

The Aliens Are Us: The Limitations That the Nature of Fiction Imposes on Science Fiction About Aliens

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Every fictional story we tell invites the reader, in some way or another, to put herself in the position of the story's characters and ask herself, "What would I do in this situation?" This comparison is the very point of storytelling.

This becomes problematic, however, when the characters in a story are aliens. Because all such stories are written for human readers, we, the readers, must judge the aliens' behavior in terms of our human value system—one that is not the aliens' own. Even if a writer did somehow contrive to frame a story within what purports to be an alien value system, or to write a story in which only aliens and no humans were involved, it would still be for a human audience, which cannot but compare the aliens' actions with those a human might take.

This means that our stories about aliens cannot be *about* aliens in the same way that our stories about humans can be about humans. Our stories about aliens are still basically about humans. This constraint, I would argue, heavily dictates the forms the stories take, the roles aliens play in them, and ultimately, the limits of our conceptions about what aliens can be like. Below, I'll delineate some of those forms.

Aliens as Stand-Ins for Humans

In practice, most writers who write stories about aliens aren't trying to grapple with the above-mentioned constraint on what those stories can be. In other words, they're not trying to stretch the boundaries of the human value system. Rather, they stay quite deliberately within it, and use the aliens as stand-ins for human beings or other forms of earthly life. The aliens in these stories are not necessarily even serious attempts to imagine what an alien would be like; rather, they are merely a technique for bringing questions about human values into sharper relief.

Popular classics like *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*, for instance, are elements in a long series of human morality tales. Some of these are about the *nature of friendship, loyalty, or leadership* among humans in the face of adversity. In this they resemble any number of non-sci-fi coming-of-age stories, war stories, and other tales in the heroic mold—all that's changed is that aliens hold the roles usually reserved for parents, ghosts, or enemy troops. Others are about *how we treat the "Other"*—opponents, minorities, criminals, endangered species, or the environment—with the aliens as proxies for each.

Many other dramas about an alien encounter with humanity frame it as a *struggle against an implacable foe*—a long tradition of science fiction from *The War of the Worlds* to *Starship Troopers*. Here the aliens serve to remind us of oppression in human history—reprising the role of European colonists, for instance (if the story's moral is the equality of nations) or Nazis (if it's a paean to individual freedom).

In other stories (e.g., *The Day the Earth Stood Still*; *2001: A Space Odyssey*; *Interstellar*), the encounter with aliens is a *path to enlightenment*. Here, the aliens are benevolent, superintelligent beings who take the place of old-time deities, sent to remind us of our insignificance and pettiness, or to lift us up into a new phase of human development.

The aliens may also act as *foils for an ideological argument*, as in Iain M. Banks's (1994) *Culture* series of novels. The Culture is an atheist, materialist, humanoid society governed by benevolent AIs in which scarcity has been abolished. (Banks himself, it is clear from his essay "A Few Notes on the Culture," 1994, sees it as an idealized form of Communism, one without the food shortages and the dreary military parades.) The Idirans, an alien race with whom the Culture fights a war, consider the Culture morally bankrupt; they represent religious dogma that threatens the idealized society Banks has created.

Aliens as Philosophical Questions

There is a subgenre of science fiction concerning aliens so truly alien that they cannot play these parts in human moral dramas. Ann Leckie's (2013) *Imperial Radch* series of novels includes an alien species, the Presger, with whom a human-based empire—the Radch—has reached an uneasy peace treaty after a bitter war. The Presger never appear as explicit characters in the books, but their motivations—and even whether they have such a thing as motivations in any human sense—are said to be unfathomable.

In China Miéville's novel *Embassytown* (2011), the aliens, the Ariekei, speak a language (known simply as "Language") that is impossible for a human to speak. Each Ariekei has two voices that speak simultaneously; every word has two parts, one from each voice. For instance, one of the creatures introduces itself as

da kora eshin
u shahundi qes,

meaning, "I am *kora/shahundi*," where the last pair of words, spoken together, are its name. The peculiarity of the Ariekei is that they perceive as sentient, and can comprehend, only other single organisms that can speak Language. Even if two people, or a pair of recorded voices, pronounce Language

perfectly, the Ariekei don't understand them. (The only people able to communicate with them are human twins raised from birth in identical conditions, whom the Ariekei are able to perceive as a single sentence.)

Both these scenarios force us to question whether we could encounter a species with whom communication is in principle impossible. If in more conventional sci-fi the aliens challenge our moral precepts, here they challenge our philosophical ones, asking us *whether concepts we consider universal truly are so*.

Nonetheless, the reference point for this question in both stories is still human. These two writers, at least, make no attempt to get at the inner life of the aliens. By virtue of their very alienness, they cease to become agents in the story and instead become props, as incomprehensible and unpredictable as wild animals or winter storms.



Figure 1. [Alien eviction notice](#) (Jackson et al., 2009).

[Ctrl+Click title to view video clip.]

Can Alien Futuretypes Be Broken?

The phrases I've italicized above could be said to represent a number of futuretypes within the alien sci-fi genre. Essentially, I am arguing that all alien sci-fi is merely alien-flavored variations on familiar fictional themes, and the aliens serve simply as more exotic devices for exploring these themes. In most cases, they are human stand-ins, subsumed into and judged within the human moral framework. In the few exceptions, they remain enigmatic black boxes (Figure 1).

But the notion of futuretypes—and their origin, cyberypes—also presupposes that an alternative is theoretically possible, just that we are too unimaginative or hidebound by preconceptions to create it. What might that alternative look like?

I've already claimed that breaking out of alien futuretypes is at some level impossible, because no matter what story you write, its readers will be human and will view it through a human moral lens. But let's try to imagine an attempt to break it nonetheless.

Imagine a story about an encounter between a human and an alien race, in which both have arrived at and are trying to colonize the same planet. And let's suppose that the story alternates between the humans' and aliens' point of view, but that the aliens' value system isn't oppositional to the human one—in the way that, say, Communism and capitalism are oppositional—but orthogonal, such that it's literally impossible to evaluate one in terms of the other.

In this case, the story would be neither about the moral superiority of one species over the other, nor about an attempt to find common ground. It would simply be a dual narrative, in which the rightness and wrongness of the aliens' actions—if they even have such concepts as right and wrong—is discussed only from their perspective, and likewise for the humans.

Technically speaking, this might be analogous to telling a story in words and also in musical notation, two entirely incompatible descriptions. (Or for a scientific metaphor, think of the two value systems as the wave and particle descriptions of a quantum-mechanical system.) It would severely stretch the capacity of human language—because our words and concepts would have to be repurposed to serve as alien ones—and it might make for perplexing reading, but it could be an interesting experiment.

Would it, however, be considered literature? One of the two narratives—the human one—would be. But if the writer truly succeeded in abstracting the alien narrative from any human moral framework, would it be part of the story, or just a series of morally incomprehensible interludes between episodes of the real story—the fictional equivalent of white noise? In short, would anyone want to read it?

Response by Lonny J Avi Brooks

Gideon presents us with a more realistic and plausible version of intelligent alien life: that we may not ever really understand it at all. I wonder whether, in the pursuit of understanding our encounters with them and breaking beyond our human-oriented alien futuretypes, our empathy for interstellar cultural understanding will expand our circles of empathy on Earth. Scientists have just recently created the capability to translate dolphin songs and language and have discovered how whales are singing one continuous song that contains dialects and variations. Even if we crack the code of cetacean speech, will we really understand their views of their own watery environs?

The buzz and hype about the dangers of creating artificial intelligence (AI) point to a similar issue Gideon raises about the unknowability of alien language and philosophy. In creating AI machines and the

possibility of intelligent and conscious computers, the advances in intelligence hypothesized move exponentially beyond what we can comprehend into an alien and unknowable realm.

At the same time, we can only deduce from the past about what other intelligent, human-like species thought, felt, and practiced. For instance, Neanderthals held rituals and burials for their dead, created clothing and jewelry, and bred with *Homo sapiens*, us. In South Africa, 1.2 million years ago, another species of human labeled *Homo naledi* seem to have ritually placed the bones of their families into a cave barren to preserve their memory. And similarly, we will only have our past, present, and future human values as a map. We can assume that any alien intelligence that we encounter had the ability to create and use tools, has had an experience of some sort of reproductive capacity (i.e., had sex in one way or the other), and has had a desire to move beyond their home world. Probably death is in their realm of reality as well, given that we live in the same universe where entropy happens.

Response by Aubrie Adams

Gideon begins his essay by pointing out an interesting conundrum. He posits that fictional narratives about aliens are actually about humans. Being written primarily for a human audience, he explains that we interpret and attribute the actions, thoughts and beliefs of the aliens through our own human lens. At the core of the provocation, he argues that this is problematic because it limits what we are allowed to imagine about aliens and the predictions we can make.

To demonstrate this, Gideon shows how aliens function in science fiction narratives as just a stand-in or a placeholder for a being that has remarkably ordinary humanoid ideals, thoughts, backgrounds, motivations, and goals. Thus, rather than using an alien being, a piece of toast could also be sufficient as a prop or replacement for aliens, and it would still be able to convey the same humanoid behaviors.

In this vein, Gideon demonstrates a second type of device used in alien narratives—that of the unknowable and mysterious creature. In some ways, this might seem like a counterpoint in that it provides an alien that is not just a stand-in for humans. However, this type of alien is still imagined through a human lens in that we cannot know it because of our humanness.

This provocation leaves the reader wondering: what kind of narrative can we possibly understand about aliens that allows us to reimagine alien beings in new ways? One possibility Gideon proposes describes an alien narrative in which the views and behaviors of the aliens are viewed not in opposition to humans, but orthogonally so that the two cannot be viewed in relation to one another.

One must wonder, to what extent do all popular versions of aliens fit so neatly into these two categories? For example, what about an alien who functions more like an animal, bacteria, or microbe? Several exemplars of this type already function in science fiction. Certainly, we could examine aliens such as these from a human perspective, but it may also be possible to do so from another perspective. If we think of such aliens as beings who only seek to satisfy their basic needs and reproduce, can they really be played or replaced by human actors so easily?

In addition, I agree to some extent with the use of the aliens from *Interstellar* (Nolan, 2014) fulfilling a role in relation to humans as sages guiding humanity on our path toward enlightenment. On the other hand, they are also unknowable beings we do not truly understand, and they fit within the “black box” type of alien as well. Still, what is unique about these aliens is that (spoiler alert) they are actually humans from the future. Though this fits both mold of aliens as humans and aliens as unfathomable, they function in a fuzzy realm of neither type, which may seem an interesting way to conceptualize a new breed of alien being.

As Gideon already notes, perhaps the endeavor to imagine an alien that is not rooted in human ideals is a futile task. Nonetheless, it becomes an important undertaking for science fiction writers of the future to push the boundaries of the ways in which aliens can function so as to not restrain our potential for imagining these potentials and hypotheticals.

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