

Reach for the Sky or Prepare to Die?

Richard Branson and fellow billionaire and world's richest man, Jeff Bezos, recently soared to the edge of space in their "self-financed" rocket ships. Elon Musk has a similar trip in the works. Bezos says that his trip marked the fulfillment of a childhood dream. Besides, he has so much money and could not think of any better way to spend it.

Recently interviewed about his thoughts for the future, Elon Musk admitted, "if this species is going to survive, we kind of have to escape." One suspects that Branson and Bezos may harbor similar thoughts. Otherwise their efforts appear to be little more than a pissing contest.

More and more people have begun to wonder if the human species is going to survive. The short answer is, "No!" We may die out, like the dinosaurs, or the Neanderthals. Or we may destroy ourselves, by eco-cide or nuclear war. Or, in the unlikely event that we survive for very much longer, we will evolve into something else.

This raises some very big religious and ethical questions. What does it mean that we are bound for eventual, if not impending, extinction? What are we to do in the face of current and impending crises that are finally awakening us to the prospect that the planet may not even continue to be habitable for our species beyond the next century?

It strikes me that the way Branson, Bezos, and Musk are spending their time, resources, and creativity reflects a deep pessimism about the prospects for extending and improving human life on planet Earth. Bezos in particular has so much wealth that he could make a huge difference in the lives of untold millions, starting with better pay and working conditions for his sizeable work force but hardly stopping there. Instead, he has resorted to a crude Epicureanism of living it up (literally!) because life is short and tomorrow we die.

I grant that privately financed space travel may yield some public benefits down the road, so to speak, but at great cost – and without any real prospect of making it possible for human beings to find and occupy a favorable habitat elsewhere. There may be hundreds, thousands, even millions of habitable planets in the cosmos, but getting to any of them is beyond reach any time soon, or maybe ever – and certainly not possible for human populations numbering in the billions.

As individuals, each of us in our sober moments realizes that he or she will die. What is it that continues to make life worth living in the face of one's inevitable demise? Could the answer to that question also be the answer to the question of what we should be doing in the face of our own species' eventual extinction?

Could it be that the quality of life matters even when the quantity is in question? Could it be that making our days count makes more sense than counting our days? How about caring for one another, sharing each other's joys and sorrows, enriching each other day by day through acts of love, kindness, and justice rather than enriching ourselves for some fantasy future by exploiting the circumstances of others? How about caring for the Earth rather than plundering, degrading, and defiling it?

God knows, there are all kinds of ways that peoples' lives can be made better now. The sacrifices it will take are nothing compared to the sacrifices that will soon be imposed upon us if we do not find ways to make others as well as ourselves peaceably at home on this planet. There is no Planet B.

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