

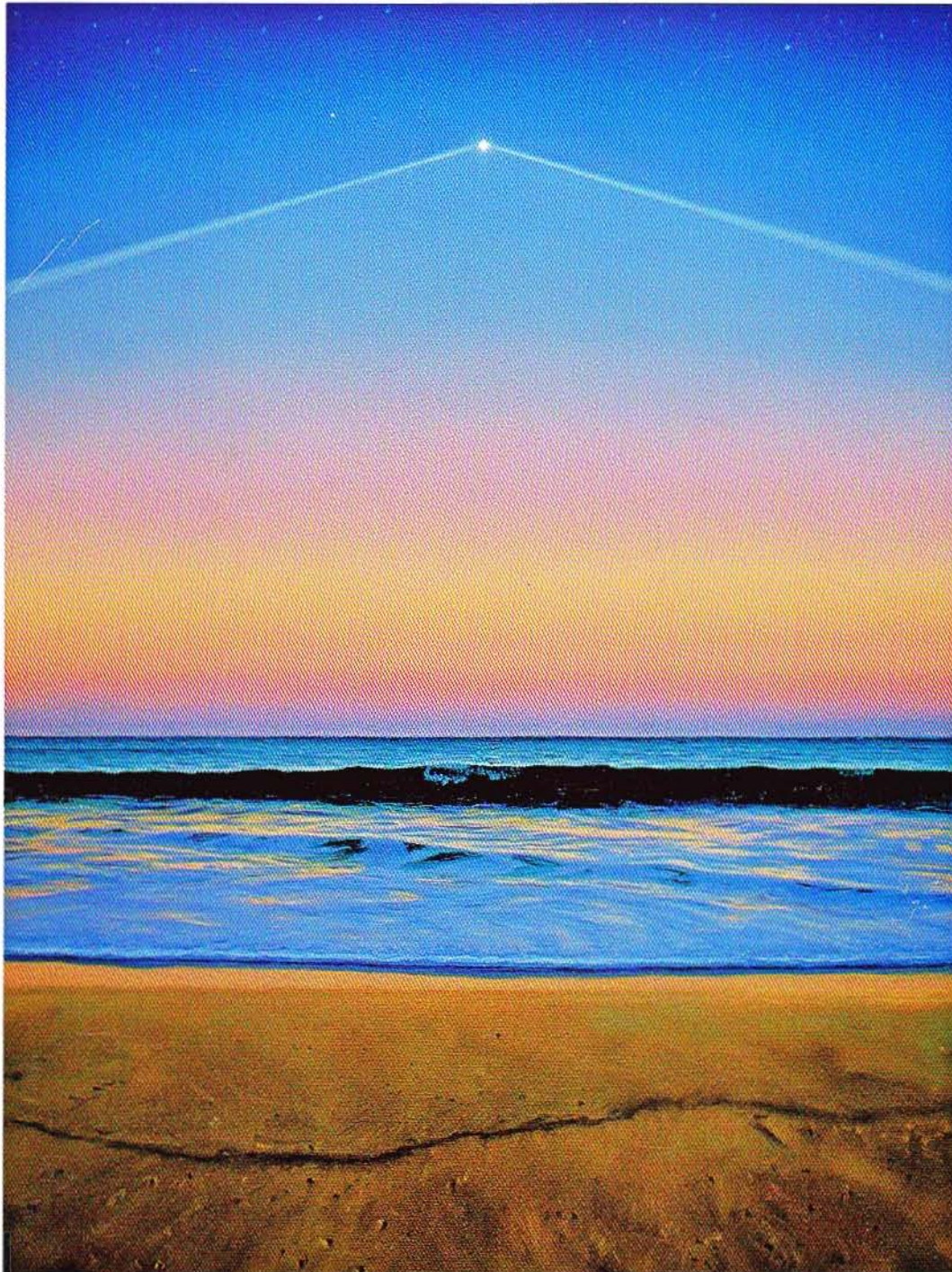
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A HUMANITY 3000 KNOWLEDGE WORKSHOP

When SETI Succeeds: The Impact of High-Information Contact

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Null or Negative Effects of ETI Contact in the Next Millennium

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...electromagnetic (indirect) contact will probably have negligible effect on us, and physical (direct) contact will probably be harmful to us.

Every productive meeting needs an *agent provocateur*. Since I cannot be sure, looking at the list of attendees, that we have one among us, I shall assume that role until otherwise deposed.

My hypotheses are that there will likely be no positive effect from contact with ETI during the next thousand years. Yes, it would be nice to know if ETIs exist in space; the “commission” that astronomers have from the public to keep an eye on the universe demands that we strive to inventory cosmic life in all its forms, just as we do for matter and radiation. However, in the long run, electromagnetic (indirect) contact will probably have negligible effect on us, and physical (direct) contact will probably be harmful to us.

Should contact with ETI be limited to electromagnetic means, and there be little chance of ETI traveling to Earth (or us to their home) within the next millennium (owing largely to light-speed restrictions), then the impact of ETI on our civilization will be minimal, perhaps virtually zero, given the steady stream of “in-house” global problems inevitably confronting humankind while pushing out along the arrow of time. Of course, we shall study ETIs’ signals, decipher their messages, perhaps even learn some things from them (since any ETI initiating contact with us will be, essentially by definition, more advanced and knowledgeable than we). Earth’s academics will publish scholarly analyses of ETI data in the specialized cyberspace journals; commentators

will propagate opinions among the bits and bytes of the new Net; and the media hype of each new ETI finding and its cultural vicissitudes will cause the mainstream press of the third millennium to resemble the tabloid press of the late-second millennium. But indirect contact alone will likely be of meaningful concern only to a small minority of Earth’s citizens—essentially an ensemble of future people statistically indistinguishable from those currently interested in SETI. As long as contact remains solely electromagnetic, Earth-based global issues of (mostly) our own making will dominate our lives, indeed drive our future evolution during the next thousand years.

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Should contact with ETI be physical, even as a mere ceremonial visitation, then the impact could be large and negative for our species. I refer to the universality of physical and chemical phenomena in the cosmos, and by extension to the subjects of biology and its allied behavioral sciences. In short, if neo-Darwinism (or some version of it) holds cosmically, meaning that competition is at least part of any complex being’s methodology, then it is not inconceivable that they (who will be, again, more advanced than we are) would dominate us. Not that they would “come and eat us”—though they might; we do, in fact, consume many other, “lesser” species—and not that their alien posture toward us would be overtly hostile. Rather, dominance is likely to be the natural, indeed perhaps inevitable, stance of any advanced life form. It is just as reasonable to argue that advanced life, anywhere in the cosmos, will tend to control other life (as well as controlling matter and radiation locally) if given the opportunity and if in physical contact, as it is to suggest that positive consequences will result from our detection of and interaction with extraterrestrial intelligence.