

## Scientists can be lawyers or judges: how to spot the lawyers (November 2020)

Scientists (and even philosophers!) are human beings first and scientists (or philosophers) second. The same psychodynamics are at work in almost all individuals despite the scientists' appeal to evidence-based objectivity, which as any philosopher will tell you can be illusory. There is also the corporatization of academia which fuels the dynamic--more on that later. What do I mean by all this? Well, let's take the example of lawyers and judges. As with mutually exclusive contrasts (introverts vs extroverts etc) the oversimplification is woeful. The reality is quite different, but let's go with it for the moment.

Judges will tell you they want to get to the truth. Yes, I know, what is truth and all that, but let's stick with the story. Lawyers will try and convince you of something and hope you will believe that to be the truth. Scientists also want to know the truth. Most try to live up to the ideal, but I don't think that is always the case.

Scientists who act like judges are aware of their limitations, their own fallibilities. They are intellectually honest, open to being shown to be incorrect and comfortable with that. They don't shout you down. They are a joy. The lawyer scientist is quite the opposite. Always confident. Egoistic. They can't handle the truth.

I recently attended a wonderful 'Origin of life conference' (see the publications page). One of the speakers was clearly troubled by recent criticisms. The criticisms sound as though they were belligerent, dismissive, confrontational, even personal. They stung because they came from leaders in the field. But the findings, by most accounts were very interesting and warranted further investigation. Of course, robust

disagreement is always good. Group leaders in research will tell you they thrive on this. But over-zealous, non-constructive debate is unhelpful. Especially to early scientists who may be less confident about how the psychodynamics play out. 'Established', 'well-known', 'highly thought of'. These adjectives raise suspicion if the individual being described is an intellectual bully. As a judge once commented (The Age of Expert Testimony: Science in the Courtroom, 2002) "law and science are in some ways about as different as they can be".

The corporatization of academia fuels the lawyer-scientist. This is an age of metrics in universities. The top-notch universities don't fall for it, but for most universities its all about numbers. How many publications. How many citations. This is completely out of



control. As for university rankings, oh please, tell me another. On a recent application the form one had to fill in to demonstrate output was so ridiculous the applicant decided to can it. Will an intellectually honest scientist really want to work in a department where quality is secondary? Yes, I know. This the real world. If you want a job you have to play the game. In most cases anyway. As I say the really good institutions with the soul of a university are all too aware of this. I guess for most people, and especially early scientists, the answer is to be aware of the trade-offs and navigate the terrain as far as possible. Just don't be fooled by the emperor with no clothes.



Great movie: A Few Good Men.