



## **An Attainable Global Perspective**

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# An Attainable Global Perspective

The need for education that promotes a global perspective is increasingly apparent. What is less clear is just what constitutes such a perspective, particularly one which young people might actually be able to attain in the course of their formal and informal education. In what follows, I will describe certain modes of thought, sensitivities, intellectual skills, and explanatory capacities which might in some measure contribute to the formation of a global perspective.

What is a global perspective? As conceived here a global perspective is not a quantum, something you either have or don't have. It is a blend of many things and any given individual may be rich in certain elements and relatively lacking in others. The educational goal broadly seen may be to socialize significant collectivities of people so that the important elements of a global perspective are represented in the group. Viewed in this way, a global perspective may be a variable trait possessed in some form and degree by a population, with the precise character of that perspective determined by the specialized capacities, predispositions, and attitudes of the group's members. The implications of this notion, of course, is that diversified talents and inclinations can be encouraged and that standardized educational effects are not required. Every individual does not have to be brought to the same level of intellectual and moral development in order for a population to be moving in the direction of a more global perspective.

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With these thoughts in mind we can identify five dimensions of a global perspective. These are:

1. Perspective Consciousness
2. "State of the Planet" Awareness
3. Cross-Cultural Awareness
4. Knowledge of Global Dynamics
5. Awareness of Human Choices

## **Perspective Consciousness**

*The recognition or awareness on the part of the individual that he or she has a view of the world that is not universally shared, that this view of the world has been and continues to be shaped by influences that often escape conscious detection, and that others have views of the world that are profoundly different from one's own.*

Few of us in our lives can actually transcend the viewpoint presented by the common carriers of information and almost none of us can transcend the cognitive mapping presented by the culture in which we grew up. But with effort we can at least develop a dim sense that we have a perspective, that it can be shaped by subtle influences, and that others have different perspectives. This recognition of the existence, the malleability, and the diversity of perspective we might call perspective consciousness. Such an acknowledgement is an important step in the development of a perspective that can legitimately be called global.

One must make a distinction between opinion and perspective. Opinion is the surface layer, the conscious outcropping of perspective. But there are deep and hidden layers of perspective that may be more important in orienting behavior. For example,

in the deep layers of Western civilization has been the assumption that human dominance over nature is both attainable and desirable. This, until recently, has not been a matter of opinion but assumed as a given.

One of the interesting things that reform and protest movements do is to carry out mining operations in the deep layers. They dredge to the surface aspects of perspective that have never before seen the light of day. Once made visible, these may become the foci of debate, matters of opinion. The environmental movement surfaced the assumption of man's right to dominion over nature and thus posed some philosophical choices that had previously escaped notice. The feminist movement raised the consciousness of women and men with respect to "women's place." They labeled the most commonplace behaviors and attitudes "chauvinist," and thus revealed the deeper layers of perspective in action.

I have suggested that with effort we can develop in the young at least a dim sense, a groping recognition of the fact that they have a perspective. And this is very different from knowing that they have opinions. At the present time the schools and the media socialize all of us to be traders in opinion. We learn this through discussion and debate, through the contentious format of forums and organizational meetings, through talk shows and newspaper columnists. We learn, especially, that the individual is expected to have opinions and to be willing to assert them. And we learn tacit rules about "tolerating" differences in opinions so asserted.

We can also learn, if we approach the task with a sure sense of purpose, how to probe the deep layers of perspective. A variety of specialists and social commentators regularly operate in these realms and there are well-developed methods and techniques. Some of these methods can be learned and practiced. For example, some (but not all) values clarification exercises can heighten awareness of otherwise unrevealed aspects of perspective. At the very least it should be possible to teach almost any young person to recognize a probe of the deep layers when he sees it. Such probes come in many forms, from the ironic humor of a "Doodlesbury" cartoon strip to the pop sociology of a book like *Future Shock*.

#### **"State of the Planet" Awareness**

*Awareness of prevailing world conditions and developments, including emergent conditions and trends, e.g. population growth, migrations, eco-*

*nomie conditions, resources and physical environment, political developments, science and technology, law, health, inter-nation and intra-nation conflicts, etc.*

For most people in the world, direct experience beyond the local community is infrequent—or nonexistent. It is not uncommon to meet residents of Chicago's neighborhoods who have never traveled the few miles to the central business district, or sophisticated New York taxicab drivers who have never been further south than Philadelphia. If this is true for a geographically mobile society like the United States, it is even more a fact for other parts of the world. Tourism, urban migrations, commerce, and business travel notwithstanding, most people live out their lives in rather circumscribed local surroundings.

#### **Communication Media and Planet Awareness**

Direct experience is not the way that contemporary peoples learn about their world. Nonliterate village or suburban housewife, it doesn't matter that one stays close to home. Information travels rapidly and far through the mass media. News of a border crisis in the Middle East reaches within hours the shopkeeper in Nairobi, the steel worker in Sweden, the Peruvian villager. There is now a demonstrated technical capacity for simultaneous transmission of messages to almost the entire human species. The character of the messages is something else again. Here we must ask, do the messages received on those millions of transistor radios and television sets contribute meaningfully to a valid picture of world conditions? That question matters because it is difficult to imagine a global perspective that does not include a reasonably dependable sense of what shape the world is in.

Generally speaking, the media in almost every country will transmit news from around the world. Unfortunately, the fundamental quality of news is its focus on the extraordinary event. An outbreak of influenza is news; endemic malaria is not. A rapid decline in values on the world's stock exchanges is news; the long-standing poverty of hundreds of millions is not. So, there are significant limits and distortions in the view of the world conveyed by news media. Nonetheless, the prospect is not entirely bleak. For one thing, the characteristic interests of the news media can be exploited; events can be staged in such a way as to call attention to world conditions not ordinarily judged newsworthy. A world conference can be convened on food or population or pollution problems. The conference

itself is news. More importantly, the condition that gives rise to the conference takes on a new level of visibility—worldwide. And the news media are the instruments of this increased awareness.

### ***Limits to Understanding***

There are other sources of distortion. Political ideology chokes off the flow of some information, the defense and security syndrome of nations blocks still other information, and the selective disinterest of audiences constricts yet other channels. As an instance of the first, Americans until recently have had little access to information about Cuba under Castro. As an example of the second, the testing of nuclear weapons by the French and the Indians in recent years produced few hard details about site, yield, fallout, etc. (Governments have ways to obtain the information; publics do not.) As for patterns of audience interest and disinterest, consider how little attention is paid to the affairs of small nations, or to conditions in the rural areas of the world; and with no complaint from the audience.

Finally, there is the matter of the technical nature of world data. There are now unprecedented resources for generating information about the state of the planet, and for sharing and processing the information in order to obtain a sense of the important patterns. But the procedures are highly technical and the results expressed in technical terms. A certain level of education is required to see the full significance of the data.

### ***Overcoming the Limitations***

This is an instance where the energies of the schools, properly directed, might resolve the question in favor of the general populace. If from the earliest grades on students examined and puzzled over cases where seemingly innocent behaviors—the diet rich in animal protein, the lavish use of fertilizer on the suburban lawn and golf course—were shown to have effects that were both unintended and global in scope, then there could be a receptivity for that kind of technical information necessary to understand many global issues. Situations such as the depletion of ozone in the atmosphere from aerosol sprays would not seem forbidding, it would be another instance of a model already documented. Students would have a framework within which to handle it. As for the technical aspects of something like the ozone situation, these do not seem beyond the reach of science and social studies departments that focus cooperatively on the technical dimensions of significant planetary conditions. It may be true that school programs are

not typically organized for such a task, but it is not outside the boundaries of our predilections or our capacities.

### **Cross-Cultural Awareness**

*Awareness of the diversity of ideas and practices to be found in human societies around the world, of how such ideas and practices compare, and including some limited recognition of how the ideas and ways of one's own society might be viewed from other vantage points.*

This may be one of the more difficult dimensions to attain. It is one thing to have some knowledge of world conditions. The air is saturated with that kind of information. It is another thing to comprehend and accept the consequences of the basic human capacity for creating unique cultures—with the resultant profound differences in outlook and practice manifested among societies. These differences are widely known at the level of myth, prejudice, and tourist impression. But they are not deeply and truly known, in spite of the well-worn exhortation to “understand others.” Such a fundamental acceptance seems to be resisted by powerful forces in the human psychosocial system.

Several million years of evolution seem to have produced in us a creature that does not easily recognize the members of its own species. That is stated in rather exaggerated form but it refers to the fact that human groups commonly have difficulty in accepting the humanness of other human groups.

The practice of naming one's own group “the people” and by implication relegating all others to not-quite-human status has been documented in nonliterate groups all over the world. But it is simply one manifestation of a species trait that shows itself in modern populations as well. It is there in the hostile faces of the white parents demonstrating against school busing. You will find it lurking in the background as Russians and Chinese meet at the negotiating table to work out what is ostensibly a boundary dispute. And it flares into the open during tribal disputes in Kenya.

There was a time when the solidarity of small groups of humans was the basis for the survival of the species. But in the context of mass populations and weapons of mass destructiveness, group solidarity and the associated tendency to deny the full humanness of other peoples pose serious threats to the species. When we speak of “humans” it is important that we include not only ourselves and our immediate group but all four and one half billion of those other bipeds, however strange their ways.

This is the primary reason for cross-cultural awareness. If we are to admit the humanness of those others, then the strangeness of their ways must become less strange; must, in fact, become believable. Ideally, that means getting inside the heads of those strangers and looking out at the world through their eyes. Then the strange becomes familiar and totally believable. This is a most difficult trick to pull off, but there may be methods that will increase the probability of success. Further, there are lesser degrees of cross-cultural awareness than getting inside the head; these more modest degrees of awareness are not to be scorned.

### **Knowledge of Global Dynamics**

*Some modest comprehension of key traits and mechanisms of the world system, with emphasis on theories and concepts that may increase intelligent consciousness of global change.*

How does the world work? Is it a vast, whirring machine spinning ponderously around a small yellow sun? Is there a lever we can push to avert famine in South Asia, or one that will cure world inflation, or one to slow the growth of world population? Is it our ignorance of which lever to move that results in tragedy and crisis? Is it our ignorance of how the gears intermesh that causes breakdowns in the stability of the system?

Or is the machine useful as a metaphor? Is it perhaps better to think of the world as an organism, evolving steadily in response to the programming in its germ plasm? Are wars and famines merely minor episodes in the biological history of a planet serenely following a script already written?

The latter view is not a comfortable one for people in industrial societies, raised to believe that almost anything can be engineered, including the destiny of the world. But the machine image doesn't quite work, either, although we continue (as I have done) to speak of "mechanisms." The idea of a machine suggests an assembly of parts that interconnect in a very positive fashion, so positive that when you manipulate one part you get immediate, predictable, and quantifiable response in other parts. That does not seem to describe the world as we know it.

But both machines and organisms are systems of interconnected elements and it is the idea of *system* that now prevails. How does the world work? As a system. What does that mean? It means we must put aside simple notions of cause and effect. Things interact, in complex and surprising ways. "Effects" loop back and become "causes"

which have "effects" which loop back . . . It means that simple events ramify—unbelievably.

But let's begin to talk in more concrete terms. What exactly might the schools teach about global dynamics? The answer proposed here is very selective, with the criterion of selection being, does the particular learning contribute to an understanding of global change; because the control of change is the central problem of our era. There are changes we desire and seem unable to attain. There are changes we wish to constrain and, as yet, cannot. There is also another kind of change: in spite of our difficulties we are growing in our capacities to detect and manipulate change. A global perspective that fails to comprehend both the problems of change and promise of improved control will not be worthy of the name.

Three categories of learning about change suggest themselves:

1. Basic principles of change in social systems
  - the ramifications of new elements in social systems
  - unanticipated consequences
  - overt and covert functions of elements
  - feedback, positive and negative
2. Growth as a form of change
  - desired growth in the form of economic development
  - undesired growth in the form of exponential increase in population, resource depletion, etc.
3. Global planning
  - national interests and global planning
  - attempts to model the world system as related to national policy formulation

### **Awareness of Human Choices**

*Some awareness of the problems of choice confronting individuals, nations, and the human species as consciousness and knowledge of the global system expands.*

Throughout I have talked of changes in awareness. Awareness of our own cultural perspective, awareness of how other peoples view the world, awareness of global dynamics and patterns of change. In this final section I wish to emphasize that such heightened awareness, desirable as it is, brings with it problems of choice. As an instance, in a "pre-awareness" stage the undoubted benefits of pesticides in agriculture, forestry, and the control of diseases such as malaria provide clear justification for prolific application.

But then information about the dangers of pesticides begins to accumulate. DDT is found in the tissues of organisms far removed from the points of application. Some species are threatened with extinction. Risks not only to present human populations but to future generations are identified. In some countries the use of certain pesticides is halted altogether. A change of awareness has occurred and new behaviors have resulted—in some parts of the world.

Where is the problem of choice? It lies in the fact that pesticides like DDT are still in use. Widely. Hundreds of millions of people depend on DDT to control malaria and agricultural pests. Ask someone in the developed countries if DDT is still in use and he will likely say no, answering in terms of his own country's practices. But pose the question on a world basis and the answer is yes. Viewed as a collectivity, the human species continues to use DDT.

This continued use constitutes a *de facto* human choice. In a conflict between the rights of living populations to control obvious and immediate threats to health and the rights of other living and future populations to freedom from subtle and long-term threats to health and subsistence, the former wins out. The immediate and the obvious triumph over the long-term and subtle. But although the choice seems to have been made, the *problem* of choice remains. There is a new cognition in the world. We now know that there are long-term and subtle risks. Once we did not. We now admit that other people and future generations have rights. Once we did not. This new knowledge has not had the power to halt the use of DDT where life and health are under severe threat, but it has had the effect of blocking its use in many other parts of the world. To put it simply, there are now two possible behaviors with respect to DDT:

- if it will solve a problem, use it
- even* if it will solve a problem, don't use it

The second of these behaviors originates in the new cognition, the new awareness of risks and rights.

The DDT situation is simply an instance, a small manifestation of the major cognitive revolution that is now under way. But it is a representative one. Many practices once essentially automatic, whose benefits were assumed, are now questioned. They are questioned because we know new things. We know how to measure minute quantities. We know that factors interconnect in complex ways. We know

there are limits to the resources and carrying capacity of the planet. In the context of the new cognition, action does not proceed automatically. Calculations of advantage and disadvantage become explicit and detailed. Choosing a course of behavior becomes a more reasoned process. That shift—from the automatic to the calculated—is a very important expression of the cognitive revolution we are now experiencing.

That cognitive revolution involves a shift from a pre-global to a global cognition. In the pre-global stage, rational consideration of goals, methods, and consequences tends to be limited to the near—the near in time and social identity. The preoccupation with the short-term and the neglect of the long-term has been particularly characteristic of Western industrial societies.

Pre-global cognition is characterized not only by a constricted view of the future but by a relatively simple theory of linkages between events, a linear theory in which some things are causes and other things are effects. This theory leads in its most exaggerated and magical form to the conclusion that conditions are the result of single causes, sometimes personified. In primitive societies this is the basis of witchcraft and ghost beliefs. In a sophisticated society like our own we have the recent example of two presidents who employed the CIA to locate the sinister foreign influence that must surely have been the root cause of the antiwar movement.

The emergent global cognition contrasts sharply with the pre-global. Long-term consequences begin to be considered. Linkages between events are seen in the more complex light of systems theory. Social goals and values are made explicit and vulnerable to challenge. And nations begin to note that their interests and activities are not separable from the interests and activities of others. Further, systematic attention is given to problems that transcend the national, regional, or coalitional; human problems. A global cognition has certainly not been achieved. Pre-global forms of knowing continue to orient much of human behavior. But the transition is under way, driven by the convergent energies of a variety of social movements.

In summary, we are in a period of transition, moving from a pre-global to a global cognition. Global cognition is characterized by new knowledge of system interactions, by new knowledge in planning human action. As such, knowledge and its rational use expands, human choices expand. An awareness of this expanded range of choice con-

stitutes an important dimension of a global perspective.

I have discussed five dimensions of a global perspective. Are there more? I am tempted to be waggish and say no, this is it, the final crystalline truth. But of course there are more, as many more as anyone cares to invent. Such dimensions are inventions, constructs of the mind. This particular set is just one assemblage, a collage of ideas selected and shaped by one individual's proclivities and prejudices. This is not to say there are not

real changes under way in human consciousness. I am convinced there are and that they are in the direction of something that can be called a global perspective. But any particular description of that phenomenon is properly suspect. Even this one which is, by coincidence, my favorite.

*Note:* This essay is a summary of a more detailed discussion of global perspectives by the author available from *Global Perspectives in Education*, 218 East 18th St., New York, N.Y. 10003 at \$2.00 per single copy. Bulk rates available on request.

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