The Physiology of the Noosphere: Segment 2

David Sloan Wilson: I wanted to bring in something which I regard as very Teilhardian, which is that this expansion of the Noosphere is gradual. And if we want to find good examples of a Noosphere, in other words a human population that functions like a single brain, we should be looking at intermediate scales. The global scale that's something that has to be brought into being, it doesn't exist yet, but at intermediate scale, various polities, various cultures, various social groupings that because there is a history of cultural evolution at the group level, when you examine them as meaning systems, and I've done this quite extensively for religion in my book, Darwin's Cathedral. Starting then, and continuing. We actually can see cultures that are very, very well adapted to their environments, and there is a thinking element to it that has been expanding through human history as Teilhard said. And as Peter, people like Peter Turchin document, there's a whole breed of historians that are doing that.

And so here we are now with kind of intermediate scale human societies complete with our thinking dimension. And we need to expand that to the global scale. Francis is right that globalization has only dawned upon the world within the last few centuries, the idea of we're all citizens of the earth. I believe that the Baha'i Faith is arguably the first faith that really envisioned itself as all embracing, all creeds, all races, all everything. That was 19th century. You go back further than that and it was beyond the imagination that there might be some.

But now of course the fact that we're globally interconnected has just become a fact of life. I mean, so that's, and will always remain so. But as to whether we actually become functionally organized at the global scale, that's the final step for Teilhard, and it's in the future, we shouldn't call the global interactions, global interconnectedness a brain at this point, that's something we need to create. But if we go down to some lower scales and intermediate scales, we could actually find some pretty good examples of cultures that are highly adapted to their environments. And yes, there's a thinking dimension to that, and part of that's unconscious. I mean in many cultures the members of the culture behave adaptively without even knowing that they are, they take part in something and they don't even know. Friedrich Hayek made that point for economic systems. And what he called the extended order, economic systems work without anyone having invented them or knowing why they work.

So that conscious-unconscious distinction can be made for cultures, but we should be looking at an intermediate scale. And then of course our objective is to build up to the global scale. That's how I see it. So I'm really eager to know how you see it. Shima why don't you go first this time?

Shima Beigi: I think something that I would like to add to what you said David. I think globalization, yes I think it's a force that is influencing how different layers of the Noosphere kind of connecting to each other, and creating something that maybe we call it a meta Noosphere or something like that. At the same time I think the thinking that we are having right now also is different. So for example, the amount and intensity of information that individuals are being exposed to is I think very different from 10 years ago. I mean I can say 20 years ago, I'm not that old to say like maybe 50 years ago, but I think comparing that to 20 years ago the way we are using information, the way we are handling information is really affecting the individual's way of thinking.

And I think this is something that I feel, especially with COVID I would like to bring this example back that also we give in the case of our article, is that I think the example of COVID was very interesting just to me, that I think for the first time a new crisis or a stressor was being experienced at a mass level, at the same time adaptation was happening at the mass level. So scientific adaptation, news adaptation, or people adapting to the same thing. So that is really a kind of, I think a network effect of adaptation that was very present with COVID pandemic. That I think opens this possibility, or maybe way of improving the Noosphere, for what we call as maybe we should think of sets of etiquette's as, for example netiquettes or etiquettes that are being moral, that are globally accepted for everyone to think about

them, to adopt them and to basically take into account those kind of etiquettes. This is I think something that I can say right now.

Francis Heylighen: I would like to elaborate on what Shima said. I guess what David was saying is there are a number of existing communities, let's say religions, cultures, that function quite well according to norms that they are not consciously using, those norms are the result of a process of evolution that probably has taken centuries. These norms have undergone selection to be pretty effective within that particular community, dealing with the particular type of problems that that community faces. But now suddenly we are turned into a global society, which has these problems like COVID, but which also has this means of interaction like the Internet. And suddenly we don't have these rules anymore. We don't have any clear norms that tell us how we should behave in these circumstances.

And what Shima was saying about netiquette or what I might also call Internet ethics, is we need to learn a number of norms of how to interact at this global level of the Noosphere, dealing with the Noosphere the way it's shaped now. It has a completely different dynamic, which is novel for everybody. We may have some rules in our local community for example, do not gossip or do not tell untruths, but at the level of social media those rules are not obviously applicable. And then you see all kinds of pathological things appear, and you can't even blame the people who are doing it, because yeah, their norms do not obviously apply to this new medium in this new global situation, and things that were pretty innocent before suddenly can balloon into some world problem. I'm pretty sure that in previous pandemics lots of conspiracy theories were being propounded in cafes and in families, but those never reached the global level, and therefore they didn't have the kind of impact that conspiracy theories nowadays have.

So as Shima said, we need to develop this kind of netiquette rules or norms for the global Internet based society, and looking at how traditional societies have done it within their local thing is definitely useful, but it probably won't be enough, because there are new dynamics playing.

SB: I wanted to just add something here. Like societies that have been very successful in adapting themselves to the situation that we're facing, I think maybe they had these moments of realization or aha moments, or something happened that really changed their paradigm. So I think if something like that happened to them, if you take that as a kind of maybe a general process of how we change our minds, or how we change our world views, then we can maybe think of mechanisms that would help us to ... Like yesterday, we were discussing with Francis that are there kind of gestalt change cycles at the level of the Noosphere? And if so for example, if you think about the Arab spring or COVID-19, or the collapse of economy, economic crisis in 2008, or September 11, these are events that really are affecting the collective consciousness. So maybe we can use them also in positive ways to create change, and to create moments of adaptation, or to create really necessary conditions for creating shift of paradigms. This is something I think maybe related to this conversation.