

Philosophical Issues Connected To The Search For Life Elsewhere

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Recent developments in biology, geology, planetary science, and astrophysics have brought excitement in the potential for life elsewhere to a high level. One of the less-often-discussed aspects of the resulting search concerns why we are interested in the potential for life elsewhere, what the philosophical issues are that drive us to search, and what it would mean to find (or to not find) convincing evidence for extraterrestrial life. That such a large fraction of the public is interested in the issues and that much of the research in the planetary and astrophysical aspects of astrobiology has few practical applications, yet enjoys widespread support regardless, underscores the deep meaning of the results. This likely connects up to the value of exploration in our society, to the desire to understand our origins and how we as a species and as a society fit into the world around us. That is, it connects to understanding what the nature of humanity is and what it means to be human. We as a society have been exploring the world around us for more than 2000 years, and, in fact, that exploration arguably is the hallmark of civilization. These issues will be discussed, along with the connections between science in general and society and the religious aspects of extraterrestrial life.