

DR. SETI'S STARSHIP

Searching For The Ultimate DX

Their Past, Our Future

Often, SETI critics (and even some of its supporters) ask why an alien civilization would bother to beam messages our way. After all, we on Earth generally have not chosen to announce our presence to our cosmic companions.

Social scientists tell us that only two possibilities motivate all human actions: altruism and self-interest (although some argue that even seemingly altruistic acts are performed with an underlying selfish motive). Can we imagine selfish or altruistic reasons why another civilization would expend considerable resources on the deliberate transmission of electromagnetic signals over interstellar distances?

Successful altruistic civilizations, it has been theorized, harbor an innate desire to share their cultural wealth with those less fortunate. Such civilizations may consider it a cosmic imperative to undertake the transmission of their accumulated knowledge and experience to younger, emerging species. If this theory holds true, we stand on the brink of reception of *Encyclopedia Galactica*, a knowledge base that can transform human existence in ways we cannot begin to imagine. This justification for human SETI endeavors is only warranted if our cosmic companions are disposed to such generosity.

However, what of the other possibility—that our galactic neighbors might choose to transmit in our direction strictly out of self-interest? Of what possible benefit could such a transmission be to civilizations presumed older, wiser, and more capable than ours? It's easy to concoct scenarios whereby the very act of reception of interstellar signals is somehow damaging to humanity and advantageous to the transmitting species. Competition rules the jungle, so why not the cosmos? As Earth is, in essence, a paranoid, self-involved planet, will any such scenario that you can imagine easily attract a host of followers willing to



Someday SETI experiments conducted from the Arecibo Observatory, or elsewhere, may well detect a cosmic "message in a bottle" from a civilization long extinct. What might we hope to learn from such a transmission?

embrace it? I believe this says far more about the human condition than it does the alien condition. Further, such speculations have served to inhibit the acceptance and growth of SETI science on Earth as though somehow one can believe that turning a deaf ear to the universe can protect us from harm.

There is a third possibility, little discussed in the literature, as to why we might someday find ourselves on the receiving end of an interstellar "CQ." We believe that time and space are finite. Civilizations, as far as we understand the laws of nature, can be long-lived but not eternal. Imagine a technologically advanced civilization facing its own inevitable demise. Might it not wish to put

its entire history and culture into an electromagnetic time capsule—a modern message in a bottle—in hopes that someone else (maybe us) might pluck it out of the cosmic pond and simply know that they existed? Might not they transmit in the hopes of achieving a degree of immortality? Might not we?

Given the above possibility, I can envision someday receiving a beamed transmission from a civilization long dead. It would seek to inform us about its art, culture, society, history, spirituality, hopes, dreams, and aspirations. Such a transmission could be an unparalleled look into a neighboring civilization's past—and humanity's future.

73, Paul, N6TX

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