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Is Ethical Revitalization the Secret to Avoiding Collapse?

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The most important ethical question facing society and the scientific community today is whether we can prevent the collapse of global civilization in response to today's "perfect storm" of environmental problems. That is, will (or can) we pay enough today to spare future generations from utter disaster? The interrelated crises of overpopulation, wasteful consumption, rapidly deteriorating life-support systems, growing economic inequity, widespread hunger and poverty, toxification of the planet, declining resources, an increasing threat of resource wars (especially over oil, gas, and fresh water), a worsening epidemiological environment that enhances the probability of unprecedented pandemics, and persistent racial, gender, and religious prejudices that make these problems more difficult to solve, represent the greatest challenge ever faced by *Homo sapiens*. The urgency of finding answers is signified by the view of many scientists that society may have only a decade to initiate drastic corrective action, that this complex of interrelated problems is unrecognized by the elites who run the world, and that it has not yet generated a global "issue public" around sustainability. Civilization is fiddling while its life-support systems burn.

The failure to address the increasingly obvious threats from climate disruption alone have clearly shown that scientific knowledge, even if widely presented to the public, can fail to produce adaptive behavioral change. One basic reason for this is that human beings have evolved wonderful mechanisms for observing and reacting to sudden changes, in part by mentally holding the environmental background constant to make the changes stand out. But individuals are not so well equipped to perceive changes in that background, such as the gradual accumulation of greenhouse gases and toxic compounds in their environments. A rock hurtling toward one's head is immediately translated into an existential threat; words

and charts about rising greenhouse gas concentrations are not. New ethical norms and institutions are required to develop proper responses to such difficult-to-picture threats.

The failure to develop the norms and institutions to overcome this built-in handicap is hardly surprising in view of the endarkenment sweeping the United States today. Just consider the very successful Republican war on science and education (and women and minorities). The nation is rapidly regressing from an evidence-based into a faith-based world. Therefore, I believe environmental scientists must find new ways to communicate the urgent situation to the public, offer practical solutions, and do so in an ethics-focused mode centered on concern for our children and grandchildren. Ethics are behavioral standards agreed upon by human groups; the challenge now is to very quickly generate a global ethical movement agreeing to change human actions for the benefit of our descendants. Limited models for such a development might be found in elements of past revitalization movements (early Christianity, ghost dances, “cargo cults,” the civil rights movement), which were generally responses to crises in the physical or social environments, and had prophets (Jesus, Wovoka, Yali, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King).

Today’s human predicament has convinced many people that business as usual will not lead to a society that can fulfill most people’s needs. As a result, an environmental movement has been growing that, like earlier revitalization movements, has produced prophets (Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, Garrett Hardin, Jim Hansen, Bill McKibben). Like many predecessors, it could be considered anti-colonial (Occupy Wall Street), has millenarian expectations (a possible transition to a sustainable and just society), and contains people, at least in the USA, who feel oppressed by a concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a corporate-military state.

An attempt to revitalize environmentalism is the Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere (MAHB, mahb.stanford.edu), which is providing a public forum for generating information, insights, and solutions to the global environmental crisis. It is endeavoring to enlist participation by people from diverse communities, including NGOs, politics, business, universities, philanthropy, religion, and the media in developing a revitalization. The MAHB attempts to play two key roles. The first is to focus on all elements of the human predicament and their interactions in trying to advance and disseminate understanding of the escalating threat to civilization. The second is to generate an appropriate response to the human predicament in the face of global society’s failure to do so. MAHB hopes to learn from previous successful movements by openly promoting a political agenda that includes dramatically altering the social order (e.g., unregulated capitalism, widening economic inequity, depletion of natural capital) and seeking to develop new norms with a strong focus on ethics (e.g., shunning over-reproduction, competitive consumption, racism, and sexism; caring for both the environment and people in other cultures as well as future generations). Revitalization seems a tall order, but as I once said¹

¹ *Machinery of Nature*, 1986, p. 17

I am convinced that ... a quasi-religious movement, one concerned with the need to change the values that now govern much of human activity, is essential to the persistence of our civilization.

MAHB-UTS Blogs are a joint venture between the University of Technology Sydney and the Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere. Questions should be directed to joan@mahbonline.org.

MAHB Blog: <http://mahb.stanford.edu/blog/is-ethical-revitalization-the-secret-to-avoiding-collapse/>