

Peter Szendy

Kant in the Land of Extraterrestrials: Cosmopolitical Philosophifictions.

Trans. by Will Bishop.

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Kant in the Land of Extraterrestrials is a translation of a book originally published in French under the title *Kant chez les extraterrestres: Philosophifictions cosmopolitiques* (Les Editions de Mennuit, 2011). Although Kant's views on extraterrestrials are indeed discussed in some detail, the title of the book is not fully indicative of the book's contents. Author Peter Szendy's analysis of Kant and extraterrestrials is embedded within a broad-ranging discussion of a number of science fiction films and television series featuring extraterrestrials (for example, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, Spielberg's *War of the Worlds*, *Men in Black*, *When Worlds Collide*, *The Twilight Zone* – his text also includes twenty-five black and white images from these and other video productions). Many other theorists' views on extraterrestrials are also contrasted (sometimes very briefly) with Kant's – Carl Schmitt and Fontenelle above all, but also Feuerbach, Epicurus, Husserl, Kepler, as well as others. Ronald Reagan and Al Gore also make brief but crucial appearances. And the cosmopolitical theme flagged in the subtitle is also prominent throughout the book. Kant's views on this topic are also discussed, and here as well they are often contrasted with other thinkers' cosmopolitanisms (the cynic Diogenes of Sinope, the Stoics, Augustine, and particularly Derrida) and antic cosmopolitanisms (Hegel, Mazzini, Marx, and Schmitt again). However, in keeping with the book's title, this review will focus on Szendy's analysis of Kant's remarks about extraterrestrials.

Kant, Szendy reminds readers, “did indeed speak of extraterrestrials” (4), but, more surprisingly, he also “regularly summoned inhabitants of other planets, inviting them over and over again into his discourse” (45) throughout his writing career. Kant's extraterrestrial enthusiasms are most vividly on display in Part Three (“On the inhabitants of the planets”) of his 1755 book, *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens*, but non-earthlings also make occasional guest appearances in later writings as well – including the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, several of the essays on the philosophy of history, as well as his numerous writings on ethics. Szendy makes use of all but the last in presenting readers with his own interpretation of “Kant's cosmologic discourse” (54).

In *Universal Natural History* Kant declares confidently that “most of the planets are certainly inhabited” [Immanuel Kant, *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens*, trans. Olaf Reinhardt, in *Natural Science*, ed. Eric Watkins (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 297 – hereafter *UNH*], and he then proceeds to offer readers what Szendy call “a rational *alienology*” (5) – viz., a classification of the mental powers of our planetary neighbors, based on “**the distance of their domiciles from the sun**” (*UNH*, 301). Earthlings, he concludes, “occupy as it were the middle rung of the ladder of beings” (*UNH*, 301) – the inhabitants of Jupiter and Saturn and higher; Venus and Mercury, lower. But “what in the world drove Kant to speculate like this on forms of life unknown to us, to us Earthlings?” (5). Szendy's question is important, but the answer he repeatedly offers – viz., that Kant needs “the extra-earthly philosophifiction in order to be able to think or judge the humanity of the human species and the eventual progress of humanity in turn” (57, cf. 50, 69, 78) fails to convince.

Szendy bases his answer largely on a remark toward the end of Kant's 1798 *Anthropology*, where he states that it is impossible to clearly indicate the character of the human species, because in order to do so we would need to undertake a "comparison of two *species* of rational being," and we unfortunately "have no knowledge of *non-terrestrial* rational beings" [Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, ed. and trans. Robert B. Loudon (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 225 – hereafter *Anth*] (47). Szendy's answer does fit this specific text well, but it is not a good overall answer to the "what-drove-Kant-to-speculate-about-extraterrestrials?" question for at least two reasons. First, in other anthropology lectures where Kant attempts to articulate the character of the human species, he does not appeal to extraterrestrials at all. For instance, in *Pillau* (1777-78) he adopts a comparative human history strategy: "I attempt to find the character of the human species by comparing one age of the human beings with another, and seeing what the destiny of the human being is" [Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology Pillau*, trans. Allen W. Wood, in *Lectures on Anthropology*, ed. Allen W. Wood and Robert B. Loudon (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 273]. And in *Mrongovius* (1784-85) he adopts a comparative terrestrial ethology strategy: "One sees what is characteristic of the human species if one places the human being next to the animal and compares the two" [Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology Mrongovius*, trans. Robert R. Clewis, in *Lectures on Anthropology*, 498]. (This is also the fallback strategy Kant eventually settles on in the 1798 *Anthropology*, after admitting that the intelligent extraterrestrial tactic isn't feasible.) Second, in most of the texts where Kant refers to extraterrestrials (including the previously-cited *UNH*, which is his most extensive and well-known discussion of the topic), Kant is not even trying to define the character of the human species. A more plausible answer to the "why extraterrestrials?" question, defended by Arthur Lovejoy in his 1936 book, *The Great Chain of Being*, is that Kant believes the physical universe has "infinite extension" and contains an "infinite plurality of worlds" [Arthur O. Lovejoy, *the Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Harvard University Press, 1936; reprint ed., Harper & Row, 1960), 140]. The different "star systems" are themselves "links in the great chain of being," and creation "must have no limits at all" (*UNH*, 262). Thus in view of "the wealth of nature in which worlds or systems are only specks of dust in the sunlight compared with the whole of creation," "it would be nonsense to deny" that "most of" the planets "must be inhabited" (*UNH*, 295). A milder version of these Kantian beliefs is still detectable today in those SETI (search for extraterrestrial intelligence) scientists who believe that, given the huge number of planets that exist, the odds that some of them contain intelligent life are very high. And because Kant also asserts later in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that "the widely respected law of the **ladder of continuity** among creatures" is "a legitimate and excellent regulative principle of reason" [Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 604] for the natural sciences, we can see that he carries this core belief with him into his critical period as well.

Szendy also sees a strong connection between Kant's references to extraterrestrials and his cosmopolitical convictions. "The significance of" Kant's speculations concerning extraterrestrials, he claims,

and what makes them more contemporary than ever, is that they are directly and structurally linked to the cosmopolitical stakes of his thinking. . . . It is as if Kant could sustain a cosmopolitan discourse worthy of its name only by being forced . . . to conjure up the extraterrestrial hypothesis (5-6).

However, Kant's cosmopolitics is firmly terrestrial. There are no alien invaders or wars between worlds, no interplanetary federations or colonizations in his speculations concerning the human

future. His more modest hope is simply that “the citizens of the earth” will eventually organize themselves into “a system that is cosmopolitically united” (*Anth*, 238). But given Kant’s evident extraterrestrial enthusiasms, why does he not (as countless science fiction writers have done) speculate about political and military encounters between terrestrial rational beings and their extraterrestrial neighbors? I’m not sure. One hypothesis is that he simply didn’t think interplanetary travel for embodied beings would ever be possible. In this case, although humans are not alone, the prospects of any close encounters between *Homo sapiens* and ETs (peaceful or otherwise) are nil.

As a Professor of Aesthetics, Szendy is understandably most at home with Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, and his references to this particular book far outnumber those to any other Kantian text. And in this text too he sees an extraterrestrial-cosmopolitical theme hiding within. Part of his goal here is “to inscribe a veritable *cosmopolitics* into aesthetics as a *cosmetics*” (7) – a goal achieved a bit too easily by reminding readers that “in Greek, *kosmos* means both the universe and a beautiful decoration” (7). Etymology should not be allowed to dictate philosophy. And Szendy errs again when he glosses Kant’s analysis of the judgment of taste by noting:

Faced with the object I call beautiful, and in order to be able to say it is such,
I find myself adopting a point of view that not only *could* be, but that *should*
be that of an inhabitant of another planet. In this respect, there is always
something Martian – or Saturnine, of [sic] Venusian, etc. – in beauty (66).

For Kant states clearly in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* that “beauty is valid only for human beings, i.e., animal but also rational beings” [Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 95; hereafter *Judgment*]. Aesthetic appreciation in Kant’s view is a humans-only phenomenon. Other intelligent beings might not share our feelings. But they will share our reasons, which helps explain the universality of moral norms: “The [morally] good, however, is valid for every rational being in general” (*Judgment*, 95). Thus there is “always something Martian – or Saturnine, or Venusian, etc.” – in the good, but not in beauty.

I have criticized some of Szendy’s interpretations of Kant’s views about extraterrestrials, but allow me to end on a positive note. The author’s ability to move virtually seamlessly between radically different types of media, cultural productions, and philosophical texts is extremely impressive. And even though Szendy brings Kant’s difficult philosophy not down to earth but even further out in space, in focusing on the Sage of Königsberg’s fascination with the perennially popular idea of extraterrestrial intelligent life, he may extend Kant’s wide readership still further. (I would like to thank Susan Shell and Jeppe Platz for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this review.)

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