

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

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AN ACTIVE AND COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH TO INCLUSIVE DEBATES IN SETI ETHICS

**Abstract**

SETI research has the potential to generate expansive global impacts and even to represent humanity and our planet in meaningful ways. What, then, are the obligations of SETI practitioners and researchers? Answering this question falls under the purview of multiple disciplines, but philosophical inquiry and science communication are indispensable tools for the appropriate analysis of astronomical research that carries the potential for expansive ethical impacts. We maintain that it is crucial to carry out such analyses not only in academic and scientific circles but also in pre-college classrooms and communities. We draw on our experiences in local schools and diverse communities to call for an active approach to science and ethics debates regarding astrobiology and SETI. ‘Active’ here means that discussants are not simply passive recipients of accepted wisdom but rather active in developing and producing knowledge surrounding important and challenging debates.

For example, DeMarines has developed and administered a SETI/METI curriculum prototype. The result was that, in a small study, a large majority of students changed their attitude on the decision to send messages to potential extraterrestrials after being guided through a SETI/METI-themed curriculum. This curriculum discussed the history of METI, current transmission plans, policy considerations, and more. Haramia has developed an award-winning active philosophy course that complements this curriculum’s methods and fosters an appreciation of logical argumentation and the practice of questioning beliefs and uncovering assumptions, including one’s own. Looking forward, the goals of this combined curricular approach to SETI-specific issues are (i) accessible tutorials on both SETI science and ethical analysis ; (ii) recognition of the intersections between scientific inquiry and ethical inquiry; (iii) development of critical sensitivity and an attentiveness the way that certain details can shape the content of both scientific and ethical questions; and (iv) the ability develop comfort with uncertainty while at the same time fostering the capacity to recognize philosophical and scientific progress within ongoing, unsettled debates. The overall goal is the manifestation of these skills in a community of philosophical and scientific inquiry with non-specialists whose input is nonetheless vital for inclusive discussions regarding SETI science and its ethical impacts.