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## A Pale Blue Dot at the Hinge of History

The eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote: “Two things fill the heart with ever renewed and increasing awe and reverence, the more often and more steadily we meditate upon them: the starry firmament above and the moral law within.”

Today, we know a lot more about “the starry firmament above than Kant knew. By expanding our grasp of the vastness of the universe, science has, if anything, increased the awe and reverence we feel when we look up on a starry night (assuming, that is, that we have got far enough away from air pollution and excessive street lighting to see the stars properly). But we may feel that greater knowledge forces us to acknowledge that our place in the universe is not particularly significant.

In his essay “Dreams and Facts,” the philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote that our entire Milky Way galaxy is a tiny fragment of the universe, and within this fragment our solar system is “an infinitesimal speck,” and within this speck “our planet is a microscopic dot.” The truth of this was vividly demonstrated in 1990 when the astronomer Carl Sagan suggested that the *Voyager* space probe capture an image of Earth as it reached

the outer limits of our solar system. Earth shows up in a grainy image as a pale blue dot. If you go to YouTube and search for “Carl Sagan—Pale Blue Dot,” you can see it, and hear Sagan himself telling us that we must cherish our world because everything humans have ever valued exists only on that pale blue dot.

That is a moving experience, but what should we learn from it?

Russell sometimes wrote as if the fact that we are a mere speck in a vast universe showed that we don’t really matter all that much: “On this dot, tiny lumps of impure carbon and water, of complicated structure, with somewhat unusual physical and chemical properties, crawl about for a few years, until they are dissolved again into the elements of which they are compounded.”

But no such nihilistic view of our existence follows from the size of our planetary home, and Russell himself was no nihilist. He thought that it was important to confront the fact of our insignificant place in the universe, because he did not want us to live under the illusory comfort of a belief that somehow the world had been created for our sake, and that we are under the benevolent care of an all-powerful creator. “Dreams and Facts” concludes with these stirring words: “No man is liberated from fear who dare not see his place in the world as it is; no man can achieve the greatness of which he is capable until he has allowed himself to see his own littleness.”

After World War II, when the world was divided into nuclear-armed camps threatening each other with mutual destruction, Russell did not take the view that our insignificance, when considered against the vastness of the universe, meant that the



end of life on Earth did not matter. On the contrary, he made nuclear disarmament the chief focus of his political activity for the remainder of his life.

Sagan took a similar view. While seeing the Earth as a whole diminishes the importance of things like national boundaries that divide us, he said, it also “underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we’ve ever known.”

Thirty years later, the Oxford philosopher Derek Parfit gave that idea even greater significance when he wrote, near the end of the second volume of his magisterial work *On What Matters*: “We live during the hinge of history.” Parfit was thinking of the fact that our species is living through “its most dangerous and decisive period,” but if we can survive the hazards we face, the development of new technologies will enable our descendants to spread through our galaxy. Over the next few centuries, Parfit suggested, we will be able to live independently on other planets. Those centuries will then be only a sliver of time compared to what is to come, for we may populate the Milky Way galaxy, or spread even further in this section of the universe. As Parfit put it in the penultimate paragraph of the third and final volume of *On What Matters*:

Life can be wonderful as well as terrible, and we shall increasingly have the power to make life good. Since human history may be only just beginning, we can expect that future humans, or supra-humans, may achieve some great goods that we cannot now even imagine. In Nietzsche’s words, there has never been such a new dawn and clear horizon, and such an open sea.

The most significant contribution our generation can make to reaching this open sea is to ensure the survival of intelligent life on our planet.

Could this idea that we are essential to this process be merely the latest version of the self-important delusion that humans are the center of existence? Surely, in this vast universe, there must be other forms of intelligent life, and if we don't populate the Milky Way galaxy, someone else will.

The physicist Enrico Fermi once asked some fellow scientists with whom he was having lunch at Los Alamos National Laboratory: "Where is everybody?" He wasn't commenting on empty tables in the lab's dining room, but on the absence of a visit, or at least a message, from extraterrestrials. The thought behind that "Where is everybody?" is now known as the Fermi Paradox: If the universe is so stupendous, and has existed for 13.7 billion years, why haven't other intelligent forms of life made contact?

According to a 2018 paper by researchers at the University of Oxford's Future of Humanity Institute, the most likely answer is that intelligent life is *extremely* rare. It is so rare that we may be the only intelligent beings in our galaxy, and perhaps in the much larger Virgo supercluster to which our galaxy belongs.

It is an extraordinary thought that we, the inhabitants of this pale blue dot at this particular moment, are making choices that will determine whether billions of stars are populated, for billions of years. It may not be true, but it could be. Granting that, what should we do about it?

Clearly, we should take all reasonable steps to reduce the risk that we will become extinct. We should seek to prevent nuclear war, of course, and future pandemics, whether natural or the

result of bioterrorism. We should track asteroids and comets that might collide with our planet, and develop means for deflecting any that we might detect. That does not mean that we should neglect present problems, though, because we should acknowledge that we do not always know what will best reduce extinction risks. If we are at the hinge of history, enabling people to escape poverty and get an education is as likely to move things in the right direction as almost anything else we might do; and those are good things to do anyway.

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