THE VITA HYPOTHESIS

Solving the Anthropocene Crisis through the synergy of environmental education and spiritual enlightenment

by Guy Lane - March, 2021

Introduction

The global climate and ecological emergency (Anthropocene Crisis) threatens the annihilation of the human race. As the crisis is wholly created by human behaviour, it makes sense that widespread pro-environmental behavioural change could be a panacea. One avenue for fostering behavioural change is through environmental education; however, there are limitations to this approach. Given the important role that spirituality plays in guiding human actions, an option exists to synergize environmental education with nature-based spiritual philosophy. Fortunately, there is such a spiritual philosophy that is suited to overcoming the challenges of the Anthropocene: Vita. This paper puts forward the hypothesis that a program that combines environmental education with spiritual growth could potentially drive global-scale behavioural change sufficient to solve the Anthropocene Crisis. This is the Vita Hypothesis.

Our Planet is Dying

Our Living Planet is dying (WWF, 2020), and through climate change, human civilization risks triggering a cascade of climate tipping points which would pose a "*severe risk for… the habitability of the planet for humans*," (Steffan, *et al*, 2018, p. 8256). Behavioural change and transformed social values are two of the potential solutions to avoid biosphere collapse (Steffan, *et al*, 2018). Given the speed, scale and scope of this *Anthropocene Crisis (Kennel, 2020)*, a lot of radical behaviour change is quickly called for; in short: a "*dramatic deviation from business as usual*" to avoid collapse (Gilding, 2019, p. 26).

How Not to Do Environmental Education

One pathway to bring about pro-environmental behavioural change is environmental education, although there are challenges to its effectiveness. Simply imparting knowledge does not automatically inculcate behaviour change (Jensen & Schnack, 1997, p. 167). Indeed, there are many pathways to environmental education that fail to bring about behaviour change.

Boynes & Stanistreet developed a novel survey that probed the views of secondary students in UK, USA, Australia and some European countries on behaviours to combat climate change. An early finding was that "*altering a student's belief about certain issues will have little effect on their willingness to act*" (Boynes & Stanistreet, 2012, p. 1591). This is primarily because what we believe/know is just one of many factors that dictate behaviour including social norms, situational influence, and perceptions of efficacy of action (Boynes & Stanistreet, 2012).

Furthermore, environmental education will have little impact on people's behaviour if they are already performing those actions or of they believe that proposed actions will have low efficacy, or are outside of the capacity of the individual to act (Boynes & Stanistreet, 2012). Another error in environmental education is the failure to incorporate systemic evaluation (Carelton-Hug & Hug, 2010). Without evaluation, it is not possible to know what works and what doesn't.

Orams' Dolphin Technique

Some environmental education programs do yield discernible behaviour change. Orams (1997) surveyed people who participated in a wild dolphin-feeding program on Tangalooma Resort on Moreton Island, Queensland, Australia. The research compared tourists who fed the dolphins through a tailored education program, and those that didn't get the education program. He found that the combination of the *experiential* with the *educational* lead to significantly more entrenched behavioural change than just the dolphin feeding experience, alone.

While this might seem a good pathway for fostering swift and profound behaviour change to fix the Anthropocene Crisis, there is a flaw: there's simply not that many friendly dolphins. Conceivably one could swap dolphins for

rainforests or some other unique natural location, but the Anthropocene Crisis calls for a resource that is widely available in order that behavioural change is fostered swiftly and widely. Orams' dolphin technique is simply not scalable.

Learning and Feeling

The experiential aspect of the Tangalooma experience suggests that the visitors were not just cognitively 'learning', but also emotionally 'feeling'. With wild dolphins swimming around, the sunlight glistening off the clear waters of Moreton Bay, the awesome spectacle of the forested sand island; these all fall within the realm of what Maslow calls Peak Experience, one of the elements of spirituality (Maslow, 1964). Maybe it is the spiritual element that fosters behavioural change, and education simply guides the behaviour.

Tolliver & Tisdell (2006, p. 38) identify the spiritual aspects of "*transformative learning*" that they say is fostered by "*engaging multiple dimensions of being, including the rational, affective, spiritual, imaginative, somatic, and sociocultural domains through relevant content and experiences.*"

This goes some way to explain why new knowledge is more readily acted upon when the messaging is delivered with Peak Experience. Knee-deep in Moreton Bay, surrounded by wild sea creatures, one is already indulging in a new world, a world with different senses, risks, experiences and emotions. One has already started a journey.

To what extent, then, does spirituality feature in environmental education? Thompson, *et al* (2010, pp. 6-9) provide a list of definitions of environmental education including those from the UNESCO Belgrade Charter, the Tbilisi Declaration, and the North American Association for Environmental Education. In *none* of these definitions are there any references to spirituality.

Synergise Cognition with Spirituality

This essay puts forward the idea that a program that seamlessly fuses both cognitive and spiritual elements could create a synergistic interplay of knowing and feeling that fosters radical behavioural change; *driven by feelings, guided by knowledge*. To use a sailing boat analogy: spirituality is the wind in the sails, and education is the helmsman's hand on the tiller.

In times past, spirituality was the concern of the established religions. However, in the second half of the twentieth century it became a deinstitutionalised and private experience (Carrette & King, 2005). The titles of the books *Spiritual Marketplace* (Roof, 1999) and *Selling Spirituality* (Carrette & King, 2005) illustrate contemporary spirituality as a market niche in a consumer culture. Spirituality is for sale, but it is not easily defined. Instead, it is "*a vague signifier… able to carry multiple meanings without any precision,*" (Carrette & King, 2005, p. 31).

Spiritual Umbrella

Rather than trying to define the *vague signifier* of spirituality, let us consider the word as an umbrella concept that shelters a collection of themes. Carrette & King (2005) include the meaning of human existence, our individual purpose in life, questions of the afterlife, and the existence of God, spirit and soul. Fredrickson & Anderson (1999) offer: ineffability, intangibility, heightened sensory awareness, momentary loss of the passage of time, transcendence, engaging with inner life force. Maslow (1964) suggests the mystical, illumination, awakening, personal development, peak experience, revelation, ecstasy, unity, self-actualisation, effortlessness, and meaningfulness. Finally, Atran (2016) includes sacred values in spirituality.

SPIRITUALITY

the meaning of human existence

our individual purpose in life

awe, wonder & peak experience

the sacred & divine

the inner self

existence of God, spirit, soul & the afterlife

sacred values

timelessness & flow

The diagram shows some of the concepts and ideas that fall under the umbrella term: spirituality.

Evidence described below shows that appealing to these spirituality themes can bring about the most dramatic of behavioural changes, and quickly. Consider Islamists and Pentecostals.

Birds of a Feather: Islamists and Pentecostals

Atran (2016) studied Islamist fighters and the process by which they are recruited. He finds that spirituality is an integral driver of behaviour amongst the recruits. By appealing to spirituality, over the internet and in just a few months, the recruiters transform every-day young men – interested in football and not geopolitics – into front line fighters strapped with explosives, and willing to die for the Caliphate. The recruiters inculcate in these young men "*new sacred values*" that become "*nonnegotiable preferences whose defense compels actions beyond evident reason*," (Atran, 2016, p 193).

A similar process occurs in Pentecostal churches around the world. Referring to Australian mega-churches with 2,000 plus attendees, Miller (2005, p. 2) says the mega-churches operate like businesses "*with warehouse-like buildings, large numbers of highly trained staff, large capital and investments, and an eye for exploring new markets, locally and internationally.*" The mega-

churches owe their vast riches to tithing, where members of the flock donate 10% of their pre-tax income to the church (Ferguson, 2005).

Environmentalists struggle to get people to donate to *Save the Whale*. Meanwhile, the above-mentioned religious folk take the fast route to the most extreme behaviour change of all: the willful surrender of blood and treasure. However, while Islamists and Pentecostals are passionate, they are few in number. Solving the Anthropocene Crisis calls for a significantly broader audience.

Spiritual But Not Religious

Fortunately, there is such an audience, a growing social movement that goes by the name *Spiritual But Not Religious* (SBNR). SBNR is buoyed by folk who are open to spiritual wisdom but wary of dogma, rituals, ideology and hierarchy (Parsons, 2018, p. 1).

To effect widespread behaviour change amongst the SBNR crowd calls for a more subtle approach than the mercantilist pulpits of the Pentecostals, or the deadly strictures of Islamist lore. SBNR folk eat from the free-market spiritual smorgasbord. So, what is needed is a line item on the menu, a *spiritual philosophy* that fosters a reverence for nature within the context of the Anthropocene Crisis.

The Golden Rule

Unfortunately, spiritual philosophies commonly adopted in the Western world have little if anything to offer in solving the Anthropocene Crisis. To demonstrate, consider the Golden Rule, "*that instructs us to treat others as we want to be treated ourselves*" that is found in most religions (Neuser & Chilton, 2008, p. xi). Across two millennia and multiple world religions, not one variant of the Golden Rule refers to the Living Planet. Nowhere does it say: *do unto others and the Living Planet as you would have them do unto you.*

Even nature-based philosophies such as neo-Paganism and Taoism are a long way from offering salient spiritual insights into the Anthropocene, and the rapidly approaching civilization collapse (Moses, 2020).

Fortunately, there is one nature-based spiritual philosophy that has been designed for the challenges of the Anthropocene Crisis: Vita. Vita is both the name of the spiritual philosophy and of the super-organism that contains all life on Earth, including the humans (Vita, 2020). Vita was incorporated as a registered charity in March 2020 in Australia (ACNC, 2020).

Fostering the rapid uptake of Vita's spiritual philosophy calls for a program that seamlessly integrates the spiritual and the cognitive. With respect to the cognitive, Orams (1994) describes Piaget's cognitive development model that describes how the mind 'assimilates' new information, to amend existing 'schemes' of information. The interconnected 'system of schemes' that makes up one's knowledge base informs behaviour. This view is similar to that of Lakoff & Johnson (2003) in which they state that we understanding new ideas by likening them to something that is both similar and familiar to us.

In order to make the concept of Vita align with 'existing schemes' or to liken it to something that is 'similar and familiar', it is proposed to Anthropomorphise Vita: to assign human characteristics to the non-human entity. Anthropomorphising generates a sense of connectedness that motivates protective behaviour (Tam, *et al*, 2013). An example of this might be to say that greenhouse emissions have given Vita a fever.

To further assist Vita spiritual philosophy spreading far and fast, one could employ the concepts of Virtual Nature (Levi & Kocher, 1999) and Technobiophilia (Thomas, 2013). Virtual Nature suggests that it is possible to foster earth-protecting sentiments via virtual reality and the internet. Technobiophilia similarly fosters biophilia (the love of living things) through technology. Using the internet overcomes Oram's dolphin shortage problem, making Vita available to anyone in the world with an internet

connection i.e. over half of the human population (Statista, 2020).

The literature described above suggests that it would be possible to design a Vita outreach program that synergistically fuses environmental education and spirituality, and spread it to half the world's population via the internet. Conceivably, if a sufficient number of people adopt the Vita spiritual philosophy and act accordingly, this could potentially make the difference between the mass extinction of life on Earth and the *Verdant Age*, a time when humans and the biosphere thrive in synergy deep into the Long Future (Vita, 2020).

Conclusion

The Vita Hypothesis holds that fusing environmental education with a spiritual growth program based on Vita spiritual philosophy, delivered over the internet, could potentially solve the Anthropocene Crisis. The argument is based on the observation that environmental education alone is insufficient to foster pro-environmental behaviour, and that behavioural change is more likely when peak experience and other spiritual elements are incorporated.

The profound behaviour change observed in recruits to Islamist and Pentecostal religious beliefs attests to the power of appealing to spirituality. Seeking to deliver the Vita Program to as wide an audience as possible, it is proposed to focus on an audience who are *spiritual but not religious*. Using the internet as the medium for the message allows access to over half of the world's population.

Looking forward, the next steps in advancing the Vita Hypothesis would be to map out the content of the Vita Program, and continue researching the most effective techniques for synergizing the cognitive and spiritual messaging to foster rapid and deep pro-environmental behaviour change.

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