

The Nature and Function of Our Global Social Contract

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Social contract as “external agreement.” The phrase “social contract” may give the impression, so common in capitalist societies, of some external agreement among contracting parties. Some of the 18th century social contract theorists such as John Locke also had the idea that human beings and their rights existed prior to society and entered into a social order under government as a “contract” designed to protect these a priori rights and freedoms (Two Treatises on Government, 1680-90).

However, a global social contract is, and should be, much more than this kind of external agreement among independently existing parties. The world has received from Indian culture, and from many other traditional religions and cultures, the principle Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, the world is one family. It is a family made up of diverse cultures, nations, races, and religions, but that is at the same time “one family.” Contemporary science has borne out this contention that we are all one species, deeply interdependent and fundamentally related to one another. The principle of a global social contract is to actualize this oneness, to bring to reality the several dimensions of our common humanity that will bring to fruition a world of peace, freedom, justice, and sustainability.

A global social contract would involve an “agreement” penetrating deeply into our subjective, civic, and social selves involving our habits, our assumptions, and our largely unspoken recognition of the common good at the heart of legitimate communities. The social contract

embodies our moral obligation to live under the rule of democratically legislated laws within cultural, ethical, and civic frameworks that all interface to promote both individual freedom and the common good of all. The largest dimension of this integrated social matrix would be embraced by the planetary democratic government generating institutions for protecting and regulating the common good of humanity and the Earth (see my *One World Renaissance: Holistic Planetary Transformation through a Global Social Contract*, 2016).

Fragmentation. This oneness of humanity as one family and one community is as yet implicit and ideal. It has not been actualized on the Earth. Instead, fragmentation and division threaten the future of our human project as well as our planetary environment. The fragmentation involves private, profit-driven corporations worldwide exploiting persons and nature in the service of the accumulation of private profit and power. This fragmentation also involves a consequent world of scarcity where a few have more than their share of wealth, comfort, and power while billions live without the basic necessities for a decent and fulfilling life.

Our present planetary fragmentation includes a worldwide multiplicity of media organizations serving private interests and spewing out misleading or false information and analysis in the service of dogmas and points of view that have little interests in the common good of the whole of humanity. People become divided against one another by race, religion, culture, or nationality. This fragmentation involves vast digital and electronic spy systems in which people around the global treat one another with suspicion and fear of what

the others might be doing and thinking.

This fragmentation includes the system of some 193, mostly militarized, “sovereign” nation-states in competition and conflict with one another. It involves both the militarism and wars of these nation-states (“state terrorism”) and the hate and fear of violent extremists around the world (“private terrorism”). In the face of a global population of 7 billion people, and growing, this world of fragmentation, violence, hate and fear, makes the future look bleak indeed.

Eclipse of Reason. In the late 17th century, Thomas Hobbes declared that human nature involved “a general inclination for all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power that ceaseth only in death” (*Leviathan*, 1690, chap. Xi). In the 18th century David Hume had declared that “reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them” (*Treatise on Human Nature*, 1740).

Hume’s compatriot Adam Smith integrated this false assumption into his book *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), arguing that self-interest for pursuing, wealth, pleasure, and power were fundamental principles of “human nature.” Following Adam Smith closely, the 19th century Utilitarians such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill argued that “pleasure” was the good and that reason was simply the instrument of utility that allowed people to pursue pleasure and minimize pain in life. In the 20th century such figures as Hans Morgenthau, Joseph Schumpeter, or Leo Strauss emphasized the struggle for power and profit and generally took a dim view of human motivations and possibilities.

This distorted view of human nature was denied and corrected by many thinkers from Spinoza in the 17th century to Kant in the 18th century to Thomas Hill Green and G.W.F. Hegel in the 19th century to thinkers like Ernest Barker, Errol E. Harris, and Jürgen Habermas in the 20th century. However, irrationalism prevailed and today dominates the irrationalist foreign policies of militarized sovereign states, global corporations, and planetary banking institutions such as the World Bank and IMF. This fundamentally wrong paradigm endangers our future on this planet.

Reason and selfhood. For Kant, reason reflected the very essence of our humanity. The fact that we exist as free, moral agents capable of doing what we understand to be right “regardless of our inclinations” shows our connection with the very foundations of the universe (the “noumenal” world) and our infinite “dignity” as moral agents, beyond all “price” (*Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals*, 1785). This view of humanity is quite the opposite of Hume’s view. Rather than reason being the “slave of the passions” Kant asserted that reason was primary over the passions. As Plato, Aristotle, and many others had argued, our passions are capable of being controlled, modified, and redirected into the service of reason. Indeed, Kant posited a fundamental division in us between reason and our “inclinations,” but he also determined that we could acquire virtues that brought these inclinations progressively into harmony with the dictates of reason.

Despite the fact that Kant developed a critique of theoretical reason that identified limitations on our ability to directly know the metaphysical foundations

of the universe, his view of practical reason harkens back to Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and the ancient Stoics who all, in various ways, saw human beings, with our capacity for reason, as microcosms of the macrocosm. The rational depths of the universe are manifest in us.

Kant distinguishes between ordinary voluntary contracts and the social contract, which he characterizes as a “union as an end in itself—as the end that everyone ought to have, and thus as the first and unconditioned duty in each external relationship of human beings” (Theory and Practice, 1974: 57). There is an absolute moral obligation to live under planetary “republican” government, a universal duty forever violated by the system of “sovereign” nation-states who refuse to recognize enforceable laws beyond themselves. This link between rationality and our basic humanity was developed further by the thinkers mentioned above, two of which I will briefly mention here.

Hegel discerned two things about the world that he linked to reason. First, the world was a whole, a dynamic whole consisting of a multiplicity of particular things, forces, and laws. Reason sees not only this holism, but the many interrelations of things that make each thing what it is through its relationships with all other things. Second, the world was a developing historical-cosmic process. It was not a static holism (such as the Ancients posited) but it was an evolving, developing holistic process.

Therefore, Hegel understood that reason was not something that discerned universal essences independently of the “particulars” that embody these essences (as many ancient and medieval thinkers had

thought), but rather reason operated dialectically: discerning the dynamic interaction of ideas and natural phenomena that result in ever-new, ever-more holistic configurations. His famous statement “the real is the rational and the rational is the real” must be understood in this light. The teleological progression of the holistic process itself, and the human ability to comprehend this process as free, moral beings arising out of that process, constitute the rational.

And, for Hegel, this places human beings in the category of microcosms of the macrocosm, just as many of the Ancients had thought. For Hegel, the universe is becoming conscious of itself in us, in our rationality, freedom, and self-awareness. Similarly, contemporary physicist, Henry Stapp, sees the human mind as participating in the fundamental creative dimension of the universe itself, as “an integral part of the highly nonlocal creative activity of the universe” (in Kitchener, *The World View of Contemporary Physics*, 1988: 57).

Habermas, like Hegel, like 20th century sociologist George Herbert Mead, and many 20th century social scientists, understands that the Lockean idea, mentioned above, that human beings exist prior to their social contract and enter into this contract with a priori natural rights, is fundamentally mistaken. First, Habermas understands that “human nature” is not a preexisting metaphysical characteristic but rather something that is created through history. Second, Habermas understands that society and individual persons arise together: our “subjectivity and singularity” as individuals are inseparable from our universal socialization, our common humanity as language speaking beings (*Theory of Communicative Action*,

Volume Two, 1987: 97).

Habermas critically examines Max Weber's theory of the progressive rationalization of society after the collapse of Medieval societies in Europe founded on supposedly unchanging sacred dogmas. Weber had despaired of hope at the progress of this rationalization process that led, he determined, into the blind alley of "the iron cage" of late capitalism with its "loss of freedom" and "loss of meaning." But Habermas reveals that Weber had implicitly limited the "reason" behind this rationalization process to "instrumental" reason, reason as Hume or Bentham had described it: simply instrumentally figuring out how to satisfy human drives for profit, power, pleasure, and mastery of nature (*Theory of Communicative Action*, Volume One, 1984).

Habermas' analyses of language show that the fundamental presuppositions of language are communicative, not instrumental. He further shows that instrumental uses of language (and hence reason) are secondary and parasitic upon the primary assumptions that make language itself possible. These assumptions behind the very possibility of language mean that human rationality is much deeper than instrumental rationality. They also show that human subjective individuality is inseparable from our commonality as language-structured beings. They show that individuals are not prior to society and that communicative reason is as much a fundament of the community (of humankind) as it is of individual persons (*On the Pragmatics of Communication*, 1998).

Society. In his 18th century *Groundwork*, cited above, Kant famously pronounced that every person is an "end

in his or herself.” He had already identified the basis for a universal human community, as had the Stoics before him who argued that the entire world was a cosmopolis of rational beings or the Upanishads of India who pronounced *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*. Kant saw the telos and principle behind existing governments as a categorical imperative to actualize the “kingdom of ends,” that is, as “a systematic union of different rational beings under common laws.”

This systematic union, he says, abstracts from all personal differences and their private ends “to conceive of a whole of all ends in systematic conjunction.” In his 1795 essay *Perpetual Peace*, he declares: “Since the narrow or wider community of the peoples of earth has developed so far that a violence of rights in one place is felt throughout the world, the idea of a law of world citizenship is no high-flown or exaggerated notion.” A union of ends in systematic conjunction, Kant declares in this essay, would mean a worldwide “federation of free states.”

Hegel, in the 19th century, understood that human beings are within a process of development, a process in which we now understand ourselves as the universe becoming conscious of itself in us. This holistic process involves society as well. While a global society was clearly implicit in Hegel’s philosophy, he generally stopped at the nation-state in his analysis. Nevertheless, he saw that individuality cannot be separated from society, that ethics and reason are not simply individual characteristics but involve the whole of society, and that the government, as the maker of laws, was part of a deep common human agreement and social processes from family to workplace to civic organizations to government,

a holism that he termed *sittlichkeit* (Elements of the Philosophy of Right, 1820). This holism also characterizes our life on this planet. Holism is implicit in family, workplace, civic organizations, and even governments. Laws (against murder, rape, etc.) are said to embody universal principles. Constitutions of nations routinely cite universal rights, or human dignity, or our common humanity, as does the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In the 20th century, Habermas has shown the basis for all this in language, in the very fact that every normal human being is a language-constituted being. Every human being orients his or herself within a universal communicative framework. Every human being is individualized through and by this very framework. Our common humanity and individual uniqueness arise hand in hand. Therefore, every aspect of global civilization involves this same dynamic of simultaneously universalizing and particularizing. Human beings are within a vast historical process of actualizing the holism implicit in our individual selves and within planetary civilization.

Conclusion. The lethal and destructive fragmentation of planetary society described above is why there is an absolute need for ratifying the Constitution for the Federation of Earth (found on-line in many places such as <http://worldparliament-gov.org/constitution>). We are in the process of destroying ourselves and need to bring democratic order and law to our beleaguered planet directed toward establishing a world system based on peace, freedom, justice, and sustainability. Hence, on the one hand, this Earth Constitution can be termed our global social contract. Its ratification would involve

a major agreement from the majority of the Earth's citizens to move history to a higher level of actualization by uniting humanity together within global democracy.

On the other hand, this Constitution is simply the actualization of the global social contract that is implicit in the global common good at the heart of civilization mentioned everywhere in world literature, cultures and religions. The great early 20th century Indian sage, Rabindranath Tagore, writes: "It is the mission of civilization to bring unity among people and establish peace and harmony: (Gitanjali, 2006: 214). The 20th century French-American visionary Teilhard de Chardin proclaimed: "It is impossible to become one with All without carrying to their extreme limit, in their simultaneous progress toward differentiation and convergence, the dispersed elements that constitute us and surround us" (Let Me Explain, 1970: 117). Albert Einstein famously declared: "We shall require a substantially new manner of thinking if mankind is to survive."

It should be clear that this "mission of civilization" is actualized within our united universality and particularity. We humans synthesize our "differentiation and convergence" to become "one with All." Through our "substantially new manner of thinking," we can become one with the rest of humanity and, indeed, with the cosmos from which we emerged. We take first real steps toward this conscious oneness by ratifying the Earth Constitution.

This new way of thinking involves a deep recognition of the holism of humanity, of the planetary biosphere that embraces us, and of the sacred cosmos that created

us. It means recognizing, as Einstein himself declared, the need for democratic world government. The ratification of the Earth Constitution would embrace the unity in diversity that is the true social, linguistic, and evolutionary principle at the heart of our human situation. The Preamble of the Constitution declares:

Conscious that Humanity is One despite the existence of diverse nations, races, creeds, ideologies and cultures and that the principle of unity in diversity is the basis for a new age when war shall be outlawed and peace prevail; when the earth's total resources shall be equitably used for human welfare; and when basic human rights and responsibilities shall be shared by all without discrimination....

This passage correctly identifies a link between embracing this constitution and the actualization of "a new age." The Constitution embraces the principle of unity in diversity brilliantly within all of its 19 articles. Holism permeates the Constitution and reveals a recognition of our human situation that goes much deeper than the mere signing of a contractual agreement. The Constitution not only recognizes societies, cultures, civic organizations, and religions as part of the holism of humanity, but clearly its ratification would significantly help raise this holism to much greater human awareness. Dialectically, ratifying the Constitution as our global social contract would help actualize the deep holism, rationality, and common good of our human project implicit at every level of global and local societies. It is this deep reality that constitutes the real substance of our global social contract.

Our global social contract already lives within the deep

dimensions of the dynamic unity in diversity of our human situation. Ratifying the Constitution for the Federation of Earth will help bring our deep common reality to actuality and self-awareness everywhere on our planet. Global democracy embraces our fundamental human reality and raises it to mutual recognition among the peoples of Earth. It will lay the foundations for a world of peace, freedom, justice, and sustainability that is the true heritage of our common human project.



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