**Comment on the Primacy of Threats**

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We frequently are asked why TNT focuses on threats rather than goals and opportunities. This comment is an attempt to answer that question.

First, consider the data: Numerous studies find that people’s utility curves are steeper for losses than for gains. Although it depends on the circumstances, as a general principle their disutility for a loss is greater than their utility for an equivalent gain. Research on TNT’s discrepancy test has repeatedly shown that decisions about the acceptability of alternative futures are almost wholly determined by the unsatisfactory features of those alternatives. That is, choices are determined by the threat of having to live with those unsatisfactory features if the alternative future were to happen. And it is not a trade-off, good features cannot balance out bad features. Moreover, studies show that when presented with multiple options for the future, people screen out the ones that fall short of their standards (threats) and then use one of any number of strategies to pick from among the survivors based on the relative goodness of their features. In short, the threat of bad things is far more substantial than the allure of good things.

Second, consider common observations: Weather forecasters know that it is better to mispredict bad weather than good; if you say it is going to be cloudy and the sun comes out, nobody will much care but if you say the sun will shine and it doesn’t, people will complain. Market analysts who predict a bear and get a bull aren’t much condemned. In medicine, a misdiagnosis of cancer that is wrong is more easily forgiven than a clean bill of health that is wrong. Scenario planners’ clients are much more concerned about spotting potentially bad surprises than they are in spotting good ones. Finally, parents are more distressed by their children’s bad behavior than they are pleased by their good behavior.

Third, consider Biology: It is commonly understood by those who know about these things that life arouse out of the surrounding environmental matrix rather than plopping down into it. And even the simplest life-form exhibits cellular and form characteristics that prevent it from being absorbed back into the environmental matrix. Which is to say, life had a trajectory from the beginning: avoiding anything that could result in reabsorption. This trajectory set the stage for threat avoidance being pre-eminent in the motivational hierarchy of living thing. For animals, this requires avoidance of anything that can wound or kill, including anything that produces notable discomfort as a possible prelude to being wounded or killed.[[1]](#footnote-1) Some only react to adverse impingement on their senses, usually by withdrawing. 'Higher level' animals’ reactions are more complicated. Humans in particular anticipate future threats and try to prevent or reduce them before they occur. TNT is a theory about how that happens (Beach, 2019; Beach, Bissell, & Wise, 2016).

The ability to conceive of a dangerous future comes at the price of constant vigilance; even if things are good, they may soon turn bad. You never know what danger lies around the next corner or behind the next boulder or bush. By definition, good things aren’t threatening, so it doesn't require much attention but bad things require you to be ready to take defensive action.

Okay, that’s three spheres of argument for the primacy of threats, but what about goals and opportunities? In contrast to threats, which we actively avoid, don’t we actively pursue good things? Well, yes and no. Yes, in the sense that we do act in ways that leads toward good things, including opportunities for even better things. No, in the sense that what makes a goal or opportunity attractive is the belief that it will improve our current and expected condition. In that sense, if the expected future can be improved, at least some of its features threaten to fall short. Indeed, the sheer availability of an opportunity often arouses dissatisfaction with previously acceptable expectations—making the expected future undesirable. Pursuit of that spoiler opportunity is a way of mitigating the threat of having to endure a now-unsatisfactory future. We have never encountered an example of a goal or opportunity for which a motivating threat cannot be identified.

**Some Consequences**

As we write this comment, the United States and much of the world is reeling from a mob attack on the Capital Building in Washington, D.C. Those of us who were not in the mob are asking ourselves how things came to this; what is it that led these people to do what they did? More to the present point, how does TNT account for what they did?

Commentators offer many reasons, prominent among which is a sense among the rioters that their government has failed them; that the needs of minorities, especially Blacks, have taken precedent over theirs; and that immigration is both out of control and creating unfair competition for employment. The counterargument is that videos of the rioters showed predominantly middle class people who at least had the funds to make the trip to Washington. Nobody looked particularly downtrodden, neglected, or poor. So, what’s their problem?

We think their problem reflects a universal phenomenon that has its roots in the primacy of threat and how it shapes one’s prime narrative. To start with, as we mature, virtually every human comes to realize that the world is a dangerous place. To one degree or other, each of us knows that something bad could happen without warning—that good things tend to be transient and are followed by bad things. Moreover, good things don’t compensate for the bad things, which often leave scars and devastation in their wake. Even if the bad things aren’t all that bad, they aren’t good. Every moment of security is brittle and could easily fall apart.

But to feel threatened isn’t the same as knowing what the threat actually is. Unspecified threat, the sense that things aren’t going well but you don’t quite know what, is called anxiety.[[2]](#footnote-2) In TNT’s terms, when you are uncertain about what is going to happen, the future part of your prime narrative cannot be entirely accounted for as an extrapolation of your past and present; which makes your past-present-future prime narrative correspondingly incomplete and less coherent. Anxiety is the negative emotion that accompanies lessened narrative coherence. Because you cannot ever be entirely certain about the future, there always is at least some anxiety; it is what keeps us vigilant to threats. In short, it is the price we pay for being aware of the future and its possible threats.

TNT also tells us that humans are cause and effect creatures. We need to know causes in order to know where to direct action to produce desired effects, especially to fend off threats. This is fundamental to how we operate and we find ourselves constantly in pursuit of ‘Why?’. Indeed, in an effort to boost the prime narrative’s coherence and reduce our anxiety, we go to great effort to discover causes when they aren't immediately apparent. So, when anxiety builds, we look for causes, something that explains our distress. If we are in clear danger (war, pandemic, etc.) the entirety of our anxiety can be attributed to it—it doesn’t reduce it but it justifies it, makes the prime narrative coherent, and removes the need to look further for its cause. But, when no specific danger is apparent, it is difficult to explain our anxiety, we feel threatened, but we don’t know by what. Threat prompts mitigating action and anxiety tells us that there is a threat we should be combating. When the threat is obvious, mitigation requires altering or eliminating its cause so that the future, when it gets here, isn’t dangerous. But when no specific cause is apparent, the prompt to act is strong but frustrated by not knowing where to direct it.

Unrelieved anxiety can produce a significant amount of pent-up energy; without a cause to target, the urge to action has nowhere to go. Individuals frequently solve this, to some degree, by ‘letting off steam’—parties, real or vicarious participation in sports, and so on. Sometimes immersion in a gripping movie or play will do the trick, or an argument, or a rant, or a good cry.[[3]](#footnote-3) Groups solve it in much the same way, but being with others sometimes magnifies the energy and it can build. When it becomes large enough, it can be difficult to control, sometimes ending in violence—the so-called madness of crowds or mob mentality. Every culture has had to deal with this danger, usually by designating specific ideas or people as acceptable targets of (ultimately futile) efforts to reduce or eliminate anxiety. In the U.S., segments of the culture have variously targeted the government, Muslims, Blacks, immigrants and socialists as the causes of its anxiety and has condoned otherwise unacceptable actions to mitigate it.[[4]](#footnote-4) This also is the case for much throughout Europe and elsewhere. Designation is seldom official, although it was in Nazi Germany and it is becoming so in the eastern parts of the EU (especially Hungary). But it usually has champions, people who act as the culture's or subculture’s spokespersons. For 100 years after the Civil War, the KKK was such a group, but there are so many groups these days it is difficult to keep track of them. And, they prompt growth of organizations to oppose them, designating them as threats and sanctioning action against them. And so it goes—one big circle of violence and hatred all driven by a useless effort to turn off the anxiety that isn’t even related to its targets. All that it accomplishes is to add more threat and more anxiety; both for the targets and for those who target them and fear retaliation. All of which is magnified by the fact that most cultures cherish those who vanquish its enemies and there always are those who volunteer, reveling in the rightness of their endeavor. So, the Proud Boys and others who attacked the U.S. Capital were answering the call to fight the cause of their segment of the culture's anxiety; government, Blacks, and immigrants. They were heroes saving their little corner of the culture and reducing its feeling of itself being threatened. But, after the excitement and exhilaration wear off, nothing they did actually addressed the underlying problem, because it can’t be addressed, at least not directly. Since Eden, we’ve all paid for Adam’s first bite from the apple from the tree of knowledge; the future is coming and it is quite likely to be unpleasant.

**References**

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1. We tend to think of survival of the fittest as meaning the creature that can best exploit its habitat lives and the others die before they can have progeny. But, I don't think that's right. Exploitation is easy if you can survive the unexploitable, therefore threatening, parts of the habitat. No amount of successful exploitation can compensate for even one significant calamity. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Philosophers have called it existential angst, which seems a bit much. Anxiety isn’t deep depression, consuming paranoia, or hopelessness. It is the weariness of extended vigilance, of keeping watch over oneself and those one values, of hoping things will get better but fearing they probably won’t. It is the human condition. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. And there is ample evidence for both humans and other animals that aversive circumstances can induce aggression and outright violence (e.g., Lewon, Houmanfar & Haynes, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In group theory terms, there is ‘closure under transformation’ by hammering away on all of the real and imagined instances involving these types of groups’ members. Then there is “centering”—establishing the Identity Transform— onto the Group identity. Then there is projection of the fear into the future --\*translation operation”— convincing the disaffected of what will happen if they don’t act. Then there is the use of ‘scale invariance’”, ramping up the perceived threats until it becomes nation threatening. Taking away all our freedoms! All of the invariant transforms of narrative are there to establish a strongly held belief waiting for one crystalizing suggestion—where and how to act on it. That crystallizing direction was given by Trump in his address to the rally of his supporters. It didn’t take any more thinking than that. In short, it is narrative thought gone wrong. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)