

Summary of “Would Contact with Extraterrestrials Benefit or Harm Humanity?”

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Baum, S.D., Haqq-Misra, J.D., & Domagal-Goodman, S.D. (2010). Would contact with extraterrestrials benefit or harm humanity? A scenario analysis. *Acta Astronautica*, 68, 2114-2129.

In “Would contact with extraterrestrials benefit or harm humanity? A scenario analysis,” Seth D. Baum, Jacob D. Haqq-Misra, and Shawn D. Domagal-Goodman describe the results of a scenario analysis performed to determine if contact with extraterrestrials would benefit or harm humanity. Baum et al. identify three types of scenarios: beneficial, which would be desirable; neutral, which would prompt indifference; and harmful, which would be undesirable. They point out that previous work in this field has been rather narrow in scope, as it only identifies a few potential scenarios involving extraterrestrial contact. Other authors also have a tendency to jump to conclusions, limiting the practical applications of their work.

Baum et al. outline several scenarios that could occur if human beings make contact with extraterrestrials. If human beings detect extraterrestrials without contacting them directly, there are still some philosophical implications. Contact with cooperative extraterrestrials has several potential benefits, including asking for help with problems on Earth, asking for advice on ways to avoid global catastrophes, and engaging in illuminating science and mathematics discussions. If humans come into contact with uncooperative extraterrestrials, it is possible to overcome the threat, leading to a beneficial outcome. Neutral contact scenarios would have no net positive or negative effects on humankind. Baum et al. explain that extraterrestrials may be intentionally hiding from humans or unintentionally escaping human notice because they have no desire to communicate, they have a different form of existence, or they are too far away for humans to see. If extraterrestrials are visible to humans, they may be uninteresting or considered a mild nuisance.

Harmful contact scenarios are linked to negative outcomes for humankind. Baum et al. posit that this harm may be intentional or unintentional, with selfish extraterrestrials and universalist extraterrestrials causing harm for different reasons. They theorize that selfish extraterrestrials may harm humans by eating them, attacking them, or enslaving them, while universalist extraterrestrials may cause harm while pursuing goals such as improving galactic infrastructure and identifying ways to use Earth's resources more efficiently. Unintentional harm may arise as the result of physical or information hazards. Physical hazards associated with extraterrestrial contact include the transmission of disease, acts of incompetence that occur when extraterrestrial creatures conduct physics experiments or use self-replicating probes, and mechanical harm. Extraterrestrials may also behave as invasive species, depleting resources that humans need to survive. Information hazards include biological hazards, computer viruses, and the possibility that contact with extraterrestrials will demoralize human culture.

Baum et al. admit that there are many unknown factors that could influence the outcome of contact between human beings and extraterrestrials, so this paper does not describe every possible outcome. Another limitation of this scenario analysis is that actual contact with extraterrestrials may not follow the scenarios outlined in the paper. However, the results serve as a means of training humans to recognize patterns and analyze the potential outcomes of contact with extraterrestrials before that contact ever occurs. Baum et al. recommend using caution when sending messages to extraterrestrials, as providing too much detail about human life may actually be harmful, especially if humans make contact with uncooperative extraterrestrials. They also recommend that humans try to avoid the appearance of a rapidly expanding civilization, as this perception may cause extraterrestrial organisms to fear humans. As a result, extraterrestrials could launch a preemptive attack on Earth, hoping to eliminate the perceived threat. It is also

possible that universalist extraterrestrials may observe the way humans are damaging Earth's ecosystems and decide to eradicate humans as a means of preserving the planet. Baum et al. recommend reducing greenhouse gas emissions and taking steps to preserve ecosystems as a means of preventing an attack by these extraterrestrials.

