



Reperceiving the World

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Note by Chris: I helped to produce “Metanoia”, a short-lived journal published in Holland. My job was to commission and edit articles. In the first issue (Spring 1994) the majority of articles were by Network members! I contacted Willis, because I liked what he said about the need for a different kind of science. I ended up contributing a few ideas and sentences to this article. The only thing changed here is the title, which originally was “Cause for Change, Cause for Hope”. Although I miss Willis very much, I am sure he is still with us in some form, helping us to develop and actually do “wholeness science”.

There seems little doubt that a fundamental change has been going on in the Western world for several decades. While it is too early for the exact form of this to be discerned, we can already make out several of its basic characteristics.

- There is an increased awareness of the interconnectedness of phenomena. External and internal, matter and mind, objective and subjective, are increasingly seen as different aspects of the same essential oneness. This is apparent, for example, in depth-ecology and a number of new spiritual movements.
- There is a detectable shift away from a reliance on external authority towards internal authority. Whether it is religion, politics or science, there is growing disenchantment with external authorities and increasing reliance on one's own inner, intuitive wisdom.
- There is also a profound change in our ideas about causation, which again reflects a movement away from the external towards the internal. For example, the weak meaning of a statement such as “Our thoughts create our reality” is that the way we perceive ourselves and the world around us is affected by our unconscious minds. The stronger meaning of the statement is that we are co-creators of our world, and that the ultimate cause of anything is to be found not in the physical world, but rather in consciousness itself.

The contrast between these ideas and the objectivist, reductionist assumptions of science is extreme. In this context an article by Ken Wilber is helpful (1). He notes that the worldviews of practically all societies, with the exception of modern western society, agree on certain core characteristics. A central feature of this “perennial wisdom” is the belief that the world of material things is somehow embedded in a *living* universe, which is in turn embedded in a realm of consciousness or spirit. Things are not – cannot be – separate. Everything, no matter what, is part of this “great chain of being”. This perennial wisdom also holds that every human being is capable of being directly aware of all levels of this continuum, from matter to spirit. It further claims that ultimately, in this Oneness, everything is the cause of everything else. Thus, causality proceeds both upwards and downwards. For example, it is clear that in one sense chemical interactions in the cells of my muscles cause my arms to rise, but in another sense it is caused by my wish to raise it.

It has been a peculiarity of modern western society that it has based its official knowledge system, science, on a very limited view of this continuum. It has restricted itself to the matter end, where things are physically measurable, and to upward causation only. This in turn has led to the conviction that all phenomena are governed by inviolable, quantifiable “scientific laws”. In this are to be found the roots of the power of modern science, to create manipulative technology, but also of its principal weakness, its inherent inability to deal with the non-physical, especially anything related to our experience of consciousness. *By leaving consciousness out of its worldview, science has contributed to the widespread modern confusion about important matters such as values, meanings, aesthetic sense, ultimate human desires and motivations, spiritual yearnings and so on.*

The restriction of science to a narrow portion of “the great chain of being” was undoubtedly useful and justifiable for a particular period of history. The big mistake was to become so impressed with its powers of prediction and control that we were tempted to believe that science could lead us to an ever deeper understanding of the whole. Yet there is no reason to suppose that such a restricted form of knowledge will ever provide us with an adequate picture of the whole. We seem now to be sensing this at some levels, and we are therefore determined to legitimise a broader form of understanding. People feel the need to relate to the transcendental, yet there is a tension here because many of those scientists who deny the transcendental hold commanding positions as guardians of the only generally accepted cognitive authority in the modern world.

The present cultural shift implies a worldview in which we humans are spiritual beings in a spiritual universe, in which ultimate cause is *not* to be found in the physical world, and in which consciousness is not the product of billions of years of material evolution, but was and is always present. It is a worldview in which evolution is seen as taking place within consciousness, and in which the physically measurable world is to the Universal Mind as a dream image is to the dreamer's own mind. It is as impossible to imagine the eventual impact of such a dramatically revolutionary shift as it would have been impossible in the seventeenth century to imagine the characteristics of the modern world.

A new form of science

A society is characterised by its worldview. The prevailing worldview is strongly influenced by science. How then is the new paradigm related to the scientific worldview?

Science has been spectacularly successful at what it was designed to do – predict, control, and enable the manipulation of the physical world through a science-based technology. In view of this success, it might seem unlikely that its worldview, based as it is on such highly sophisticated disciplines as quantum physics, molecular biology, and complexity theory, could be challenged successfully by the cultural changes outlined above. In fact, the challenge is not to science itself, but rather to the claim that its worldview is an adequate base upon which to build individual lives or human societies. If a scientific worldview is to be used for these purposes, then it will have to be founded on a new epistemology.

“Epistemology” can be translated loosely as “rules of evidence”. It is the way we answer the question: “How do we know what we think we know?” The agreed epistemology of science includes such imperatives as restricting itself to public, objective data; the search for inviolable, quantifiable scientific laws; being able to replicate results, and so on. This has provided us with our current prediction and control science, and its worldview. But we have long known that there is something seriously amiss with this approach. It has no place for many of the most important things in life – intuition, creativity, aesthetic sense, spirituality, and the general conviction that life has essential meaning. In fact, it does not even have a place for what is most familiar to all of us, our own subjective awareness, our inner experience, our conscious intent. It omits consciousness altogether. To be more accurate, it attempts to explain it away in reductionist terms.

The scientific exploration of phenomena and experience related to consciousness has long been hampered by two big obstacles. First, subjective experience is not normally accepted as valid evidence in science because it is not public, objective or replicable. Second, many consciousness-related phenomena do not fit comfortably within the scientific worldview. For instance, the common sense assumption that conscious volition is causal – that by simply choosing I cause things to happen – conflicts with the assumption in science that the universe operates according to causal laws, and that these can be known objectively. Scientists have improvised ways of dealing with these two objections, such that for most of the time they do not cause a problem. For example, research into the efficacy of analgesics continues, despite the fact that pain is clearly a very subjective matter. Similarly, useful research has been carried out on imagery, emotions and dreams, all of which depends very largely on subjective reporting. Paranormal experiences – those that appear to contradict both scientific and conventional notions of reality – are typically explained away as non-replicable, or faulty observation, or fraud.

The situation can hardly be considered satisfactory. Downward causation, causation from consciousness, is largely unacceptable as a scientific concept despite being one of the most impressive parts of our practical experience. A group of scientists and philosophers have tried to evolve an epistemology that might be acceptable to the scientific community, and which can at least accommodate the most basic aspects of consciousness, particularly awareness, volition and creativity. Its main features are:

- It is *radically empirical*, as urged by William James. This means that it is experiential in the broadest sense, in that it includes subjective data as a primary source, rather than being limited to physical-sense data. It also addresses the totality of human experience, such that no phenomena or experiences are ignored merely because they appear to violate agreed scientific laws
- It is objective, open and free from any hidden bias. At the same time, it admits both external and internal experience as evidence

- It insists on open inquiry, while recognising that this may be met only incompletely, particularly when addressing knowledge that involves a deeper understanding of human experience
- It places emphasis on the unity of experience. It is therefore sympathetic to the holistic view by which parts are best understood through the whole, but does not exclude the reductionist view, which seeks to understand the whole through its parts
- It acknowledges that science uses models and metaphors that represent only aspects of reality
- It recognises the partial nature of all scientific concepts of causality. In other words, it questions the assumption that a nomothetic science – one characterised by inviolable laws – can in the end deal adequately with the fundamental question of causation
- It is participatory. It explicitly acknowledges that understanding comes not only from being detached, but also from cooperating and identifying with whatever is being studied, and experiencing it subjectively. This means a real partnership between the observer and the observed
- It recognises the role and personality of the observer – including his or her unconscious processes – in any scientific work. The corollary also follows: to be a competent investigator, he or she must be willing to risk being profoundly transformed during the process of exploration. Because of this transformation, the whole epistemology may have to be replaced by another, more appropriate one, for which the former may have laid the intellectual and experiential foundations

We believe that this epistemology is likely to become increasingly acceptable to the scientific community precisely because of the growing cultural changes noted earlier. It would open the door to a more thorough investigation of all aspects of consciousness. It could help to resolve the dilemma described by C.P Snow (2): that of attempting to operate from two different and mutually contradictory worldviews, the one of reductionist science that prevails in our institutions of power, and the other the humanistic spirituality that most of us use in our everyday lives.

The significance of all this should not be underestimated. We are accustomed to the idea of revolutions within science, such as that of quantum physics. These have taken place within the current epistemology of empirical science. *What we are talking about here, however, is the revolution of the whole of science itself.* If such an epistemology is eventually accepted, it would undoubtedly amount to the most dramatic development in the history of science since the seventeenth century.

Change at the individual level

For several decades a growing number of people, both inside and outside mainstream institutions, have been making the kinds of personal changes described above. Each has in their own way come to the conclusion that our thoughts create our realities and are the cause of what happens to us; that each of us has at the core of our being a deep sense of purpose and meaning; that fear can be removed from our lives by recognising that we only fear what we believe to be fearful, and that even unconsciously held beliefs can be changed; that if we trust in and operate as much as possible from unconditional love, the universe seems to support us in mysterious ways; and that it really helps to live as if all experience is feedback, neither to be deplored nor exalted, but simply to be learned from.

Although it is true that in the past some individuals have made discoveries like these and changed their lives accordingly, never, as far as we know, has an entire society attempted to operate on such a basis. The exciting prospect before us is that, first, individuals and small groups, and then

organisations, and then finally whole societies might shift to a transcendental worldview. If and when that occurs, completely new ways will open up for living in harmony with Nature and each other, and encouraging the development of our highest potential.

Transformation on a global scale

When enough individuals in an organisation change, then the organisation itself begins to change. When enough organisations change, this puts pressure on the whole system to change. One of the forces helping to bring this about is the emerging worldview referred to earlier. Another force, perhaps more pressing, is the growing sense that the present system just does not work. It does not work for people in the “developing” countries, it does not work for the poor and low paid in developed countries, it does not work for the planet, and it does not work for future generations. It is not sustainable in the long run.

It is not just wishful thinking to speak of a “paradigm change” throughout the modern world. It is already happening, pulled by a spreading vision of what could be, and pushed by systemic crises. Global problems are symptoms of a deeper, underlying systemic flaw. The fact is that we cannot create a sustainable society on the basis of the western world’s dominant understanding of reality. Hardly a week goes by without hearing about some environmental disaster or threat of climate change. Frequently the blame is attributed to companies. And the usual response is to attempt to penalise the culprits, legislate for environmental control, and repair the damage. However, what seems like a perfectly reasonable response at the time utterly fails to get to the heart of the matter.

We find it difficult to think about these questions in terms of whole systems, to recognise, for example, that businesses and the economy are but parts of the larger ecological system, and to acknowledge that practically all of the proposed remedies are ineffectual attempts to patch up a system that will in the end require much more fundamental change. It is not as if fundamental change is, in practical terms, any more costly or difficult than a patch-up. It is just that we have much more resistance to it!

“Few people can be unaware these days of the complex of global problems of degradation, depletion of resources, species extinction, toxic chemical concentrations, soil depletion, deforestation, desertification, global warming, and so on.”

The familiar litany of environmental problems hardly needs repeating here. Few people can be unaware these days of the complex of global problems of degradation, depletion of resources, species extinction, toxic chemical concentrations, soil depletion, deforestation, desertification, global warming, and so on. The point to note is that there is a strong correlation between all of these and the world economy as it is currently constituted and practised. It is not as if we do not know this, but we tolerate the situation because the alternative – remedying it – would, so the prevailing wisdom goes, eat into profits and cause job losses. Meanwhile, yet more demands on the environment are made by those living in chronic poverty. Overgrazing, the destruction of forests for firewood, and topsoil erosion are some examples of this. These problems can only be properly addressed by doing something about the root cause, poverty itself.

It is essential to recognise that poverty is not the same as being without money. On the contrary, it is the state of having one's subsistence culture severely undermined by a money culture within which one becomes marginalised. Indigenous cultures have endured for millennia without causing social or environmental problems. What passes for "development" in the Third World has not been the solution to poverty, but a major cause of it.

A shift in perspective

We need to begin to think of global problems as symptoms of a more fundamental, underlying systemic malaise. It is this malaise that we need to identify, characterise and address seriously, otherwise all our "solutions" and policies will simply induce other problems.

The analogy with treating the symptoms of an illness is obvious. We have no difficulty in seeing how absurd it would be to ask our doctor to cure our illnesses, but only on the condition that we are allowed to continue living unhealthily. Yet we do something very similar when we insist that the "cures" to the problems of our time are not allowed to interfere with our cherished notions of perpetual economic growth, "progress", Nature as the infinite provider, and the assessment of our fellow human beings mainly in terms of their usefulness to the money-based economy.

Modern society is addicted to control, cheap energy, material growth, and consumption. But just as we cannot cure addiction to substances with palliatives, so too with our socio-economic additions. Deeply rooted beliefs have to be brought into the light for re-examination and probable replacement. These include the belief that economic logic and values will lead to socially desirable outcomes; the belief that individuals are linked to society mainly through jobs; the belief that the economy must be driven ever faster to maintain sufficient jobs; the belief that inequality and poverty can be solved by economic growth; and the belief that the materialist-scientific worldview is a satisfactory basis for the guidance of individual and collective decisions.

The challenge

To summarise, if there really is a fundamental shift in the assumptions upon which the powerful institutions of society are based, this must also imply a whole-system change, just as the assumptions of the scientific revolution led to equally profound changes. In fact, we believe that this shift is being accelerated by the growing recognition that human society is no longer sustainable in its present form.

In its most basic terms, we are witnessing a shift away from a focus on economic production and consumption towards a focus first and foremost on the growth of human beings as human beings. We believe that the world is moving towards a society in which every endeavour and every institution – commercial, judicial, political, whatever – will have as its primary function the encouragement of this central goal.

A paradigm shift is a very serious matter. It entails nothing less than re-perceiving the world. When we do this individually, it transforms us our lives. When we do it collectively, it changes history.

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References

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