

## **A holistic worldview for a planetary civilisation**

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We are approaching a critical point in our collective evolution: our world has become economically, socially and ecologically unsustainable. Persisting in the values and practices of the rationalist, manipulative civilisation of the modern age will create deepening rifts between rich and poor, young and old, informed and marginalised, and human societies and the natural environment. To survive in our planetary home, we must create a world better adapted to the conditions we have ourselves created.

A Chinese proverb warns, 'If we do not change direction, we are likely to end up exactly where we are headed'. Applied to contemporary humanity this would be disastrous. Without a change in direction we are on the way to a world of increasing population pressure and poverty; growing potential for social and political conflict; escalating maverick and organised warfare, accelerating climate change, food, water, and energy shortages; worsening industrial, urban, and agricultural pollution; further destruction of the ozone layer; accelerating reduction of biodiversity; and continued loss of atmospheric oxygen. We also run the risk of mega-disasters caused by nuclear accidents and leaking nuclear waste, devastating floods and tornadoes due to climate change, and widespread health problems owing to natural catastrophes as well as to such human factors as the accumulation of toxins in soil, air, and water.

Where we are now headed is not where we want to go.

- There are higher levels of frustration and discontent as wealth and power become more concentrated and the gap increases between the holders of wealth and power and the poor and marginalised segments of the population. (80% of the world's domestic product belongs to one billion people, and the remaining 20% is shared by five-and-a-half billion, an imbalance that will only worsen, since the poor countries are paying 38 billion dollars more each year in interest than they are receiving in development aid.)
- Although more women and girls are being educated than before, in many parts of the world fewer women have jobs and more are forced to make ends meet in the 'informal sector'.
- There is a greater propensity in many parts of the world to resort to terrorism and other forms of violence to right wrongs, or at least to call attention to the perceived wrongs. There is deepening insecurity in countries both rich and poor.
- Islamic fundamentalism is spreading throughout the Muslim world, neo-Nazi and other extremist movements are surfacing in Europe, and religious fanaticism is appearing the world over.
- As governments seek to contain maverick violence by organised warfare, conflicts escalate in the Middle East, Asia, Central America and other hot-spots.
- In 2005 world military spending rose for a sixth year running, growing by 5% to \$ 1.04 trillion, with the US alone accounting for \$ 455 billion or almost half the

world figure. The G8 countries together are selling over 12 billion dollars' worth of arms to the poorest countries.

- Degradation of vital balances continues, in the world's atmosphere, in the oceans and fresh-water systems, and in productive soils. The consequences include the greenhouse effect with attendant climate change, and a reduction of the productivity of seas, lakes, rivers, and agricultural lands.
- There is a drop in food self-sufficiency in the majority of the world's economies, ominously coupled with the diminution of the internationally available food reserves.
- There is also a diminution of available fresh water for well over half of the world's population.

But trends are not destiny: they can be changed. Breakdown is just one of the possible futures facing us. If we wake up to the need to cope with the dangers we face and join a sense of urgency to live and act responsibly with a sense of commitment to each other and to our shared future we can still shift to a better path.

Seizing the better alternative calls for new thinking. New thinking is more holistic thinking, encompassing all the relevant factors – seeing the forest and not just the trees. This kind of thinking finds ready support in the latest insights emerging at the leading edge of the sciences.

Although it is not widely known, the worldviews based on the theories of Newton, Darwin and Freud have been overtaken by new discoveries. In light of the emerging conceptions the universe is not a lifeless, soulless aggregate of inert chunks of matter; rather, it resembles a living organism. Life is not a random accident, and the basic drives of the human psyche include far more than the drives for sex and self-gratification. Matter, life and mind are consistent elements within an overall process of great complexity yet coherent and harmonious design. Space and time are united as the dynamic background of the observable universe. Matter is vanishing as a fundamental feature of reality, retreating before energy; and continuous fields are replacing discrete particles as the basic elements of an energy-bathed universe. The universe is a seamless whole, evolving over eons of cosmic time and producing conditions where life, and then mind and consciousness, can emerge.

The emerging scientific worldview is holistic, and it can inspire the incipient holism of people as they search for more integral ways of living, eating, healing and consuming. The new worldview must reorient the basic ambitions, goals and priorities of society, in the public as well as in the private sphere. This reorientation can be grasped in reference to a shift from the extensive to the intensive form of growth. Growth is not necessarily bad or even limited: the desirability and the future of growth depends on what kind of growth we are embarking upon. Unrestrained, purely quantitative growth in energy and material production and consumption is not possible on a finite planet with a delicately balanced biosphere – ultimately it is bound to turn into growth of a cancerous kind. But there are other forms of growth as well. We shall distinguish two principal kinds: one is 'extensive growth' and the other 'intensive growth'.

Extensive growth moves along a horizontal plane on the surface of the planet: it conquers ever more territories, colonises ever more people, and imposes the will of the dominant layers on ever more layers of the population. Intensive growth, on the

other hand, centres on the development of individuals, and of the communities in which they live.

The ends of extensive and intensive growth are radically different. A basic end of extensive growth is the extension of human power over larger and larger areas. Traditionally, the means to achieve this end has been conquest: the conquest of nature and the conquest of other, weaker or less power- and domination-oriented peoples. Successful conquest led to the colonisation of other tribes, nations, cities and empires, subjugating them to the ambitions and interests of the conquerors. For most of recorded history this was accomplished by force of arms. Since the second half of the twentieth century it has also been attempted by economic means, using the power of wealthy states and global companies to impose their will and values on wide layers of the population. For states, the goal of extensive growth is territorial sovereignty, including sovereignty over the human and natural resources of the territories. The corresponding goal for global companies is to generate demand for consumption, often without much regard for the social and environmental consequences.

The paramount end of extensive growth can be encapsulated in three 'Cs': *conquest, colonisation, and consumption*. This end is served by corresponding varieties of means: first, the technologies that use and transform matter, the technologies of *production*; second, the technologies that generate the power to operate matter-transforming technologies, *energy-generating* technologies; and third, the technologies that whet people's appetite, create artificial demand, and shift patterns of consumption, the technologies of *propaganda*, PR and advertising. The first of these kinds of technologies built habitations with networks of transportation and communication, and increasingly powerful production structures for a growing variety of products. The second harnessed the forces of nature to drive these technologies. And the third produced the demand-provoking images and the subtle or not-so-subtle means by which the producers of products and services impose their will on clients and customers.

In intensive growth the end is very different. It can be encapsulated under three other 'Cs': *connection, communication, and consciousness*.

Let us take connection first. One of the great myths of the Industrial Age has been the skin-enclosed separation of individuals from each other and the disjunction of their interests from the interests of others. The former aspect of this myth has been legitimised by the worldview based on classical physics. Like the mass points of Newton, humans appeared to be self-contained, mutually independent chunks of organised matter only externally related to each other and to their environment. Classical economics reinforced this myth by viewing the individual as a self-centred economic actor, pursuing his or her own interests, harmonised at best with the interests of others through the workings of the market. The contemporary sciences no longer support this view. Now every quantum is known to be subtly connected with every other quantum, and every organism with other organisms in the ecosystem. In turn, economists know that there is a decisive connection between the interests of individuals, individual states and individual enterprises, and the workings of the globalised international system. In our world these embracing connections are evolving rapidly, and it is one of the ends of intensive growth to order them, creating coherent structure in place of random proliferation.

The second aim of intensive growth is directly linked with the first. It deepens the level of communication and raises the level of consciousness of the communicators.

Communication unfolds on multiple levels. First of all, we need to communicate with ourselves, caring for and developing our consciousness and personality. People who are 'in touch with themselves' are better balanced and more able to communicate with the world around them. We also need to be in communication with those who make up the immediate context of our lives – family, community, and work or profession. Still wider levels of communication are equally necessary: communication with other people, whether near or far, in our own community and in other communities, countries and cultures.

Communication calls for connection, but on the human plane more enters into play than connection: communication also involves *consciousness*. The full potentials of human communication unfold when the communicators apprehend the strands of connection through which they communicate. A high level of communication calls for a high level of consciousness that enables people to make use of the many, sometimes extremely subtle, strands of connection that bind them to each other and to their environment. Consciousness of these connections lifts human thinking from the outdated ego-centred level to the urgently needed community, ecology, and planet-centred dimension.

Einstein said that we cannot solve the significant problems we face at the same level of thinking at which we were when we created the problems. He was right: the problems we face today cannot be solved at the level of thinking that gave rise to them. We need new thinking – an evolution of our ideas, feelings, values and perceptions: an evolution of our consciousness. Addressing a joint session of the US Congress in February of 1991, Václav Havel, who was then president of Czechoslovakia said, *'Without a global revolution in the sphere of human consciousness, nothing will change for the better . . . and the catastrophe towards which this world is headed – the ecological, social, demographic, or general breakdown of civilisation – will be unavoidable.'*

Havel's point is well taken, but it is not a reason for despair: the breakdown of civilisation can be avoided. Human consciousness can evolve. At the innovative margins of society, in the alternative cultures, simpler lifestyles and more responsible ways of consuming are emerging. A holistic worldview is taking shape, one that perceives the human being as an organic whole, embedded in the socio-cultural sphere, embedded in turn in the wholeness of the biosphere. It is the task of every moral and responsible person to further the shift toward intensive growth by evolving his or her own worldview and consciousness.