HUMANITY IS NOT A PLAGUE

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Living with 10 Billion People on Earth

ESSAY

Noordboek

There is enough for everybody's need,
but not for everybody's greed.

Gandhi

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Avarice and usury and precaution
must be our gods for a little longer still.
For only they can lead us out of the tunnel
of economic necessity into daylight.

Lord Keynes (reaction on the crisis in 1930)

Introduction

Nowadays, in our Western societies the most important purpose in life seems to be to live as long and healthy as possible – or rather, to become immortal. This is naturally supposed to happen in luxury with maximum personal prosperity, all with the hopes of achieving happiness. However, these goals are only accessible if we close our eyes to the consequences of such a lifestyle, namely an ever-growing environmental crisis, an increasing gap between the rich and poor parts of the world and a growing feeling of meaninglessness as experienced by an increasing number of people. Strangely enough, the so-called overpopulation (and particularly the growth in poorer countries) is blamed for these global problems, instead of acknowledging that they are the result of our own goals and behavior.

How can it be that we are so focused on ourselves? Could it be that the 'demystification' of the world through science incited this attitude? Science has burdened society in recent years with a number of visions that, in my opinion, are questionable. Not only are we nowadays apparently just a cosmic accident, but we are also solely our brains. Consciousness, or our own free will, appears to be extinct. Man just follows a kind of computer program that is fixed in their genes. Indeed, human intelligence is not even linked to one's consciousness, according to neuroscientists. The ultimate consequence is that human intelligence could very well be replaced

by computer intelligence. In my view, this rational scientific vision could lead to major problems, especially in relation to the challenges our planet and humanity are facing.

For example, there is the threat of a climate crisis, a raw materials deadlock and a water scarcity crisis in a world that will soon have 10 billion people. There is a huge increase in the speed with which animal and plant species become extinct. Can these problems be solved with our current science and technology? In this book I will illustrate that the amount of fresh water available to humanity is already fully used and the effects of economic growth on this water scarcity.

Returning to the demystification or rationalization of the world. The main force behind this demystification is that science has given all kinds of descriptions and predictions for natural phenomena. The Theory of Evolution, in particular, undermined the authority of the Churches, whereas along with the massive increase in prosperity (also largely thanks to science) the authority of science grew steadily.

Religion and mystery often gave way to ideas and apparent scientific absolutes. Some scientists think that ultimately there will be an end to mystery. This view is a misapprehension. We have no idea where our universe came from and it is generally acknowledged that we, as humanity, will never be able to look beyond the Big Bang. The origin of the universe, therefore, remains a mystery. Additionally, the emergence of life on Earth is still a great enigma. In other words, the almighty status of science is open to a good deal of debate. In this respect, I will elaborate on how deeply the ideas and authority of science have penetrated our thinking.

What is required is a new vision: a vision that recognizes the consciousness of people, a vision that values people more than what they can produce. Such a vision is a source of hope for our future. The consciousness of mankind has been evolving for 50,000 years to become less self-centered. It is often thought that the ancient peoples from prehistoric times had a higher level of consciousness. That is not the case: in general, they were violent people, according to our current standards. Back then, man's chances of dying from war-related causes was around 50%. Now that chance is in the single digits.

Consciousness is an invisible phenomenon that is often ignored or forgotten, whereas it is decisive for the behavior of a civilization. Although those with a new economic system or technological innovation hope to solve the world problems, this will be impossible without further growth of our consciousness. Namely, the most important characteristic of a growing consciousness is no longer putting our own interest first. We become less self-centered and, in my opinion, better people. The culture of a society is determined by the average of the individual level of consciousness. This has increased enormously in 50,000 years and we are now at a very high level of consciousness. Which is, of course, good news. At the same time, however, the recognition that even more consciousness is called for is further away than ever. Even when less egocentricity is the solution for virtually all disasters that threaten us. A new vision for our society in response to this, is to embrace our consciousness again.

It is becoming clear that science and technology, without ethical consciousness, are slowly but surely turning from a

blessing into a danger to mankind. Technologies are being developed to earn money and no longer to solve social problems. They also have a larger impact and are more dangerous, as nuclear disasters have shown us. Additionally, many of the proposed solutions are, on the whole, only beneficial for the rich part of the world, such as underground CO_2 storage. We should focus on technologies that can be used by everyone and that do not cause any further damage to the environment. In this book I am making a case for this coherent technology. By coherent technology I mean an approach that recognizes that we cannot understand everything, and that more caution and care is required in dealing with nature and ourselves.

The idea that we will be on Earth with 10 billion people in a few years shocks us. But why should it? Is it because of the people who see humanity as a plague and consider us as the greatest threat to biodiversity? Or is it the fear of shortages and that there will soon be too few resources for everyone? Or perhaps because of the vision that the universe – and therefore also the people – are created randomly by colliding particles, and thus we in fact count for little and do not serve a special purpose, as is implicitly expressed by many scientists? These beliefs are instilled in us. Today, every nature film ends with an accusation to humanity. We hear that the extinction of animals is directly related to a reduced space for nature due to the growth of cities and agriculture, alongside the overfishing of the oceans and pollution of the environment. The lack of raw materials, such as oil and food, is also attributed to overpopulation. A theme in many films and books is that humanity is hit by a major disaster,

after which only a select number of people can rebuild a new society. We also see fantasies about space travel to get raw materials from other planets or, even more futuristically, people colonizing outer space. Furthermore, replacing human intelligence with computer intelligence could cause billions of jobs to disappear. Billions of people then become 'worthless', which will give a whole new meaning to the term 'overpopulation'.

Instead of first considering what kind of world we want to live in and subsequently applying the science and technology to that end, it seems that first and foremost our society is a reflection of man's technical ability. There are just as many scientists who want to work on a chemical-free agri-

Slum in Kenya (unknown photographer, source: Aqua for All)

culture as there are those who want to work on a chemical-based agriculture. So the choice should not be determined by financial earning potential, but by society, i.e. by ourselves.

From a philosophical point of view, the popularity of ideas such as genetic manipulation, space travel and artificial intelligence are interesting. Insights that emphasize control over mysteries, such as the scientific explanation for the origins of our universe, are much more eagerly embraced by the media than concepts that claim that solving these mysteries will never happen. It indicates the desire for a 'controllable, engineered' world. A certain complacency seems to have seeped into our minds, as we are shutting ourselves off for things we cannot know and therefore not control. We want to be the lords of our lives, without risks and without fate. Complete control is what we long for. At the same time, this vision upholds the illusion that in the West and other rich parts of the world we can still become richer without serious consequences, that there are no limits to what the Earth can offer us, and above all, that we do not have to share with the rest of the world and with future generations. The facts suggest, however, that we will have to share if we do not want to immerse the rest of the world in poverty and hunger and destroy the environment for future generations. In doing so, we ensure not only a fairer distribution, but also more stability, peace and a reduction of refugee crises. Sharing is therefore a necessity. For example, there is not enough water in the world to cater for a Western lifestyle for everyone. There is, on average, 2,300 liters of sustainable water per person per day available in the world; an average European person currently consumes 4,000 liters per day. This lavish

water use can predominantly be attributed to our meat and clothing consumption. This involves water from outside the Europe and is largely unsustainable as it is usually extracted from groundwater sources that are being depleted. Such a water footprint does not seem compatible with a global vision proclaiming that we do not have to share.

With this book, I will argue that we are facing a very interesting era in which we will have to share our Earth with 10 billion people. However, there will only be room for 10 billion people if we become less self-centered. If we manage to live together with 10 billion people, we must learn to share. All in all, this is an optimistic vision for the future; we should not think in terms of doomsday scenarios, and we should not assume that there is not enough. We should not become cynical and assume that everything revolves around money, greed, power and envy. Our aim should be to seek a higher consciousness within ourselves, as humanity has successfully done for 50,000 years. Less self-centered people need fewer items and are better able to share. This sharing is crucial, because we cannot solve these problems with large-scale technological innovations.

The threats that the Earth and mankind now encounter are serious, and because of their scale we no longer know where to start; every individual contribution appears to be futile. It seems that we need a new vision on the role of mankind in order to set new goals. In this book I propose an overture for such a vision and offer a guide as to what we can do ourselves. In my view, there is no reason why we should not be optimistic about our future.