

Our Future in the Cosmos—Space

Isaac Asimov

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Throughout the history of humanity, we have been extending our range until it is now planet-wide, covering all parts of Earth's surface and reaching to the bottom of the ocean, to the top of the atmosphere, and beyond it to the Moon. We will flourish only as long as we continue to extend that range, and although the potential range is not infinite, it is incredibly vast even by present standards. We will eventually extend our range to cover the whole of the solar system, and then we will head outward to the stars.

It frequently happened in my business as a writer, especially in my younger days when I knew some pretty overwhelming editors, that an editor would say to me, "I have a great idea for a story." He'd slap me on the back and say, "Now go home and write it." I would always think how easy it was for him to give me an idea for a story, but it was I, not the editor, who had to sit down and look at the most terrifying of all things: a blank page. In the same way, it's fun to be introduced and have someone tell a lot of exaggerations about me; however, then he sits down and I'm the one who has to face the audience. I must say that it helps a great deal to face an obviously friendly and intelligent audience. I have brought almost the entire MENSA organization of this region to this presentation, and, naturally, they take it personally when I talk about intelligence. I am the international president of that organization, not because of anything I have done but because of a whim of the organization.

I want to discuss our future in the cosmos. One of the things I think will mean the most to us and will make the future different from the past is the coming of a "space-centered society." We are going to expand into space, and I think it is fitting and right that we should do so. All through the 50 000 years of *Homo sapiens*, to say nothing of their hominoid precursors, humanity has been expanding its range of habitation. We don't know exactly where the first *Homo sapiens* made their appearance, but they have been

expanding until they now inhabit the entire face of the Earth. For the first time in human history, we are faced with a situation in which we literally have no place on Earth to expand. We have crossed all the mountains; we have penetrated all the oceans. We have plumbed the atmosphere to its height and the oceans to their depths. Unless we are willing to settle down into a world that is our prison, we must be ready to move beyond Earth, and I think we are ready. We have the technological capacity to do so; all that we need is the will. I think it is quite possible, starting now, to build settlements in space, to build worlds miniature in comparison to the Earth but large in comparison to anything we have done so far. These worlds, in orbit around the Earth, would be capable of holding tens of thousands of human beings.

This idea of space settlement seems odd to people; it doesn't seem inviting. When I suggested such an idea in an article I wrote a few years ago, I received a number of letters arguing against the possibility of space settlements. The arguments weren't based on economics; the main argument was that nobody would want to live in space. Nobody would want to leave his comfortable home on Earth. As nearly as I could tell from their addresses, all the people who wrote to me were Americans, and I presume that they knew American history. Americans should understand exactly what it means to leave their comfortable homes and to go to a completely strange world. This country was a wilderness at the beginning, and even after it was settled, it was a foreign land for most people. We in the United States are the descendants (unless any of you happen to be American Indians) of people who came here from other continents in search of something. Our forefathers, who came, at first, under harsh conditions, knew it would take them weeks to cross the ocean. They knew that if they met a serious storm, they would probably not survive. They also knew that when they landed, they would find a wilderness and possibly hostile natives. Yet, they still came. Between 1607 and 1617, 11 000 Englishmen came to the new colony of Virginia. In 1617, the population of Virginia was 1000. How was it possible for 11 000 people to come and yet to have only a population of 1000? The answer is easy; 10 000 died. Yet people continued to come. Why? They came because life in Europe, for many, was intolerable and because they wanted to come to a new land to start a new life. Whatever