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Beware the Cow in E.T.'s Barn

In the days when saber-toothed tigers prowled the night, humans acquired a healthy instinct: fear of the dark. Astronomers, boyishly defiant of this inherited wisdom, have renewed their search of the universe's dark spaces for signs of alien civilizations. What if they should find them?

The implicit assumption is that other life will be more civilized than ours, and command higher technology. But what if these high-tech aliens are unpleasant, mean or even cannibalistic? Contact with an extraterrestrial civilization could have its hazards.

If, by good fortune, the astronomers turn up a friendly crew, the peril is hardly less. How demoralized we would be to learn that our science, by comparison, is medieval, our art prehistoric or our mores Paleozoic. Should the other-worlders be less advanced, we may learn little — yet be tempted to send mercenaries and missionaries to enchain their bodies and liberate their souls.

It is, of course, otiose to speculate on the nature of alien civilizations. Assume we were the aliens. Who would lightly venture, single and unarmed, to stumble among us on a dark night in the universe? History records how ruthlessly our stronger civilizations have preyed on weaker neighbors. Do our stargazers realize the dangers?

Under the auspices of the National Academy of Sciences, astronomers recently reported on their plans for exploring the universe. With one exception, all have great merit. But their report remarks that

reception of signals from space "could have a dramatic effect on human affairs, as did contact between the native peoples of the New World and the technologically more advanced peoples of Europe."

Precisely because it recalls the fate of American Indians, you might think the report would go on to counsel caution. To the contrary: "The effects would be beneficial, if the information could be deciphered and should prove generally useful; on the other hand, they could be harmful if humanity is not ready to use the information wisely."

The caveat about deciphering does not reach the more fundamental problem of comprehension. As Wittgenstein warned, "If a lion could talk, we would not be able to understand him." The laws of physics and chemistry may be the same on other worlds; those of semantics surely differ.

As for the effects of contact with another civilization, less naïveté can be found in the words of the cockroach whose mode of signaling was to thud on the lower-case keys of Don Marquis's typewriter:

"i once heard the survivors / of a colony of ants / that had been partially / obliterated by a cows foot / seriously debating / the intentions of the gods / towards their civilization"

The new search is merely to listen for signals, but if any are detected, the case for contact will doubtless be pressed. As they rummage through the dark crannies of the universe, astronomers should take care not to stir up extragalactic tigers or oblivious cows.