

# Philosophy & SETI

## The Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence

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# SETI

- Using radio telescopes to search for unnatural patterns in interstellar radio waves - might be messages.
- Context:
  - World War II technologies
  - Cold War anxieties
- Assumptions of SETI Science
  - 👍 We are not alone.
  - 👎 **“Uniformitarianism”** → **“commensurability”** between intelligences

# Critique of SETI #1: Evolutionists

Dueling large-number probabilities:

- # of habitable worlds
- # of twists & turns in evolutionary path that produced human intelligence

Highly unlikely that we are alone

Highly unlikely that intelligences elsewhere will be like ours

∴ Incommensurability

# Critique of SETI #2:

Plausible non-humanoid intelligences → incommensurability

- Simple physiological differences
- ETIs emergent from entire galaxy
- Neutron star ETIs
- Machine superorganisms
- Hive intelligences

# Critique of SETI #3: Philosophers

Linguistics + cognitive neuroscience → incommensurability

- Thomas Nagel – *What Is It Like To Be A Bat*
  - incommensurable sensoria
- Wilfred Desan
  - might see different objects
- George Seffler
  - language carves up world
- Lewis White Beck
  - radar technology filters out all but humanoid intelligences

Putting it all together:

Soviets share their concerns with Americans

- An isolated symbol system cannot be distinguished from a non-symbol system.
- Only way to decode a symbol system is to see symbols repeated in a familiar context.
- It is impossible to translate a message from an incommensurable intelligence.
- We might not even recognize that a message *was* a message.

**Soviets first to propose searching & first to stop searching**

# Institutional & cultural influences on the production of scientific knowledge

	USSR	USA
Funding	peer review	popular review
Temperament	reflection	action
Cultural Ethos	academic prestige	fame & riches
Politically acceptable topics	dialectical materialism predicts ETIs	ETIs considered fantasy
Academically acceptable topics	study of “mind” is scientific	study of “mind” is unscientific

# Today

- Is SETI pseudo-science?
- Private patronage
- Addressing philosophical issues:
  - search for evidence of large energy consumption
  - *SETI* → *SETL*



Popular Culture is a rhetorical site  
where attitudes toward scientific inquiry are negotiated



# Discussion Topics???

- Role of public opinion in driving scientific inquiry?
- Why is SETI still so popular today?
- Similarities between SETI and religion?
- Other types of plausible non-humanoid intelligences?
- Why haven't we detected a message in 60 years of searching?