

Interview with Prof. Chelsea Haramia

## **“Maybe the aliens are saying to themselves:**

## **No, thank you very much!”**

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Will the world still be the same when humanity has made contact with extraterrestrial life forms? In any case, US philosophy professor Chelsea Haramia believes that it is better to think about this beforehand and make amicable plans for the day after. She has been researching this as a fellow of the NRW Academy for International Affairs in Bonn since August. Martin Wein met her there.

Professor Haramia, you dedicate part of your research to space ethics and global planning for the “time after discovery”. What does that mean from a scientific perspective?

Chelsea Haramia: It's about the question of how we should proceed once we have discovered extraterrestrial life forms. I'm particularly interested in the aspect of extraterrestrial technology because it could enable communication with distant planets. We certainly shouldn't wait until we have discovered extraterrestrials before we think about it.

Is there already a discussion about this outside the USA?

Haramia: So far, it's mainly an academic discussion among scientists - both in the US and in Europe. It's about any form of proof of life - even if it's microbes on Mars. The United Nations has not yet addressed the issue of astrobiology in depth.

When I went to school in the 1990s, it was said that the discovery of higher extraterrestrial life was statistically highly unlikely. Not even planets outside the solar system were known. Has this view changed?

Haramia: The astrobiologist Nathalie Cabrol writes in her book “The Secret Life of the Universe” that it would be a statistical absurdity if there wasn't at least simple life out there. The question is rather: can we find it and communicate with it? We know from the history of the earth that the development of higher life forms can take a very long time. On the other hand, today we can use radio waves to listen very far into space, which increases the chances of contact. However, we are looking for life forms like us and technologies like ours. Perhaps we are missing something.

Do you expect to make a discovery in your own lifetime?

Haramia: It's hard to say. Since we don't know anything about the capabilities of possible aliens, we can't estimate how likely contact is. In any case, we should be on the lookout for anomalies in order to think outside the box. Even on Earth, life has been discovered in the most inhospitable places that scientists previously thought were uninhabitable.

How does extraterrestrial life differ philosophically from terrestrial life?

Haramia: Immanuel Kant describes a moral agent as someone who can evaluate and act according to moral criteria. He explicitly does not limit this to humans. If there are others out there who can act rationally and autonomously, then in terms of moral philosophy they would also be persons, even if they are not human beings. So there is no fundamental difference. It's more a question of how we deal with other life forms. And this question also arises on Earth, for example in relation to the treatment of animals or abortions.

Would our self-image change after the discovery?

Haramia: Many people are concerned about the consequences of contact for life on Earth and for us in particular. But it could also have significant consequences for others. We should seriously consider this now. Similarly, we are discussing whether animals and plants or entire habitats have their own moral right to exist. It's not just about us!

How do you think humanity would react to the news of a discovery?

Haramia: The reactions would probably be as varied as people are. Very defensive, xenophobic reactions are conceivable, but also more open-minded cooperative ones. It would be good if we were to learn lessons from our earthly past, in which foreigners were often deliberately morally dehumanized.

Would this mean that earthly religions would lose their justification because they are very human-centered?

Haramia: Holistic perspectives in Hinduism or Buddhism, for example, could certainly integrate the new knowledge better into their world view. But there are also currents in Christianity or Islam that would be compatible with extraterrestrial life.

Some people say we'd better hide from possible aliens. We are ruining our home planet, wiping out many other life forms and could look like a terrible plague to aliens, which would be better eradicated.

Haramia: Well, it's quite possible that we've already been discovered. Maybe the aliens are saying to themselves: No, thank you very much! We'd rather not have anything to do with these guys. In any case, it is a possible scenario that aliens use us as a resource or exterminate us. But it also reflects our own treatment of other life on Earth, such as farm animals. It therefore makes perfect sense to question our self-image of ourselves and life on Earth. Philosophy and ethics should therefore accompany the natural sciences in their exploration of the cosmos. After all, it is also possible that contact would be extremely beneficial for us.

Steven Hawking said that intelligent life should first be sought on Earth, i.e. we have enough problems of our own down here. Where did your interest in space ethics come from?

Haramia: A good friend of mine is an astrobiologist. She was concerned about the messages we have been sending out for decades to potential receivers in space using high-frequency radio radiation. Such messages inevitably always speak on behalf of the whole of humanity, our planet. And ultimately, they affect us all. They should therefore be formulated in a consensus of humanity. That was an exciting philosophical question for me. This kind of spectacularly science-fictional sounding question also helps us to better understand ethical problems that we are dealing with here and now on Earth. It's about structures of hierarchy and oppression, for example. In this respect, the debate helps even if contact never occurs.

What insights did your stay at the NRW Academy of International Affairs give you?

Haramia: I volunteer for the "SETI Post-Detection Hub" at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. With the Academy's funding, I was able to pursue these questions more intensively

for a few months. I was able to do some preliminary work here for future field research, which is not part of the usual repertoire of philosophy. But we should find out what people think about messages to possible aliens - without a predefined expectation of possible targets. Otherwise that would be pretty unfair.

Personal details: Chelsea Haramia, born in 1982, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy at Spring Hill College in the US state of Alabama and is currently a Senior Research Fellow for five years at the University of Bonn, where she is conducting research at the Center for Science and Thought. She is also a Fellow at the Academy for International Affairs NRW until February. She has focused on the ethics of space research, in particular astrobiology. Among other things, Haramia is chair of the Human Factors working group of the Post-Detection Hub of the British SETI research network. wmr

What is the SETI Post-Detection Hub?

The SETI Post-Detection Hub is an initiative of the UK SETI Research Network (UKSRN) led by physicist Dr. John Elliot and hosted by the St Andrews Centre for Exoplanet Science, the Centre for Global Law and Governance, Durham Law School and the Jodrell Bank Centre for Astrophysics at the University of Manchester. Its mission is to initiate impact assessments, protocols, procedures and treaties that will enable humanity to respond responsibly in the event of a discovery. wmr