The Case for Existential Risk Reduction

By William Archer Pirone

KABOOM!!!

Around 66 million years ago, the dinosaurs met a sudden, explosive end. Whether by meteor strike off the Gulf of Mexico or cascading volcanic eruptions, the once-in-an-epoch calamity quickly coated the atmosphere with tremendous amounts of harsh soot, starving the Earth's ecosystems of sunlight and leading to the mass extinction of billions of terrestrial organisms. The strongest creatures to ever walk the face of the Earth vanished in the blink of an eye.

Flash forward to today, and the most recent forms of advanced life, *Homo Sapiens*, are largely prospering. For our 300,000-year existence, despite the occasional natural disaster, international conflict, or crop failure, human society has prospered. Access to education has exploded, science has constantly yielded novel innovations from medicine to satellites, and entire countries have lifted themselves from the depths of poverty owing to global integration. And, with the United Nations projecting that the global population is expected to skyrocket to 10.4 billion by 2080, the dinosaurs' demise is taught as a one-off fatal event, never to be repeated.

Humanity won't meet a similar fate to our giant reptilian counterparts…right?

Not exactly. Beyond the distant danger of asteroids, the risk of an existential catastrophe (a mass death event that poses a significant threat of civilizational collapse) remains larger than ever—and these threats remain multifaceted and imminent.

On one front, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) recently presented humanity with a dire message: international governments must undertake substantial and immediate emissions cuts to have a fighting chance at mitigating the existential threat posed by global warming.

In the realm of international relations, the war in Ukraine continues to worsen, with the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) warning that "the risk of nuclear weapons being used seems higher now than at any time since the height of the cold war."

And, just last year, the World Health Organization estimated that a substantial pandemic or public health emergency would emerge at least once every five years—and with the recent and exponentially growing Monkeypox outbreak, the timeframe may be shortening every year we wait.

Combining all threats, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists' Doomsday Clock—a measurement of humanity's current level of existential risk—recently struck a mere 100 metaphorical seconds

away from human Armageddon—a level unseen since the brink of nuclear catastrophe during the peak of the Cold War.

But even after considering the threat of permanent annihilation, humanity remains unable to fully comprehend the sheer level of risk it faces. At the Global Catastrophic Risk Conference at Oxford University, existential risk scholars estimated that the probability of societal collapse occurring in the next century is approximately 19%. Moving away from abstract percentages, let's put that into perspective. In the words of the Global Priorities Project, "a typical person is more than *five times as likely to die in an extinction event as in a car crash.*"

Yet, when asked to estimate the chance of an extinction event in the next 50 years, U.S. adults in surveys reported percentages ranging from 1 in 10 million to 1 in 100—nowhere in the ballpark of the magnitude of risk we face as a species.

Even worse, this lack of attention bleeds into the academic landscape. In the words of Emilia Javorsky of the Harvard Kennedy School of Government,

> "A recent search of the scientific literature through ScienceDirect for "human extinction" returned a demoralizing 157 results, compared to the 1,627 for "dung beetle." I don't know about you, but this concerns me. Why is there so little research and action on existential risks (risks capable of rendering humanity extinct)?

Why does this discrepancy exist? It could be ingrained cognitive bias—humans, naturally, prefer to avoid thinking about the worst outcomes for our species. Alternatively, perhaps it could be the sheer magnitude of an existential event, a catastrophe definitionally unseen by any modern species.

In either case, if we are to prioritize the promotion of peace, freedom, and justice, ensuring there is a future version of our species to carry on our legacy remains a fundamental prior question. In the words of existential risk philosopher Nick Bostrom,

> "Our present understanding of axiology might well be confused…If we are indeed profoundly uncertain about our ultimate aims, then we should recognize that there is a great option value in preserving our ability to recognize value and to steer the future accordingly. Ensuring that there will be a future version of humanity…is…the best way available to us to increase the probability that the future will contain a lot of value. To do this, we must prevent any existential catastrophe." – *Nick Bostrom, Existential Risks: Analysing Human Extinction Scenarios and Related Hazards, 2002*

Put simply, once we're all gone, our end goals of peace, justice, and freedom become permanently unattainable. That's why the NCBI reports that "Even with *the most conservative estimates of existential risk*, reducing the risk of human extinction is at least 100 times more cost-effective than standard…interventions." If preserving life is our priority, existential risk reduction *must* come first.

Given the precarious state of current affairs, it's fair to assume that we're running out of time—*but all isn't yet lost*. With the right combination of government impetus and widescale civic engagement, tangible actions to reduce existential risks are not only possible but highly probable. Take the Paris Climate Accords, an international deal once thought impossible but now set to blunt the worst impacts of climate change across the globe. Or, perhaps the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2015, which set substantial limits on Iran's capacity to obtain nuclear weapons, averting a potentially catastrophic arms race. With cogent policymaking, open debate, and freedom of speech—democracy and international diplomacy can reduce the chance of an existential disaster.

At the same time, it's critical to remember that government isn't the only solution to existential crises. The daily choices that we make, as individual members of society, could very well trump the potential impact of a swish of the legislative pen. That starts with conserving resources, avoiding pollution, and reducing greenhouse gases to curb existential warming. To stop diseases in their tracks, wearing masks and getting vaccinated remain effective ways to protect those around us. And, with countless humanitarian fundraisers and a vast public outpouring of support for Ukraine, individual action can truly make an impact. Regardless of the issue, with significant civic engagement, our society can tackle both the seen and unforeseen risks that we will inevitably encounter.

All isn't lost, but there's no time to waste. If the next generation rises to meet the existential challenges of tomorrow, we can fully live out our destiny as the single most prosperous and advanced species to ever set foot on planet Earth.

But, if not, humanity's path forward is simple—we'll end up just like the dinosaurs.