



May 2023

Response to Comments

Contribution to GTI Forum [Big History and Great Transition](#)

David Christian

I thank contributors to this discussion for their wide-ranging, diverse, and often illuminating comments on the proposition that something like Big History may have an important role to play in the Great Transition. While some commentators did indeed see a role for the sort of thinking that Big History represents, others were clearly skeptical of the Big History approach and, more generally, of the modern body of scientific thought in which it is embedded. However, I believe all discussants accepted the core idea that new perspectives and new ways of thinking will be needed during the colossal changes of coming decades. I hope this discussion can contribute in a small way to the construction of these new ways of seeing the world.

Here, I will respond only to some of the main lines in the discussion.

My [original essay](#) tried to sketch what I think will be key features of new ways of thinking that can guide and inspire the global task of building a more sustainable future world. Above all, I argued that we will need more thinking at global scales, simply because the problems we face are now global. In education, research, and public debate, we will need more wide-ranging perspectives that can integrate different disciplinary and cultural perspectives, ranging from the personal to the planetary and beyond. I see Big History as an attempt to construct and disseminate such perspectives.

I accept many of the critical comments. Big History is, after all, a work in progress. However, I must admit to being dismayed by comments that oversimplify and sometimes caricature what is already a rich and diverse body of scholarship. I sometimes fear that the label “Big History” may invite such caricatures. Because it focuses largely on very “big” processes that are often

downplayed, particularly in the humanities disciplines, it may seem that Big History overlooks or ignores detail, nuance, and agency. But no good scholarship can afford to do that, and, as one of the commentators has pointed out, the real goal must be to encourage the use of many different lenses—a sort of zooming in and out—as we desperately try to get on top of the many dilemmas that face us today. In any case, my argument was not primarily about Big History, but rather about the sort of thinking it represents—thinking that can range across multiple scales and perspectives and integrate the insights of many different scholarly disciplines.

Criticism of existing ways of thinking will of course be vital as we try to build new perspectives. I offered my own criticisms of many aspects of contemporary thought and debate, and the discussion offered many more. But I think that, even as we look for new ways of thinking, we must be wary of simple dichotomies between modern scientific thought and traditional perspectives on the world because they cannot do justice to the extraordinary range and subtlety of human thought both today and in the past. The thought traditions of the past do indeed have much to offer us today, and it is true that those working mainly within modern scientific traditions have often overlooked those insights. But it is also true that the millions of people who work within the rich, diverse, and unfinished body of thought we describe as “modern science” (in which Big History is embedded) are not all as ignorant of dialectical contradictions or power relations, or as immodest or insensitive to the insights of traditional religious, philosophical, and, yes, “scientific” thought as some contributors claim.

In any case, eventually we must move beyond critique and look for the shared perspectives that may provide a foundation for global collaboration during the Great Transition. What common ground can there be in a world of such staggering diversity in thought, in cultural traditions, in lifeways, in power relations? That is really the problem that concerns me: what is to be done? Can we find enough common ground to allow for real and effective global collaboration during the Great Transition? We do not need to agree on everything (that would indeed be terrifying), but we will need more agreement and collaboration than we find today. I offered the emergence of nationalism as an example of perspectives that allowed for common commitments to shared goals without necessarily flattening cultural and social diversity. How can we best contribute to the building and dissemination of similar perspectives but at global scales?

One thing of which we can be sure is that these perspectives will be new, because so many of the problems we face are unprecedented. And that means that modern science, the best of science, will play a crucial role during the Great Transition. Yet many of the challenges, particularly those turning on our ability to cooperate on common goals, are as old as humanity. And that is why ancient thought traditions will also have much to offer as we look for some global consensus on the tasks and challenges that will face all humans in coming decades. Ethical guidance will be as important as good science because science does not act; humans act, and humans act with purposes guided and inspired by visions of a good future.

About the Author



David Christian is Professor of History and Director of the Big History Institute at Macquarie University in Sydney. By training a historian of Russia and the Soviet Union, he has become interested in world history on very large scales, or “Big History,” since the 1980s. He taught at Macquarie University from 1975 to 2000, then at San Diego State University, before returning to Macquarie in 2009. He was founding president of the International Big History Association and co-founder, with Bill Gates, of the Big History Project. He is the author of *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History*, among many other books and articles. He holds a PhD from Oxford University.

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