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THE EXPANSE AND PHILOSOPHY



WITH A FOREWORD BY
JAMES S. A. COREY
AUTHOR OF *THE EXPANSE*

BLACKWELL PHILOSOPHY AND POP CULTURE SERIES

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THE EXPANSE AND PHILOSOPHY

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THE EXPANSE AND PHILOSOPHY SO FAR OUT INTO THE DARKNESS

Edited by
Jeffery L. Nicholas

WILEY Blackwell

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To all those involved in *The Expanse* world. Thank you!

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Expanded *Rocinante* Crew List

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Jeffery L. Nicholas edited *Dune and Philosophy* and is author of *Love and Politics: Persistent Human Desires as a Foundation for a Politics of Liberation*. He is an associate professor at Providence College, mainly because Michael O'Neill (see below) didn't quite tell the truth about how much snow Rhode Island gets. While he'd much rather be Joe Miller and is known as “the Fedora Guy” on campus, he's more likely to be the angel on Holden's shoulder acting as his conscience.

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Diana Sofronieva is the editor of a Bulgarian short fiction zine, and an assistant professor at the University of Economics, Varna. She often mistakenly submits her short stories to academic journals and her philosophy papers to fiction zines. She just wants to know everything about ethics and about what Avasarala is wearing.

S.W. Sondheim holds an MTS from Harvard Divinity School, the acquisition of which seemed like a really good idea at the time. She then earned a BSN from UMass Boston because she decided that being able to buy groceries and sleeping under a roof seemed like even better ideas and also, helping people is cool. She now writes social media copy for the food and shelter part and yells about books, comics, and sci-fi/fantasy/anime on ye olde inter webs. She lives in Pittsburgh with her spouse, two smaller beings with whom she shares DNA, two geriatric cats who have suddenly decided they’re allowed on the table to eat leftovers, and four plants named Tanaka, Kirishima, Asta, and Yuno. At least, she thinks she does. There’s always the possibility she’s a protomolecule construct without a hat.

Guillem Treiber is a postdoctoral researcher at the Institute of Philosophy, KU Leuven, Belgium. He specializes in contemporary social and political thought, specifically French poststructuralism and critical theory. He has published articles on Foucault, Althusser, and Clausewitz and is currently working on his first book manuscript. He is confident that only Chrisjen Avasarala can solve the covid-19 global crisis and what will ensue. In any case, he has rented a room on Luna just to be on the safe side.

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I'd like to thank my wife, Janet, for letting me buy a bigger TV to watch the show on.

Foreword

Science fiction, like philosophy, is an act of critical imagination.

The heart of philosophy is how to think meaningfully about issues that defy measurement. Great questions of philosophy—what is the universe made from, how does the natural world function, what is life and how did it begin—give way over time to science as measurement and data collection provide evidence, answers, and definition. The elements are revealed not to be earth, air, fire, and water, but atoms and the things that make up atoms. The origin of life becomes a question of chemistry producing amino acids and evolution selecting for stable replicating structures. Philosophy moves forward into the realms where data and its interpretation don't yet exist.

Science fiction is also a way to think about what we don't yet know, but can imagine. Over time, even the most rigorously meant speculations of science fiction are shown to be inaccurate or else proven true and cease to be speculative. What was once Science Fiction becomes Fantasy, and the next generation of writers and artists, actors and game designers move on to places where the truth isn't yet established.

And so, slowly, between the imagination of the artists and philosophers, and the discoveries of the scientists and engineers, the universe becomes better understood, the breadth of human knowledge is increased, and nature of culture is changed.

The Expanse is at its heart a collaborative project. As a series of novels, it began with two of us. As television show, it grew to include the efforts of literally hundreds of talented, engaged artists with specialties in set design, visual effects, acting, sound and lighting design, editing, and dozens more.

It also grew as an instance of popular culture through the efforts of fans and critics, marketing departments and online Lang Belta teachers, and the shared enthusiasm of people who came to the project and then brought other people in.

But it also began with the books that we read when we were growing up—Alfred Bester, Larry Niven, Arthur C. Clarke, C. J. Cherryh, Harry Harrison. And with the historical figures and events back to pre-classical times that we used as models for the events we imagined in our collective

future. The taxonomy of what *The Expanse* is—where it begins, where it ends, what its boundaries are—is, like so many taxonomies, only clear at a distance. The border becomes much less defined as it is examined more closely.

And just as history—both the documented acts of real people and the literary and genre conversations that came before us—gave us a lens to make sense of our project, *The Expanse* is going on to provide a lens for other people to engage with their own stories, their own analyses, and their own contributions to the ever-wider acts of cultural and intellectual creation.

This is not a book we wrote, but one we helped to inspire. In it, you will find arguments, observations, and opinions on a wide variety of philosophical subjects with *The Expanse* acting as a kind of touchstone for the conversation. It is gratifying in a way that's hard to put in words to see the conversation we took from the generations before us carry through beyond the work we've done. It will challenge you, reframe some of your ideas, and—hopefully—leave you a little more awed, a little wiser, and a step or two further along your own intellectual journey.

Because philosophy, like science fiction, is an act of critical imagination.

James S. A. Corey

Introduction

Jeffery L. Nicholas

“I am that book!”

So declared *Leviathan Wakes* in 2011 when James S. A. Corey published it. And, to quote Chrisjen Avasarala, they weren’t bullshitting. *The Expanse* series is a phenomenal science fiction read that delves into the greatest questions of human life, a part of the “literature of progress” that challenges our everyday world by thrusting human life out to Mars, the outer planets, and worlds beyond the Ring Gates.

And when *The Expanse* premiered on the SyFy channel, it declared with equal strength: “I am that show!” You know the one, the one we’ve been searching for that is better than any other sci-fi series out there. *The Expanse* TV series has wonderful characters, cast, and filming, and dialogue that pulls us in and doesn’t let go.

The TV series is particularly phenomenal for me. See, I suffer from aphantasia—pictures don’t populate my brain like they do most people, and it’s not from some transcranial magnetic stimulation. I feel empathy just fine, and when reading books, I lose myself in the characters. But I don’t see the *Roci* searching the stars for a safe harbor or picture Jules-Pierre Mao kneeling at the feet of Avasarala. Watching the *Rocinante* on screen, seeing the torture that Naomi goes through to save people’s lives, only makes me love the books and the characters more.

You are here, reading this book, because you love the books, the series, or both. And we too, the authors of the chapters you hold in your hands like Joe Miller holds Julie’s necklace, we love *The Expanse*. These chapters sing our love to you. They sail through this shared world, both books and TV series. We look at the challenges of flying our Epstein drive into space, explore the challenges of populating different worlds around Sol and out beyond the Ring Gate. Like Avasarala we interrogate our characters: Miller, Holden, Amos, Bobbie, Naomi, and, of course, Avasarala herself. I’ve seen online people wondering who would win a fight, Amos or Bobbie, but we’re interested in who’s more evil, Amos or Avasarala, and who might be good, Naomi or maybe Holden? We examine the costs of interstellar migration and wonder if it’s worth the cost or whether we even have a choice.

The chapters in this book cover the first five seasons of *The Expanse* TV series, with hints and suggestions of what we might expect in the sixth by looking at *Babylon's Ashes*. We offer these to you so we can enjoy the books and TV series even more.

Taki taki. Yam seng!

First Orbit
FROM EARTH TO THE
STARS

The Infinite and the Sublime in *The Expanse*

Michael J. O'Neill

It made a damning comment as it looked over Fred Johnson's actions against the Anderson Station civilians ("Back to the Butcher"). It stood over Holden's shoulder as he talked with his mother by the campfire and she gifted him a copy of *Don Quixote* ("New Terra"). And it strolled alongside every character that has donned a suit and ventured out of their craft to walk in space. One of the most important characters in *The Expanse* is not named in the credits. It cannot compete for our attention with Avasarala's Machiavellian cleverness, with Naomi's resourcefulness or even with Holden's dreamy hazel eyes. But this character is onscreen almost constantly. The fact is, it is on camera more than any character in the credits. It is the infinite.¹

Chiaroscuro

The aesthetic techniques used in *The Expanse* are indicative of the infinite space that is an essential and ever-present character in the show. Even the claustrophobic condition of the Belters on Ceres, Ganymede, and Eros points to the infinite space outside. The design of the show keeps infinite space always present.

In the opening credits, the directors and art designers of *The Expanse* give us the setting of the story in a context of infinite space. Views of several planets—Earth, Mars, Saturn—are framed by black spaces that communicate that these huge objects are mere specks of activity in an endless darkness. The opening shot of Saturn might be the best example. The planet is offset in the camera frame—set to the left side as we look out over the famous rings of the planet. What then is the center of the camera's focus? The darkness beyond Saturn. The cinematography and set design of *The Expanse* make extensive use of *chiaroscuro* (ke-ah-ro-skoor-o)—a