

foreword

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On October 29th, 2025, the comet now known as 31/ATLAS neared our Sun, shooting past at 220,000km/hr (61km/sec) in an extreme hyperbolic trajectory. Boffins gleaned that such a trajectory meant the object was *interstellar*; it was moving so fast, and at such hyperbole, that it couldn't possibly have originated in our solar system, and was from *elsewhere*. That elsewhere was the southern celestial hemisphere of the Milky Way, at least seven billion years ago.

Telescopes and scientific equipment on Earth and in orbit somehow managed to bombard the comet with infra- and ultra-violet rays, and all other known methods of astronomical visualisation. Its nucleus (head) is approximately 3.5 miles in diameter, containing water and carbon dioxide. Its coma (tail) emits, among other substances, cyanide gas and atomic nickel vapour.

The interstellar history of 31/ATLAS led some to question whether it might be an extraterrestrial spacecraft. Its relatively large size, improbable speed and trajectory, and distant origins could conceivably represent some ancient, vastly superior life-form's foray into our neck of the woods. Such questions are essentially unanswerable, given 31/ATLAS is moving so fast that no device we could launch could catch up to look at it. In unfalsifiability, alien theories abound.

But the discovery is remarkable enough as to not require UFOs. We should pause, and realise the wonder of what we can see, of what we can do. Our exploration is at once pathetic and primitive, be it as we are, stuck spearing each other on a blue-green orb so small as to be infinitely non-existent on the scale of the universe; and at the same time, noble and beautiful: that we should even bother to try, and in that trying, see *something*. Even the faintest glimpse of beauty, however unlikely, misunderstood, misinterpreted, should still be treated as glorious.

Think of it like this: we have worked out how to track an interstellar missile, moving at 220,000km/hr, from its birth some seven billion years ago, to its eventual passage past our Sun. But if 31/ATLAS doesn't inspire you, look at the folds of a curtain, or the pattern on the subway seats, or the creases on the back of your hand...

I looked at a film of sand I had picked up on my hand, when I suddenly saw the exquisite beauty of every little grain of it; instead of being dull, I saw that each particle was made up on a perfect geometrical pattern, with sharp angles, from each of which a brilliant shaft of light was reflected, while each tiny crystal shone like a rainbow.... The rays crossed and recrossed, making exquisite patterns...'.

Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception*