

Space Policy and Humanities Policy
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In his January 14, 2004 speech on the future of space exploration, President George W. Bush proposed a return to the Moon followed by “human missions to Mars and to worlds beyond.” Bush’s proposal called for both robotic missions and new manned space vehicles to replace an aging set of space shuttles, and sought a new justification for space exploration. In the words of NASA administrator Sean O’Keefe, this plan is not “merely for the sake of adventure, however exciting that might be, but seeks answers to profound scientific and philosophic questions.”¹

Bush’s proposal stimulated renewed reflection on both the goals of our nation’s space policy, and the means (financial and otherwise) for achieving these goals. A return to such first order questioning of our goals for space has been long overdue. The Columbia Accident Investigation Board described “a lack, over the past three decades, of any national mandate providing NASA a compelling mission requiring human presence in space.”²

This lack of a mandate reflects our inattention to the philosophic and spiritual roots of space exploration. It is a truism that our interest in space expresses fundamental aspirations of the human spirit. Even the appeal to scientific curiosity as the reason for research is but another expression of the traditional philosophic and religious search for truth, the desire to understand the deep nature of things. Scientists today are still the heirs of Kant, who uttered the cry *sapere aude*—dare to be wise.

It is curious, then, that we rarely consult with those specifically trained in and devoted to matters of the human spirit in the design and implementation of space policy. Of course, from the beginning of the US space program 45 years ago to the most recent NASA pronouncements there has been no lack of comments that spoke of the humanistic aspirations lying behind space travel. In the words of one observer, the early space program “was about guts and glory, about the endurance of the human body and soul in the deadly void.” But such sentiments are liable to become platitudes if they are not followed up by careful, in-depth reflection into the meaning and values of exploring and inhabiting space.

Following O’Keefe’s comment, it is time that we draw more consciously upon the expertise of scholars trained in the areas of art, philosophy, and religion in the design of our space policy. Take the example of the space station. We have missed an opportunity by not treating the space station as a *humanities* laboratory as well as a science lab. Treating the space station as a humanities lab would mean bringing scholars in history, politics, philosophy, art, music, and religion to the space station. The experience of space

¹ Frontpiece, *The Vision for Space Exploration: February 2004*. National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

² Cited in Adam Keiper, “A New Vision for NASA,” *The New Atlantis*, No. 3, fall 2003, pp. 3-22.

travel and space inhabitation would inspire their thinking upon crucial issues such as the changing place of humanity in the universe, the implications of our growing understanding of the cosmos, and our increased appreciation of the interdependence of life on earth.

Some will say that we have already done this, through bringing politicians into space. Moreover, another such attempt led to tragedy, when the first recipient of the NASA Teacher in Space Project, elementary teacher Christa McAuliffe, perished in the Challenger disaster. Bringing citizens into space is itself a worthy goal, but it does not address the need of bringing artists, humanists, social scientists and religious scholars into space to help us clarify the meaning and goals of space travel.

Some may object to the suggestion of bringing religious perspectives into a publicly funded venue, seeing it as a violation of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." But this misreads the Constitution. The Founding Fathers were interested only in preventing the establishment of one church over all others. More to the point, exploring the lived experience of the sacred (whether at the Grand Canyon, or in outer space) is distinct from questions about the place of organized, doctrinal religion in public life.

It is worth noting that NASA has recently given some attention to these wider concerns. Some of the research within the NASA Astrobiology Institute (NAI) has considered philosophical issues. So, for instance, the Center for Astrobiology at the University of Colorado lists *philosophical and societal issues in astrobiology* as one of its research themes. Tellingly, however, this research has been focused on fairly narrow epistemological issues such as the difference between historical and experimental sciences, rather than more interesting questions of how the discovery of extra-terrestrial life might affect our conception of ourselves.

In general, then, we have not taken up the task of sustained thinking about the humanistic aspects of space exploration. While NASA's Astrobiology Roadmap lists three questions as setting the agenda of its work—how does life begin and evolve? Does life exist elsewhere in the universe? What is the future of life on Earth and beyond?—a fourth bullet is needed: how might such a discovery affect our sense of our selves and our cultural institutions?

Such questions are properly the province of humanities policy—humanistic reflection that seeks engagement with the wider world. We are unlikely to make much progress in understanding our fundamental motivations concerning space travel until we commit ourselves to this crucial and difficult task.