

IS THERE A BIGGEST PROBLEM IN PHILOSOPHY? SOME REFLECTIONS ON SETTING PRIORITIES

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Philosophers and others with inquisitive minds have busied their brains for millennia with questions such as: 'Does god exist? What is the meaning of life? Are we free or determined? What is truth? Is there any knowledge which is so certain that no reasonable person could doubt it? What is reality? What is good? What is beautiful? Why exist? What is "to be"? What is justice? What did Kant mean by the categorical imperative?' Are all these topics equally (un)important or is there a ranking of philosophical problems? If there is such a ranking, is there a need to set priorities? What philosophical problem is most urgent?

The Biggest Problem is the *ecological crisis*, i.e. the human-induced ecological degradation of our planet. There is a delicate evolutionary evolved ecological balance which will collapse when a tipping point has been reached. We are on the verge of reaching that tipping point. Human life is sustained by a functioning ecosystem. From our modern perspective, it may be hard to see ourselves as part of nature and to be aware of our total dependence on the so-called ecosystem services, like food, a stable climate, a stable sea level, clean air and fresh water. We tend to take all of these for granted. Unfortunately, it is now certain beyond any reasonable standard of scientific doubt that the global ecosystem is being increasingly degraded by anthropogenic impacts. Human caused climate change is just one aspect of a multifaceted ecological disaster, which includes large scale deforestation, desertification, overfishing, ocean acidification, accumulation of the plastic soup, fresh water shortages, air pollution and large-scale biodiversity loss. If we fail to solve this ecological crisis, either we or our

descendants will perish. It will be future generations who will suffer from our ignorance, negligence and shortsightedness. We are shifting the burden of our lifestyles onto future generations.

If philosophy is about reflecting on the fundamental questions of humankind, it turns out that we can no longer neglect to rethink our relation with nature. Nature is not limitless; there are ecological planetary boundaries, which, if passed, pose an existential threat to our species and those of many others. Shouldn't philosophers play their part in trying to solve this problem? Some already do. But many are concerned with a plethora of other problems. Within the discipline of philosophy, there is the recent branch of applied philosophy and, within that branch, there is environmental philosophy which addresses aspects of the ecological crisis, for example climate ethics. Unfortunately, only a fraction of philosophers is professionally concerned with the ecological crisis. It seems philosophers are much like the general public in neglecting to reflect on setting priorities.

The Biggest Problem is how humanity can survive and overcome the ecological crisis. Humans collectively have an impact on the finite carrying capacity of planet Earth. If that impact is larger than the carrying capacity (overshoot), then there will be an environmental collapse. The impact factor consists of a simple calculation: (1) the number of people multiplied by (2) their average ecological footprint. The ecological footprint is a measure of human demand on the Earth's ecosystems. The human population is growing rapidly, the average ecological footprint is also growing and therefore the impact factor inexorably increases. Despite all the green policies and good intentions of sustainable development, the global ecological crisis is worsening. Population control – stopping the unsustainable growth – and decreasing our (average) individual ecological footprints are therefore a *philosophical, moral and political* issue of the highest importance.

The job of philosophers is searching for blind spots. Philosophers are explorers in the realm of ideas. During

the last few decades, their explorations have turned up many new ethical blind spots. This has led to emancipation movements on behalf of homosexuals, women, unbelievers, animals, and, to some extent, the environment and future generations. But how do we find such blind spots when we are unable to perceive our own? By searching actively, with the help of guidelines and theoretical insight, we can succeed in finding new blind spots. When such a blind spot has been located, it is important to address the problem. The need for a theory is urgent, but the need for action is even more pressing. Awareness of our dependence on the ecosystems of the planet is one such huge blind spot. Humans are ruining the earth on an unprecedented scale and the limits of the earth's capacity will soon be reached. The time has come for action. It is time for setting priorities.

First things first. We have to realize that we are earthlings first and humans second. Solving the ecological crisis while reducing suffering in the world should be the main task of philosophers. It is time to lay aside Heidegger, to name just one, for when we have reached the safe ground of sustainability and the amount of suffering in the world has been minimized, then there will be time to ponder other philosophical questions. In the meantime, philosophers should assume their fair share in solving the Biggest Problem. Environmental ethics is *Prima Philosophia*. If we do not solve the Biggest Problem, we commit involuntary collective suicide.

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