

53rd IAA SYMPOSIUM ON THE SEARCH FOR EXTRATERRESTRIAL INTELLIGENCE (SETI) –
The Next Steps (A4)
SETI 2: SETI and Society (2)

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CAUSAL IMPOTENCE AND COSMIC MESSAGING: A LOGICAL RESPONSE TO THE BARN
DOOR ARGUMENT

Abstract

One critique of Messaging ExtraTerrestrial Intelligence (METI) involves the concern that contact could be seriously harmful to Earth or to humanity. There could be very damaging effects of our intentional cosmic messages being detected. One candidate response to this critique is what is sometimes referred to as the ‘Barn Door’ argument. This argument is grounded in claims of causal impotence. That is, there are a myriad of ways in which we could be detected, and abstaining from intentional messaging will not affect other detectable signals and activities. If other detectable signaling is already contributing significantly to the potential outcomes the critic is worried about, abstaining from messaging will not alter our detectability in a way that causes the desired effect. If the Barn Door Argument is correct, then those who engage in messaging arguably have a moral excuse. They are permitted to continue messaging because there’s no point in abstaining.

I provide a logical reconstruction of the Barn Door argument and then systematically evaluate three candidate interpretations of the appeal to causal impotence in the key premise. I show that the two interpretations that maintain the soundness of the argument are inapplicable to current messaging scenarios. While the third interpretation is applicable to messaging scenarios, this interpretation renders the key premise untrue according to our best knowledge, which entails that the Barn Door argument is unsound. I conclude that the Barn Door argument does not generate the moral excuse on which proponents of this argument rely. While this response does not challenge all arguments in favor of METI, it is demonstrable evidence that, in our current circumstances, the Barn Door argument cannot justify intentional messaging.