SPECTER OF THE MONOLITH

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SPECTER OF THE MONOLITH

Nihilism, the Sublime, and Human Destiny in Space — From Apollo and Hubble, to *2001*, *Star Trek*, and *Interstellar*

(Yeah, it's a wordy subtitle, that's what is needed for search engines)

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INTRODUCTION
THE MONOLITH AND MOONWALKING

> The most terrifying fact about the universe is not that it is hostile but that it is indifferent. If we can come to terms with this indifference and accept the challenges of life within the boundaries of death, our existence as a species can have genuine meaning and fulfillment. However vast the darkness, we must supply our own light. — **Stanley Kubrick**

1. *Earthrise* and *2001*

It's 2016. We are almost fifty orbits of the sun since 1968, the year Apollo 8 and Stanley Kubrick gave us the two key existential icons of the 20th-century space age — *Earthrise* and the monolith in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, respectively. Via these two images, we're presented with the ultimate philosophical challenges facing humans in the quest to explore space and find meaning for our existence in a vast and expanding universe.

The Apollo 8 astronauts were the first humans to escape the gravity of Earth. As they orbited the moon, they turned their cameras back toward Earth and took the most beautiful and important selfie ever.[1] By showing Earth against the blackness of the cosmic void, Apollo 8 provided the human species with its first view of its true existential condition, namely that we inhabit a tiny planet floating alone in a colossal universe. Across the decades, Apollo 8's journey around the moon has proven more prophetic and influential than Apollo 11's landing on the moon, where Neil Armstrong stepped off the lunar module and stated: "One small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind." Apollo 8's prophetic influence comes from the fact that when confronted with *Earth in the cosmic void* and the specter of human meaninglessness, the astronauts resorted to reading from the Bible's Genesis to a global TV audience reaching one billion people. Five decades later, Genesis and stories of all-powerful Creators still reign as the dominant narratives we turn to for explaining humanity's origins and destiny in the universe. In contrast, the overall secular meaning of Apollo 11's moonwalk and Armstrong's phrase have yet to generate any serious challenge to the theologies that inspire most of the people on planet Earth.

Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* ranks as the greatest space film and one of the most philosophically profound films of all time. *2001* depicts a past and future in which humans have evolved from apes to astronauts via science and technology along with an assist from a mysterious black monolith. With stunning cinematography and special effects, *2001* taps into the sublime majesty of the cosmos along with the marvels of science and technology. At the same moment in history, NASA and Kubrick both "directed" space odysseys that expressed the highest trajectories of the space age, when humanity first ventured into the cosmos beyond planet Earth. However, neither NASA nor Kubrick provided *the philosophical meaning* for these discoveries and achievements.

Though the monolith is famed for inspiring the apes to invent technology and evolve into space farers, the monolith and *2001* also pose the question of what we humans will become as we venture into a magnificent cosmos in which are not central, not significant, and maybe not alone. Now that we've touched the monolith, what will we evolve into as artists, thinkers, inventors, and creators of a spare-faring civilization? *2001* and the monolith provide starting points for our philosophical evolution, moments when we are challenged to face three key questions about our existence as advanced simians and space voyagers: Where are we going, what does it mean, and what can we hope for?

2. "A Rope Over an Abyss"

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (the book that inspired Richard Strauss to write the symphony *Also Sprach Zarathustra* [1896], which was later used by Kubrick in *2001*), Friedrich Nietzsche speculated that since humans are the superior species that evolved from apes, there might be an equally greater species that would evolve from humans — what he termed the "Ubermensch" or "Superman."[2] Nietzsche wrote how "man is a rope stretched between the animal and the Superman — a rope over an abyss."[3] So what comes next? What will emerge in the next stage of human evolution?

That's the question Kubrick poses at the end of *2001*, with the Star-Child appearing against the blackness of the cosmos, Earth literally rising in his gaze. As a space-faring species, what will humans make of themselves in an awe-inspiring universe with unlimited possibility? That's where the monolith has profound metaphorical meaning. Tall, sleek, and black, the monolith is an icon of awe and the cosmic void, yet it's also a towering blank slate for us to write a new philosophy for the future of the human species.

We are a species with much promise, the very species that touched the black monolith in *2001*. We are simians that emerged from Africa's savannas and evolved into humans, apes who became astronauts, spear throwers who became space farers. In our midst emerged artists and philosophers who wondered about our place in the cosmos, and scientists and technologists who have extended our consciousness into space and across the universe to offer remarkable new perspectives on our origins and destiny. We are a brainy and brave species that looked up to the starry skies with our telescopes and said, "What the hell! Let's go for it!" So we launched Apollo to the moon, orbited the International Space Station around the planet, and pointed the Hubble Space Telescope to the edge of the universe.

The Apollo missions, *2001*, and the original *Star Trek* TV series blasted us into a sublime future with the opportunity to build a unified planetary civilization, but we rejected it because we were unwilling to accept that we are a single species inhabiting a watery rock orbiting a flaming ball of hydrogen in a limitless universe. Apollo and Hubble forced us to confront cosmic nihilism, or the fact that there is no obvious meaning to human existence in a godless universe. Via Apollo, we've walked on the 4.5 billion-year-old moon, and via the Hubble Space Telescope, we've peered across 13.7 billion years of space-time — and there is not a Creator in sight. As Nietzsche famously said long before Apollo and Hubble: "God is dead."[4] But most everyone can't accept it. Apollo's photos of Earth from space and the Hubble Deep Field images have obliterated the rationales supporting the dominant narratives (theology, nationalism, and tribalism) we use to explain our origins, meaning, and destiny. Yet our species remains in utter denial.

We humans apparently can't handle the paradoxical meaning of our greatest scientific achievement and most important philosophical discovery: *The universe is vast and majestic, and our species is insignificant and might be utterly meaningless*. Our species has discovered we inhabit an immense universe in which we are not the center and have existed for only a blip in cosmic time. There may well be no meaning or purpose to our existence in the immensity of the cosmos that spans billions of years in the past and trillions upon trillions of years in the future. Or maybe some cosmic meaning can be found in the notion that we are one way the universe knows itself. So far, our species has proven too vain and fearful to move *forward* and develop new narratives based on our actual place in the universe, too small-minded to embrace our shared evolutionary origins and create a shared destiny for our long-term future and the health of our planet, the very home that provides the resources for us to live, love, and explore the cosmos. We seem too terrified to embrace the evolutionary and philosophical blank slate symbolized by the monolith.

3. Specter of the Monolith

As a new space age ramps up in the 21st century, future astronauts and the human species itself will inevitably face the specter of the monolith and the challenge of nihilism and meaninglessness. With the phrase "specter of the monolith," I am naming a complex existential moment — the simultaneous experience of the sublime and nihilism. As explained in Chapters 1-3, this powerful concept is evident in the cultural responses to Apollo and in the themes of the greatest space films in history.

The black monolith signifies the complexity of mysteries and meanings, if any, in Stanley Kubrick's "indifferent" universe — the magnificent cosmos that allows us to exist on a tiny planet yet seems eternally unconcerned with the fate of the many species that populate Earth. Like Earth floating in the void in *Earthrise* or the towering star factories in the Hubble images, the monolith is a pillar of beautiful indifference yet also a beacon for wonder and curiosity in an immense universe. Simultaneously, the monolith is the void and the hope, the emptiness pregnant with infinite possibility for human reason. Not unlike how the apes were initially fearful of the monolith and touched it with great

trepidation, the Apollo 8 astronauts observed the cosmic void with *Earthrise* and instantly retreated by reading from Genesis. Similarly, when we scan the Hubble's cosmic images and those from the world's many telescopes, our aesthetic sense grasps their beauty while our reason affirms their scale and splendor, yet our minds are blown and we end up dizzy or intellectually paralyzed by what it means for our species, the tiny species with big brains and a yearning for significance. We gaze into the sublime wonders of the cosmos, yet sensing nihilism and meaninglessness we retreat from any new possibilities offered by the cosmic blank slate. Astride the abyss between now and what's possible, we get vertigo and step back into the comfort of the traditional narratives that order life on Earth, even if those narratives are completely false.

In the specter of the monolith are existential conditions and intellectual challenges that haunt the human species. We're the advanced simians who have evolved to be courageous space farers yet still remain cowardly cosmic and Earthly philosophers. Think this is too harsh? Just scan the Google News reader to see the absurd carnival of human events on Earth and those proposed for space (see Chapter 4). Like the apes in *2001*, we have tossed the technological bone in the air, but we have yet to evolve beyond the Star-Child gazing at Earth rising in space. When are we going to launch the philosophical bone into the cosmos?

4. Moonwalking into the Future

There are no easy exits from our existential condition. If we continue to seek refuge in the pre-Copernican notion of almighty Creators who will rescue us for eternity, and if we insist upon ransacking the natural world and the universe to satisfy our own consumer desires — including strip-mining the moon and terraforming Mars — the human condition will not improve.

It's time to grow up. It's the moment for our collective coming of age. We are *not* the center of the universe; thus we have *no* inherent right to pillage moons and planets for our own entertainment and consumption as we have already done on Earth. What is the meaning for our existence in the universe: conquest, knowledge, survival, flourishing, entertainment, or something else or nothing at all?

It's as if we're plotting two space trajectories at once: one headed for the cool space hotel in *2001* and the other headed back to the *Planet of the Apes* (1968). Since *2001* and Apollo, we have certainly *accelerated* forward in terms of science and technology. But upon encountering the sublime and cosmic nihilism primarily brought about by the Apollo journeys and the Hubble Space Telescope, humanity has gone into cultural *reversal*, retreating backward into narcissistic, pre-Copernican narratives that place us at the center of the universe, the center of everything that matters — from theism to tribalism to the 24/7 social media spectacle. In some ways we're going forward, but we're going backward at the same time. We're "moonwalking" into the future.

5. About This Book

Recent years have seen several books about space exploration that offer multiple

perspectives about past and future space exploration.[5] In contrast, this is not a book about the science or history of space exploration, nor is it a book chronicling the many space films. It won't go into heavy scientific detail or examine all the possible "hidden" philosophical messages in various space movies. It's a work of *cosmic cultural theory* that considers what space exploration and space films have to say about human destiny and the meaning of human existence in an ancient and magnificent universe of which we are not the center and seem utterly insignificant. So let's blast off into the cosmos and see what's shaping our future in space.

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[1] Robert Poole, *Earthrise: How Man First Saw the Earth* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); Robin McKie, "The Mission That Changed Everything," *Guardian*, November 29, 2008, accessed January 5, 2015; and Craig Chalquist, "*Earthrise*: A Mythic Image for Our Time?" *The Blog* (blog), *Huffington Post*, January 24, 2014, accessed January 5, 2015.

[2] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One* (New York: Penguin, 1972), 26. By citing Nietzsche, this does not mean I necessarily agree with everything or anything he wrote beyond that fact that he pronounced God to be "dead" and posed the profound question: What will evolve from humans?

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Here are a few recent space-oriented books: Margaret Lazarus Dean, *Leaving Orbit: Notes from the Last Days of American Spaceflight* (Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2015); Matthew D. Tribbe, *No Requiem for the Space Age: The Apollo Moon Landings and American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Neil deGrasse Tyson, *Space Chronicles: Facing the Ultimate Frontier* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012); and David Bell and Martin Parker, *Space Travel and Culture: From Apollo to Space Tourism* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).