



Cosmos & Culture: Cultural Evolution in a Cosmic Context

National Aeronautics and Space Administration

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Cosmic evolution, the idea that the universe and its constituent parts are constantly evolving, has become widely accepted only in the last 50 years. It is no coincidence that this acceptance parallels the span of the Space Age. Although cosmic evolution was first recognized in the physical universe early in the 20th century, with hints even earlier, the relationships among planets, stars, and galaxies, and the evolution of the universe itself, became much better known through the discoveries by planetary probes and space telescopes in the latter half of the century. It was also during the last 50 years—a century after Darwin proposed that evolution by natural selection applies to life on our own planet—that researchers from a variety of disciplines began to seriously study the possibilities of extraterrestrial life and “the biological universe.” Considering biology from this broader cosmological perspective has expanded biological thinking beyond its sample-of-one straightjacket, incorporating biology into cosmic evolution. Astrobiology is now a robust discipline even though it has yet to find any life beyond Earth. But there is a third component to cosmic evolution beyond the physical and the biological. Even if we only know of culture on one planet so far, cultural evolution has been an important part of cosmic evolution on Earth, and perhaps on many other planets. Moreover, it also dominates the other two forms of evolution in terms of its rapidity. Humans were not much different biologically 10,000 years ago, but one need only look around to see how much we have changed culturally. Yet, unlike the study of biological evolution, which has made great progress since Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, the scientific study of cultural evolution languished after Darwin’s death for the better part of a century. Only within the past few decades has significant progress been made, and concerned with advancing their fledging science, cultural evolutionists have yet to expand their thinking beyond their current planetary sample-of-one concerns. But if life and intelligence do exist beyond Earth, it is likely that culture will arise and evolve. In this volume authors with diverse backgrounds in science, history, and anthropology consider culture in the context of the cosmos, including the implications of the cosmos for our own culture.

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