

Scale in the Story of Interbeing by Charles Eisenstein

Let me present a logic that has immersed me ever since I became aware of the state of the planet as a teenager:

The world has some big problems right now. The crisis is urgent. There is no time to indulge in small, insignificant solutions that will be swept away by the tsunami of climate change, economic meltdown, nuclear holocaust, resource-scarcity fueled wars, and so forth. We need big solutions to big problems. Therefore, whatever you do on a local level, you'd better make sure it is scalable. You'd better make sure it can go viral, because otherwise its impact will be trivial.

Contained within this logic is an implicit hierarchy that values the contributions of some people - and some kinds of people - more than others. It values the activities of people who have a big reach, a big platform, a loud voice, or the money or institutional power to affect thousands or millions of people. That valuation is, you may notice, nearly identical to the dominant culture's allocation of status and power - a fact that should give us pause.

The logic of bigness devalues the grandmother spending all day with her granddaughter, the gardener restoring just one small corner of earth to health, the activist working to free one orca from captivity. It devalues anything that seemingly could not have much of a macrocosmic effect on the world. It devalues the feminine, the intimate, the personal and the quiet. It devalues the very same things that global capitalism, patriarchy, and technology have devalued.

Yet the logic seems unquestionable. Certainly my message will have a bigger effect if a million people hear it than a thousand, or one, or none at all? If the gardener puts a video of her soil regeneration project on social media, it will have a much greater potential impact than if she practices it invisibly on her small piece of land. Because if no one finds out about it, it will affect only a few square meters of soil, and nothing more. Right?

Here we come to what some call the 'theory of change' that underlies the ambition to do a big thing, to scale it up, to reach millions. At its root it is a Newtonian cosmology that says that change happens only when a force is exerted upon a mass. As a single individual, the amount of force you have at your disposal is quite limited, but if you can coordinate the actions of millions of people, perhaps by becoming a president or a pundit, or by having lots of money, then your power as a change agent is magnified as well. Thus we sometimes see an ambitiousness among NGOs and activists that eerily mirrors that of CEOs and celebrities: a race to compete for funding, for members, for Facebook likes, for mailing lists, for consumer attention.

A force-based causality in which bigger is necessarily better is a recipe for despair, paralysis, and burnout among those seeking social and ecological justice in the world. For

one thing, the ruling elites who are wedded to the status quo have far more power - more money, more guns, and through concentration of media a much bigger voice - than any activist organization ever could. In a contest of force, we lose. Furthermore, when we buy into bigger-is-better, most of us must live with the disheartening knowledge that we are smaller-and-worse. How many of us can have a big voice that reaches millions? By necessity very few.

Moral philosophers have grappled for several centuries with a dispiriting corollary: that what you do doesn't matter. For example, no matter how much you conscientiously recycle and conserve, your individual actions won't make a difference. It takes millions of others doing the same, and if millions of others do it then it doesn't matter if you do or not. Philosophers have advanced various moral and ethical principles to countermand this logic, which is on its own terms unassailable. Foremost among them is Kant's Categorical Imperative: act in the way you would want everyone to act in that situation. This idea is common in popular morality today: don't dump poison down the drain, because even though it won't matter if you do it, if everyone thought that way it would matter. Yet, underneath that morality lies a secret, nihilistic fear: "Yeah, but not everyone thinks that way. Actually, it doesn't matter what I do."

We need another reason to do those small things. We need a reason beyond, "If everyone did them it would add up to a more beautiful world." Because you and I are not 'everyone'.

My indoctrination into the logic of bigness exerted an insidious effect on my own life, causing me always to question whether I am doing enough. When I focus on the small, intimate realms of life, taking the hours to tend to a relationship, to beautify a space, perhaps, or to enter the timeless child's world with my youngest son, I am subject to unease along the lines of, "There is something more important I'm supposed to be doing." The logic of bigness devalues the very heart of life.

We all have another source of knowledge that holds the small, personal actions sacred. If a loved one has an emergency, we drop everything to help them because it feels like the most important thing we could possibly be doing at that moment. It feels like the most important thing in the world to be at the bedside of a dying loved one, or to be present for a child at a special moment.

Reality, moreover, often turns out to be the opposite of what the arithmetic of measurable impact would suggest. The most potent actions are often done without forethought of publicity. They are sincere and uncalculating, touching us with a kind of naiveté. Ask yourself, which is more inspiring : to accidentally witness a touching act of generosity, or to watch the same act staged to become a spectacle ? Consider the man who stood in front of the tank at Tiananmen. Would it have been as potent a symbol if he had made sure first that someone was there to photograph it ?

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In my work I have discovered that the most powerful gatherings were the ones that were not recorded, as if the shielding from the outside world allowed us to enter a separate reality more completely. These gatherings also seem to ripple their power out into the future beyond the room, despite the lack of any attempt to make that happen. Maybe causality doesn't work the way we've been told.

We are transitioning away from a narrative that holds us separate from each other and the world, toward a new and ancient story that Thich Nhat Hanh calls interbeing. In this worldview, self and universe mirror each other; whatever happens to any being is also happening in some corner of ourselves. Every act we take ripples out to affect the whole world, and eventually comes back to affect ourselves. Rupert Sheldrake calls it the principle of morphic resonance : a change that happens in one place generates a field of change that causes similar changes to happen everywhere.

Perhaps part of that transition out of the old story of separation is a strange and growing incapacity among those powers that have the most force at their command. Despite its mighty military, the United States seems increasingly incapable of achieving its foreign policy objectives. Despite its arsenal of antibiotics and pharmacology, modern medicine seems helpless to stem a stagnation or decline in health in the developed world. And the world's central bankers are powerless to fix the global economy, despite possessing the ability to create infinite amounts of money. As a society, we are losing faith in the tools and methods that we thought gave us power.

The principle of interbeing or morphic resonance coincides with our felt experience of significance when we engage the people and land around us with love, courage, and compassion. Even if we have no idea how those choices will affect the larger world, we sense that they do, and yet, paradoxically, we don't make choices for that reason. Sometimes we encounter special choice points in life that seem to be deliberately constructed to offer no possibility of selfish benefit - not even the benefit of being able to tell yourself you are doing something important. These moments are opportunities for self-creation, when we choose to listen to the voice of the heart over the voice of the calculating mind, which says we are being impractical, unreasonable or irresponsible.

Reasoning from interbeing, applying the principle of morphic resonance, this opposition between heart and mind crumbles away. Every act of compassion strengthens the global field of compassion ; every choice of conscience strengthens the global field of conscience. Each act becomes equal ; each act 'scales up', even if by a process so mysterious and untraceable as to evade any perceptible sequence of cause and effect. How can anyone know what fruits will come from that monumental effort at patience you made, unwitnessed, when you stayed gentle with your child on that frustrating afternoon ?

People possess a kind of primal ethics that understands that we are all equally important, that no human life is to be valued above another. Accordingly, there must be some

Gods-eye perspective from which every choice of a country's president is no more or less significant than the choice of the lonely addict in the alleyway. The former's choices may have an immediate and visible effect on the world, while the latter's may bear fruit 500 years in the future. We cannot know.

This is not to say that we should engage in the small and humble in hopes that it will have a macroscopic impact anyway. Nor is it to replace one valorization of bigness based on Newtonian causality with another based on morphic resonance. My intention is to get scale-based thinking out of the way of love-in-action. I find that the story of interbeing allays my unease that says, "What if it doesn't make a difference?" "What if it is all for nothing?" This unease is built into the modern worldview and, more acutely, into the social structures of modernity in which personal relationships to community, to place, to extended family, and to the beings of the plant, animal and mineral world have been attenuated or severed, replaced with the diffuse, generic relationships of the market economy.

Bereft of a full complement of personal relationships, the self that is lodged in such a world feels out of place, lost and never quite at home. When I am in relationship to the faces I see throughout my day, when I know them and they know me, I know myself as well. I belong. All the more when I am in living relationship to the animals, plants, and earth around me, feeding me, clothing me, housing me. When nature becomes instead a spectacle or an inconvenience, when my daily interactions are with strangers or acquaintances whose important stories are unknown to me; when my human, bodily needs are met through decontextualized, standardized commodities, then the small-scale seems less relevant.

When I understand the fig tree in my yard as a unique individual with whom I have a mutually sustaining relationship, then I don't need a macroscopic reason to care for it well, just as I don't need a reason to take care of my children. But if I am speaking of the global problem of deforestation, then I no longer apprehend the trees as individuals; they are rather generic members of a category, units that become important in contributing to a quantity. I think in terms of hectares or tons of carbon - so of course, bigger is better. Better to protect a million hectares than a thousand. Better to protect a thousand than just one tree. Yet here I am, about to go out and water my fig tree again. Wouldn't the planet be better off if I didn't spend so much time to so little effect? Wouldn't it be better if I could scale it up?

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In other words, 'Bigger is better' is encoded into the modern social system as well as the modern ontology of generic building blocks governed by impersonal forces. It is implicit in the scientific worldview that "only the measurable is real". It is implicit as well in an economic system that assigns a linear value to all things. Scaling down, then, feels to the modern mind deeply irrational, even subversive. It runs contrary not only to conventional economic programming, but to quasi-economic concepts used in philanthropy (measurable impact) and environmentalism (carbon accounting).

To celebrate the small-scale is not to deny the validity of endeavors that might require foresight and planning and involve the combined labor of millions of people. The problem, as I see it, is that the modernized mind tends to seek scale by default, a tendency based on ideology and habit. In so doing, it further empowers those institutions that exercise large-scale power already. In politics, for example, whatever the political orientation of the big plan, the winner is the same every time : the deep state. A further problem is that the rush to scale up can short-circuit the emergence of something entirely different by channeling creative energy into the usual forms.

When people ask me why I don't build an organization around the work I do, I say, "I'm not sure if what the world needs right now is another organization." Organizations as we know them behave in the way organizations behave, for better or for worse. Something else is needed. I'm not sure what, but maybe it will have a chance to emerge if we resist the rote impulse to scale up.

Surveying the magnitude of the crises enveloping the planet, the urge to scale up and make it big is quite understandable. Many people say, "We need to create a movement." I think that is mistaken. We don't create movements ; if anything, they create us. They arise like swellings in the ocean, the sum of millions of ripples that feed back onto and excite each other. Most people don't plant a garden or start a co-op or resist house eviction or plant a fig tree with the calculated intention of starting a movement. More likely, it is the reverse - the movement inspires us to do those things. It offers an invitation to which we may respond, each in our small way. In scaling down, we relinquish the ambition to save the world, but we open to the possibility of being part of something that might do just that.

For me, scaling down implies a kind of trust that it is okay to do just this, right here, right now. Letting go of controlling the macroscopic outcome, action becomes a kind of prayer, a kind of aligning oneself with the world one wants to see.

An environmentalist acquaintance of mine, Mark Dubois, told me a heartbreaking story of a river that he and a group of activists tried to save from damming. They fought the dam all to no avail - in the end a gorgeous stretch of river with pristine ecosystems was destroyed. Their grief was so great, that for a long time the devastated members of the group could hardly bear to see each other. It seemed that their years of commitment were wasted. But coincidentally, Mark told me that was the last dam built in North America. It was as if their actions were a kind of prayer. The universe wanted to know, "Are you sure you want the dams to stop? How purely do you want it?" The fact that they gave their all answered that question. In the view of interbeing, no action is wasted.

The irony is not lost on me of attempting to assign a place for scaling down within a big-picture narrative. Universalist narratives by their nature risk devaluing the local and the particular, effacing their differences in a way that, more often than not, contributes to

the ideological hegemony (and often the economic and political interests) of those doing the universalizing.

Do we need scaled-up concepts like interbeing or morphic resonance to come to the defense of the small and humble? I don't think such questions admit to easy answers. Indeed, any simple, categorical answer would itself represent a scaling-up, even if it were a critique of scalingup. I will therefore shirk this question except to offer, apologetically, one more universalized prescription: let us free our assessment of value from the metrics that define bigness and smallness to begin with.