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I Want To Believe: Kant, The X Files, And Cosmopolitical Unity

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It could well be that on another planet there might be rational beings who could not think in any other way but aloud; that is, they could not have any thoughts that they did not at the same time utter, whether awake or dreaming, in the company of others or alone. What kind of behavior toward others would this produce, and how would it differ from that of our human species?

— Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* [1]

Kant’s final chapter of *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, puts forth certain observations concerning the characteristics of human beings. In order for these observations to have rational validity as a proposed ‘human nature,’ however, Kant admits that it is necessary to compare between humans and another species of rational animal. Thus in an effort not to succumb to a naively anthropocentric thesis of nature, Kant still falls victim to his own anthropocentric privileging of rationality as a strictly human capacity—at least terrestrially speaking. While Kant fails to recognize any other earthly species as a rational animal, he nevertheless speculates as to the possible existence of an extraterrestrial species of rational animal, with which we might compare ourselves in order to construct a more rationally objective anthropology [2]. In the
conclusion of his final volume, Kant’s alien speculations help lead him to espouse a cosmopolitical order. Our focus here will be to examine the popular television series *The X-Files* in order to illuminate certain resonances between the show’s use of the alien and Kant’s cosmopolitanism.

An interesting illustration of Kant’s speculation can be seen in an episode of *The X-Files* (Season 5, Episode 20 "The End") in which a twelve year old boy is the object of an attempted para-governmental assassination [3]. The reason for this attempted assassination is that the boy has a cognitive ability not only to communicate with aliens telepathically, but also to read the thoughts of all human beings, and thus poses a great threat to the para-governmental conspiracy which is trying to conceal the colonizing presence of an alien race on earth. Agent Scully, the more scientifically astute of the two agents, reveals through genomic analysis that the 12 year old boy has an active strand of DNA which is, to all present knowledge, always present, however inactive, in all other humans. This strand of DNA is hypothesized by Agent Mulder to be a remnant of humanity’s ancient alien ancestry. It would appear then that the aliens from which we have descended, and with which this 12 year old boy is more closely related, resemble Kant’s aliens—those who possess no cognitive secrecy. However, Kant’s question as to the effects of this quality are not yet answered. We do know that the boy uses his abilities benevolently, by negotiating with the aliens on behalf of the epistemological quest of Agents Mulder and Scully, and against the violent authoritarian goals of the para-governmental conspirators.
Kant goes on to speculate that, “Unless [the aliens] were all pure as angels, it is inconceivable how they could live in peace together, how anyone could have any respect at all for anyone else, and how they could get on well together” [4]. If we are to further investigate how The X-Files engages these speculations, it seems obvious that the aliens are indeed no angels, but rather cosmic imperialists, as they seek to violently colonize planet Earth. This species of colonialist extraterrestrials holds communion with a group of power-elite para-governmental men, in order to execute their plans for terrestrial colonization—which necessitates the complete annihilation of the human species. The success of this conspiracy rests two-fold on the propensity for intentional deception within the power-elite group of humans, as well as the lack of a certain moral predisposition within the colonizing aliens. Perhaps the behaviors of Kant’s aliens, whom cannot lie, would entail an alien nature which knows no concept of peace; their alien empathy would not lead to compassionate behavior, but instead serve only as a function for furthering of self-preservation.

Kant of course does not go on to follow his speculations to their logical ends, such as The X-Files does—he is after all concerned here with anthropological characteristics. He ends his final volume with an interesting conclusion,

This would then result in a caricature of our species that would warrant not mere good natured laughter at it but contempt for what constitutes its character, and the admission that this race of terrestrial rational beings deserves no honorable place among the (to us unknown) other rational
beings—except that precisely this condemning judgement reveals a moral predisposition in us, an innate demand of reason, also to work against this propensity. So it presents the human species not as evil, but as a species of rational beings that strives among obstacles to rise out of evil in constant progress toward the good. In this its volition is generally good, but achievement is difficult because one cannot expect to reach the goal by the free agreement of individuals, but only by a progressive organization of citizens of the earth into and toward the species as a system that is cosmopolitically united. [5]

Perhaps then *The X-Files* does illuminate Kant’s analysis. Although the telepathic boy’s active alien capacity does offer an answer to Mulder and Scully’s ultimate question as to the existence of extraterrestrial life, it is not this capacity alone which will alleviate the crisis of the impending doom of colonization. Kant’s conclusion points out that the achievement of benevolent outcomes cannot be realized through libertarian political strategy, rather it is necessary to organize toward a universal socialist order between both aliens and humans (if in fact we can still justify the use of this distinction). As *The X-Files* shows, it is this *cosmopolitical* unity that is our only hope of overcoming the hegemony of fascist political power—and inevitable extinction.
Footnotes

1. Kant, p. 237
2. Ian Bogost’s *Alien Phenomenology* and Ray Brassier’s *Alien Philosophy* both grapple with the problem of anthropocentric empiricism, and emphasize the power of speculation as a means for circumvention.
4. Kant, p. 237
5. Kant, p. 238
6. David L. Clark’s *Kant’s Aliens* engages and critiques Kant’s speculative aliens in a much more rigorous way than has been done here. In particular, Clark looks closely at the implications of collapsing the public and the private spheres of communication, as well as Kant’s apparent disavowal of any beneficiality of telepathy, or what Clark terms “hyper-communicative collectivity.” (212-225)

References