48th IAA SYMPOSIUM ON THE SEARCH FOR EXTRATERRESTRIAL INTELLIGENCE (SETI) – The Next Steps (A4)
SETI 2: SETI and Society (2)

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THE MORALITY OF INTERSTELLAR MESSAGING

Abstract

The military is currently one of the most noticeable entities on Earth, from a cosmic perspective, sending out radio signals and pinging asteroids in an attempt to protect the planet and its inhabitants. The independent individuals at METI International, and other METI proponents, also send directed, intentional messages into space in an attempt to contact intelligent life. Because of these activities, Earth might not remain an unnoticed planet in our corner of the galaxy. While we do not yet know whether extraterrestrial intelligence exists, we do know that humans have an interest in contacting intelligent life in the cosmos, with our capabilities in that area poised to improve in the coming generations. At this point, no clear, enforceable rules and regulations exist with respect to intentional messaging attempts. Yet, the ethical ramifications of messaging attempts are deeply significant and global in nature, and one obvious risk is warfare with another civilization. Given the significant moral considerations surrounding messaging extraterrestrial intelligence (aka METI), there is good reason to analyze the question of whether and how to regulate and enforce best messaging practices. We begin by examining the role that a national space force should play in creating and enforcing rules for METI. We also open this analysis to consider other candidate agents and entities and whether they may be justified in taking on the role of creating and enforcing rules for METI. Individual, non-governmental organizations, international entities, and a global space force are all viable candidates for this role as well, and we consider the justifications and challenges for each. We then move to an analysis of what the rules for METI should be. Because contact would predictably have global effects, we present a case for attempting to achieve rough global consensus on messaging protocols. We also consider important challenges to this proposal and recognize the importance of weighing the potential benefits of messaging alongside the potential logistical impossibility of global consensus. We conclude that a key role of any nascent space force is to gather and assess input from experts across humanity regarding the prospects of METI. This input will help to formulate ideal rules as well as to determine how best to enforce these rules. Finally, we ask whether this work should include protocols for how to proceed if contact with extraterrestrial intelligence is made. We argue that this element is vital to the ethical import of METI protocols, given that the bulk of the moral concerns are contingent upon ultimate contact with intelligent life. Arguably, ethically-loaded decisions will need to be made quickly in the event of contact, and it is therefore in our best interests as humans and as Earthlings to think through the possible courses of action well in advance. Notably, one potential result of METI is warfare with an alien civilization. Thus, a military space force has a clear role to play in building appropriate protocols. However, the nature of this project exposes some challenging elements of the analysis, as we will be required to consider the legal and moral relation between humans and intelligent life whose de re qualities are currently unknown to us. We respond to these challenges by proposing a de dicto approach to the analysis of how to proceed that leaves room for de re modifications in the event of contact, and this ultimately helps to inform the above questions regarding the overall role of the space force in the debate surrounding the messaging of extraterrestrial intelligence.