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Solving the Human Predicament

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Fixed human behaviour tendencies have blocked action toward a sustainable future. Despite over 50 years of effort by scientists and environmentalists, the future of the human endeavour can no longer be taken for granted. This is due primarily to our nature. We have failed to realize our own behaviour patterns are the root cause of our predicament and have mistakenly believed that mountains of evidence would make the difference. For decades scientists have produced evidence describing the serious environmental threats we face. Their work has failed to ignite a significant public response because our message has not been delivered in a manner that addresses the drivers of human behaviour. We now understand humans are confronted with subconscious behaviour tendencies that served us well at an earlier period, but still remain in our incomplete evolutionary development. At our present stage of intellectual development, lingering malignant social constructs, especially capitalism and economic growth, impede our ability to move forward on environmental issues.

Humans have the most highly developed brain of all living species. The cognitive part of the brain is responsible for our remarkable progress in technology and science. By contrast, when human relationships induce conflict or stress, the limbic and reptilian parts of the brain dominate, overriding rational cognitive thought processes. The innate survival instincts so essential in the past still tend to overwhelm our unique reasoning capacity. Emotional factors such as fear and anger hamper rational thinking. We overestimate the human intellectual capacity when the cognitive process is undermined by our regression to subconscious influences.

Human behaviour is strongly influenced by well-established norms. Ideas extending beyond broadly accepted patterns are frequently rejected because they do not conform to preconceived beliefs that, once established, are extremely difficult to dislodge. Once locked in place, they are obstacles to change. A striking example of this aspect of human behaviour is the

never-ending debate on gun control in the United States. Any time the topic on the availability of guns occurs, the National Rifle Association (NRA) vehemently rejects any type of constraint on gun ownership, claiming “the right to bear arms” as an unalienable right that cannot be taken away. The right to bear arms became part of the United States constitution in 1791 and remains there to this day despite the evolution from muskets to AK-47s and despite abundant evidence that gun ownership fails to enhance security and creates an added public hazard.

Human behaviour contains a strong element of competitiveness, a natural occurrence in past times when survival was a daily struggle. Humans operated in a context where obtaining food and shelter were the key factors of living. Hardships bred a short-term view of life with little regard for the future. In today’s society the same characteristics can be seen in our seemingly insatiable consumption of resources and in our tendency to discount the future. These predispositions are displayed by our destructive treatment of the natural world, all in the name of unsustainable economic growth. We are caught in the trap of immediate self-gratification at the expense of our own life-support system.

The unique reasoning ability of humans has brought many benefits, but has also provided us with a problem with which we must cope. We are equipped with certain abstract knowledge unlikely to be possessed by most other animal species. Humans have a sense of self-awareness and are aware of their own mortality. We are constantly reminded by daily events around us that we are not immutable. By necessity, we have learned to deal with this knowledge by creating a number of defensive structures. We have subconsciously learned to deny reality. The denial may take the form of refuting or ignoring painful information that helps us avoid facing the issue. Denial often employs rationalization as an escape mechanism by finding reasons to discredit the information. Humans are capable of denial most frequently when the issue in question has a controversial aspect, but also occurs even when the information is widely accepted. The melting of the Arctic sea ice is a powerful example. It is recognized there is an urgent need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Despite this, oil companies and some governments are actively laying claim to areas believed to contain oil or gas reserves. The risk of potential global warming disaster is denied. Greed and vested interests prevail.

If we expect to move forward on environmental issues we will need to frame our message in a way that reaches the real drivers of human behaviour and removes the obstacles blocking change. Predicting disaster is not a driver because creating fear produces denial and paralysis. Providing more scientific evidence is helpful, but is not a driver because it has been tested for decades and found to be ineffective. At present a plan does not exist, but we now have an understanding of the elements influencing human behaviour that could be utilized in developing a blueprint for action. These elements would focus on the many positive attributes of human nature such as our proven ability to co-operate, our innate desire to protect our children, and our empathy for other creatures that share the earth with us. We have the intellectual capacity to create a plan using these and other human qualities. It is our moral responsibility to do so. The question is: “Are we brave enough to do it?”

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