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Facing Our Short-Term and Long-Term Problems: Developing Cosmic Perspectives for Sustainable Life

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Abstract: We are constantly faced with problems. This article focuses both on our short-term problems and our long term ones, and proposes that a larger cosmic perspective will enable us to tackle our problems creatively and collectively. After focussing on some of the urgent and day-to-day problems, we look at some of the far ranging ones, including the possibility of wiping ourselves out of the earth: the sixth mass extinction. Then we propose that a higher consciousness or cosmic perspective can help us cope with these challenges of our times! Such a perspective, it is hoped, will make human life sustainable and earthly existence viable for all living beings.

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Keywords: Problems and Challenges, Cosmic Perspective, Higher Consciousness, Sixth Mass Extinction, Global Sustainability.

Introduction

Most of us, most of the time, live from hand to mouth. We are immersed in so many important activities. We are engaged in managing so many crises and conflicts. From early morning to late evening, we need to manoeuvre through many diverse problems and challenges. Count us fortunate if we get some time to watch TV or to relax a bit. As such, our daily lives move from one crisis to another, mostly created by ourselves.

This series of crises demands immediate attention. We need to solve them and go beyond. At the same time, we cannot afford to let these crises blind us to the larger challenges and problems that we face, both as individuals and as a community. So in this article, I want to open our vistas to some of the larger or long-term problems that we face, so that we can have long-term solutions. Such solutions are as much needed as the short-term solutions to our immediate crises.

This article focuses both on our short-term problems and our long term ones, and proposes that a larger cosmic perspective will enable us to tackle our problems creatively and collectively. After focussing on some of the urgent and day-to-day problems, we look at some of the far-ranging ones, including the possibility of wiping ourselves out of the earth: the sixth mass extinction. Then we propose that a higher consciousness or cosmic perspective can help us cope with these challenges of our times.

Some Day-to-Day Problems

We meet problems as we breathe. But it doesn't get to us until we feel a major impact, and that's when it becomes a source of concern, hurt, or sorrow.

Life problems, depending on their magnitude, can be clogs in the wheel of our personal progress, and we may not be able to attain our full potential if we don't learn to place our problems in the proper perspectives. For most people, the main challenge they face is making ends meet. Getting up early in the morning, they go on working hard and return home tired. They do not have much time even to think of their problems, except the basic financial and health problems of food, shelter and medicine (Ho, 2011).

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Some Long-Term Problems

Besides the daily problems of food, health and financial stability that each one of us face, some of the more long-term problems that we as a human family face are:

Food Security

At the global level, the number of hungry people in the world has increased over the past few years. It is calculated that one in nine people in the world go hungry each day, and suffer from nutritional deficiencies as a result.

Food security has been one of the biggest threats to the overall health of the human population for many years. So far, 2020 and 2021 have seen the most severe increases in global food insecurity as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, affecting vulnerable households almost everywhere. Current estimates show that today, 957 million people across 93 countries do not have enough to eat (van Vuuren, 2021).

How is it that even in 2021 people are still going hungry? Unfortunately, the problem is not that we aren't producing enough food, but rather that people lack access to food. Many people do not have enough money to purchase food and can not grow their own. According to the World Food Programme (WFP), countries with the highest level of food insecurity also have the highest outward migration of refugees.

Food scarcity is intimately connected with poverty. More than 70 percent of the people in the world own less than $10,000 — or roughly 3 percent of total wealth in the world. A lack of global emphasis on foreign aid, conflict and political factors have kept poverty as a driving factor. In the last two decades, however, things have started to improve. The "middle class" has doubled in size from seven to thirteen percent.

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Water Scarcity

As with food, there is actually enough fresh water for each person currently living on our precious earth. However, access

to that water is not always possible for everyone (van Vuuren, 2021).

Issues such as poor infrastructure, displacement, and conflict mean that many people often have to use unsafe water sources. This is a clear health and sanitation risk.

It is estimated that about two billion people still use a source that is contaminated with human waste, and about the same amount don't have access to adequate toilet facilities.

Closely related to water scarcity is the pollution of the ocean. As we know, most of our planet is covered in water. We depend on the ocean to maintain our rainwater systems and many populations rely on it for food and income. The ocean also absorbs carbon dioxide and produces more than half of the oxygen on Earth (van Vuuren, 2021).

But despite its importance, the ocean is under threat. Overfishing and unsustainable fishing practices are causing the endangerment and extinction of many marine mammals. In addition, global warming has caused an increase in coral bleaching, where reefs lose vital nutrients and can no longer sustain the ecosystems that depend on them.

Commercial fishing practices dominate the market and inhibit the economic progress of local fishers, who can't compete with these boats.

And with the effectiveness of modern-day fishing techniques comes the problem of bycatch: where marine species such as dolphins and turtles are caught in commercial fishing nets, and are later discarded. Pollutants like boat fuel, pesticides, fertiliser, sewage, and plastics

cause “dead zones” – spots where no organism can live – to form in the ocean.

Biodiversity Loss

Related to food security and water scarcity is the loss of flora and fauna. Biodiversity loss refers to the decline or disappearance of biological diversity, understood as the variety of living things that inhabit the planet, its different levels of biological organisation and their respective genetic variability, as well as the natural patterns present in ecosystems. The important reasons for it are changing use of sea and land, direct exploitation of organisms, climate change, pollution and invasive non-native species.

The Guardian reports that humanity has wiped out 60% of mammals, birds, fish and reptiles since 1970, leading the world’s foremost experts to warn that the annihilation of wildlife is now an emergency that threatens civilisation (Carrington, 2018).

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The Sixth Mass Extinction

It is in this context that we want to summarize the gravest problem facing humanity in terms of the sixth mass extinction (Gary, 2019). Palaeontologists and scientists characterize mass extinctions as times when the Earth loses more than three-quarters of its species in a geologically short interval, as has happened only five times in the past 540 million years or so. Biologists now suggest that a sixth mass extinction may be under way, given the known species losses over the past few centuries and millennia. Here we review how differences between fossil and modern data and the addition of recently available palaeontological information influence our understanding of the current extinction crisis. Recent scientific results indicate that current extinction rates are higher than would be expected from the fossil record, highlighting the need for effective conservation measures (Barnosky et al., 2011).

The ongoing sixth mass species extinction (also known as the Holocene extinction or Anthropocene extinction) is the result of the destruction of component populations leading to eventual extirpation of entire species. Populations and species extinctions have severe implications for society through the degradation of ecosystem services.

Cosmic Perspective or Higher Consciousness

In the context of the problems and challenges humanity faces – both long term and short term – it is useful to widen our consciousness or have a long-term perspective. Astrophysics and modern cosmology urge us to have global and cosmic perspectives in spite of the acute problems that we face. Though human beings may not be the center of the world, a cosmic perspective informs us that our universe might not even be the only universe.

Who gets to celebrate this cosmic view of life? Not the farmworkers who have to move from job to job just to feed their families. Not the factory worker building electronics for little pay. Certainly not the homeless people rummaging through the trash for food. We need the luxury of time not spent on mere survival. Or we need to be young, comfortable enough that we don't need to worry about food or safety, and willing to look up at the stars in the sky (Tyson, 2019: 130)!

The American astrophysicist urges us to imagine a world in which everyone, but especially people with power and influence, holds an expanded view of our place in the cosmos. With that perspective, our problems would shrink—or never arise at all—and we could celebrate our small earthly differences, not fight and argue about them (Tyson, 2019: 131**).**

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