Aliens and Animals

Although the philosopher Robert Nozick is most well-known for his full-throated defense of libertarianism and the minimal state, his intellectual contributions extend beyond the bounds of analytic philosophy and into the realm of science fiction writing. Tucked away in the back of his book *Socratic Puzzles*, one can find a small collection of sci-fi short stories, each inflected by Nozick's distinctive style of taking a plausible starting premise and subjecting it to a barrage of rhetorical questions until it warps into conclusions both novel and unexpected.

The stories focus on the otherworldly; two concern themselves with God and creation while the third contemplates contact with extraterrestrials. Each is compelling in its own way, but it is the last-mentioned—titled "R.S.V.P."—that deserves special attention as Voyager I departs from our solar system and into interstellar space.

Launched in 1977, Voyager I's primary mission was to photograph Jupiter and Saturn along with their respective moons. With that mission long-completed, the space probe has continued to drift outwards to the edge of the solar system and beyond, all the while collecting data on the medium through which it travels. Eventually—around 2025—the onboard power supply will exhaust itself and the probe will fall silent as it plummets ever deeper into the void.

However, even after electromagnetic communications ceases, Voyager I has the capability of delivering one final message—not back to Earth, but to any intelligent beings who might happen to come into contact with the probe. It carries with it a gold-plated phonograph record etched with detailed playback instructions. If followed, these instructions will allow aliens to listen to sounds from our planet as well as reconstruct a series of photographs designed to showcase human life in all its varieties.

This attempt at communication runs contrary to one of the starting premises of Nozick's story. In a pair of sentences that ought to make the relevant NASA engineers blush, Nozick sets up his narrative by noting that "Little thought is required to realize that it would be dangerous simply to start sending out messages announcing one's existence. You don't know who or what is out there, who might come calling to enslave you, or eat you, or exhibit you, or experiment on you, or toy with you."

This possibility—that the alien life that who would receive our transmissions might me hostile—dissuades the hyper-rational inhabitants of Nozick's fictional Earth from making any sort of attempt to contact extraterrestrial civilizations. Thus, even when the people of Earth begin to *receive* signals from an alien civilization begging for help in the face of an impending supernova, safety considerations push them to maintain radio silence. So, too, do they stay callously silent when the desperate aliens begin to pass along all of their culture and knowledge, begging only for recognition prior to their extinction. Though the temptation is to respond to this final request is strong, the humans ask themselves: what if the cries for help and recognition were actually a trick designed by pillaging marauders? Were this the case, a response from Earth would reveal both its location and its naïveté, marking it as an easy target for invasion.

Whether the transmissions were genuine or an elaborate con is never determined. The signal suddenly goes quiet, but this development could reflect either an exploding star or bored space pirates. Leaving the matter unresolved, Nozick concludes the story by noting that no other civilization is ever overheard responding to the calls for help. But much like the signal, this silence is open to multiple interpretations. Perhaps only the Earthlings overheard the cries for help, and were now left completely alone in the universe. Or, perhaps there *were* other civilizations listening in, but they reasoned along the same

game theoretic lines that prescribed non-responsiveness. It is this latter possibility that seems to most disturb Nozick, as he concludes:

No one had described the horrendousness of realizing that the surrounding civilizations are like one's own; of realizing that each neighbor remaining in the universe, each of the only ones there are, is a mute cold wall. Limitless emitlessness. Lacking even the comfort of deserving better, facing an inhabited void.

The conclusion is striking, but as far as Voyager I is concerned, one could have stopped with the first premise: the possibility that aliens are moral monsters makes it too dangerous to even pay lip service to the idea of contacting them. Yet, regardless of this fact, there is presently a golden disc emblazoned with the details of humanity cruising into the unknown.

[An aside: The pursuit of spectacular achievement without first considering trade-offs with human well-being is, unfortunately, characteristic of many of NASA's endeavors. Consider, for example, all the money spent on putting a person on the moon—money that might have instead gone to social programs. In this respect NASA resembles a parent who wantonly neglects their family or invites danger upon their children in pursuit of attaining some idiosyncratic world record.]

So what, exactly, would aliens that encounter the probe find? The sounds and images encoded onto the disc were each carefully selected to present humanity in a way that was both comprehensive but also favorable. Since the contents of the disc are to serve as humanity's audio/visual cultural emissary, they obviously do not include documentation of the negative aspects of humanity. Photographs of concentration camps did not make the cut.

However, this selective presentation might lead one to wonder if the curators are guilty of perpetrating a bait-and-switch—the same sort of trick Nozick's Earthlings suspect the transmitting alien civilization might be trying to pull. By

only showcasing the best of human culture, the disc suggests that humans are a species worth contacting. Yet, the harsh reality is that humans have repeatedly waged war on outgroups, killing millions with nuclear arms while in the grips of xenophobia and the fear of a potentially-hostile Other. True, we may not have any explicit intention to raid and pillage alien civilizations. But if human societies cannot help but wage devastating wars against one another despite having much in common, then why do we think aliens will not fall within our parameters of what makes for an enemy or a threat? To put this point slightly differently: what makes us think that we come in peace? In deliberately omitting certain facts about human existence, the golden disc masks the danger that humans pose to others, effectively luring those others with our culture only to surprise them with our violence.

All this assumes, of course, that the curators *succeeded* in their effort to cherry-pick only the benevolent aspects of human culture from the many less-than-savory practices of the species. Unfortunately, they let slip one key fact about humans—a revelation that could potentially endanger us in the (unlikely) event that intelligent aliens happen to stumble upon the probe. Consider the following images, the details of which are encoded on the golden disc:

In each of these images, humans are displayed making use of either the flesh or the labor of animals. For most people, the inclusion of such photos will likely seem unremarkable. After all, we are used to such behavior: the mass exploitation and slaughter of animals is a given in most cultures, with the prevalence of such practices having the self-reinforcing effect of making them seem both natural and unproblematic. As a result, the unspoken premise that these sentient creatures are not deserving of moral consideration generally goes unexamined.

[A second aside: Curiously, the committee responsible for selecting the images was chaired by Carl Sagan who explicitly recognized that animals might be deserving of moral consideration. In *Dragons of Eden*, he writes that signs of animal intelligence "raise searching questions about the boundaries of the community of beings to which special ethical considerations are due, and can, I hope, help to extend our ethical perspectives downward through the taxa on Earth and upwards to extraterrestrial organisms, if they exist."]

The troubling question, though, is what if alien civilizations don't share our moral assumptions about the appropriate treatment of animals? Even on Earth there are people who consider the use and killing of animals to be abhorrent. Some judge current practices to be so immoral that they risk spending decades in prison in order to contest them. And though these militants are a distinct minority, the fact that they exist here suggests that they might also exist among alien populations, perhaps as the overwhelming majority.

The worrying possibility, then, is that we have sent out a calling card that proudly displays practices that the recipients might find horrific. In Nozick's story, the concern is that human communications might be picked up by moral monsters. However, perhaps the real concern ought to be that our communications will reveal that *we are the moral monsters*—and that some alien species will feel morally compelled to take action. Though the photos provide only a glimpse of how humans treat animals, that may be all that alien intelligent life needs to infer what is transpiring on Earth. And once this fact is understood, only a few normative premises are needed to send armed ships towards Earth to liberate the creatures denied moral consideration.