

Famine, plague and war were always at the top of the list. For generation after generation humans have prayed to every god, angel and saint, and have invented countless tools, institutions and social systems – but they continued to die in their millions from starvation, epidemics and violence. Many thinkers and prophets concluded that famine, plague and war must be an integral part of God's cosmic plan or of our imperfect nature, and nothing short of the end of time would free us from them.

Yet at the dawn of the third millennium, humanity wakes up to an amazing realisation. Most people rarely think about it, but in the last few decades we have managed to rein in famine, plague and war. Of course, these problems have not been completely solved, but they have been transformed from incomprehensible and uncontrollable forces of nature into manageable challenges. We don't need to pray to any god or saint to rescue us from them. We know quite well what needs to be done in order to prevent famine, plague and war – and we usually succeed in doing it.

True, there are still notable failures; but when faced with such failures we no longer shrug our shoulders and say, 'Well, that's the way things work in our imperfect world' or 'God's will be done'. Rather, when famine, plague or war break out of our control, we feel that somebody must have screwed up, we set up a commission of inquiry, and promise ourselves that next time we'll do better. And it actually works. Such calamities indeed happen less and less often. For

the first time in history, more people die today from eating too much than from eating too little; more people die from old age than from infectious diseases; and more people commit suicide than are killed by soldiers, terrorists and criminals combined. In the early twenty-first century, the average human is far more likely to die from bingeing at McDonald's than from drought, Ebola or an al-Qaeda attack.

Hence even though presidents, CEOs and generals still have their daily schedules full of economic crises and military conflicts, on the cosmic scale of history humankind can lift its eyes up and start looking towards new horizons. If we are indeed bringing famine, plague and war under control, what will replace them at the top of the human agenda? Like firefighters in a world without fire, so humankind in the twenty-first century needs to ask itself an unprecedented question: what are we going to do with ourselves? In a healthy, prosperous and harmonious world, what will demand our attention and ingenuity? This question becomes doubly urgent given the immense new powers that biotechnology and information technology are providing us with. What will we do with all that power?

Before answering this question, we need to say a few more words about famine, plague and war. The claim that we are bringing them under control may strike many as outrageous, extremely naïve, or perhaps callous. What about the billions of people scraping a living on less than \$2 a day? What about the ongoing AIDS crisis in Africa, or the wars raging in Syria and Iraq? To address these concerns, let us take a closer look at the world of the early twenty-first century, before exploring the human agenda for the coming decades.

### The Biological Poverty Line

Let's start with famine, which for thousands of years has been humanity's worst enemy. Until recently most humans lived on the very edge of the biological poverty line, below which people succumb to malnutrition and hunger. A small mistake or a bit of bad luck could easily be a death sentence for an entire family or village. If heavy rains destroyed your wheat crop, or robbers carried off your goat herd, you and your loved ones may well have starved to death. Misfortune or stupidity on the collective level resulted in mass famines. When severe drought hit ancient Egypt or medieval India, it was not uncommon that 5 or 10 per cent of the population perished. Provisions became scarce; transport was too slow and expensive to import sufficient food; and governments were far too weak to save the day.