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EXISTENTIAL PURPOSE: WHAT IS THE POINT OF A SPACE PROGRAM?

Abstract

Management and leadership of large organizations depend heavily on having an existential sense of purpose and mission. With an existential rationale in hand, proximate challenges and tasks become easier to define and coordinate. Perhaps more importantly, a clearly defined and well-understood existential rationale allows for the possibility of rationally allocating resources and establishing priorities. Many national space programs are assumed to be operating on the basis of some sort of guiding principles, often enshrined in the agency's implementing legislation. Yet close examination of space agency objectives shows that they are more often lists of topics or activities, without any sort of unifying principle. In essence, most space agencies exist and act without a conscious understanding of their existential purpose within their government or society. As a consequence, agencies often try to substitute technology- or destination-based missions for an existential purpose. But without anchoring these missions in an underlying purpose, they become very difficult to complete or even manage. This paper examines the core sociological and human drives and desires that ultimately lead nations to establish national space programs. Within that framework, this paper explores how the particular drive to explore and utilize space can be operationalized and established as an existential purpose for a national space program, and presents a few sample options. Using these examples, the paper then touches on the way that these example existential purposes differ from current rationales about the existence of space programs. Finally, the paper will provide a few illustrative examples of the implications of different existential purposes in large-scale space agency decision-making.