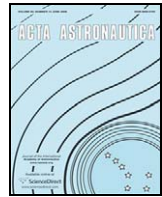




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Universalist ethics in extraterrestrial encounter

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ABSTRACT

If humanity encounters an extraterrestrial civilization, or if two extraterrestrial civilizations encounter each other, then the outcome may depend not only on the civilizations' relative strength to destroy each other but also on what ethics are held by one or both civilizations. This paper explores outcomes of encounter scenarios in which one or both civilizations hold a universalist ethical framework. Several outcomes are possible in such scenarios, ranging from one civilization destroying the other to both civilizations racing to be the first to commit suicide. Thus, attention to the ethics of both humanity and extraterrestrials is warranted in human planning for such an encounter. Additionally, the possibility of such an encounter raises profound questions for contemporary human ethics, even if such an encounter never occurs.

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1. Introduction

To date, humanity has never encountered extraterrestrial life, let alone an extraterrestrial civilization. However, we can also not rule out the possibility that such an encounter will occur. Indeed, insights from the Drake equation (see e.g. [1]) suggest that such an encounter may be likely. As human exploration of space progresses, such an encounter may become increasingly likely. Thus analysis of what would happen in the event of an extraterrestrial encounter is of considerable significance. This analysis is particularly important for the astronautics community to consider given that it is on the leading edge of space exploration.

There is extensive debate on what would be the outcome of an encounter between humanity and an extraterrestrial civilization. This debate can also be extended to consider encounters between two extraterrestrial civilizations. Much of the debate centers on the moral character

of the extraterrestrials and the significance of this for how humanity would fare in such an encounter. Several commentators have speculated that the extraterrestrials would be benevolent and thus safe to humans [2,3] while others have speculated that the extraterrestrials would be malicious and thus dangerous to humans [4,5]. For broad reviews of the debate, see [1,6].

This paper considers an important set of scenarios, largely overlooked by the existing literature, in which either humanity or the extraterrestrial civilization or both act according to a universalist ethical framework. Universalist ethics roughly refers to ethics where the two civilizations value specific aspects of each other equally, regardless of which civilization these aspects occur in. Universalist ethics is defined more precisely and elaborated in greater detail in Section 2. Meanwhile, for purposes of this article, civilization can be defined as a system of individuals working towards some common objective. Heterogeneity within a civilization, though undoubtedly important, is beyond the scope of this article.

Ethics in general, and universalist ethics in particular, are important in humanity–extraterrestrial encounters because the outcome of such an encounter will depend not only on

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the relative strengths of the civilizations (i.e. who would destroy the other in an inter-civilizational war) but also on some specifics of the ethics held by the civilizations. Encounters in which one or both civilizations act according to a universalist framework hold particularly interesting properties. For example, if each civilization acts according to a different universalist framework, then an encounter might lead to a race between the civilizations to be the first one to commit suicide. Section 3 discusses a broad range of encounter scenarios involving universalism.

The particular specifics of universalist ethics possibly held by humanity or extraterrestrials have important implications both for human civilization strategy and for contemporary ethics. The implications for civilizational strategy, discussed in Section 4, are important for humanity's planning for extraterrestrial encounters and its response should such an encounter occur. The basic message is that humanity would be wise to consider extraterrestrials' ethics in addition to their war-fighting strengths, because the ethics can be as an important factor in the outcome of an encounter. The implications for contemporary ethics, discussed in Section 5, hold even if no encounter occurs. In particular, the possibility of extraterrestrial encounter challenges certain forms of anthropocentrism commonly found in contemporary human ethics because extraterrestrials might be superior to humans on the same grounds that humans consider ourselves to be superior to other Earth species.

2. Universalist ethics

The term *universalist ethical framework* comes from the term *universalism* as used in the philosophy and psychology literatures on human values. The terms *values* and *ethics* can mean different things, although for the purposes of this paper both terms will be taken to mean views about right and wrong and about what should be done. As discussed in the psychology literature, universalism is a type of ethical framework humans might support in which there is great equality. For example, Schwartz and Boehnke define universalism as "Understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection for the welfare of all people and for nature (equality, social justice, wisdom, broadminded, protecting the environment, unity with nature, a world of beauty)" [7, p. 239].

For this paper I will employ a slightly different definition of universalism. First, I must review the concept of *intrinsic value*. Intrinsic value is that which is valuable for its own sake, independent of anything else [8]. Intrinsic value is contrasted with *extrinsic value*, which is anything that is valuable but is not intrinsic value [9]. For example, we might consider human welfare to hold intrinsic value (such as in anthropocentric variations of the utilitarianism ethical framework). In this case, phenomena such as food, clothing, and shelter would hold a form of extrinsic value called *instrumental value*, which is valuable because it causes other value [9]—in this case the intrinsic value of human welfare.

There has been much philosophical debate over the question of whether intrinsic value actually exists or if it is instead only considered to exist by individuals with sufficient cognitive capacity to form such a consideration (e.g. humans) [8]. This question is at the heart of *meta-ethics*, i.e. the study

of the nature of ethics and ethical knowledge. Possible answers to this question will not be discussed here because this paper focuses on what different civilizations consider to hold intrinsic value, which is a topic that can be examined independent of any knowledge of what might or might not actually hold intrinsic value. The reason for this focus is to explore what civilizations might do in an encounter. No attempt is made at assessing whether the civilizations might be actually right or wrong in the ethics that they support and in the actions they perform. While they are beyond the scope of this paper, such assessments could be readily made given knowledge of what ethics actually are correct if such knowledge could somehow be achieved.

For the purposes of this paper, a *universalist ethical framework* is an ethical framework in which the phenomena considered to hold intrinsic value hold the same intrinsic value regardless of where or when the intrinsic value occurs. For example, a universalist form of anthropocentric utilitarianism would place the same amount of intrinsic value on all human welfare. Likewise, a universalist form of non-anthropocentric utilitarianism would place the same amount of intrinsic value on all welfare, regardless of what species (or non-species) the welfare occurred in. It should be noted that the types of ethical frameworks considered here are all *consequentialist*, meaning that they only place intrinsic value the consequences of actions. No consideration is given to whether certain actions are fundamentally right or wrong (as in deontological ethics) or to whether what is important is not what actions we perform but is instead the character of who we are (as in virtue ethics). While such ethics are important and have enough support among contemporary humans to merit attention, they require a somewhat different analysis and are beyond the scope of this paper.

Human philosophers have extensively debated the extent to which humans should be universalist. Some argue that we have special relations to ourselves and those near us which justifies non-universalism (see [10] for examples). Others argue that universalism is too demanding and thus while being a universalist may be commendable, it is not morally required [11]. Meanwhile, still others argue that non-universalism is immoral and that we should strive for universalism [12]. A prominent argument for universalism stems from a thought experiment in which we select our ethics as if we do not know which member of society we are, thereby removing any incentive for non-universalist favoritism [13].¹

Much of the debate on universalism has existed within anthropocentric ethical frameworks. These frameworks only place intrinsic value on human phenomena (welfare, health, etc.) and thus only debate how intrinsic value should be distributed among humans. However, such anthropocentrism is not unanimously supported. For example, several prominent philosophers have advocated non-anthropocentric forms of utilitarianism, placing equal intrinsic value on the welfare of human and non-human animals [15–17]. Others have

¹ This thought experiment is very similar to the "original position" thought experiment developed by Rawls [14]. Rawls uses the original position thought experiment to assess how idealized members of society might form societal rules instead of to assess what ethical framework might be selected by idealized ethical agents.

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