

## Letters

## If Extraterrestrials Do Exist: Not to Worry

To the Editor:

At a time when a serious radio search for extraterrestrial intelligence (SETI) is being advocated by a distinguished group of 70 scientists from 13 nations, including seven Nobel laureates (news story Oct. 22), and when a small amount of money has finally been authorized for the United States component of such a search (news story Dec. 21), it is surprising to find The Times advocating "fear of the dark" of space ("Beware of the Cow in E.T.'s Barn," editorial Dec. 28). It happens that we live in this dark.

We do not know the motives of extraterrestrial civilizations, should they exist. But some of the anxieties expressed in your editorial are unwarranted:

*Extraterrestrial "cannibalism."*

It is implicit in the evolutionary process that extraterrestrial carnivores are unlikely to find the sequences of amino acids in human proteins especially tasty. Even if human beings were a famous interstellar delicacy, the freightage would be prohibitively high; it would be much cheaper to synthesize proteins in the amino acid sequences favored by extraterrestrial gastronomes than to muster a lunch-expedition to Earth.

*We are unlikely to understand a message from another civilization.*

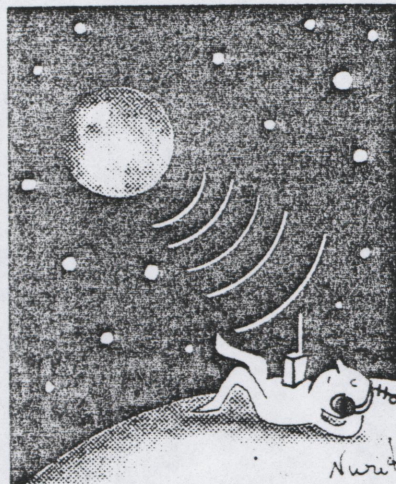
On the contrary, because the message is transmitted by radio, the transmitting and receiving civilizations will have at least radiophysics, radioastronomy and radiotechnology in common.

Because the laws of nature are the same everywhere, science itself should provide a means of communication even between beings that are

physiologically very different. I suspect that the decrypting of the message, if we are so fortunate as to receive one, will be much simpler than its acquisition.

*It would be "demoralizing" to learn that our science is "medieval."*

By the standards of the next few centuries, at least some of our present science will of course be considered



medieval, provided we are not so foolish as to destroy our civilization. To go beyond present science is one of the goals of science.

Students are not commonly plunged into fits of despair on turning the pages of a textbook and discovering that there is some further topic, known to the author but not yet to the student. Usually, the student assimilates the new knowledge and, following an ancient human tradition, continues to turn the pages.

*History records the depredations ruthlessly visited by slightly more ad-*

*vanced civilizations on slightly less advanced ones.*

Certainly. However, all major radioastronomical SETI programs are intended to listen, not to transmit. Those who worry about the supposed dire consequences of extraterrestrials' learning of putative intelligence on the planet Earth might consider directing their concern to the organizations that are transmitting powerful signals into space — military radar facilities and commercial television networks.

One wonders what the extraterrestrials will make of us if these are the characteristic signs of human intelligence that are casually and continuously broadcast at the speed of light to our neighbors in the dark of space.

CARL SAGAN  
Professor of Astronomy and Space  
Sciences, Cornell University  
Ithaca, N. Y., Jan. 2, 1983

To the Editor:

Although your concerns about the dangers of possible contact with alien civilizations seem prudent, they also betray a certain naiveté regarding the physical scale involved.

Even if our E.T. should have his home around the nearest star, communications to Earth would not be what you would call lively: it would take over eight and a half years to get a reply. As for "extragalactic tigers," by the time the nearest of our galactic neighbors became aware of our presence and got here with an expedition, about half a million years will have passed on Earth. That long ago; our ancestors were just beginning to learn the technology of making flint weapons.

ALAN FORD  
New York, Dec. 29, 1982