Running The Planet

By Walt Patterson

The Royal Institute of International Affairs
Chatham House

Running The Planet

By Walt Patterson

Contents

Illustrations by Peter Till

The World Today

The Royal Institute of International Affairs, at Chatham House in London, has provided an independent forum for discussion and debate on current international issues for nearly 80 years. Its resident research fellows, specialised information resources, and range of publications, conferences and meetings span the fields of international politics, economics and security. The Institute does not express opinions of its own; the views presented in this publication are the responsibility of the author.

For further information on membership, meetings, publications and conferences contact
The Royal Institute of International Affairs:
Tel: 44 (0) 20 7957 5700 Fax: 44 (0) 20 7957 5710
email: contact@riia.org
website: www.riia.org

Published in Great Britain by The World Today,
The Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House, 10 St James's Square,
London SW1Y 4LE (Charity Registration No. 208 223)

ISSN 0043-9134

Editor: Graham Walker
Assistant Editor : Caroline Wetherilt
Design: Martin Colyer

Printed in Great Britain by Simpson Drewett and Co. Ltd,
Richmond, Surrey TW9 1UF

Running The Planet

Walt Patterson is Senior Research Fellow in the Energy and Environmental Programme at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House. A nuclear physicist by training, he lays no claim to expertise in political science or international affairs. *Running The Planet* is inspired and informed by a series of informal internal seminars Chatham House staff members have been holding since mid-1998, to discuss fundamental issues for the new millennium. The essay is a personal commentary, distilled from many hours of thought and discussion with colleagues. The author wishes to thank them for their stimulating and provocative insights; but responsibility for the text, and for its inevitable shortcomings, is his alone.

Seizing the millennium

THE MILLENNIUM IS AN ARBITRARY MOMENT. It is determined by one cultural strand of many on the planet that all humanity shares. Nevertheless, precisely because so many people notice it, the millennium is an occasion to take stock of where we are, where we have come from and where we may wish to go. It is an opportunity to look beyond the immediate controversies and conflicts that preoccupy us, to take a wide overview with a long perspective.

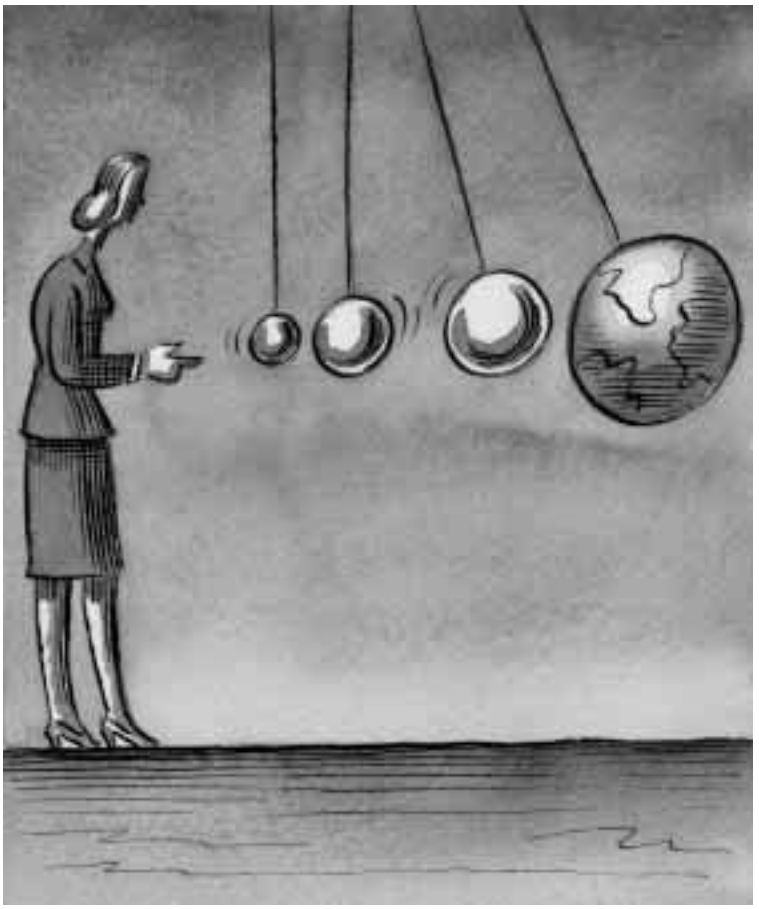
We see the world swept by hectic change. But appearance may be deceptive. After tens of millennia, is human life significantly different, for individuals and society? Do we behave differently? Some would say not. But our behaviour may now have consequences more far-reaching and rapid than ever before. A single individual act can now produce an effect at once global and almost instantaneous. Moreover, people almost everywhere can learn of the act and its effect, as it happens. Human society now has technologies that magnify our behaviour, bringing us close together, whether we like it or not.

We depend, as we have always depended, on the life-support systems of earth, water and air, plants and animals, the living envelope of the planet. Human invention has also created other systems, physical, social, economic and political, on which society now relies. In some parts of the world, and for some people, these systems appear to work very well. However, in far too many places they do not, condemning far too many people to poverty, disease and brutal hardship. Moreover, evidence now suggests that both human systems and natural systems may be vulnerable to serious disruption. The global reach of our behaviour, and the pace of change of human systems, especially technological and economic, may be overstretching the capacity of our social and political systems to adapt. Natural systems themselves, taken for granted throughout human history, are showing signs of stress.

We humans now number more than six billion, and our numbers continue to increase. We also move around, more of us, farther and faster than ever before. We meet

each other, not only indirectly but often face to face, across vast gulfs of difference in culture and circumstances. We speak many different languages, explicitly and implicitly. All too often we do not understand each other. Understanding is difficult; ignorance and hostility are easy. We see the results wherever we look.

For more than three millennia people have been trying to develop and communicate a better understanding of the world and the way we live in it. Sages, priests, philosophers, historians, scholars, generals, artists, scientists, jurists, economists, all have created disciplines of thought and language to describe, discuss and direct human experience. These disciplines evoke great concepts – identity, love, family, nation, state, government, law, science, commerce, peace, war – and continuing debate. They resonate through our lives.



Nevertheless, as our numbers increase and even individual behaviour can have global consequences, the structures and processes of these human disciplines face ever greater challenges. All too often they focus narrowly inward, when they should interact and complement each other.

Dealing more and more in abstractions, aggregates and averages, they may lose sight of the individual. But each of us is an individual in society. Each of us acts as an individual, but is caught up in a nexus of interactions. In the formal world of states and companies we may be active or passive participants, but we participate. For good or ill, we cannot opt out. International affairs are also our affairs.

We have seen the earth from space. We know how beautiful it is, and how finite. Against the background of the stars, we can recognise a kind of totality, here on earth. As the arbitrary moment of the millennium catches our collective attention, the time is ripe to pool our efforts from every discipline. We need urgently to reassess the fundamentals of human life – from first principles.

The human problem

As the Voyager spacecraft left our solar system in the mid-1990s, it sent back a photograph of where we live. The earth appeared as a blue dot. More than six billion of us now live on this blue dot, and it is getting crowded. We share the planet with other life-forms, from blue whales to viruses; but we humans are now the dominant species – or at least we believe we are.

The dominance comes not from our numbers, but from our impact, as we change the face of the earth to suit our purposes. We can influence how the planet itself works. From the inception of agriculture more than ten millennia ago, we have reshaped our surroundings and shifted their balance. We rearrange the soil and redirect the water. We foster the species we favour, such as rice, wheat and sheep, and diminish others, such as redwood, orchid and rhino. We alter the very air we breathe, adding gases that affect our health and disturb the climate. The human capacity to create and destroy is reaching bewildering levels. One way and another we can now make parts of the planet sumptuous, for those fortunate enough to live there. We can also make parts of the planet uninhabitable, for ourselves if not for cockroaches.

We may be the dominant species, but some of us are more dominant than others. Partly for that reason we can and do make parts of the planet intolerable for each other. We have been doing so throughout human history. Why humans behave this way, and what to do about it, has been a central theme of thinkers at least from Homer onwards. Each individual has a personal agenda, starting with survival and continuing through satisfaction. How this works out in practice depends on the individual and the context. The thread from personal to general is always tangled; but it may now be long enough to circle the globe.

We interact with each other – sometimes in concert, sometimes in conflict. Humans are social beings. All of us need others, at least some of the time. We cooperate easily, at work and at leisure, in endless variety, from couples to multitudes. But cooperation can also dissolve readily into conflict, at any level – personal, tribal, national, international or global. Cooperation and conflict coexist. A degree of conflict – a difference of understanding, viewpoint or opinion – can

be fertile and constructive, within appropriate limits. A conflict resolved to mutual satisfaction can enrich both sides. A conflict unresolved, however, can fester. Even at a personal level the result can be poisonous. Between groups of people the result can be devastating, both metaphorically and literally. All too often the ultimate outcome can be summed up succinctly: **'My survival or my satisfaction requires your death.'**

For at least ten millennia this scenario has been taken for granted, as an everyday aspect of human experience. It has been played out in countless encounters, within and between families, tribes, nations and states, at every level of human society. It has been acclaimed and applauded, recalled and celebrated, the joyous triumph of us over them. It can now be played out globally. It no longer requires confrontation face to face.

Destruction and death can be delivered with little if any personal involvement. A local conflict, even one initiated at a personal level, can now have global and almost immediate repercussions.

The problem of conflict, and the resolution of conflict, is our problem, and we are the problem. The overriding challenge facing humanity is to find a way to run the planet without destroying ourselves or the systems we depend on.

Systems for life

We are immersed in systems. Every individual human body is an unimaginably complex system that can feel, think, love and kill. It interacts with the systems of nature around it, maintaining temperatures and pressures, breathing, seeing, and sensing its surroundings. We manage this complexity without even noticing, unless the system malfunctions. If it does, if we become injured or ill, we turn to those who specialise in studying these particular systems. Over more than two millennia they have built up a parallel system of concepts and language to describe and analyse the system of the human body, and to identify and prescribe ways to forestall or rectify malfunctions – medicine, surgery and healthcare.

Those who study other natural systems, again with appropriate concepts and language – think of astronomy,

geology, physics, chemistry, biology, and all their many permutations – are not so preoccupied with malfunctions. Their first intention is to understand these systems and how they work. Some nevertheless seek ways to intervene, to alter the course of a natural system towards a different result, which may yield an outcome more desirable by some human criterion – a different material, a different process, an outcome specifically useful for some human purpose. Ever since humanity learned to control fire, the urge to intervene in natural systems has played a central role in human life, shaping not only our surroundings but the way we think and talk about them.

As it is with nature, so it is with human society. Any group of humans, even as few as a couple, constitutes a system – a network of interactions, a dynamic process that may or may not achieve a kind of equilibrium. Through the millennia we have evolved a multiplicity of concepts and languages to describe and analyse how humans interact in social systems. We can discern various social boundaries, the individuals and groups within them and the interactions across the boundaries. We can identify at least some of the forces that drive social systems – why people acting in groups behave as they do, in cooperation and in conflict. But we still do not know how to establish and guide processes that will keep social systems stable, within tolerable limits for the people in the systems, over the whole of the earth, indefinitely.

We have already come a long way. After many tens of millennia of very gradual change, the organisation and structure of human society have evolved at accelerating speed, especially throughout the century now closing. The first step of social organisation is the family – humans directly linked by mating and birth. As the linkages become more extended, a family becomes a tribe, in which genetic relationships between individuals may be tenuous or non-existent but in which a shared history maintains the linkages.

The word 'nation' continues the theme of extended family. Etymologically, a nation is a group of people linked 'natally' – that is, by birth. In practice, of course, the actual genetic relationships involved may be vanishingly small when not completely absent. At this level of complexity the linkages are not so much genetic as cultural – a shared history, language, modes of dress and behaviour. Moreover, at this level of complexity another aspect of social organisation becomes obtrusive, if not indeed dominant. A family is by definition exclusive; you either belong to it or you do not. If you are not one of us, you are one of them, a simple fact of life. A tribe is exclusive more by choice than by genetics; but for that very reason the division between 'us' and 'them' becomes much more a factor in conscious thought and action. Carrying the process to its culmination, a nation defines itself as much by what and whom it excludes as by what and whom it includes. As a concept, a nation is an inherently divisive level of social organisation, with potent consequences for the systems of human society.

The processes of social interaction within and between families, tribes and nations have always included both cooperation and conflict. Cooperation can be mutual, but even a cooperative relationship may be stratified, with clearly identifiable leaders and followers among those

involved – even within a family, where patriarchy and matriarchy have long been acknowledged structures. Such stratification, in turn, may be established and maintained only through continuing conflict, between leaders and those who would replace them. Managing such conflict, and keeping it within acceptable bounds, has always been a key issue for social systems. Much of human history is a record of the process and its consequences.

The other most dominant theme of human history is the record of conflict between nations – that is, between groups of humans that identify themselves as nations. Such conflict is 'international' – between nations. Until less than three centuries ago nations in conflict were usually defined by their leaders – emperors and empresses, kings, queens, or other singular individuals sometimes accorded the status of divinity, as a kind of transcendental 'head of the family'. The gradual rise of the 'state', especially the popular state that emerged from the American and French Revolutions two centuries ago, changed not only the terminology of discourse but the concepts employed. A state is a significantly different social system from a nation. Its identity and coherence have different foundations, and its roles and functions are different.

A nation is self-identified by language and culture, a group of people that feel themselves to be a homogeneous community. A state, by contrast, is an institution to administer the society under its aegis. Some commentators argue that the role of the state is legitimised by the fact that it administers a nation. A government may then allude to 'the nation' it administers, to underpin its legitimacy. Conversely, a nation can argue that it is entitled to a state. But the nuances implicit in the concepts of 'nation' and 'state' remain both potent and confusing. For historical reasons, for instance, the Charter of the United Nations, like the name of the organisation, refers to 'nations', not 'states'; but the members of the General Assembly and the Security Council are states.

The term 'nation-state' attempts to elide this difference; it also avoids the ambiguity arising in federal structures such as the United States, in which a 'state' means a regional government subordinate to the federal or 'national' government. Nevertheless, to refer to a 'nation-state' may seriously blur distinctions that ought to be clearly recognised and that are growing steadily more important – not least in the area of conflict and resolution of conflict. Nations and states overlap, but rarely now coincide. Not all nations have states; few states now administer distinct nations, in the original sense of the concept. With some reservations, this discussion will use the word 'state' as it applies to members of the UN General Assembly.

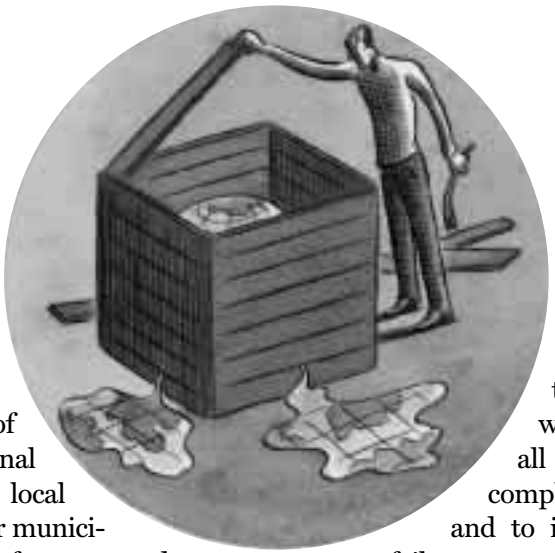
The systems of human society – the social systems, the political and economic systems, and the technological systems – now cover the entire earth. However, even where they usually work well enough they are now prone to breakdowns, and threatened by ever graver malfunctions. These system problems are not just theoretical but practical; and they need solutions that are coherent, global and lasting. The need is urgent, and time is short.

Global society

HUMAN SOCIETY ITSELF IS ALREADY GLOBAL. ITS STRUCTURE AND organisation embrace the entire planet. Deep in a remote rainforest, activists with satellite cellphones track illicit logging, in real time and in contact with colleagues thousands of kilometres away. The geographical separation and the traditional social stratification of human activities and interactions are blurring and fading, giving way to a complex dynamic network whose fluid linkages no longer fit easily into conventional formal frameworks.

Formally, nevertheless, the six billion people of the world are still organised into a framework of states. According to one definition widely accepted, each state has a defined territory within identified borders, a name, a population of citizens and a form of government recognised by other states. Perhaps 200 such entities are now variously recognised worldwide. The government of a state, a 'national government', however constituted, is considered 'sovereign', with certain privileges both inside and beyond its borders. However, the practical meaning of sovereignty, as it affects the behaviour of individuals and groups representing a national government, has always been a matter of dispute.

A national government, for example, exercises various powers over the individuals within its borders. The ultimate manifestation of these powers is that the government can claim to hold the monopoly of the legitimate use of violence against those within its borders, including the use of police, courts, prison and lethal force. As recent events in KOSOVO, RWANDA and elsewhere have demonstrated, this claim, like other attributes hitherto accorded to governments of states, may require reassessment; but the process will be fraught with pitfalls.



Within a state, other levels of government subordinate to national government may exercise significant responsibilities, including regional government of a province, subnational state or land and the local government of a city or municipality. The allocation of powers and responsibilities between different levels of government within a state is usually contentious and continuously evolving. The United States of America, for instance, as its name indicates, was created by a merger of states previously governed separately under the British. Tension between the US national or federal government and the governments of the separate states continues more than two centuries later. Similar tensions arise in other states with formally federal systems, such as Australia, Brazil, Canada, Germany and Switzerland. Even city and municipal governments can confront their national governments on issues of power and responsibility.

More recently, states themselves have begun to surrender a measure of their sovereignty to supranational alliances with certain powers over even national governments. The most fully established is the European Union, with fifteen member states and a queue of others waiting to join. Mercosur in South America and the North American Free Trade Agreement (Nafta) are less fully-fledged but developing.

The World Trade Organization (WTO) may be the first worldwide supranational organisation with powers to compel all member states to comply with its rulings, and to impose sanctions for failure to comply.

Although the remit of the WTO is global, its actual membership is still patchy. Nevertheless, despite the surrender of sovereignty entailed, non-member states including China appear eager to join. States themselves are thus now interacting in ways that weaken once sacrosanct national borders. Other dimensions of social organisation are reinforcing this trend, especially those groups of individuals cooperating in the form of companies and corporations.

States still presume the power to defend their borders, to tax the citizens within those borders, and to make and implement cross-border agreements with other states. However, as international trade and commerce expand and global telecommunications penetrate to the most remote corners of the earth, many national borders are becoming increasingly permeable, if not effectively imperceptible to many human activities. Information now flows freely around the world, even into and out of locations where governments may wish to impede its flow. So does money. Goods and people are not so

mobile, but they too are on the move, often across borders impenetrable not so long ago. The gradual opening of national borders to people and their organised activities, including companies, complicates traditional government responsibilities such as taxation, management of national currencies, maintenance of national standards for goods and services, and control of crime. The fading of national borders weakens the state, the central framework of social organisation upon which global society – or at least its historically most powerful elite – has learned to rely.

Until recent decades 'international affairs' always clearly involved two or more states, and could be readily distinguished from 'domestic' or purely national affairs.

Now, however, as a result of international trade and commerce, international currency dealings and transnational corporate ramifications, almost any human activity beyond the level of subsistence farming has international connections, implicit if not explicit.

As an aspect of worldwide social organisation, government at whatever level may therefore be growing less important in practical terms, while companies and corporations, acting across national borders and indeed sometimes globally, grow more important.

A company or corporation is a 'legal individual', an entity recognised in law, made up of a group of people working together towards a shared objective, within an agreed legal framework of shared responsibility. Their individual responsibility, however, for instance to repay debts, may be limited by the law under which the company is recognised, a major benefit of incorporation for the individuals involved. Government of course makes the law according to which society recognises a company, and which provides a framework within which the company acts. But the activities of many companies can be and now often are much more far-reaching than those of most national governments – geographically, financially, and in impact on the daily lives of people.

Companies and corporations now represent a strong but quite different framework of social organisation from governments – not necessarily limited by geography, without borders as conventionally understood, and now often extending worldwide, as multinational or transnational entities. Moreover, the nature and function of these entities are also changing. Many of their most significant economic activities now involve international transactions based entirely on flows of information, intellectual property, entitlements and finances rather than physical goods. Some commentators foresee the emergence of the 'virtual company', a global entity defined by networks of contracts and information – a form of social organisation far removed from those based on genetics or geography.

Companies and governments interact, but have very different objectives, powers, responsibilities and scope. Almost all people are citizens, willing or otherwise, of one or another state and its national government. Most people on earth, however, do not belong to any company or corporation – not even a local one, much less a global one. That is not necessarily a disadvantage; but it may yet prove to be, as patterns of power shift. Already it dramatically separates most 'haves' from most 'have-nots'.

As aspects of social organisation, states tend to encompass millions of individual

people, and companies up to many tens of thousands. For each individual, however, perceptible social organisation begins with identity – 'I' compared with 'you' – and extends, progressively, through family, friends, colleagues and acquaintances out to an anonymous world beyond, the wider social framework within which each person lives and functions.

Identity seen from inside looks very different to identity seen from outside. From outside, your identity will be described and labelled for social purposes: name, personal attributes – female, male, old, young and so on – and according to where you fit into the larger social framework: marital status, job if any, company if any, nationality, national origins, connections and allegiances with one social grouping or another. Although you may be able to choose or change your employer or the political party or football team you support, you cannot choose or change certain aspects of your social identity, for instance your national origin. You are identified as a member of a particular group, a subset of society distinct from others.

On one level, such social identification is a straightforward process of differentiation, to tell one person from another. On another level, however, it may implicitly if not explicitly carry value judgements about the comparative worth of individuals. Social identification is an essential tool of social interaction; but it may be an edged tool. It helps to determine not only what we do for each other, but what we do to each other.

Living together

HUMANS NEED EACH OTHER; BUT INDIVIDUALS have different agendas. Over the millennia we have evolved an assortment of ways to resolve disagreements on how to behave together, how to reconcile different agendas, to maximise useful cooperation and minimise corrosive conflict. We have always had to manage this individually at a personal level. We now also have to manage this collectively, not only at local and regional levels but at a global level.

The crucial step is to acknowledge that no individual can behave without reference to others. Individual actions happen in a social context, and are shaped by that context. How you talk, how you carry yourself, what you wear, what you eat and drink, how you interact with others of your own or the opposite sex, or older or younger, or friends or strangers, all are part of the social structure and process, the culture in which you live. Much of this culture is absorbed in infancy and childhood, with little or no conscious thought. You take it for granted as the framework within which you behave, and you behave accordingly.

The social and cultural framework influences the decisions taken, and the consequent behaviour of individuals and groups. Some decisions are yours to take; some you can affect but not determine; some are taken for you. If you do not like a decision, you can accept it nonetheless, or protest against it; the nature of your response is an indication of your power. Your capacity to take, implement and enforce decisions leading to action is a measure of the power you command within your social structure and its processes. The stratification of a society is above all a stratification of power, of individuals and groups within the society.

From the beginning of recorded history the concept of power – why and on what basis some individual or group can compel other humans to behave a certain way – has fascinated commentators. One human can influence another's actions by direct physical threats, by rewards and punishments, or by persuasion, overt or subtle. Four categories of power able to influence both individuals and groups can be readily identified. The first is physical power – personal violence and lethal force, including military force. The second is productive power – control of resources and labour. The third is financial power – access to money and ability to grant credit. The fourth is intellectual power – knowledge and how to acquire, control and use it. In today's world, some would add a fifth category – cultural power, the ability to disseminate a worldview and affect the climate of thought.

Across the world, different individuals and groups have different levels and distributions of these categories of power. Away from the immediately personal, the most obvious locus of power is government. At the moment, people are organised into states with national governments, some with regional and local governments subordinate to them. The national governments currently recognised differ widely in the power they can exercise, both within and beyond their borders, according to the categories listed. Today much the most powerful state, taking all the categories together, is the United States. Where power will reside in the new millennium, however, is much less certain. The balance may shift not only between states – consider China, India and Brazil, to name but three – but also between states and global companies or other entities, with concomitant effects on human life everywhere.

The concept of 'government' itself already covers a wide range of roles and functions for those individuals who represent and exercise powers and responsibilities according to this concept, and for those upon whom these powers are exercised. Across a broad spectrum of human activities a government can tell people what to do and what not to do, can reward and punish individuals and groups, and in the ultimate sanction kill them. Profound questions arise afresh. On what basis can a government legitimately exercise these powers? Is this basis adequately valid now, and will it

remain so? What constitutes 'good' or 'bad', 'strong' or 'weak' government?

Authoritarian government rules ultimately by force or the threat of force; changing an authoritarian government may involve violence. The alternative may be democratic government, 'of the people, by the people and for the people' or with the 'informed consent of the governed', in which a government surrenders power and leaves office without protest when it can no longer command popular consent. But the term 'democratic' has long been routinely misapplied and misused. Moreover, even where governments change peacefully, and people give their consent through ballot boxes, the process of legitimation of government may fail to address fundamental practicalities of social organisation, including access to finances and information.

These practicalities are growing steadily more demanding, even within states with well-established government systems and comparatively stable social order. Indeed, precisely where these conditions are most evident, people are turning their attention away from the processes of government. Many no longer even bother to vote. This should not, however, be construed as a sign of popular contentment. It may rather be a sign of disillusion with government and the political process that validates it, that gives it legitimacy. If so, the portent may be ominous. The discontented, too, now have access to power that can be significant, disruptive and difficult to counter.

Government, as it refers to the social process by which a certain group of people make decisions on behalf of a larger group, is a subset of the broader concept of 'governance'. The question of 'good governance' comes into play not only for entities of government but also for other social entities such as companies. What constitutes good governance, and how is it achieved? These questions are ever more pressing. For a company, those making decisions, the senior management, are granted the power to do so by those who own the company – perhaps shareholders or private investors. Once the senior management is in office, the owners withdraw to a passive role, awaiting the results of the decisions they have empowered the

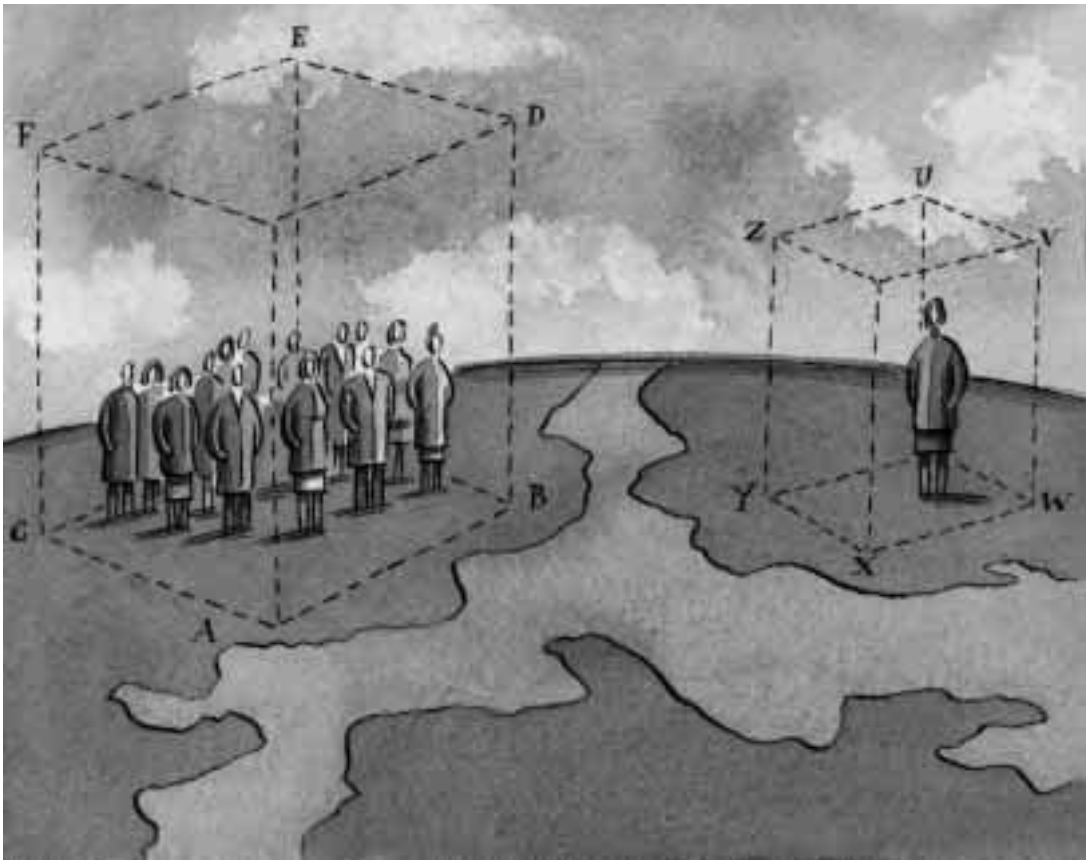
management to take. If they do not like the results they remove the existing management from power, and assign the power to others.

Much has been made of the putative parallel between a democratic government and a company owned by shareholders: the voters empower the government to manage the affairs of the state, and remove the government if it does not deliver acceptable results. This makes the voters by analogy the owners of the government. In any context, however, the concept of 'ownership' carries with it a cargo of corollary assumptions about power and its practical use, that must be examined carefully. Moreover, however powerful a company is, its very existence, recognition and continuation as a social organisation depend on the government that creates and enforces company law. In any form of social organisation, in any group of people acting together for whatever reason, from a family outwards, governance – who takes and implements decisions on behalf of those within the organisation, on what basis and with what legitimacy – is a primary concern.

An authoritarian government or a dictator can exercise power capriciously, on a whim. People subject to this whim have no reliable framework of reference within which to behave. To reduce the consequent uncertainty and create a form of predictable order, society through its government creates laws. In principle these laws stand independent of the particular individuals or groups administering them. The body of law established in a society becomes a framework defining decisions and actions acceptable to that society, and penalties for decisions and actions that society considers unacceptable. Social criteria still differ widely. Many societies, for instance, have now abolished the death penalty for even the most serious transgressions; others retain it, some for offences that other societies consider minor. Nevertheless the rule of law remains a crucial underpinning of social organisation, which otherwise deteriorates into an endless conflict of ruthless physical power, as too many recent examples demonstrate.

At the moment, the global mosaic of states also constitutes a global mosaic of laws. Any given law is ultimately defined and enforceable only within the borders of that particular state. So-called 'international law' is usually referred to as 'soft law'. It embodies agreements, conventions and treaties between national governments, which provide a quasi-legal framework for international activities. But it ultimately has no formal enforcement mechanism to compel compliance, nor any consistently effective international regime of penalties or other sanctions for non-compliance.

Whether a particular international law can be enforced in a particular context depends on the power of the national governments involved, not on any international or global rule of law. Nevertheless the **UN Tribunals on Rwanda and Bosnia**, the **WTO tribunal** and the **International Criminal Court** may represent the first tentative steps towards a different regime. Extending the rule of law to encompass the planet as a whole will be daunting. In the new millennium, however, it may be essential.



Disparities and dangers

EVERY HUMAN INDIVIDUAL IS different and distinct. The fundamental difference every human notices is the difference between 'me' and 'everyone else'. That is the starting point for human relations, social organisation, cooperation and conflict. Humans are endowed with memory. The accretion of remembered experience creates a sense of identity, at first personal, then social – shared identity, as one of a group. In today's world, almost every human individual has many group identities, overlapping but distinct. Subsistence hunters and farmers may identify themselves primarily within their families or settlements; but a well-to-do European or North American with a family, a job, leisure pursuits, an Internet connection and a chance to travel may have dozens of different identities, depending on the context at any given time.

The sense of identity as one of a group establishes bonds between those in the group. But it also underlines differences, not only between 'me' and 'everyone else', but also between 'us' – the members who share the group identity, however recognised – and 'them' – everyone outside the group. Differences between individuals and between groups can be considered under two headings: diversity and disparity.

Diversity, a portfolio of variously different attributes brought together, is beneficial; one attribute complements another, making the whole stronger than the parts. Disparity between individuals or between groups, however, implies inequality of some kind.

A group of people, for instance, with diverse experience and skills, combining this variety of experience and skills to act together, can accomplish achievements beyond the capacity of a group without such diversity. This group, however, may also manifest disparity. The activity to be undertaken may, for instance, be decided by only one or a few members of the group, without consulting the others; the experience and skills of the others are required, but not their views on the choice of activity. If those who decide on the activity can nevertheless induce or compel the others to help carry it out, the decision-makers are more powerful, at least in this context, than those who have no say in the matter. Disparity of power is an omnipresent attribute of human social organisation, from families to states and companies. It is also a corollary of the other disparities that permeate human society.

The concepts of diversity and disparity deserve careful examination. When is a difference diversity, and when disparity? Categories of difference between individuals include, for example, age, gender, appearance, health, strength, intelligence and competence, including social skills. Categories of difference between groups include number of members; language; shared history; culture; acceptable modes of behaviour within the group; acceptable modes of behaviour to those outside the group; access to resources; and collective competence, including the ability to act together coherently within the group. Such differences are easy to recognise, less easy to classify as diversity or disparity. A difference of gender, for instance, is clearly diversity, not least in the sense of *'vive la différence'*; but it is also disparity, when opportunities unrelated to the biological difference of the genders are available to one gender but not to the other.

If difference is manifest simply as diversity, it enriches the collective human experience: 'variety is the spice of life', 'opposites attract' and so on. Difference, however, is often genuine and objectively verifiable disparity, for instance between the competence of a professional golfer and that of a duffer, or between the spending power of a Wall Street banker and that of a Russian peasant. Even when difference cannot objectively be called disparity, it may nevertheless be thought to be. Disparity may be simply perceived, or inferred as a value judgement: 'We are better than they are, because they don't speak the right language/wear the right clothes/say the right prayers…'. Whether a particular difference is considered diversity or disparity, by whom and on what basis, has profound implications for social processes. So does the question of whether a disparity is genuine or merely perceived.

Disparities, whether genuine or perceived, shape interactions between humans and between groups. They affect individual self-interest and self-esteem, families, tribes, nations, states, corporations and other organisations to which humans affili-

ate or belong. At a global level, disparities are manifest not only within states but between states. For the stability or otherwise of social organisation, disparities between individuals and disparities between groups are crucial, especially disparities of competence and of power, however manifest. Disparities all too often engender resentment and hostility, hatred and fear.

The planet has always been riven with disparities. Many we simply take for granted as a fact of life – disparities, for instance, of individual physical size and strength, appearance, applied intelligence or competence, and so on. Even such disparities can nevertheless cause distress and social tension for those on the wrong side of the divide. If you find yourself at a disadvantage because of some disparity, you may strive to gain a compensating advantage according to some other criterion. If you succeed, the first disparity becomes less important, and matters less to you. A great deal of normal social interaction consists of such implicit jockeying for position within a group. From outside the group, a pattern of such compensated and complementary disparities may simply appear as diversity.

A larger aggregation of people will include many such groups, some overlapping, many with little or no direct contact with each other. Individuals interact among themselves within the group; and each group interacts with other groups. Once again, the differences between groups can be considered as diversities or disparities. If differences are considered only as diversities, opportunities arise for cooperative and mutually advantageous interaction between groups. If the differences appear as disparities – if one group is, or considers itself to be, at an advantage or disadvantage relative to another group according to some significant measure – cooperation becomes more constrained, and tensions increase. The effect can be seen throughout society, within and between families, neighbours, neighbourhoods, local social groups of every kind, schools, clubs, companies, towns, cities, regions and – quintessentially – nations and states.

When considering the tensions in human society, however, a crucial distinction must be made between two categories of disparity: the objectively verifiable and the perceived. Perhaps the most extreme example of objectively verifiable disparity is that of access to resources. Some fortunate humans can pick and choose among an abundance of resources competing for their attention. Others, while not so fortunate, have adequate access, enough to satisfy what have been called basic human needs – shelter, clothing, clean water and food at a minimum, possibly extending also to health care and education and, by some criteria, employment. Many humans, however – certainly more than one billion, possibly more than two billion, a third of the people on earth – do not have adequate access. Their shelter and clothing are meagre, their water filthy, their food sparse and unhealthy, their lives unremittingly arduous and their numbers increasing. The disparity between their circumstances and those of the fortunate is gaping, and widening. The disparity between their power and that of the fortunate is also, at least superficially, gaping. But the poor are not entirely powerless. Their numbers alone mean they cannot be ignored. The coexistence of opulent luxury and desperate poverty, sometimes within the same urban area, on a finite and interconnected planet is not a recipe for stability.

The present-day disparity between rich and poor is a consequence of human social behaviour throughout past millennia. From one viewpoint human history is a

record of people grouping together, cooperating to achieve common purposes. It is also, however, a record of divisive behaviour, of conflicts between groups set on widening the disparities between 'us' and 'them' in favour of 'us'. Historically the process has been a central organising principle of society.

It has entailed aggression by one group against another, invasion, slaughter, occupation of land, suppression of opposition, torture, colonisation, exploitation and slavery, opening wide gaps between the winners and the losers. It has defined key factors such as ownership of property and materials, land tenure, water rights, and transfers of goods and services from the poor and powerless to the rich and powerful. The organisation and structure of global society today is in large measure the legacy of divisive human behaviour through the ages.

A related organising principle, dramatically effective especially for the past two centuries, has been the evolution from subsistence food production and craft manufacture, essentially self-sufficient but limited, to a division of labour. Division of labour is nominally a cooperative activity; diverse skills and competences are deployed appropriately to multiply the productive output of goods. These goods can then be made available to all participants by means of an agreed mechanism of exchange in the form of money, and a market-place in which exchanges can be transacted. In practice, however, division of labour usually leads to wide disparities between the participating individuals and groups – in particular disparities of power and of access to resources. Why this is so has long been a topic of discussion and dispute. It became the focus of one of the fiercest global confrontations of the twentieth century, between the forms of social organisation known as capitalism and communism. That confrontation has now abated; but the underlying question festers unresolved.

Some commentators have long advocated straightforward redistribution – taking from the rich to give to the poor, and thus in some measure making restitution for millennia of flow in the opposite direction. Although even some of the comparatively rich endorse this view, the practicalities are awkward, not least precisely because the rich are at once more powerful and usually reluctant to surrender either riches or power. Instead, in recent decades, the touchstone of social evolution on the planet has been so-called 'economic development'. Commentators argue that economic development will better the lot of the poor, and help to reduce the disparities between poor and rich. The proclaimed objective is not to impoverish the rich, but to enrich the poor. To do so requires, according to the analysis, creation of more 'wealth', making the global pie bigger, to allow a larger quantity of wealth to reach the poor.

Wealth, however, is yet another concept more easily employed than defined. It is a standard basis for comparison, and is routinely used to quantify disparities between individuals and groups. But its meaning has been gradually but inexorably evolving, and the process may be accelerating. In a simple society, wealth can be measured, for example, by the area of land or the number of livestock an individual or a group owns, however ownership is established and retained. As a society becomes more complex, the measure of wealth becomes more abstract. It is often summarised not directly in terms of ownership but rather by posses-

sion of a certain quantity of the medium of exchange – so much money, and therefore by implication the goods or services that money can buy. The transactions do not have to take place, and perhaps cannot, at least not readily, if the wealth in question is, say, largely in the form of the owner's house. Wealth itself gradually becomes hypothetical and inferred rather than demonstrable.

Layer upon layer of abstraction can be superimposed. The global transactions now taking place continually, in which one currency is simply exchanged for another, dwarf the global transactions in actual goods and services. These currency transactions, abstract though they be, alter the measure of value of goods and services. They thus profoundly affect the quantified wealth of individuals and groups, up to and including states. Measured in this way, wealth can vary substantially, even day to day and indeed minute to minute. What remains true nevertheless is that even the abstract quantified measures of wealth still exhibit vast and persistent disparities, not only between individual humans but between postulated 'average' citizens in different regions and states of the world.

Philosophers and other commentators throughout history have stressed that wealth does not necessarily make individuals happy or satisfied. The collective wealth of a group, from a family to a state, says nothing about the balance of wealth and satisfaction of its individual members, nor about the stability and durability of the group as a social organisation. That said, the disparity between 'haves' and 'have-nots' grows steadily more acute. In today's interconnected world, 'have-nots' are made perpetually aware of their disadvantage, and 'haves' can no longer easily insulate themselves against nor ignore those less fortunate. Greed and resentment stirred intimately together make an explosive mixture.

As if genuine disparities were not problem enough, human society is riddled with perceived disparities – the 'us-them' syndrome. Perceived disparity, according to which one individual or group considers another inferior, can be based on almost any criterion, or none. Although it entails value judgements that may have no basis in objectively verifiable fact, it has been a feature of human life and human society at least throughout recorded history; it probably dates back to the emergence of the species. At its ugliest it leads to atrocity, 'ethnic cleansing' and genocide. If perceived disparity proves to be an inherent and uncontrollable part of human make-up, global society is in deep trouble.

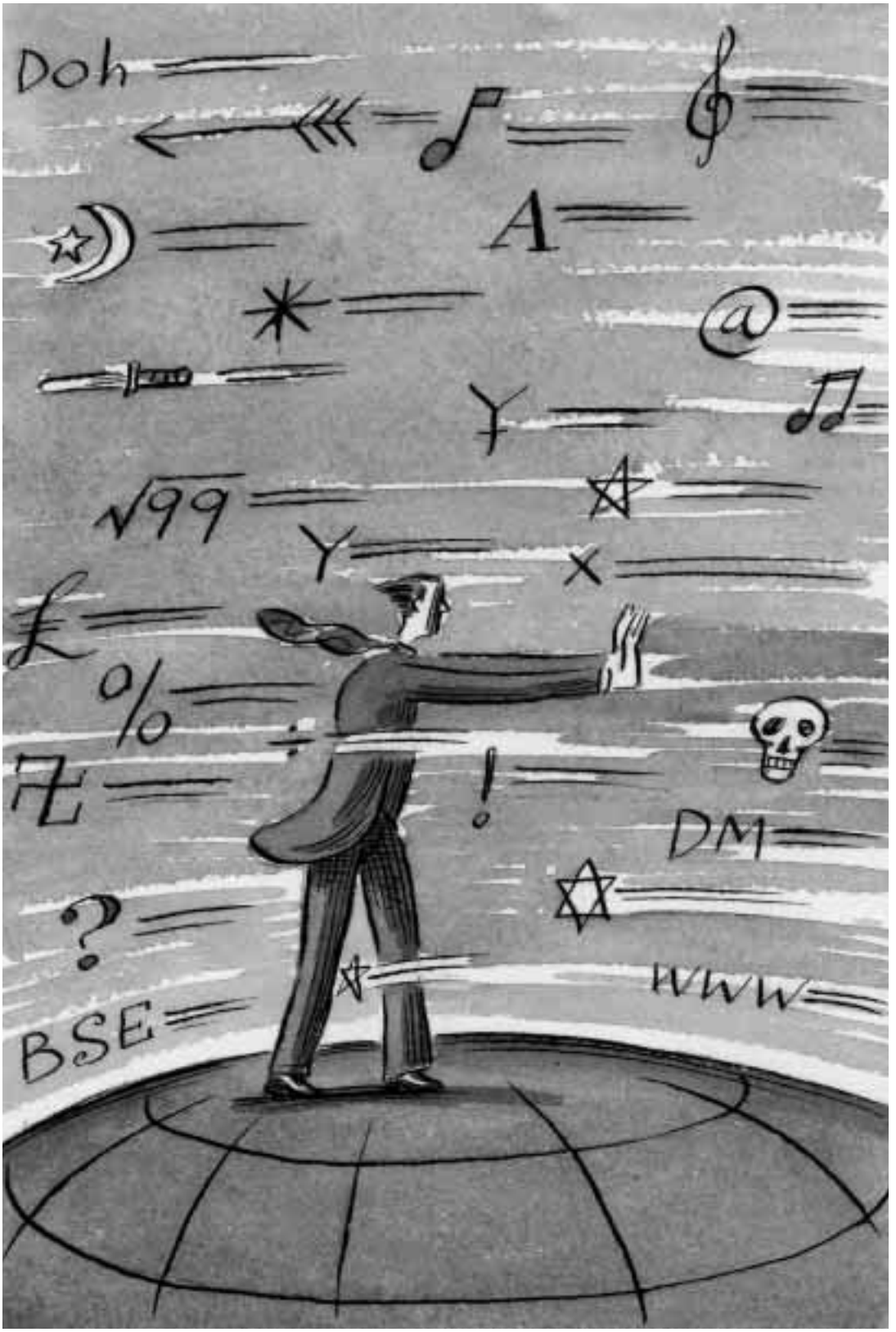
Conflict does not require disparity; but disparity breeds conflict. If we are to manage and mitigate conflict we shall have to manage and mitigate the worst genuine disparity, wherever and however it appears. We shall also have to learn to recognise, to welcome and indeed to celebrate diversity, without perceiving it and stigmatising it as disparity.

Knowledge, faith and wisdom

WHAT DO WE KNOW, AND HOW DO WE KNOW IT? AS WE grapple with the challenge of running the planet, the process of acquiring and applying knowledge, individual and collective, is central to the task. The world is now awash in information. It is gathered assiduously and disseminated continuously, to almost every corner of the globe. But information is not knowledge. To become knowledge, information must be assimilated and understood, by individual humans and by groups of humans. To be useful, information thus assimilated and understood must be correlated with other knowledge. Only then can it influence human decisions and human behaviour. The flood of information now engulfing the world is meaningless unless and until it becomes knowledge. Nevertheless knowledge too – at least some categories of knowledge, in some places – is expanding faster than ever before; indeed it is becoming a key dimension of economic activity. But knowledge, both individual and collective, is ultimately and inevitably limited. Moreover, what we need most is not merely knowledge, but wisdom. Wisdom is all too rare.

A small child is usually a voracious and insatiable learner, acquiring language and behavioural competence at a rate that would be breathtaking in an adult. The learning process is both personal and social. Much of what a child learns is absorbed without conscious thought, including a personal identity, group identities and social skills – how to interact with other humans. As yet, however, we do not understand the process of childhood learning well enough. Perhaps if we understood better the older humans involved might not so often make a mess of it.

What we do know is that childhood learning is formative, exercising a profound and lifelong influence on the individual. What you learn as a child affects everything you do for the rest of your life, including the way you behave, the decisions you make and how you interact with other humans. Historically, the process of childhood learning has usually been deeply and inherently divisive. It stresses differences and exclusive identities – family, tribe, nation, the 'us-them' dichotomy. At best it undervalues the wider context, the system context, in which each individual interacts continually if mostly unconsciously not only with the human systems that now span the globe but


Doh
A
@
√99
Y
X
£
%
÷
!
DM
?
BSE
WWW

also with the natural systems essential to human life, the web of interdependence.

The process of childhood learning tends to see differences not as diversity but as disparity. The starting point is the disparity of size and power between the child and the adults it first encounters, as it establishes its personal identity; the child then seeks forms of countervailing power – disparities in its favour, including not only genuine but perceived disparities. Throughout human evolution this process has clearly had survival value, as different groups compete for resources and power and their progeny join the fray. In the coming millennium, however, the consequences may be crippling, not only for humanity but for the planet.

One process of acquiring knowledge is called education. Every human individual undergoes some form of it, which may or may not involve schooling, teachers and formal qualifications. Some societies routinely acclaim it as universally desirable if not essential. Others restrict access to some forms of the process, excluding those for whom such education is judged unsuitable, for example young females. Etymologically, 'education' means 'leading out'. In practice, it usually entails the transfer – or the attempted transfer – of competence and understanding from those more experienced and therefore commonly older to the less experienced and younger. The communication required may be direct and personal, or indirect through a medium that can convey a record of experience, real or imagined.

However education occurs, it conveys, at least implicitly, not only factual information but a particular way to organise and evaluate that information and correlate it with knowledge already acquired. The process of education is inevitably selective, not only because of the limited capacity of human individuals to assimilate knowledge, but because those in authority over the process may consider some knowledge undesirable, for example knowledge about human sexual behaviour.

Education, however arranged and guided, is but one aspect of the process of acquiring knowledge. Most knowledge is acquired more or less continuously if incoherently, as a result of everyday life and social interaction; much is trivial, some useful, some unquestionably influential on the individual or group acquiring it, prompting action or behaviour that otherwise would not occur. What any given individual knows is different and distinct from what anyone else knows; but groups of people share bodies of common knowledge. They compare, share and expand this common knowledge by communicating through explicit and implicit language. They can do so in two ways, whose approach, consequences and implications are essentially different. One can be called, broadly, the scientific method. The other can be called faith.

At its most basic, the scientific method is organised curiosity, prompted by an awareness of ignorance about something of interest. You don't know what will happen when you do something; so you try it and see. You believe the evidence of your own eyes and other senses. Then you do it again, and see if the result is more or less the same. If it is, you have acquired new knowledge. Through the millennia, humans have learned to control fire, to manipulate materials, to foster desirable plants and animals, to create artificial structures – a cumulative body of practical knowledge, skills and competence that now allow us to send human artefacts to the outermost reaches of the solar system and beyond. This practical knowledge has created much of the physical framework of global society today.

For much of human history this body of practical knowledge was largely accumulated and transmitted personally, for instance by artisans to their apprentices, as diverse forms

of understanding without any unifying coherence to link one discipline with another. Only with the rise of so-called 'natural philosophy' – what we now call 'science' – did such unifying coherence begin to emerge. Natural philosophers and scientists created concepts, language and procedures that proved to be a powerful way to approach, organise and interpret human experience. One of the most striking consequences was to recognise the interlinkages and interdependence between apparently diverse and disparate forms of experience. As understanding extended to encompass aspects of nature beyond the reach of our personal senses, such as atoms and molecules, crystals and cells, disciplines once entirely distinct – for instance metallurgy and botany – revealed underlying commonality.

The body of knowledge now called scientific is already vast, and expanding faster than ever. To be accepted as scientific, knowledge must be objectively verifiable on some basis commonly agreed. Science as an approach to knowledge is both cumulative and collective. It is inherently social; it functions by communicating and comparing recorded experience, results and analysis, usually including measurement and quantification for precision where appropriate. Crucially, scientific knowledge is always and inherently provisional. If the accepted scientific knowledge proves inadequate to reflect and represent actual experience, the knowledge must be amended accordingly. If the evidence changes, the scientist's understanding has to change.

The scientific approach to knowledge has given humans significant capability to intervene in natural processes and redirect them to fulfil human purposes. For a century or more, the scientific approach to knowledge has also been applied directly to humans themselves, not only to the functions of an individual human body, with considerable success, but also to the functions and behaviour of humans in groups, not perhaps so successfully. Biochemistry, behavioural science and other disciplines have yielded fascinating insights, and suggested new ways to think, for instance, about illness, consciousness and intelligence.

As yet, however, these studies and findings remain intensely controversial, at best provisional even by the usual cautious scientific criteria. Disputes continue as to whether, for example, intelligence as manifest by humans can be meaningfully attributed to non-human animals, or to human artefacts such as computers. Science still has difficulty dealing adequately with living systems – that is, not just individual organisms, however identified and isolated, but entire systems of organisms, interacting continuously with their surroundings and each other in processes of extreme complexity and subtlety.

Some forms of science approach this complexity by arbitrarily reducing it to fewer components, breaking up the complexity into manageable subsets. Unfortunately, by doing so – for instance by killing the frog in order to

dissect it – science loses an essential part of the relevant information. In many circumstances the most important part of the information is precisely this system dimension, the interaction and interdependence that is often literally vital. This has always been true of the human relationship with the natural systems that sustain us. It is now also true of the human relationship with human systems, including technology and social organisation. Thus far, as an approach to knowledge, science has been much more effectively applied to natural and technological systems than to social organisation. Disciplines such as economics, sociology and anthropology endeavour to study aspects of the behaviour of humans in groups, combining historical and observational evidence and scientific analytic techniques; but success remains limited.

Every single experience is unique, because of the individual who has the experience, and the effect of time. Everything that happens happens only once. From the scientific viewpoint this poses very deep problems, not least about consciousness, the sense of self and the sense of time. Nevertheless, biochemistry is now suggesting intriguing interpretations of psychology, human moods and behaviour, and even of intelligence and understanding, how they are manifest and applied. To some extent, many people now consider science to be developing an understanding of how the planet works, and even how the universe works.

Here, however, the crucial word is 'how'. For humans, understanding how is not enough. Humans want to know why. Why are we here? Why is life? Why is death? The greatest conundrum for human understanding is the fact of the end of life, including your own. You don't know when or how it will happen, but you know it will happen. You know it, but you do not understand it. The incomprehensible inevitability of death and the need to know why inspire a different approach to knowledge, called faith. Unlike science, faith does not rely on observation of external reality. Quantification, measurement, and other conceptual tools are irrelevant. Unlike science, faith is ultimately personal, not social. At its core it cannot be shared.

We humans are therefore aware of two categories of ignorance: what we don't know, and what we can't know. We have developed two ways to approach ignorance: science and faith. These two ways lead to two types of knowledge. Science says 'I know because I have tried it and it happens this way'. Faith says 'I know because I believe'. The two types of knowledge are, however, difficult if not impossible to disentangle. At least since Darwin, science has been steadily encroaching into areas of knowledge previously claimed by faith. Yet science always interacts with faith, both individual and collective. 'Culture', for instance, is what you 'know' without thinking about it. Some of what you 'know' you can, if you think about it, verify objectively. On the other hand much of what you 'know' may not be objectively true, by any external criterion, starting with your sense of self. The implications for individuals and for society have preoccupied philosophy and the arts throughout human history.

The interactions of science and faith influence the behaviour not only of individuals but also of groups. Although faith is essentially personal, it is often manifest in ways that elicit a positive response from others, and an impulse to communicate and share some form of mutual understanding based on faith. If enough people can agree on what they consider essential aspects of this mutual understanding, a shared form of faith becomes a religion. For those who adhere to it this religion becomes a key group identity. Because a religion addresses questions that humans feel the need to answer, it can have a potent role as a form of social organisation. Throughout history religions have developed bodies of shared knowledge, based on faith, that have shaped human society, its structures and its processes. At its strongest, a religion can be viewed as a parallel form of government, able to influence the behaviour of those under its authority at least as effectively as any secular government, and possibly more so.

Knowledge based on science and knowledge based on faith differ in one crucial respect. Science is a global activity. To be accepted, scientific understanding must apply everywhere. Faith, by contrast, requires no external verification. It need not be shared; but when it is, the essential requirement is mutual belief, not verification. Accordingly, one group of faithful can agree on one body of shared faith or religion, while another group of faithful rejects that body and agrees on some other body. Because of the intensely personal nature of faith, the 'us-them' syndrome may then emerge in a peculiarly virulent form. The perceived disparities of knowledge and understanding may make each group of faithful regard the other as inferior. History abounds with grisly examples of the consequences – brutality, torture and slaughter. Whatever the faith, historical evidence indicates at best mixed results for humanity.

The same may be said of science. Since the Industrial Revolution, science and the technology it fosters have all too often aggravated disparities between 'haves' and 'have-nots'. Science and technology have enabled humans to intervene in natural systems so intensively that some systems now show serious signs of breakdown. Moreover, from edged tools to weapons of mass destruction, scientific knowledge has enabled humans to kill each other more and more easily, and in ever greater numbers. Unlike faith, science rarely provokes killing; but science facilitates it. Even as science edges relentlessly onto the terrain of human knowledge once dominated by faith, the faithful use science to arm themselves.

Knowledge of whatever kind is manifest in action. How we apply knowledge, and to what purpose, depends on the values that guide our choice and course of action. Sharing a single interconnected planet, no matter what we know or how we know it, we have yet to learn to act wisely.

Values in conflict

HUMANS ACT ACCORDING TO what they value – what they consider worth doing, worth having, worthwhile. No matter what they say they value, how they act demonstrates what they really value. The difference in values endorsed by words and values demonstrated by deeds is frequently stark.

If someone asks you seriously what you value, you may answer equally seriously that you value your spouse or mate, your children, your family, your friends – certain particular other humans close to you. Depending on

your circumstances, including age and health, you probably value your life. People value their personal property – specific goods of which they can claim ownership. Some individuals value money, status, power or all three. Historically, people have always valued land, especially if they own and control it. In all of these cases, the value you place on someone or something is demonstrated most vividly by how you respond to a threat that endangers either what you value or its relationship to you. If you value someone or something enough, the threat of danger, attack, injury, damage, theft or conquest will prompt you to respond, in an effort to repel the threat or rescue the endangered.

Such values are immediate, specific and personal, and elicit actions accordingly. When the question of values is posed in more general and abstract terms, however, the answers and the actions tend to be much more ambiguous. What values do humans in general recognise? How are they acquired and how manifest? Take an obvious example: laws and customs in most places call murder – killing another human – a crime. This might suggest that humans in general value human life in general. That, however, is clearly an oversimplification. Sometimes, in some circumstances, humans value human life highly; witness for instance innumerable acts of selfless heroism in fires, floods, earthquakes and other disasters. On the other hand, humans are very good at killing other humans, and notably prone to do so. They kill not only complete strangers but those closest to them – wives, husbands, siblings, offspring. Some commentators argue that only social inhibitions and prohibitions prevent humans, especially young males, from resolving every conflict by a straightforward fight to the death with all available weapons. Military training reverses the social process and removes the inhibitions, making killing socially acceptable in certain circumstances. Perceived disparities also weaken inhibitions. Killing someone you consider inferior is easier. As recent events have demonstrated with pitiless clarity yet again, you do not have to be a trained soldier to kill unarmed civilians.

Even the value of your own life depends on the context. The tenacity with which some individuals cling to life in even the grimmest conditions testifies to the value they place on life. Nevertheless the prevalence of suicide demonstrates that for some individuals, at some time, continued survival is intolerable. Pious pronouncements about the sanctity of human life fail to address the realities of experience. How people value people, and how they demonstrate this valuation, range from unconditional love to implacable hatred, with every imaginable variation in between, and actions to match. Moreover the valuation changes with time. The evidence suggests that the value humans put on human life is at best provisional. It depends on who is doing the valuing, and in what circumstances.

Consider another example. Human societies almost always claim to value children. Children embody the future. They are a source and a focus of pride, and in some contexts also of power. Because they are comparatively vulnerable, they elicit an especially protective reaction from most adults. Nevertheless, human societies routinely treat children in ways that are hard to reconcile with any consistently high valuation. Some societies indeed resort quite ruthlessly to infanticide, especially of female children. Moreover, quite apart from blatant abuse and neglect, even treatment ostensibly well meant may miscarry. Schooling, for example, all too often suffocates a child's hitherto enthusiastic eagerness to learn. For too many children school is frustrating or frightening, a place to learn modes of behaviour from which society will later suffer. If society genuinely valued children it

would reappraise and reorganise the process of childhood learning from infancy onwards.

Humans value their own personal property; indeed some humans regard their children as their property, value them on that basis and act accordingly. Etymologically, the word 'property' is akin to the word 'ownership', in the sense of belonging to the self, with the implications that entails. One immediate corollary is that property is by definition exclusive: what's mine is mine, and is therefore not yours.

Some commentators suggest that the urge to possess property and especially land, as defensible territory, is part of the genetic make-up of humans, in particular adult males seeking mates. Whatever the truth of this suggestion, humans undoubtedly value possession of land, including the exclusive aspect of possession that demands repulsion of intruders.

Paradoxically, however, this value may be endorsed even if the possession of land is not personal but collective and indirect, through some form of group allegiance, ultimately perhaps a nation or a state. That moves the question of values and their effect on human activity into a different dimension. A single individual can hold certain specific people, things and places valuable by virtue of direct connection to them, in the form of personal relationship or ownership, acting accordingly to cherish and defend what is of personal value to that individual. However, the value manifest through actions inspired by personal relationship or ownership is different in nature to the value manifest through actions inspired by allegiance to a group. Consider, for example, the great abstractions so often acclaimed as variously ultimate values for the whole of humanity – for instance freedom, independence, justice, and peace. These values are not personal, but shared within a group. For that reason, actions inspired by these values at once raise issues of group decision-making, leadership, governance and power.

Even the interpretation of the meaning of a value such as 'independence' becomes an issue for the governance of the group. Conversely, disagreement between members of the group about the interpretation and consequent action may affect the leadership and governance of the group. A further complication for such shared values is the frequent gap between the ostensible value that the group through its leadership endorses in words, and the value the group demonstrates by actions, especially when the actions are undertaken by the group as a

whole. Disputes between group members about their shared values are usually charged with emotion; evidence of inconsistency or frank hypocrisy, particularly on the part of leaders, intensifies the emotion.

Yet more intense is the emotion arising between different groups that endorse different shared values, or interpret them differently. For humans in groups emotion is contagious, in any context from a football match to a lynching, no matter what the individuals involved may value personally. The power of a charismatic leader arises in significant measure because the leader understands instinctively the system dynamics of a crowd of people, and can manipulate the crowd accordingly. The great abstractions – freedom, independence and the rest – are potent tools for manipulating crowds. Leaders have almost always stressed the disparities between 'us' and 'them', the superior values we share and the inferior values they share, to great and sometimes devastating effect. This approach also serves to distract attention from the genuine disparities, particularly of power and access to resources, within the group itself. An exclusive group identity such as nation or faith, if coupled with perceived disparity in shared values between that group and those it excludes, makes conflict all but inevitable. Most of human history is devoted to recording the consequences.

One crucial corollary, however, is often overlooked. Values such as freedom, independence, justice and peace, shared by people in groups, interact with one another. Their meanings and interpretations change, depending on the context; and so do the actions they inspire. Shared values function together in value systems, which evolve over time. In the rhetoric of leaders these concepts of value, these great abstractions, resound as absolutes. They are not. They are provisional – like all of human life.

Whatever their status as abstract philosophical concepts, values as impetus to action interact and evolve, as value systems. They also interact and evolve with other systems of importance to humans, including social systems, technological systems and natural systems. All these systems are interdependent, including those of unquestionable and essential value to humans both individually and in groups – the natural systems of which we are a part. Human value systems still tend to take natural systems for granted, to ignore or at best to undervalue them. The consequences are alarming.

Unlike social or technological systems, natural systems are inherently global. Yet we do not have a global value system, internally consistent, evolving with the advance of collective knowledge and understanding, and embracing all the interdependencies that make up global society. Instead we have many different value systems, inconsistent and conflicting. We humans, as individuals and groups, act according to these conflicting value systems; and in so doing, we threaten to destroy ourselves. Reconciling these conflicts of value may be the severest challenge we face.

A global agenda

AS WE ENTER A NEW MILLENNIUM, THE DEFINING issue for the global agenda is simple. Do we as humans seek ways to resolve conflicts on a global basis? **In other words, do we – at least those of us in a position to do so – accept responsibility for running the planet?** In principle, 'we' means all humanity. **In practice, 'we' means those of us reading this essay, and those who might.**

In a world awash in information, knowledge and its application become global issues. Access to information, and the knowledge it can convey, is now itself a source of widening disparity between 'haves' and 'have-nots'. We are the 'haves', and responsible accordingly. We have a better opportunity than most of our fellow humans to be aware of and to understand the challenge, and to attempt to meet it. If, however, those of us among the 'haves' presume some form of superiority because of the disparity of our access to information or knowledge, we shall not alleviate the disparity but aggravate it, and with it the problems it poses. A measure of humility is essential. We know and understand a lot less than we may realise, and a lot less than we need to know.

We now live in a world of daunting complexity. Natural and human systems interconnect, interact and evolve, carrying us with them at bewildering speed. Whether we like it or not, human society is now unambiguously global; only global catastrophe can break the interconnections. Such catastrophe is all too easy to imagine. Unless we learn to live together, we shall assuredly die together; but dwelling on the possibility is little help. A counsel of despair will be self-fulfilling. If we look for signs of hope, we find them. Although some tensions and stresses continue to mount, others are easing.

In many parts of the world, for instance, the traditional subordination of women to men has begun to abate, gradually reducing the disparity of opportunity between the two halves of humanity. The process is halting and erratic, and by no means universal, but it is happening. Long-standing barriers

between different groups of people, including national borders, language differences and cultural divisions, are becoming less obstructive and obtrusive. Varieties of the English language are spreading across the globe, offering a common medium of communication. English is becoming a world language for the wrong reasons – because of the military and economic power of Britain in the nineteenth century and the US in the twentieth. But English is endlessly flexible and adaptable, a bridge across the gap of incomprehension that different languages impose. Native anglophones, however, must beware of a disconcerting corollary. If you are a native anglophone and know nothing of the native language of a non-anglophone speaking English to you, the other speaker understands you better than you understand the other speaker. As English becomes a world language, monoglot anglophones, paradoxically, may be at a grave disadvantage.

As barriers fall, the isolation of individuals and groups diminishes and opportunities for cooperation increase, reinforcing interactions and interdependence. Diminishing isolation shifts power structures; it can flatten hierarchies, foster decentralisation and enhance personal responsibility and control. Barriers and isolation make offences against humanity easier to commit. If the barriers fall, if the whole world knows, the whole world can react in outrage, and demand that the perpetrators be seized and punished. Such possibilities are still at best incipient, but the trend is clear. The early outlines of a global value system may now be perceptible.

Such global convergence should not, however, be misconstrued. What is desirable is not uniformity but equitable diversity. Diversity provides resilience, a robust network that is mutually supportive, reinforcing and enriching. As we strive to reduce disparities we should welcome and celebrate diversity. This is not altruism, or mere tolerance of difference; it is in our own interdependent interest, individually and collectively. Indeed the time may be at hand for a global declaration of interdependence.

If we humans accept the responsibility for running the planet, we must therefore ensure that as many of our fellow humans as possible are successively enlisted and equipped to participate, to contribute and to share the responsibility. We shall need to develop a common global agenda – what needs to be done. Anyone who looks at the world today will have no doubt about the magnitude of the task before us. Nevertheless, humanity can already offer an extraordinary diversity of knowledge, skills and competence. We need to bring it all to bear on the future, communicating and disseminating what we know, and learning what others know, to extend our common understanding. Working together we may even attain a degree of wisdom.

Wisdom, however, always acknowledges uncertainty. Anything you know absolutely is almost certainly wrong. Unsettling though the thought may be, knowledge and values are provisional. Life itself is provisional. Let us take that as a given, and proceed accordingly. We might perhaps begin with two propositions we all can accept. We are all members of the human species; and we are all citizens of the planet earth. Thereafter the details are open to discussion – from first principles.

No one knows all the answers. We may not even be asking the right questions. We are all in this together, and we'll need all the help we can get.

ROYAL INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE
Tel: 44 (0) 20 7957 5700 Fax: 44 (0) 20 7957 5710 email: contact@riia.org website: www.riia.org