they could develop plans to avoid problems if he were right.

Jones and Smith continued to debate and discuss the problem until one day Jones proposed a friendly wager. "I have an idea on how you can test your theory."

"What do you propose?"

"If you are right, the introduction of diverse belief systems on a single planet would destabilize it."

"Exactly."

"Well, why don't we try it?"

"How? It would violate the Fundamental Rights conventions. I've submitted several proposals but none have been accepted for that reason. It can't be done."

"I think maybe it can. And I think we can even get your friends in the military to fund it. We can do the experiment we've always wanted to. And I'll bet you fifty Galactic credits your theories about people fighting over beliefs are wrong."

"Tell me what you are thinking," said Smith.

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“All we have to do is seed an uninhabited planet with primitive sentient life forms and inculcate them with different beliefs. You know, like those worker drones they have developed. They can be programmed with fairly complex thought structure. If we create a world where these creatures are programmed with inconsistent belief systems, we could see if they fight or live together peacefully. That should settle the issue.”

“You’re right. And they aren’t covered by the Fundamental Rights Charter. I’d love to do the experiment, but I can tell you already how it will turn out.”

“And I think it’s irresponsible of you to keep predicting dire outcomes without data. You owe it to everyone to test your theory. How long do you think it would take to get an answer from this experiment?”

“According to my latest research, I think that hostilities between groups with different beliefs would begin in one generation. In all of my models, planetary destruction due to internecine warfare takes place in anywhere from ten to one hundred generations.”

“Well, the labor drones they’ve developed have a lifespan that would let us observe that kind of generational change in just a few Galactic sweeps. Let’s put together a proposal for Colonel Kondrat and see if we can’t get something going.”

The wager between Jones and Smith ultimately led to PanGalactic Plan D, a joint project of the Imperial Armed Forces, PanGalactic University and the Toxus Corporation, one of PanGalactic’s largest industrial combines. Pursuant to the Plan D protocol, a small uninhabited planet in a remote part of a lightly explored spiral galaxy was identified as the test bed. A handful of sentient labor drones manufactured by Toxus were sent, tabula rasa, to the planet. The drones were assembled into groups and assigned geographical areas of the planet to develop for subsistence. Using various techniques, each of the groups was also indoctrinated with a different allegorical belief system. Each belief system was

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based on the concept that there was a supreme entity who was responsible for the creation and destruction of the world. The manifestation, behavior and temperament of each supreme entity varied, but the fundamental concept of a creator who was to be worshipped was the same for each group. Plan D followed strict experimental protocols and PanGalactic technicians were able to observe the experiment, but were not able to interfere in any way.

Jones and Smith participated as observers and also received regular updates on the project. From the very beginning, it was clear that Smith had been right. If anything, his estimates had been too optimistic. Almost as soon as the groups became aware of each other, violence erupted over their different beliefs. They had all been given language capability, but each group was coded with a different language system. The drones proved adept at learning each other's languages and quickly became aware of the differences between themselves.

"It looks like I'm winning," said Smith one day.

"What makes you say that?"

"One of the drone tribes on the test planet just enslaved another one."

"So?"

"The dominant tribe has asserted their superiority based on their perceived superiority of their beliefs. They claim that the power that they believe created their world is greater than all others. Therefore it is their duty and right to enslave the other tribes."

"That's absurd. An unprovoked attack based solely on ideology?"

"Have a look at the scans and see for yourself."

A short time later, Jones asked the PanGalactic Experimental Oversight Board to double check the Plan D methodology. "There must have been an error with the formulation of the drones. They are supposed to be sentient. They behave completely irrationally," he explained to Smith.

"Not at all. It's entirely within the scope of unexpected outcomes."

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“What! You expected that? They kill each other over these fictions? They allow themselves to be killed? They mutilate themselves? It makes no sense.”

“Relax. I didn’t say I predicted it. It simply is consistent with the experimental rubric. Irrational behavior was one of the expected outcomes.”

The reports continued.

“Terminate the experiment at once,” pleaded Jones. “It’s out of control. Did you see the latest briefing? One of them declared himself a deity. He claimed to be a direct descendent of the supreme entity. And they killed him for it. But a lot of the rest of them believed him. Now they’ve started a new tribe that’s attacking the others. They are out of control. And dangerous.”

“Now you are beginning to see my point,” said Smith. “This is what I feared from the beginning. You see the conflicts? What would happen if this sort of behavior spread throughout the Empire?”

Jones asked, “How many original tribes did we set up on that planet?”

“Six or eight. I’d have to check.”

“Don’t bother. It doesn’t matter. At last count they have broken into over one hundred twenty sub tribes. It is as if the basic ideologies we gave them are multiplying and mutating. And they all hate each other. They kill and enslave each other because of subtle differences in their belief systems. They turn their offspring into fanatics.”

“That’s surely an overstatement.”

“Well, the only difference is in the degree of hate they have for each other. Some will tolerate each other. Some kill each other virtually on sight. Did you see that report a while back? One group especially seems to think it is their duty to eliminate all the others or at least to get all other groups to join them. They’ve launched wars against other tribes. And even among their own people, they have instituted campaigns to weed out opposing views.”

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“Yes,” said Smith. “We’re looking at those crusades in more detail. Some of us aren’t sure whether they are motivated by ideology or economics. In fact, some of the tribes seem to have linked economic advancement to their ideology.”

Jones shuddered, “That’s a terrible combination; there is no stopping it.”

“Yet another example of what I was afraid of.”

“I say we stop the experiment. It’s gone too far. They have graduated beyond war and ad hoc persecution to organized genocide.”

“You want to ask the Ethics Board to look into it?”

“No,” said Jones. “I don’t care what the Ethics Board says. I concede the bet. There is no hope. It’s general warfare on the planet. They’ll wipe themselves out at this rate. All based on ideology. None of them ever stopped to question whether the irrational systems we gave them made any sense or were supportable by logic. And yet they are willing to kill over those beliefs. It makes no sense. We cannot let this menace escape.”

Smith’s communicator beeped and he consulted the screen. “I agree. And the Navy does to. They are recommending that the experiment be terminated at once and the test bed destroyed in accordance with the protocol.”

“Now we have to make sure nothing like this happens in the Empire.”

“Yes. We need mechanisms to shield the rest of our people from ideological planets.”