

From the Editor

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When thinking about big history, I am often conflicted as to how to refer to it. Is it an academic discipline or a research field? Are these even different things? Perhaps it is a branch or system of knowledge. Then the mind reels: a theory, a structuring principle, a scientific creation myth, an origin story? What is this imaginative vision that we have got hold of? Collectively, the contributors to this edition suggest that I am asking the wrong question altogether.

On one level, the essays here presented are markedly diverse. There is a historiographical piece by Barry Rodrigue wherein he narrates and documents the history of big history and reflects upon its significance. Ken Solis makes the case for the ways in which a carefully laid out theory of ethics, what he calls "complex-information ethics," could provide a broad framework for making judgments about right and wrong at scales well beyond the human, aiding big historians to think more clearly about changes to the biosphere, artificial intelligence, transhumanism, and possible encounters with extraterrestrial intelligence. For his part, Fred Spier is interested in re-examining the threshold approach. Barry Wood shares the latest research on the Chicxulub impact and connects it to the history of the IBHA itself. Ken Baskin draws on complexity theory, especially in regard to the principle of emergence, as a way of reexamining the history of religious forms and systems. But what these authors have in common is an ongoing interest in thinking *within* big history, that is, in entering into a conversation about the paradigms of our—What shall we call it?—our *perscrutation*.

Many of us see big history as a paradigm for history in general. It fits perfectly the definition Thomas Kuhn provided in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962): "a universally recognized scientific achievement that for a time provides model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners."¹ According to Kuhn, such paradigms are often laid out in

seminal texts, or, rather, we can think of those seminal texts *as* paradigms, which is arguably what we have in David Christian's *Maps of Time* (2004), which would make collective learning a paradigm for big history.² Such paradigms, according to Kuhn, share two essential characteristics: (1) their achievement is "sufficiently unprecedented to attract an enduring group of adherents away from competing modes of scientific activity," and (2) they are "sufficiently open-ended to leave all sorts of problems for the redefined group of practitioners to resolve."³

—Which is precisely what our contributors are trying to do.

Kuhn also noted, though, that finding paradigms in the social sciences is difficult, that there is far more disagreement among social scientists about the nature of legitimate scientific problems and methods than in the natural sciences.⁴ How much more so, one hastens to add, in history and philosophy.

—Which is made clear in our current edition (and arguably in the pages of the *Journal* in general).

But perhaps big history is a different sort of ecosystem. Perhaps this just *is* our paradigm. Perhaps being "sufficiently open-ended to leave all sorts of problems for the redefined group of practitioners to resolve" is who we are. The crux of the matter is that the historical sciences are more complex than the physical sciences. Big history requires some form of scientific pluralism. It is supradisciplinary—and the different systems of knowledge that it makes use of—astrophysics, geology, biology, *all* the social sciences, history, philosophy—have different problems and different methods and look at the world from different perspectives.

The English philosopher, Mary Midgley, proposed the aquarium as an apt metaphor in such cases. If we think of the world as a huge aquarium, we cannot see it as a whole from above. We must peer into it through a great number of small windows. Inside, the lighting is dim. There are rocks and weeds and all manner of tricky places where the inhabitants might hide themselves. What is that over there? Is it a fish? Is it the same fish we saw a moment ago? Is it a rock glittering in the shadows? Or some yet unidentified creature? The only thing to do for understanding it is to run around to another window and see whether we can get a better view. The only way we will be able to make sense of the world is to look at it from as many different angles as possible. It simply won't do to suggest that our window is the only one worth looking through.⁵

Notes

1. Otto Neurath, ed., *International Encyclopedia of Unified Science*, 3rd ed., enlarged, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1970), viii.

2. David Christian, "Bridging the Two Cultures: History, Big History, and Science," *Historically Speaking* 6, no. 5 (2005): 21-26.

3. Thomas Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 10.

4. Kuhn, viii.

5. Mary Midgley, *The Myths We Live By* (London: Routledge, 2011), 40. First published in 2004.