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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

## **Our Moral Footprint**

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OVER the past few years the questions have been asked ever more forcefully whether global climate changes occur in natural cycles or not, to what degree we humans contribute to them, what threats stem from them and what can be done to prevent them. Scientific studies demonstrate that any changes in temperature and energy cycles on a planetary scale could mean danger for all people on all continents.

It is also obvious from published research that human activity is a cause of change; we just don't know how big its contribution is. Is it necessary to know that to the last percentage point, though? By waiting for incontrovertible precision, aren't we simply wasting time when we could be taking measures that are relatively painless compared to those we would have to adopt after further delays?

Maybe we should start considering our sojourn on earth as a loan. There can be no doubt that for the past hundred years at least, Europe and the United States have been running up a debt, and now other parts of the world are following their example. Nature is issuing warnings that we must not only stop the debt from growing but start to pay it back. There is little point in asking whether we have borrowed too much or what would happen if we postponed the repayments. Anyone with a mortgage or a bank loan can easily imagine the answer.

The effects of possible climate changes are hard to estimate. Our planet has never been in a state of balance from which it could deviate through human or other influence and then, in time, return to its original state. The climate is not like a pendulum that will return to its original position after a certain period. It has evolved turbulently over billions of years into a gigantic complex of networks, and of networks within networks, where everything is interlinked in diverse ways.

Its structures will never return to precisely the same state they were in 50 or 5,000 years ago. They will only change into a new state, which, so long as the change is slight, need not mean any threat to life.

Larger changes, however, could have unforeseeable effects within the global ecosystem. In that case, we would have to ask ourselves whether human life would be possible. Because so much uncertainty still reigns, a great deal of humility and circumspection is called for.

We can't endlessly fool ourselves that nothing is wrong and that we can go on cheerfully pursuing our wasteful lifestyles, ignoring the climate threats and postponing a solution. Maybe there will be no major catastrophe in the coming years or decades. Who knows? But that doesn't relieve us of responsibility toward future generations.

I don't agree with those whose reaction is to warn against restricting civil freedoms. Were the forecasts of certain

climatologists to come true, our freedoms would be tantamount to those of someone hanging from a 20th-story parapet.

Whenever I reflect on the problems of today's world, whether they concern the economy, society, culture, security, ecology or civilization in general, I always end up confronting the moral question: what action is responsible or acceptable? The moral order, our conscience and human rights — these are the most important issues at the beginning of the third millennium.

We must return again and again to the roots of human existence and consider our prospects in centuries to come. We must analyze everything open-mindedly, soberly, unideologically and unobsessively, and project our knowledge into practical policies. Maybe it is no longer a matter of simply promoting energy-saving technologies, but chiefly of introducing ecologically clean technologies, of diversifying resources and of not relying on just one invention as a panacea.

I'm skeptical that a problem as complex as climate change can be solved by any single branch of science. Technological measures and regulations are important, but equally important is support for education, ecological training and ethics — a consciousness of the commonality of all living beings and an emphasis on shared responsibility.

Either we will achieve an awareness of our place in the living and life-giving organism of our planet, or we will face the threat that our evolutionary journey may be set back thousands or even millions of years. That is why we must see this issue as a challenge to behave responsibly and not as a harbinger of the end of the world.

The end of the world has been anticipated many times and has never come, of course. And it won't come this time either. We need not fear for our planet. It was here before us and most likely will be here after us. But that doesn't mean that the human race is not at serious risk. As a result of our endeavors and our irresponsibility our climate might leave no place for us. If we drag our feet, the scope for decision-making — and hence for our individual freedom — could be considerably reduced.

*Vaclav Havel is the former president of the Czech Republic. This article was translated by Gerald Turner from the Czech.*

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