

“Us” vs “Them” Fragmentation Underlies Global Problems

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Introduction

This article notes that humanity is unable to find solutions to our global problems such as the environment, poverty, hunger, disease, conflict, etc. because of our “us” vs “them” dichotomy. Our human condition caused by divisive fear and greed fragments us and the resulting lack of trust prevents collective action for common good.

Human Condition, Values and Global Problems

Religious leaders in their summit in Winnipeg in June, 2010 adopted a joint statement¹ calling upon the G8/G20 leaders “to take courageous and concrete actions” in addressing global poverty, environment, peace and security. Is this call realistic in view of the mandates of the leaders? Are the mandates global? Are the electorates, themselves consumed by fear and greed, capable of sanctioning global mandates? What is the meaning of common good in the ignorance of our commonality?

Jeffrey D. Sachs², a renowned economist, in addressing such problems, observes that we must end ‘our misguided view of the world as an enduring struggle of “us” vs. “them”’ to find collective solutions. He notes that we have made global commitments and treaties which remain unfulfilled and real solutions have failed to emerge because of barriers such as fear, greed, cynicism, defeatism and competing nationalism. He further notes that “We will need science, technology and professionalism, but most of all we will need to subdue our fears and cynicism.” Amaratya Sen³, another renowned economist, in addressing identity violence calls for developing global human identity.

Scope

Spiritual scientists and philosophers from wisdom traditions around the world long ago presented deep learning of our existential truth for improving human condition. This article presents a re-statement of this age old truth and an argument for its public education as an effective antidote to our human condition today.

Reality of Existence

The Sanskrit verse in Fig.1 is from a book entitled *Guru Gita*⁴ which is part of an Indian scripture.

Guru Gita means songs eulogizing the *gurus* who lead us from our spiritual ignorance to light. *Guru* is a person whose teachings include the reality of our existence and our relationships in its light.

अखण्डमण्डलाकारं व्याप्तं येन चराचरम् ।
तत्पदं दर्शितं येन तस्मै श्रीगुरवे नमः ॥

Fig. 1: Sanskrit text of a verse from the *Guru Gita* of the *Skanda Purana*. The verse defines an ideal teacher. In so doing, it indirectly presents the end goal of education.

The verse, in describing an ideal guru, indirectly defines the ultimate goal of education. The verse translates as follows:

“I bow to the teacher who conclusively shows that which pervades the indivisible universe of the animate and the inanimate.”

The reference to that which pervades the universe points towards the spiritual principle that underlies all that is sense perceptible. The principle in itself is like nothing that exists in the ordinary sense of the word and yet it permeates and underlies all. The discernment of this principle is the summit of spiritual insights of all our wisdom traditions.

Contemplation defines wisdom traditions and the truth is their ultimate discovery. Wisdom discerns the Absolute underlying the relative, the eternal hiding behind the temporal, the changeless revealed

by the ever changing. This changeless, eternal and absolute principle of the wisdom traditions is meant by words such as *Brahman* in the *vedic* tradition, *shunyata* or “nothingness” in the Buddhist, *Ein Sof* in Judaism, *Al Haqq* in Islam, Godhead or the Unity of Trinity in Christianity, Ground of Being or the Ultimate Reality in metaphysics.

Ultimately, the universe is indivisible because its underlying reality is one. Immediately, all that exists is differentiated by the senses. The oneness of the underlying principle unifies all that exists like a family.

Specific mention of the animate and the inanimate in the verse expressly highlights the underlying unity even of these basically different classes of being.

We are born with our senses. Wisdom develops later with understanding and knowledge. Senses differentiate and divide. Wisdom is needed to integrate and unify. Since understanding and knowledge comprise the domain of education, the final goal of teachers, educators and education itself must then be the development of integrative wisdom and discernment to personally see the essential unity not only of the animate and of the inanimate individually but also of the two of them together as one. Personal validation becomes important as living unity involves conflict with narrow selfishness which wins out in ignorance or doubt.

Validated knowledge imbibes meaning. No one wants to lead a life bereft of meaning. Therefore, we human beings live what we know.

Believing is not the same as knowing. Believing implies a measure of doubt which prevents full implementation of what we profess to believe.

The Absolute

The Absolute may be defined as that from which all that exists in the universe emerge, through which all are sustained, and into which they all are absorbed at dissolution. Besides that we cannot say anything positive about it. It does not have any form, genus, attribute or relation; nor does it engage in any activity⁵. In other words, it does not lend itself to delimitation of any nature so very necessary for a total intellectual grasp. Yet it underlies all that is relative and positively graspable with form, genre, attributes and activity. It cannot be delimited, not even by its own non-delimitation.

It is characterized by its mystery; it is unknowable yet it reveals itself. It is formless, yet it is the essence of every form including religion. It is characterized by infinity; yet it underlies everything that is finite. It is characterized by eternity; yet it manifests as every being within time. It does not engage in action; yet it enables all that happens. It is characterized by consciousness; yet nothing inanimate can exist without it. It has no attributes or relations; yet it is the source of them all.

All its characterizations apply in a transcendent manner, it not being delimited by any⁶.

The Relative

The world of our sense perception is that of differentiation, finitude, forms and division. What is finite and delimited is intellectually graspable. It lends itself to positive definitions. This world of the finite is the box that limits us from reaching out to the infinite. It conditions us thoroughly and we spend our lives chained in the proverbial Plato’s cave.

Educational System

The goals of our educational system hardly extend beyond the world of form yoking us to the sensible world of differentiation and division. The extent of integration achieved through it is within the conditioning of the sensible world. In other words, our educational system aims far below the level required to develop all-inclusive integrative wisdom.

Let alone all beings, animate and inanimate, our educational system does not even aim seriously at including all human beings in its integrative efforts. Humanity today is badly fragmented between “us”

and “them”. Human fragmentation leads to wars, conflict and cruelty towards other human beings, then how do we expect humans to treat other genre of the animate, let alone the inanimate?

If we want humans to treat each other with respect, our educational system must change to enable visualizing each other as one. If we want humanity to treat ourselves and our environment with respect, we must enable visualization of the essential oneness of all beings, animate and inanimate. We must use the resources of all educational disciplines including humanities, natural, life and social sciences highlighting global oneness and its meaning in our lives to counter the constant onslaught of the senses that divide.

The Inanimate

The real underlying all that exists is neither speculative nor an article of faith. Modern science affirms it in its domain. We just don't open our eyes to see it. Perhaps we do not want to see it. Seeing it threatens to take away our “us” identity and reduces us to the same as “them”.

Early science in over-zealous empiricism rejected all that it saw as mere speculation or faith. The motto was if we can't see it, it does not exist. Sense perception was the final validation of existence; its reach was extended with experimentation. Experiments need instruments, and early instruments were not sophisticated enough. Experimental observations and data needed interpretation. Inferential reason extended by mathematical logic helped. Look where science arrived!

Infinite diversity of matter which comprises the domain of science is underlain by a reality which science can't define. Science terms this underlying material reality as energy which, like the Absolute real, defies delimitation.

Energy congeals as infinitesimal particles which coalesce further as subatomic particles comprising an atom. The configuration of the subatomic particles in an atom defines an element. A handful of elements interact and combine with each other according to mutual compatibility of configurations resulting in an infinite diversity.

Energy becomes infinitesimally small particles, permeates the spaces around them generating different configurations to appear as particular elements. Without the permeation of energy in the atomic voids, atoms can't maintain their integrity. Energy further plays its role in chemical reactions bonding compatible atoms into lasting and sustained relations with each other.

Science concluded that matter behaved deterministically in accordance with fixed natural laws. After all, the material world being devoid of consciousness is inanimate lacking free will to escape determinism. The later discovery of probabilistic behavior in the microscopic particles deprived science of even that preconceived notion.

In fact, the inanimate world of matter seems to display a measure of free will resulting from consciousness though matter is configured for a minimum display of it.

The Animate

The world of the animate is, however, defined by both material dimension as well as that of consciousness. It is therefore considered as a more complete manifestation of the Absolute.

The degree to which consciousness is manifested in a being depends upon how the being is configured. Human configuration seems to be optimized for the maximum display of consciousness. Intellect is the distinctive feature which uniquely defines humanity. It enables us to alter our configuration by our own intent allowing a measure of free will unparalleled by any other being. It must however be noted that awareness is a pre-requisite of intent; if there is no awareness through learning or self discovery, there is no intent.

Meaning

Intellect enables us to discern meaning in facts of which we are aware. The fact that all beings, animate and inanimate, are different manifestations of the same underlying reality makes us all feel essentially as one. When we start seeing this essential oneness, we start celebrating our superficial differences in the light of our underlying oneness. The whole universe then becomes an extension of our own being. Differences are seen to exist for the purpose of mutual sustenance, service, and fulfillment. Respect, love, and responsibility develop weakening the tendencies of gluttonous appetite, hatred and exploitation.

If we are not systemically made aware of the Absolute underlying the relative, we as humanity are denied the potential of love and respect of others and for the environment.

Purpose

Purpose of education then becomes the awareness of the truth of our common reality. Education must also encompass the processes that we can use to convert this awareness to personal conviction through deep assimilation using a process of personal validation. This is the dawn of integrative wisdom.

The purpose of our lives then becomes the use of this wisdom to escape the fragmentary hold of our senses. Constant vigil is needed to counter the incessant onslaught of the senses to avoid falling back into the “us” and “them” fragmentation.

Living Oneness

Mere intellectual understanding does not go far enough. It must be taken to the level of the heart resulting into unconditional love and compassion. Heartfelt feelings lead to selfless service for common good.

Conclusions

“Us” vs “Them” fragmentation underlies global problems and the removal of it underlies global good.

The current educational effort does not go far enough in developing all inclusive integrative wisdom to transcend human condition and living oneness with our entire being: the head, heart and the hands. Common good is an alien concept in the ignorance of our commonality.

The truth of the wisdom traditions and metaphysics is the ultimate truth of all existence. Modern physics affirms it. It makes us essentially one. But most of us are totally unaware of it. Such ignorance results in divisive “othering” - a formidable barrier to the solution of our common problems.

All inclusive integrative wisdom is a necessary condition for meeting the current global crises. This article calls for a long term systemic change in public policy to refocus public education on the relative and the underlying Absolute both along with living of purposeful lives for common good consistent with the essential unity, meaning and global values ensuing from the reality of existence.

References

¹ <http://www.faithchallengeg8.com/pdfs/2010InterfaithStatement.pdf>

² Sachs, Jeffrey. Common Wealth. Time, Vol. 171, No. 12, March 24, 2008

³ Sen, Amartya, Identity and Violence, Penguin Books, London, 2006

⁴ <http://srigurugita.com/files/SriGuruGitaCompleteSanskrit.pdf>, Verse 67

⁵ Reza Shah-Kazemi, Paths to Transcendence, World Wisdom, Bloomington, Indiana, p.4

⁶ Ibid, p. 73