



Extra Terrestrial Life and Unitarianism

Jonathan Mason © 12 February 2023

The question of whether there is life in the universe is one of the big questions of the 20th and 21st century. Movies such as *ET*, *Contact*, *Arrival* and *Interstellar* have explored these issues along with alien invasion movies such as *Independence Day*. I remember growing up watching the night sky with a sense of wonder, In my search for the mystery in life, Unitarian Principle #4, I have found the question of whether there is other life in the universe to be one of the profound mysteries that I reflect on. The answer to this question may also impact Unitarian Principle #7, on the interdependency of humans with our world, in ways that I'll discuss later. In the following talk, I'll go over the prevailing science on Extra terrestrial life and then discuss its implications for our world and Unitarianism. This is a personal talk giving my views on issues, apologies for those who have different views.

The biggest realisation of the last 20 years is that planets are a very common phenomenon in the solar system, with over 5,000 identified in the last 20 years, and we're just scratching the surface. That realisation makes extra-terrestrial life more likely, but also raises questions about its sustainability.

The second big development just in the last five years is an increasing level of confidence that astronomers can identify planets that are likely to have life through the use of techno signatures. Techno signatures are planets that have signs of advanced civilisations in the atmosphere.

But as we learn that life beyond Earth is more likely, it is also worrying that we haven't seen space travellers here. Because with each step forward on techno signatures, it also means Earth with its 2 billion history of life, should have been identified by other intelligent life. One possible answer is that it's really hard to for life to travel. Using our current technology it would take astronauts 100,000 years to reach the closest star, Alpha Centauri, and the radiation would kill astronauts within a couple of decades. But scientists are developing models in

the last five years that non-manned spaceships of very small sizes could fly at close to the speed of light and reach Alpha Centauri in 20 years.

Another possibility is that life is much broader than our earth-based experience and that there is life in the universe trying to communicate with us but we haven't identified it because our ideas of communication are too narrow.

A final more troubling possibility is that intelligent life has occurred but has not been able to sustain itself because it exhausts its supporting natural resources or incinerates itself in a nuclear conflict.

If we could communicate with other intelligent life, it is possible that we could leap ahead with technological advances that we cannot conceive of today, so it could be a game changer.

To summarise, we have had an incredibly exciting 20-30 years of astronomical discoveries and know much more about the universe that we live in. Does this mean anything for Unitarianism?

First, if there is life outside Earth that we communicate with, that would likely further undermine the orthodox religions view that we live on a special planet, with a special species, humans, believing in special set of beliefs with special Supreme Being that will give us gifts that no one else gets. Unitarianism would be well placed to place extra terrestrial life within our theology comfortably. In the film *Contact*, a religious zealot tries to undermine the initiative to communicate with intelligent life.

If we don't communicate with other intelligent life, it means more uncertainty. While it's not rationally possible that we're unique, it creates a possibility that we are. But this possibility of uniqueness will keep orthodox religion in its privileged position but also rationally means that we need to protect Earth. The challenges of space travel give us no realistic Planet B. And that brings us back to Unitarian Principle #7, underlining how important it is we live with other species in a sustainable way here on Earth.

If you would like to engage more with this question of extra terrestrial life, there are three great movies from the last 20 years that are thought provoking, named [Contact](#), [Interstellar](#), and [Arrival](#).

One of my attractions to Unitarianism is the search for the mystery of life. There is no greater mystery than there is other life in the universe.

We live in an exciting age of scientific advances that may give us meaningful insights into this timeless question in our lifetime. Just like when I was 10 years old, when I look up at the sky, I wonder what is up there.

[Meditation / Conversation starter:](#)

What do YOU think about life in the universe?

Have any movies influenced your thinking?

Have UFOs visited us?

How do you feel about the size of the universe?