

Self-realisation and Sustainability: Targeting the Source

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The impact of human kind on planet Earth has caused rapid change like never before. With this changed has emerged an environmental crisis that threatens our very existence as a species. We face threats from resource shortages, overproduction of wastes and a population size that simply can't be supported. In order to tackle this crisis we need to find a way of living sustainably that will allow us to overcome these threats and exist into the future. When solving large and complex problems what is often overlooked is the root cause or source of the problem itself. Implementing superficial fixes without directly targeting the source of the problem will never eliminate the problem completely, instead endless effort will have to be made to suppress the problem. This can be illustrated with a simple analogy. Think of it in terms of the problem of forest fires. Endless efforts are made to put out these fires, contain them in a limited area, and reduce the casualties they may cause. However, if the source of the fire were determined they could be eliminated altogether, avoiding the need for the secondary solutions that would otherwise have to be implemented perpetually. In this sense, targeting the source of the problem is required to truly eliminate the problem, or "prevent the fires from starting", in order to avoid the endless effort that would otherwise be required to constantly "put the fires out". In terms of the environmental crisis, the critical question should be: what is the source of this crisis and why did it come to be? With this question in mind, many scholars have looked to human nature and the reasons for which individuals behave in the ways that they do to understand how we have come to live in such an unsustainable way. Many findings have made a connection between unsustainable behaviours and the selfish nature of our genes. If true, it appears that this genetic nature is so powerful in influencing our behaviours, that even our knowledge of how unsustainable our behaviours are hasn't been enough to encourage us to change them. In this case, the selfish nature of humans must be overcome in some way that creates a shift in

behaviour from an individual focus to a holistic species and ecosystem focus. The process of an individual transitioning from having an isolated sense of self to recognizing themselves as part of an interconnected network of life, and in turn understanding the intrinsic value of all life, is termed as self-realisation (1). In this essay I will argue that self-realisation in individuals is essential to creating the fundamental change in human behaviour that is required to overcome the source of the environmental crisis.

First I will explain the genetic nature of humans and how this has promoted behaviours that are not sustainable. Through this understanding it will become clear that these genetically driven behaviours are the fundamental source of the environmental crisis. The next factor, then is how to target and eliminate the fundamental source, which I will argue is through self-realisation.

Genetic Nature of Humans

We often use the term human nature to describe innate desires and behaviours that are fundamental to human kind. If we think of this in terms of ‘nature versus nurture’ or ‘genes versus the environment’ we would be looking at the ‘nature’ or ‘genes’ side. In other words, our behaviours can be shaped by both our genes and our environment, and in the case of human nature or our innate drives we are referring to the genetic component. Genes can be thought of as selfish in nature, as they promote traits that will ensure their own survival and projection into the future (2). In other words, genes promote the survival and reproductive success of the individual because this in turn promotes their own success. This can be used to explain the selfish nature of humans. Richard Dawkins (2) explains the concept by comparing hypothetical altruistic and selfish groups. A group that is altruistic would be driven by group selection, the idea that sacrificing oneself will make it more likely that the group as a whole will survive. However, even in these groups there is bound to be individuals who “refuse to make the sacrifice” and

instead “exploits the altruism of the rest” (2). These individuals would be more likely to survive and reproduce. Most importantly, their offspring would inherit these selfish traits and eventually “the altruistic group would be overrun by the selfish individuals” (2). In this scenario we can see the genes that provided our ancestors with traits that increased survival and reproductive success would be passed on and become more and more common over time. Eventually, this would result in widespread genetic drives that promote these advantageous traits.

In this population, and our own, gene survival and success is better ensured through acting selfishly as it proved to be the best way to ensure the survival of an individual and his/her offspring. This results in individuals not concerned with the success of our species but rather the success of themselves and their families.

An important point to make in this scenario is that a selfish or individualistic population is much more likely to go extinct. The genes that exist in the population promote selfish behaviours because these behaviours provided advantages to ancestors. This infers that in no way do these genes have the ability to anticipate what will provide advantages to future individuals. If a gene promotes a trait that provided advantages in the past with no consequences to the individuals, it will continue to promote this trait completely unable to foresee the possible future consequences that may exist. Our innate drives may then be in direct conflict with our species’ future survival.

Short-sightedness

Our selfish nature, as explained above, has caused us to adopt a very short-sighted perspective, as individuals are not concerned with the future of their population or species. Another unique trait to humans also contributes to this short-sighted perspective. Humans possess consciousness, the ability to recognize ourselves and the fact that we will someday die. This awareness of death

is a large strain on mind and therefore has led to the evolution of certain drives and behaviours that allow us to ease this strain (3). Those who avoided dwelling on the future, and instead focused on the short term likely avoided much of the strain of death and would be at an advantage. Because of this, in combination with our selfish genes, we are genetically driven to focus on the short term.

I will now explore how the selfish and short-sighted nature of our behaviours have led us to the environmental crisis we face today.

Linking the Genetic Nature of Humans to Unsustainable Behaviours

Our genetic drives continue to promote us to behave in disadvantageous ways even though as individuals we may be aware of these behaviours. This is currently occurring as we continue to behave and live unsustainably despite having the knowledge that this is threatening our future survival and well-being. This dilemma is not new to human kind but has occurred many times in the past. Many Polynesian island civilizations lived in isolated societies and experienced declines and even extinction due to ecological collapses (4). One of the most classic examples is the Easter Island society which is now non-existent and the land is barren and eroded. When the Polynesian settlers arrived the island was covered in rich tropical forest, which they quickly cleared for agricultural land and wood used to build canoes. They hunted the native fish and birds and with this their population quickly expanded. It wasn't soon after this that their population crashed as the tree species and many bird species had gone extinct, their agriculture fields became eroded, and they had no wood to make the canoes they used to hunt fish. When European settlers came upon the island only one quarter of the society remained. Other documented island collapses include the Polynesian civilizations of Henderson and Kahoolawe Islands in which their entire populations went extinct due to over exploitation of food sources

resulting in starvation (4). The ecological collapses seen in these island civilizations provide many parallels to our current global civilization. Earth is isolated with a finite amount of resources, as were the islands. As humans exploited Earth's resources for various usage, the global population increased and continues to increase rapidly. As these resources begin to diminish we have started to recognize the consequences of our exploitation and growth, and we find ourselves in the same situation as the Polynesian civilizations, facing collapse. In all of these cases, including our own, there is a clear pattern of overexploitation of resources, and because of the commonness of this pattern it would be naive to think there is not some underlying nature that drives humans to points of ecological collapse. As discussed under the genetics of human nature, genes promote traits that increase an individual's success and reproduction because that will in turn ensure their own survival and projection into the future. As genes are not conscious and therefore do not recognize consequences or limitations of resource use, we are genetically driven to exploit all available resources in the pursuit to become as successful as possible. This has led us to become a society based on never-ending 'progress' and overconsumption. Materialism and capitalism has created an endless battle to increase our success. This success is based on status, as the more possessions and money you have, the more successful you are perceived to be and the more resources you have to provide to your offspring. Overall, the selfish nature of genes has promoted behaviours that have created a society that is unsustainable in its systems, institutions and values.

With all of these behaviours, we must recognize that they evolved because they were the most beneficial for individual survival. Humans have the intelligence and consciousness to understand the consequences and limitations of this approach. However, even with this our genetic drives have been able to prevent us from taking action on this knowledge. Specifically, our short term

perspective has allowed us to neglect the threats that exist in the future. Our individualistic nature and consciousness leads us to focus on the factors that will affect us in the near future and makes us generally ineffective at dealing with problems that appear to be in the distant future.

From this it is clear that overcoming our genetic predispositions to create a shift from self-focus to species and ecosystem focus is key to changing our unsustainable behaviours and short-term perspective. A change in our genetic makeup may take thousands of years so we must make changes through other means. If we look to the genes versus environment model we know that our environment has influence over our behaviour, not only our genes. This gives hope that behavioural change can be accomplished and maintained through environmental influences.

Self-realisation

In order to target the source of the environmental crisis we must overcome our selfish genetic drives to become ecologically driven in our behaviours. I will argue that this requires the achievement of self-realisation in individuals. Self-realisation can be interpreted in many ways but in this context I am referring to the term as deep ecologist Arnie Naess has depicted it (1). He describes it as the “development of wide identification in which the sense of self is no longer limited by the personal ego, but instead encompasses greater and greater wholes”. He explains that one must realize they are “nodes in a vast web of relationships” and “how dependent they are on the well-being of nature for their own physical and psychological well-being”. In this, one is no longer isolated and develops what Naess termed the ecological self. Through this perspective all life has inherent value and therefore creates the belief that we should be concerned not only with the well-being of our species but all species. This way of living exists in various groups, one particular example is the Buddhists. In this religion they teach that all things are interrelated as “the health of the whole is inseparably linked with the health of the parts, and

the health of the parts is inseparably linked with the whole" (5). They believe that "when we abuse nature we abuse ourselves" and in this sense they exhibit a kindness for all species. With these beliefs the Buddhists live a modest and sustainable lifestyle. Although this is a religious perspective the beliefs do not require this perspective, this perspective may come from spirituality or from extensive knowledge of science and the ecosystem for example. Through self-realisation individuals will be able to develop a sense of value in all life and the survival of all life, and an overall ecological focus. Through this they will be able to overcome the selfish genetic drives that promote individual focus and unsustainable behaviours.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of the selfish nature of genes we can recognize that humans are innately driven to behave in ways that increase individual's success. Because of this we have evolved behaviours that have created an inherently unsustainable society. Removing this driving source of our unsustainable society will prevent the need for constant efforts to suppress our genetically driven unsustainable nature. Overcoming our genetically predisposed traits is no simple task and will take time, but through self-realisation we may stand a chance. The next step in this argument is to determine how to promote self-realisation in individuals, whether this is through spirituality, education or policy. Further analysis is also required to determine the importance and effectiveness of eliminating the source of unsustainable society in order to tackle the environmental crisis, as my argument is only focused on identifying the source itself and what is required to eliminate it. My argument in no way states that more superficial solutions are not required. I recognize that many issues currently exist that need to be dealt with and in a limited period of time, whereas promoting self-realisation throughout the entire population is surely a

huge task that requires time. However, the insights provided in this paper may reveal a promising approach to achieving sustainability through a complete reform of human behaviour.

References

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