

Arthur C. Clarke's Philosophy for the 21st Century

By Bob Krone

Joseph Campbell (1904-1987) was a renowned scholar in comparative mythology. In his book, *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space: Metaphor as Myth and As Religion*, he wrote:

It then occurred to me (after Armstrong and Aldin stepped on the moon) that outer space is within inasmuch as the laws of space are within us; outer and inner space are the same. We know, furthermore, that we have actually been born from space, since it was out of primordial space that the galaxy took form, of which our life-giving sun is a member. And this earth, of whose material we are made, is a flying satellite of that sun. We are, in fact, productions of this earth. We are, as it were, its organs. Our eyes are the eyes of this earth; our knowledge is the earth's knowledge. And the earth, as we now know, is a production of space.¹

Inner Space, for us in Kepler Space Institute, is in the minds of humans. And the philosophy, values and beliefs found there will be the motivation for Space exploration, development, and human settlements.

Arthur C. Clarke

Arthur C. Clarke is one of the top Space storytellers. His books, and the films made from his books, are permanent best-sellers. This *Journal of Space Philosophy* article summarizes his philosophy existing in that legacy. They reflect the insights of Arthur C. Clarke spanning a wide range of topics concerning the human condition, our existence on Earth, and Earth's place in a greater cosmos. Sources are Neil McAleer, Arthur C. Clarke's biographer, and primary sources in the collection of the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. See:

<http://www.clarkefoundation.org/sample-page/sir-arthurs-quotations/>

Freedom of Information

In 2014, information freedom is a global issue. Arthur wrote: "In the struggle for freedom of information, technology, not politics, will be the ultimate decider."² He was almost right. The political ramifications of making classified information free fill today's media. But it is the technology that fires the politics.

¹ (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2002), 2.

² www.goodreads.com/ and www.quotationspag.com. Note: Arthur C. Clarke has filled his books with quotes that flow from his personal philosophy. The ones selected here for thirteen subjects provide his relevant basic beliefs in summary form. Those thirteen could become the table of contents for a book titled *Arthur C. Clarke's Philosophy for the 21st Century*.

Reality, Fiction, and History

Arthur wrote: “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”³ Arthur’s stories are filled with his science and technology know-how combined with scenarios that readers often interpret as magic. His science-fiction magic has a way of becoming reality

The limits of the possible can only be defined by going beyond them into the impossible. One of the biggest roles of science fiction is to prepare people to accept the future without pain and to encourage a flexibility of mind. Politicians should read science fiction, not westerns and detective stories. *2001* was written in an age which now lies beyond one of the great divides in human history; we are sundered from it forever by the moment when Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin stepped out on to the Sea of Tranquility. Now history and fiction have become inexorably intertwined.⁴

Morality

Arthur wrote: “As our own species is in the process of proving, one cannot have superior science and inferior morals. The combination is unstable and self-destructing.”⁵ Here Arthur identifies what may be the major astrosociology problem for the future of humans in Space. If we specify for our purposes here that *morality* is an umbrella term for the whole set of human pathologies that have caused death, destruction, and reverses in civilization, then Arthur Clarke is right – superior science with inferior morals will be self-destructive for humankind and create huge barriers for Space missions. Yehezkel Dror, The Co-Founder and leading scholar in the Policy Sciences wrote in his 2006 “Governance for a Human Future in Space”:

New values focused on the long-term good of humanity, within pluralistic normative systems, are needed. This goes far beyond a code of ethics for space settlement, however important, involving human values as a whole. Needed is what I call Raison d’Humanite values displacing, in part at least, Raison d’Etat, and also going beyond the propensity of countries to regard what is good for them as good for humanity as a whole. Developing Raison d’Humanite is a sorely neglected task for value creators and moral philosophers. Present efforts in this direction are often very narrow in scope, doubtful in terms of serious moral reasoning, and not fitting the nature of human settlement of space, which necessarily will be “tough” in many respects.⁶

The Kepler Space Institute has formulated its Space Philosophy into three basic components: (1) reverence for life, (2) ethical civilization, and (3) policy sciences. See the Fall 2012 issue of the *Journal of Space Philosophy*, Article #8 by Bob Krone.

³ www.goodreads.com/ and www.quotationspag.com.

⁴ www.goodreads.com/ and www.quotationspag.com.

⁵ www.goodreads.com/ and www.quotationspag.com.

⁶ Yehezkel Dror, “Governance for a Human Future in Space,” chapter 5 in *Beyond Earth: The Future of Humans in Space*, ed. Bob Krone (Toronto, ON: Apogee Books, 2006), 41-45.

Laws of Nature

Clarke wrote, “Human judges can show mercy. But against the laws of nature, there is no appeal.”⁷ Human evolution on Earth has adapted *homo sapiens* so it lives in comfort with Earth’s natural laws. The past sixty years of humans venturing into Space have validated that Clarke quote. Kepler, Newton, Galileo, Einstein, and others have defined enough laws of nature in Space that today’s science and technology is capable of sending humans to the Moon and of orbiting Earth. In 2014 we know something about gravity, mass, energy, and relativity and we are learning about “Nature’s Cosmic Intelligence.” See the *Journal of Space Philosophy*, Fall 2012, Article 7, by Joel Isaacson.

Nationalism

Arthur’s quote is: “It is not easy to see how the more extreme forms of nationalism can long survive when men have seen the Earth in its true perspective as a single small globe against the stars.”⁸ This is a subject that Frank White has championed with his Overview Effect (see the *Journal of Space Philosophy*, Fall 2012, Article 9 and Fall 2013, Article 10). The resource requirements of Space missions make strictly national sponsorship difficult. The International Space Station has been the most successful example of international cooperation. But the issue has far greater implications than for individual missions. The larger research question is: *How should successful Space Settlement Governance be designed?* If internationalism is part of the answer *then what will be impacts for nationalism on Earth?* And does seeing the world absent national borders erase the historic reasons for maintain national borders? The Space Age commencement will foster serious social-political questions like these. Arthur’s bias against nationalism is clear from his quote: “There is hopeful symbolism in the fact that flags do not wave in a vacuum.”

Intelligence

“The best proof that there’s intelligent life in outer space is the fact that it hasn’t come here,” wrote Arthur Clarke. “The fact that we have not yet found the slightest evidence for life — much less intelligence — beyond this Earth does not surprise or disappoint me in the least. Our technology must still be laughably primitive; we may well be like jungle savages listening for the throbbing of tom-toms, while the ether around them carries more words per second than they could utter in a lifetime.”⁹ We don’t believe Arthur Clarke knew of Dr. Joel Isaacson’s discoveries and research into *Nature’s Cosmic Intelligence*, but that final thought is remarkably close to Recursive Distinctioning. See Joel Isaacson’s article, “Nature’s Cosmic Intelligence,” in the Fall 2012 issue of the *Journal of Space Philosophy*. Arthur also wrote: “Two possibilities exist: Either we are alone in the Universe or we are not. Both are equally terrifying. The Information Age offers much to mankind, and I would like to think that we will rise to the challenges it presents. But it is vital to remember that information — in the sense of raw

⁷ www.goodreads.com/ and www.quotationspag.com.

⁸ www.goodreads.com/ and www.quotationspag.com.

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data — is not knowledge, that knowledge is not wisdom, and that wisdom is not foresight. But information is the first essential step to all of these.”¹⁰

New ideas

Every revolutionary idea seems to evoke three stages of reaction. They may be summed up by the phrases: (1) It's completely impossible. (2) It's possible, but it's not worth doing. (3) I said it was a good idea all along. This is the first age that's ever paid much attention to the future, which is a little ironic since we may not have one.¹¹

Religion

Arthur Clarke described himself as an atheist:

It may be that our role on this planet is not to worship God but to create him. The greatest tragedy in mankind's entire history may be the hijacking of morality by religion. The rash assertion that “God made man in His own image” is ticking like a time bomb at the foundations of many faiths, and as the hierarchy of the universe is disclosed to us, we may have to recognize this chilling truth: if there are any gods whose chief concern is man, they cannot be very important gods.¹²

We created a multi-faith *Space Faith Think Tank* within Kepler Space Institute in 2008 that searched for spiritual commonalities across faiths. See Dr. (Pastor) Lawrence Downing's article #11 in the Fall 2012 issue of the *Journal of Space Philosophy*.

Automation

Any teacher that can be replaced by a machine should be!¹³

Human extinction

The danger of asteroid or comet impact is one of the best reasons for getting into space.... I'm very fond of quoting my friend Larry Niven: “*The dinosaurs became extinct because they didn't have a space program. And if we become extinct because we don't have a space program, it'll serve us right!*”¹⁴

Scale of the Universe

We have abolished space here on the little Earth; we can never abolish the space that yawns between the stars. Once again, as in the days when Homer sang, we are face-to-face with immensity and must accept its grandeur and terror, its inspiring possibilities and its dreadful restraints. To obtain a mental picture of the distance to the nearest star, as compared

¹⁰ www.goodreads.com/ and www.quotationspag.com.

¹¹ www.goodreads.com/ and www.quotationspag.com.

¹² www.goodreads.com/ and www.quotationspag.com.

¹³ www.goodreads.com/ and www.quotationspag.com.

¹⁴ www.goodreads.com/ and www.quotationspag.com.

with the distance to the nearest planet, you must imagine a world in which the closest object to you is only five feet away — and there is nothing else to see until you have traveled a thousand miles. Space can be mapped and crossed and occupied without definable limit; but it can never be conquered. When our race has reached its ultimate achievements, and the stars themselves are scattered no more widely than the seed of Adam, even then we shall still be like ants crawling on the face of the Earth. The ants have covered the world, but have they conquered it — for what do their countless colonies know of it, or of each other? So it will be with us as we spread out from Mother Earth, loosening the bonds of kinship and understanding, hearing faint and belated rumors at second — or third — or thousandth hand of an ever-dwindling fraction of the entire human race. Though the Earth will try to keep in touch with her children, in the end all the efforts of her archivists and historians will be defeated by time and distance, and the sheer bulk of material. For the numbers of distinct human societies or nations, when our race is twice its present age, may be far greater than the total number of all the men who have ever lived up to the present time. We have left the realm of comprehension in our vain effort to grasp the scale of the universe; so it must always be, sooner rather than later.¹⁵

Predicting

[We] cannot predict the new forces, powers, and discoveries that will be disclosed to us when we reach the other planets or can set up new laboratories in space. They are as much beyond our vision today as fire or electricity would be beyond the imagination of a fish.¹⁶

Entropy

Maybe those nihilist philosophers are right; maybe this is all we can expect of the universe, a relentless crushing of life and spirit, because the equilibrium state of the cosmos is death.¹⁷

For his 90th birthday in December 2007, Arthur C. Clarke recorded a greeting to his friends around the world. As part of the message, Clarke expressed three wishes:

Firstly, I would like to see some evidence of extra-terrestrial life. I have always believed that we are not alone in the universe. But we are still waiting for ET to call us — or give us some kind of a sign. We have no way of guessing when this might happen — I hope sooner rather than later!

¹⁵ www.goodreads.com/ and www.quotationspag.com.

¹⁶ www.goodreads.com/ and www.quotationspag.com.

¹⁷ www.goodreads.com/ and www.quotationspag.com.

Secondly, I would like to see us kick our current addiction to oil, and adopt clean energy sources.... Climate change has now added a new sense of urgency. Our civilisation depends on energy, but we can't allow oil and coal to slowly bake our planet....

The third wish is one closer to home. I've been living in Sri Lanka for 50 years — and half that time, I've been a sad witness to the bitter conflict that divides my adopted country. I dearly wish to see lasting peace established in Sri Lanka as soon as possible.

In his 90th birthday message, Clarke also addressed his legacy:

I'm sometimes asked how I would like to be remembered. I've had a diverse career as a writer, underwater explorer, space promoter and science populariser. Of all these, I want to be remembered most as a writer — one who entertained readers, and, hopefully, stretched their imaginations as well.

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About the Author: Dr. Bob Krone is President of Kepler Space Institute, Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Space Philosophy*, and Emeritus Professor of Systems Management, University of Southern California. His curriculum vitae can be found at www.bobkrone.com/node/103.



Editor's Notes: Arthur C. Clarke published 34 novels between 1951 and 2008. His non-fiction publications numbered 31 between 1950 and 2005. Wikipedia documents 70 cited references, 19 external links, and 15 Awards, Honours, and recognitions. During WWII he served in the Royal Air Force as a radar specialist. He was commissioned as a Pilot Officer in May 1943 and became Chairman of the British Interplanetary Society from 1946 to 1947 and again from 1951 to 1953. One of his most important contributions was his concept for geostationary satellites to be communications relays. The geostationary orbit at 22,000 miles above the equator is officially recognized by the International Astronomical Union as the "Clarke Orbit." See en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_C_Clarke. *Gordon Arthur*.

