

Philosophy Ripped From The Headlines!



Issue #16, 2 (January 2019)
Compiled & Edited by *Philosophy Without Borders*

Philosophy Ripped From The Headlines! is delivered online in (occasionally discontinuous) weekly installments, month by month.

Its aim is to inspire critical, reflective, synoptic thinking and discussion about contemporary issues--in short, *public philosophizing* in the broadest possible, everyday sense.

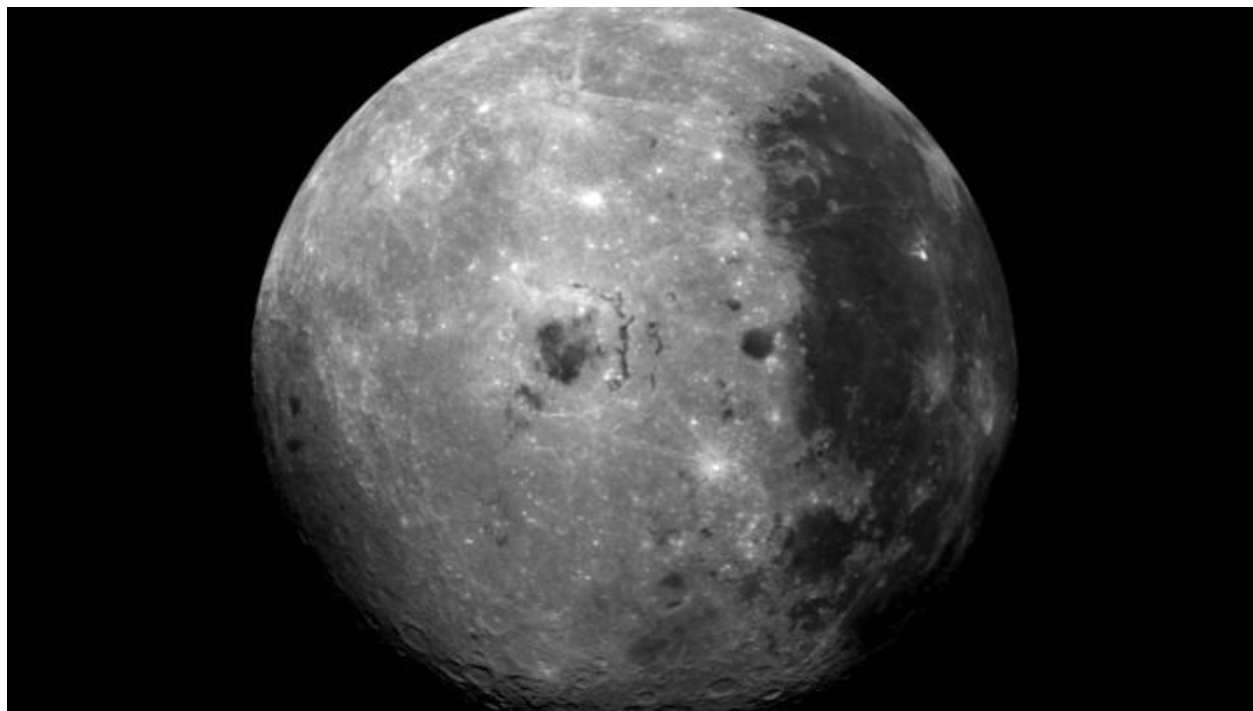
Every installment contains (1) excerpts from one or more articles, or one or more complete articles, that recently appeared in online public media, (2) some follow-up thoughts for further reflection or discussion, and (3) a link or links for supplementary reading.

1. “Why the Far Side of the Moon Matters So Much”

By Marina Koren

The Atlantic, 3 JANUARY 2019

Full article available at URL = <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2019/01/far-side-moon-china/579349/>



NASA/JPL

Humankind first laid eyes on the far side of the moon in 1968.

“The backside looks like a sand pile my kids have been playing in for a long time,” the astronaut Bill Anders told NASA mission control. For millennia, people had gazed up at the same view of the Earth’s companion—the same craters, cracks, and fissures. As the Apollo spacecraft floated over the unfamiliar lunar surface, Anders described the new territory, which promised to be a tough landing for anyone who tried. “It’s all beat up, no definition,” he said. “Just a lot of bumps and holes.”

Fifty years later, humankind landed in the sand pile.

China set down a spacecraft on the far side of the moon on Wednesday, Beijing time. On Thursday, the spacecraft, named Chang’e 4, after the Chinese goddess of the moon, unlocked a hatch and [released a rover](#) onto the lunar soil. The rover carries tools designed to explore the uncharted terrain, which, thanks to a lifetime of facing the cosmos, is covered in craters.

The landing, celebrated already as an achievement for humankind, is a reminder that people can accomplish some wonderfully wild things, given enough curiosity, skill, and rocket fuel. The first photos from the Chang’e 4 mission, captured inside a crater near the moon’s south pole, are [chill-inducing](#). But the landing is also a distinctly geopolitical win for a nation that hadn’t even launched its first satellite when Bill Anders saw that sand pile 50 years ago.

The story of space exploration, the kind carried out by national governments, began as a quest for national achievement and power. In the 1950s, the Americans and the Russians shot rocket after rocket into the sky with patriotism, not discovery, at the forefront of their minds. Any science that came out of it was a bonus.

Perhaps the clearest illustration of this geopolitical drive is a Soviet spacecraft called Luna 2. The Soviet Union launched Luna 2 in 1959, two years after sending the first satellite into orbit around Earth. Luna 2 was beachball-shaped, with spiky antennas, and weighed 390 pounds. The spacecraft carried multiple instruments designed to measure the radiation environment around the moon. It transmitted this data back to Earth as it flew through space. When Luna 2 approached the lunar surface, mission control held their breath.

The signals stopped. Luna 2 had slammed into the moon, breaking apart into pieces.

Mission control [erupted in cheers](#). For the Soviet Union, it didn’t matter that Luna 2, which became the first spacecraft to reach the moon, had been smashed into smithereens. The point was to get there first—to mark territory. The Soviets had packed the spacecraft with metal pendants bearing the hammer and sickle of the Soviet Union. The impact scattered them across the lunar regolith, where they remain today, as if on display [at a museum](#).

For the United States and the Soviet Union, every milestone in the space race was commemorated as an achievement for all humankind, yes, but also as a gain for the nation—for its government, its policies, its ideals—that reached it first. Two days after Luna 2 completed its

mission, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev visited the United States. As the British historian Robert Cavendish wrote [in the magazine *History Today*](#), Americans suspected that the space mission had been coordinated with the political visit: Khrushchev was “beaming with rumbustious pride” and gleefully “lectured Americans on the virtues of communism and the immorality of scantily clothed chorus girls.”

A decade later, when Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin landed on the moon, the Soviets were decidedly less rumbustious. Sergei Khrushchev, the son of the premier, [told *Scientific American* in 2009](#) that Soviet propaganda let the news of “one giant leap for mankind” slide by without much fanfare. “It was not secret, but it was not shown to the public,” he said.

By then, China had already been trying to insert itself into the space race for more than a decade. After the Soviet Union launched *Sputnik*, Mao Zedong instructed his country’s scientists and engineers to prepare a satellite of their own, to launch in 1959, in honor of the Great Leap Forward, the leader’s ultimately failed plan for rapid industrialization. The [directive](#) from the top to scientists was simple: “Get it up, follow it around, make it seen, make it heard.”

But the country didn’t have the necessary technology for such a fast turnaround, and space-exploration efforts would be repeatedly derailed by political turmoil in the coming decades. The satellite launched at last in 1970, equipped with a single purpose: playing the first few bars of “The East Is Red,” an instrumental song glorifying China’s Cultural Revolution.

In recent years, though, China’s space efforts have [jumped to warp speed](#). When the country launched its first astronaut in 2003, it became one of only three countries to have done so. It sent an uncrewed orbiter around the moon in 2007, and a rover in 2013. In 2011, it launched a space station that astronauts visited twice before it was decommissioned and [deliberately crashed](#) into the Pacific Ocean. A second space station launched in 2016. In 2018, China launched [more rockets into orbit](#) than any other country.

China has more bold plans for the future. The country is aiming to land a rover on Mars in [early 2021](#) and, if successful, would become the second country after the United States to accomplish the feat. It also wants to land astronauts on the moon by 2030.

These and other milestones can be celebrated on a global scale as an achievement for the human species, just like the landing was. “It is human nature to explore the unknown world,” Wu Weiren, the chief designer of the Chang’e 4 mission, [said](#) in a television interview, according to *The New York Times*. “And it is what our generation and the next generation are supposed to do.”

But China’s space accomplishments are as symbolic and strategic as the Apollo and Vostok programs were in the 1960s, especially now, when space agencies in Europe, Russia, India, and, most recently, the United States have put a big focus on lunar exploration. “We are building China into a space giant,” Wu said.

For spacefaring nations, impressive feats, whether it’s landing on Mars or on the far side of the moon, will always be seen through the lens of the nation that managed to pull it off. “When you

are the first country to land a probe on the far side of the moon, that says something about your science and technology, that says something about your industry,” the Heritage Foundation’s Dean Cheng, one of the few Chinese-speaking analysts in the United States that focus on China’s space program, [told *The Atlantic* in 2017](#).

If it still seems silly to consider geopolitical history in the exuberant moments after a moon landing, consider this reaction from the *Global Times*, a newspaper run by the Communist Party, China’s ruling party, [reported by *The Washington Post*](#):

Unlike mankind’s mania in the past, the Chinese people ultimately harbor the dream of shared human destiny and practices open cooperation. We choose to go to the back of the moon not because of the unique glory it brings, but because this difficult step of destiny is also a forward step for human civilization!

A “forward step for human civilization,” indeed. But the “unique glory” is certainly nice, too.

2. Some Follow-Up Thoughts For Further Reflection and Discussion:

Is the following argument sound? If so, why? If not, why not?

1. The human experience of outer space—via naked-eye or telescopic star gazing, visual art, literature, movies, etc.—is not only a genuine and unique form of aesthetic experience, it also has profound moral and political implications for our relationship to the natural environment, including the Earth and the infinitely larger natural cosmos in which it is embedded.
2. Nevertheless “the space race,” running at its height from the mid-1950s to the late 60s, but also spread out over the subsequent decades, including the recent landing of a Chinese spacecraft on the far side of the moon in January 2019, even allowing that it has *some* scientific and technological value, was and continues to be fundamentally a political bread-&-circuses show designed to showcase and symbolize the technocratic power of the leading nation-States for the national and global consumption of the masses via neoliberal media, and above all to deflect popular attention and funding away from issues of genuine moral and political importance.
3. In this way the space race exploits, manipulates, and corrupts the genuine and unique human aesthetic experience of outer space, by channeling it

towards these purely instrumental and ideologically-driven nation-Statist and big-capitalist ends.

4. Therefore, we should sharply distinguish between (i) the genuine and unique human aesthetic experience of outer space, on the one hand, and (ii) its exploitation, manipulation, and corruption by contemporary nation-States and big-capitalist forces on the other, and *demand the defunding and dismantling of all nation-State-based, big-capitalist-controlled space-programs*; and at the same time, we should *also strongly encourage both the cultivation of the genuine and unique human aesthetic experience of outer space, as well as its scientific study and its exploration, from a fully post-nation-Statist, post-neoliberal, non-technocratic, cosmopolitan standpoint.*

3. One Link For Supplementary Reading:

[The Political Aesthetics of Outer Space.](#)

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ISSUE #16, 1 (January 2019):

- IS HUMAN NATURE FUNDAMENTALLY BAD?

HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue16-1 jan19](#)

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- MONETIZING MORALITY

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- **ABOLISH ICE!, AND HUNGARY'S STARVATION TACTICS**

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- **UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME AND THE FUTURE OF POINTLESS WORK**

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- **THE TRUTH ABOUT INCOME INEQUALITY, IN SIX AMAZING CHARTS**

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- **EPISTOCRACY, NOT DEMOCRACY?**

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HERE: [PWB philosophy ripped from the headlines issue11 july18](#)

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