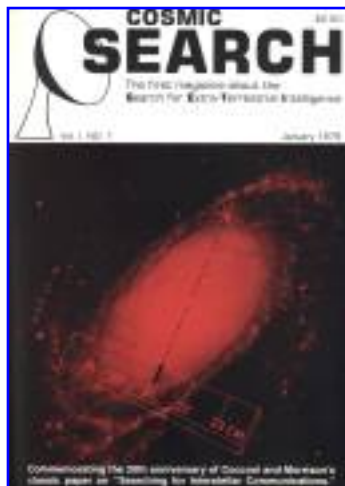




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Rendezvous with Infinity

By: Norman Cousins



A humanist's view of SETI and the cosmos by a master wordsmith in the manner of a Socrates.—Eds.

What priority should we, as a nation, give to satisfying our cosmic curiosity about extra-terrestrial intelligence? Can the American people hope to realize gains — for ourselves and humankind — that will justify the expense? These questions might easily be dismissed if there were no connection between curiosity and civilization. Human progress begins with the words "what if." The desire to know and to pursue a line of thought is not a random quality of mind, but the genesis of science.

It is unscientific to say that within the many billions of galactic systems, ours is the only planet that supports life in advanced form. Nature shuns one of a kind as much as it abhors a vacuum. Given infinite time and space, anything that occurs at one place or time in the universe will occur elsewhere or "elsewhen." The same conditions that make life possible make life inevitable. The interaction of these

conditions forces life into being. So long as the interaction continues, life will persist or recur. The possible becomes the inevitable when there are no limits on the laws of chance.

"As we move beyond the human habitat, we are gaining perspective on ourselves as custodians of the planet."

Many will argue that the problems that threaten life here on earth should have first claim on our resources. What this argument fails to take into account is the fact that the future of humankind may well depend upon an enlargement of the human horizon. The most crucial problems that confront us stem from our limited perception of ourselves as a people within the human community. Human beings have yet to experience what it means to be full-fledged members of the family of man. Though we give intellectual and reverential assent to the idea of human brotherhood, we have only partially engaged the imagination and spirit that can give the idea meaning. Our overriding problems have to do with human behavior and the value we assign to life in general.

"We belong to an unfinished species . . . our uniqueness lies in our ability to steer our own evolution."

The justification for exploring the cosmos rests not on tangible benefits, but on philosophical grounds and on our instinctive need to evolve. From the time of Copernicus, the collective ego has been trying to adjust to the discovery that the earth is not the hub of the universe. The psychological adaptation to that reality is still in process. We will come of age as a cosmic species when we make peace with the fact that although the universe is not constructed for our particular benefit and convenience, sentient life is sufficiently rare in the universe to make life precious.

It is reasonable to believe that cosmic curiosity akin to our own is signaling its

existence across stellar space, and that with sophisticated new systems we can winnow these signals from the already-detected "noise" that may be originating from beyond our solar system. It is reasonable to believe that the filtering of these signals from out of the cosmos could contribute vastly more to our future security than instruments of mass annihilation.

New perspectives lead to new perceptions. As we enlarge our sense of the cosmos, we are enlarging our consciousness. As we extend the reach of the mind, we are learning more about our potentialities. As we move beyond the human habitat, we are gaining perspective on ourselves as custodians of the planet. It is precisely because our human habitat is in jeopardy that we need to think and act on a universal plane rather than as members of hostile tribes.

What was most significant about the first lunar voyage was not that men set foot on the moon, but that they set eye on earth. The scrapings from the surface of the moon brought back to earth — significant as they are — are not as significant as the perceptions carried back in our minds. Perspective continues to be man's greatest shortage.

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We belong to an unfinished species. We have limitless capacities for growth. Indeed, our uniqueness lies in our ability to steer our own evolution. It is reasonable to believe that the search for extra-terrestrial intelligence will contribute significantly to the solving of our problems here on earth. Anything that ignites the human mind, anything that sets the collective intelligence to racing, anything that creates a new horizon for human hopes, anything that helps to enlarge our vocabulary of common heritage and common destiny — anything that does this is of incalculable value. A generation raised with the knowledge that intelligent life in another galaxy may have found answers that assure the immortality of their species will have a heightened awareness of the potential of terrestrial intelligence.

Throughout much of human history, man has sought to make connections with the

heavens, to establish and to understand his place in the universe. It is reasonable to believe that the future of the human race may depend upon keeping the rendezvous with infinity foretold by man's earliest attempts to link his fate to celestial glimmerings.

Norman Cousins has been associated with the "Saturday Review" as editor or chairman of the editorial board for almost four decades. Born in Union Hill, New Jersey, he attended Columbia University, wrote for a New York newspaper and was managing editor of "Current History Magazine" for five years prior to joining the "Saturday Review" in 1940 at the age of 25. Dr. Cousins is the recipient of dozens of honorary degrees, numerous citations and awards including the United Nations Peace Medal (1971), author of many books including "Modern Man is Obsolete" (1945) and "Talks with Nehru" (1951) and editor of several more, one of which is "Doctor Schweitzer of Lambarene" (1960).

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