

Space Philosophy: A Ten-Year Retrospective

By Frank White

Is it really possible that it was ten years ago that the *Journal of Space Philosophy* published its first edition, and it included my essay, "Deep Space: The Philosophy of the Overview Effect?" Since that time, space philosophy has made great strides, and it seems more like a century than a decade.

One of the most significant developments has simply been the growth of interest in space philosophy itself. Back in 1986, when I decided to dub myself a space philosopher, it was not because I had been trained as a philosopher—far from it. Rather, I saw a need for a new space philosophy and did not see anyone taking up the challenge. In that way, I became a space philosopher by reinventing myself and working at the task of creating this different way of thinking. I was not interested in an abstract approach to the topic, using words like *epistemology* and *ontology* that are not easy to understand or apply. Rather, I was attracted to another meaning of the word *philosophy*, which refers to basic ideas about how to do something or how to live one's life. As one of the editors of *JSP*, Gordon Arthur notes:

The Greek word *philosophia*, the root of the English word philosophy, means love of wisdom. This can as easily be practical wisdom as theoretical wisdom. Aristotle's main preoccupation was seeking virtue, not abstract knowledge: for the ancients, philosophy was about how to live as much as how to think.

I agree with Arthur, and with Aristotle!

Fast-forward twenty-six years to 2012, and the first edition of the *JSP*. That publication represented a milestone in itself, and suddenly, I no longer felt alone. Instead, I was sharing my ideas in a journal dedicated to the topic I had been attempting to highlight for more than two decades. My contribution to that first edition built on the foundation of Overview Effect theory, of course, but it suggested that we needed to go beyond that initial framework as we looked outward into the solar ecosystem. My essay argued that we needed the new philosophy of space exploration to go beyond asking how this great adventure might benefit humanity and asking how it might benefit the universe (which I later dubbed *Cosma*). Today, that case has been made in the third book of the Overview Trilogy, *The Cosma Hypothesis: Implications of the Overview Effect*. (I am deeply grateful to Dylan Taylor for publishing *Cosma*, and for ultimately becoming the publisher, through his Multiverse Media, of almost all of my books.)

The Cosma Hypothesis suggests that humanity has evolved to the brink of becoming a spacefaring species because as we explore the universe, we bring life, intelligence, and self-awareness to the cosmos. Thus, our benefit to Cosma is that we assist her to become increasingly more alive, intelligent, and self-aware. This great purpose forms the essence

of a new philosophy of space exploration. It embraces exploration over exploitation, though both are needed if humanity is going to expand beyond the planet of our birth. It seeks a balance between these two inclinations, with the basic principle that we give as much to Cosma as we take from her.

Moreover, *The Overview Effect* included a big idea that garnered little attention for quite a while—the Human Space Program. As I finished writing the first edition of the book, it became clear from what the astronauts had told me that exploring the universe was much too big a task for one space program, one country, or one company. It should be a global commitment, a central project for all humanity. I proposed such a program and waited for someone to implement it, but for decades no one did! Eventually, my colleagues and I established the Human Space Program, Inc. (HSP) as a nonprofit 501 (c) 3 organization, which is now functioning with an energetic team of volunteers and support from a wide range of people. It is slated to be a millennium-long project, which technically began in 2000 (the date specified in *The Overview Effect*), so we are only 22 years into it! There is a long way to go!

HSP's efforts are also centered around the Overview Effect, and in that sense, the organization embodies the new philosophy. In addition, the initial foundation document is included in *The Cosma Hypothesis*, so it is available for all to see, and is associated with that particular effort to create a new space philosophy. In addition, HSP has given birth to another significant project almost by accident, one that fosters the development of the new space philosophy on a weekly basis. This is the Overview Round Table, which meets online every Wednesday at noon ET. I founded the Round Table, with the support of my HSP colleagues, to respond to the onset of the COVID pandemic in the spring of 2020. Originally aimed at asking how COVID would affect the space narrative, we are now focused on shaping that narrative in a positive direction. The reference to the King Arthur story is intentional. As I wrote in my second book, *The New Camelot*, I believe that Arthur's Holy Grail was the unity of the realm of England, and that President Kennedy sought a similar outcome for the people of planet Earth with Apollo—the Apollo astronauts were his Grail Knights!

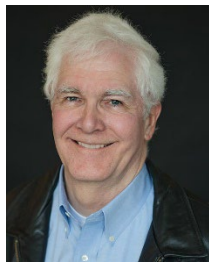
An additional development is the advent of 2211.world, a website dedicated to the space philosophy field that was launched, again, by Dylan Taylor. As a co-founder and executive contributor, I have added a number of essays to the site. However, the point is not what I have done, but the fact that several diverse individuals have now had their space philosophy work showcased on the site. Multiverse Media, through senior producer Will Henry, has played another important role by turning many of my most recent interviews with Citizen Astronauts into a podcast called "Space Philosophy with Frank White." I am pleased to say, too, that space ethics, a branch of space philosophy, has generated quite a lot of interest since 2012, and I have participated in two panels on this topic, both of which were fascinating. Michelle Hanlon, President of the National Space

Society and organizer of both panels, is planning to create an Institute of Space Ethics, which promises to bring the field to even greater prominence.

Finally, it is worth noting that there is a track on space philosophy at the Kepler Space Institute, and Kepler is creating an *Encyclopedia of Space Philosophy*. Ten years ago, a student could not take space philosophy courses or earn a certificate in space philosophy, but now they can! The Kepler experiment holds great promise, and it will be a center for innovative thinking about space migration far into the future.

In short, the expansion of the space philosophy field since the first edition of JSP has been nothing short of amazing—and highly encouraging. However, resting on our laurels would be a great mistake. As I have asserted from the very beginning, we need an action-oriented space philosophy, not one that is confined to the so-called ivory tower. As humanity evolves outward into the universe, we have an opportunity to begin anew, to correct mistakes of the past and build a positive future. Whether we make a new and better beginning or repeat old behaviors depends largely on what is in our minds, individually and collectively. It depends, largely, on our space philosophy.

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About the Author: Frank White has authored or coauthored numerous books on topics ranging from space exploration to climate change to artificial intelligence. His best-known work, *The Overview Effect: Space Exploration and Human Evolution*, is considered by many to be a seminal work in the field of space exploration. A film called *Overview*, based largely on his work, has had nearly 8 million plays on Vimeo. Since the first edition of his book on the subject was published in 1987, the Overview Effect has become a standard term for describing the spaceflight experience. The fourth edition of *The Overview Effect*, including original interviews with 31 astronauts, was published in 2021.

White considers himself to be a space philosopher, and he has long advocated developing a new philosophy of space exploration. His book on this topic, *The Cosma Hypothesis: Implications of the Overview Effect*, was published in 2019. In it, he asks the fundamental question, "What is the purpose of human space exploration? Why has the evolutionary process brought humanity to the brink of becoming a spacefaring species?" In the book,

he shares the idea of "the Human Space Program" as a "central project" that will engage all of us in the process of becoming "Citizens of the Universe."

Frank and his wife Donna live outside Boston, MA.

Editors' Notes: Frank White continues our retrospective exploration of the past ten years. As the author of *The Overview Effect*, he has been a published space philosopher for nearly four decades, so he brings a unique perspective to the discussion. He appeared in the first issue of the JSP and reappeared four more times before this issue. His excitement around the growing interest in space philosophy is energizing and inspiring to us in 2022. We humbly predict that this field of study—and his work in particular—will continue to see an increase in public attention and excitement in the coming years. As we return to the Moon, land humans on Mars, and establish the first commercial space stations we would do well to adopt the message of unity and higher aspirations that Frank advocates. This is only the beginning of human migration into space. **Mark Wagner and Gordon Arthur.**