

Vanishing Point

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Two billion people walked this earth the day my grandfather was born. “Each one,” he said to me, “from his or her own isolated well of consciousness, claims to be the center of the universe.” By 2030 the population had exploded to over eight billion. I remember my grandfather complaining, “My own significance shrinks to the vanishing point.”

Now I count myself among the few who are left. Maybe three-hundred-million of us, give or take. No one is really counting any more. My own personal worth soars as the species plummets toward extinction. Like the stock market. Supply and demand. We have saved the planet, but lost the human race.

The decisive moment came when the United Nations adopted its solution to the problem of human overpopulation. Bangladesh and other coastal nations were losing ground to rising seas. India and China were swamped with human flesh and hungry mouths. There were not enough resources to go around. Stresses fractured along religious and racial fault lines. Civil conflicts erupted into regional wars. Refugees fled the horror, but neighboring countries closed their borders, defending them with razor wire and lethal force. Political order was teetering worldwide. Something had to be done to prevent a descent into barbarism.

So the Security Council ordered XOL22 to be introduced into the atmosphere all over the world by high-soaring aircraft. XOL22 was a simple contraceptive aerosol designed to prevent human conception. The aerosol had been contrived by an international consortium of scientists as a living organism able to evolve its own defenses. To defeat cheaters.

There was an antidote. FERTILE7 was made available only to those women with government-issued licenses to conceive and give birth. Meeting reasonable, but not particularly onerous standards of health, education, and financial ability to raise and nurture offspring was all that was required. Quotas were set for each country. The standards and quotas were established by an impartial commission from measurements and calculations of the earth’s capacity to sustain a population.

In the short term, the systems performed remarkably well (although religious zealots and personal-rights fanatics would never agree). Almost immediately the world’s total population began a downward arc toward the desired asymptote of five billion inhabitants. But the Security Council edict, admittedly even-handed and well-intended, has led to an even more grievous consequence than overpopulation.

As everyone knows, the antidote FERTILE7 began to lose its effectiveness almost immediately. That was years ago. The atmosphere and waters of the entire planet were contaminated with XOL22. In the warming atmosphere the aerosol evolved its defenses. It bound to the hydrogen-oxygen bonds and could not be removed, even by distillation. The brightest minds could not find a substitute for FERTILE7. New births dwindled, then stopped altogether.

No one has been born for more than ninety years now, and the population has aged without replacement. Our numbers have now shrunk to a pitiable few old folks. And even fewer of us will see another decade pass. As a consequence, the increasingly pressing problem has now

become: how do we preserve all human knowledge and history and culture beyond the end of mankind? In my opinion, the Meme Bank Project, for all its faults, holds the greatest promise.

We are now old, feeble, demented. We can no longer do the work required with our own minds and hands. The task is beyond our abilities. So we have programmed machines to collect and organize and categorize the data and implement the project. We call them the Curators. Artificial intelligence. Self-replicating. Self-improving. Evolving. We have no way of knowing what they will become. Who can say? Maybe by cataloging and storing and comparing and studying us and our wit, a little will rub off. Perhaps the Curators will become witty themselves. And perhaps even compassionate. Maybe they will even become "human." God knows we have bequeathed them everything we know. There is nothing more we can do. I often wonder what a cosmonaut from a distant star might find should he ever happen upon this insignificant planet in the remote future.

As for myself, I remain philosophical. Stoic even. Perhaps a bit solipsistic. For me the world will end when I die, whether or not there is anyone left to carry the banner of humanity. There will be no one left to mourn the loss. Or to read this memorandum. It is impossible to ignore the irony of what we have done to ourselves. The religious fanatics proved to be right after all, and at times I cannot but smile at God's final joke on us.

This will be my last memo. The situation is now out of my hands. I have made my recommendation to the President, as have others. I have argued in favor of the Meme Bank, of course. Whatever other consequences it might portend, it seems to hold the greatest promise of preserving human culture beyond the final collapse. Beyond that, there is really not much I can say. I am going to send this memo now and shut down my computer. Then I am going home to tend the flowers and wait for the sun to set.