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I'm a virus harming the earth

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XTRA WORLD WATCH

I'M A VIRUS HARMING THE EARTH

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ON ONE poignantly beautiful autumn day in Syracuse, a group of us physics graduate students were gathered around a frugal kitchen table. We had our brilliant professor, Lee Smolin, talking to us. We held our promising mentors in very high regard. And we had high hopes for Lee.

The topic of conversation on that day was a bit philosophical, with Lee describing to us how the Earth could be considered a living organism. Using insightful arguments, Lee made a compelling case that the Earth, in fact, satisfied all the conditions of being an organism.

Lee, by the way, lived up to our great expectations in later years, publishing highly-acclaimed books and generally leaving a glorious imprint in the world of modern physics.

The point in Lee's view was not so much whether or not the Earth was literally alive, but that thinking of it as an organism was a viable intellectual model to represent the Earth. Such intellectual acrobatics was not uncommon among us physics students.

In the last few years, Lee has actually taken this mode of thinking much farther in one of his books, picturing the universe in the light of evolution. Again, the argument is not to be taken literally, imagining a bunch of parallel universes vying for survival. The idea is to let the mode of thinking carry us forward and guide our thoughts, and see what conclusions we can draw from the thought exercise.

A similar mode of thinking was introduced in the movie *Matrix*. In fact, several profound models were introduced in that hit movie. One misanthropic model that the computer agent Smith proposes is that human beings are a virus on our planet.

It is okay for the bad guy in a movie to suggest it, but an entirely different matter for a newspaper columnist to do so. But bear with me as I combine Lee's notion of the Earth being an organism and Agent Smith's suggestion of us being a virus on it. Let's see where it takes us.


YEN YOK

The first thing a virus does when it invades an organism is to flourish using the genetic material of the host body. The virus does it with little regard for the well-being of the host. On our part, we humans plunder the raw material from our host planet with such abandon that the similarity is hard to miss.

But the similarity doesn't end there. What are the typical symptoms of a viral infection on the host? One symptom is a bout of fever. Similarly, due to our activities on our host planet, we are going through a bout of global warming. Eerily similar, in my view.

The viral symptoms could extend to sores and blisters as well. Comparing the cities and other eye sores that we proudly create out of pristine forests and natural landscapes, it is not hard to imagine that we are indeed inflicting fetid atrocities on our host Earth. Can't we see the city sewers and the polluted air as the stinking, oozing ulcers on its body?

Going one step further, could we also imagine that natural calamities, such as the Asian tsunami, are the planet's natural immune systems kicking into high gear?

I know that it is supremely cynical to push this comparison to these extreme limits. Looking at the innocent faces of your loved ones, you may feel rightfully angry at this comparison. How dare I call them an evil virus?

Then again, if a virus could think, would it think of its activities as evil?

If that doesn't assuage your sense of indignation, remember that this virus analogy is a mode of thinking rather than a literal indictment. Such a mode of thinking is only useful if it can yield some conclusions. What are the conclusions from this human-viral comparison?

The end result of a viral infection is always gloomy. Either the host succumbs or the virus gets beaten by the host's immune systems. If we are the virus, both these eventualities are unpalatable. We don't want to kill the Earth. And we certainly don't want to be exterminated by the Earth. But those are the only possible outcomes of our viral-like activity here.

It is unlikely that we will get exterminated; we are far too sophisticated for that. In all likelihood, we will make our planet uninhabitable. We may, by then, have our technological means of migrating to other planetary systems. In other words, if we are lucky, we may be contagious! This is the inescapable conclusion of this intellectual exercise.

There is a less likely scenario — a symbiotic viral existence in a host body. It is the kind of benign lifestyle that Al Gore and others recommend for us. But, taking stock of our activities on the planet, my doomsday view is that it is too late for a peaceful symbiosis. What do you think?

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