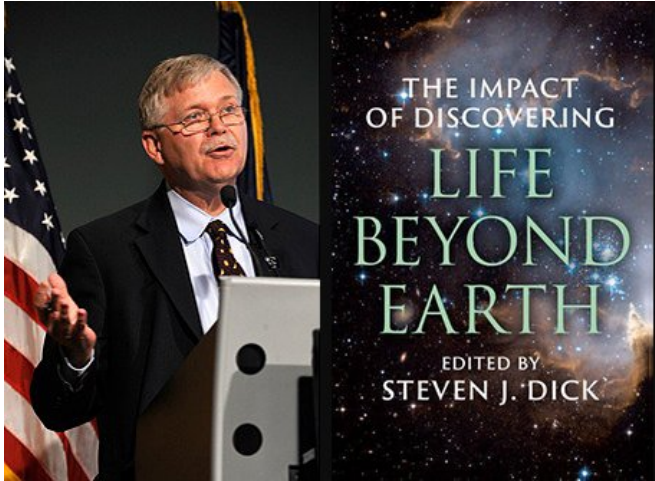


Cosmic encounters with alien life

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Credit: Steven J. Dick/Cambridge

Numerous books have been penned on the exciting subject of life on other worlds, and the news almost daily carries stories about potential new habitable sites, ranging from water on Mars to oceans on Europa and exoplanets beyond the solar system. [The Impact of Discovering Life Beyond Earth](#) picks up where those books leave off and asks "what would happen if we actually discovered life?" The answer depends, of course, on the discovery scenario. The reaction to the discovery of microbes would be quite different to the reaction to the discovery of intelligent life. And if a message is deciphered, the reaction would quite different again, depending on the content of the message! All these scenarios and many more are covered in this highly original volume, written by scientists, philosophers, historians, anthropologists and theologians addressing the new field of astrobiology and society.

How can the reaction to the discovery of [alien life](#) be approached, beyond mere guesswork? Among the methods proposed in this volume are an analysis of cases where life was thought to have been discovered in the past, an appreciation of the extended nature of the discovery process, the

prudent use of analogy, and various impact models designed to gauge the impact of science on culture. Another problem is how to transcend anthropocentrism, how to avoid projecting our own provincial views on potential extraterrestrials. This involves a deep analysis of humanity's most fundamental concepts, including life, intelligence, culture, civilization, and communication. With these approaches and caveats in mind, this volume addresses in a systematic way the philosophical, theological and moral impact of discovering life, deploying the latest scientific thought ranging from evolutionary biology to theories of consciousness. What would astrotheology and astroethics look like? What are our moral responsibilities to alien life? What might alien minds be like, and would they really think like us? And given all this, how might we prepare for such an earth-shaking [discovery](#)?

While recognizing the need to avoid a solely Western perspective, this volume raises provocative questions and no less provocative answers. Even if [life](#) is never found, questioning the foundations of human knowledge is a journey well worth taking, and could reshape our ideas of what it means to be human.

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