

March 1, 1987 (vol. 2, no. 15)

Dear Colleague:

In a paper on "Strangers and Strangeness," I suggested that although people all over the world suspected strangers they also welcomed the idea of the stranger--that is, of an individual or an alien group who did not interfere with one's normal life but who, in a crunch, would come to one's rescue. Another way of putting it is to say that the existence of strangers or a foreign culture is, in some ultimate sense, reassuring because it gives the local people a promise of renewal. Strangers, if they are not potential saviors, are at least potential sources of inspiration. The basic idea is that goodness must come from outside. Yearning for the redemptive romantic figure from beyond is still with us, if we judge by the popularity of such cowboy movies as "Shane" and "Pale Rider," or of such science-fiction movies as "ET" and "Close Encounters of the Third Kind."

The stranger that comes to us is more powerful than we are. He arrives on a shining horse or in a shining spacecraft. Our small bounded world is broken into by a mysterious, superior being. If, on the other hand, we do the expanding--that is, if we move out of our world and run into strangers, then they tend to be seen as inferior to us. They are the natives, primitives, barbarians, to be exploited, or admired as children are admired. The low opinion that Europeans hold of other peoples rests on the fact that they have found them and not the other way around. In our present enlightened age, the people we discover or have come to be aware of as a consequence of media exposure are a cause for pity and charity, not exploitation. They are still seen as "inferior" (although this is never admitted) because our cameras seek them out and we can see that they are all more or less needy. The discovery and awareness of more and more strangers "out there" (the Ethiopians, the Cambodians, the underclass Brazilians, etc.) who need our help puts an increasing strain on our conscience and on our material ability to do something. Hence, Daniel C. Denett says, let us stop space exploration. We have peace of mind now because we are unaware of the misery in the rest of the universe--and, needless to say, wherever there is life there is misery. Or, maybe if we just know about the plagues, wars, and other calamities on distant planets, it is still OK: we can forget the suffering extra-terrestrials just as our nineteenth-century forebears were able to forget the starving Chinese, because there is nothing we can do--thank God, sotto voce. (See "Information, Technology, and the Virtues of Ignorance," Daedalus, summer 1986).

Best wishes,

