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## Zooming Out, Zooming In

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

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Zooming in and zooming out are both important for understanding. We analyze—break things down into their constituent parts and see how those interact, and then break them down even further. And we synthesize—place phenomena within systems or in relationship to other things in wider and wider circles of context. For even simple things, there will be many complementary stories that could be told. So I agree with [David Christian](#) about the importance of widening the context within which to understand our lives on this planet if we are to make a great transition.

In addition to different stories that come from zooming in and out with an object of interest, there is also the analogy of looking at reality from different perspectives, such as the famous story of the elephant in the dark room that seems like a fan, a snake, or a tree trunk, depending on which part you encounter. Or there is the analogy of taking cross sections at different angles. I have a magic power of slicing cherry tomatoes through the internal pericarp wall so that the two halves show no seeds. Other slices look different and tell us different things about the structure of a tomato.

The important caution has been raised that Big History could perpetuate harmful patterns, assumptions, and power relations of modern, Western societies in ways that dominate or erase the diversity of perspectives in our world. Even though we can always seek to question elements of the worldviews we inherit, we cannot escape them entirely. Even the pluriverse narrative is shaped by a specific worldview. It is, for example, a largely secular narrative (at least insofar as it tends to treat religion as a mere social construct), and it aligns with relativistic ideas in recent Western social theory. Still, it is helpful because it makes space for diversity and problematizes relations of oppressive power between different groups and perspectives. How do we tell Big History in ways that do not detract from the more particular stories of our pluriverse?

I can think of a couple of ways that we can address this, though I am sure there are others.

First, we can strive to include diverse perspectives in the narrative-building work, and seek to find points of resonance or harmonization between them or see how they fit together. The story is stronger if it can bring together different perspectives. Once you see the whole elephant, you can see how all the parts fit together. But while still in the dark, it would take exceptional multilateral skills of listening to, sharing, and synthesizing all the different perspectives to develop some conception of an elephant from the fan, snake, tree trunk, and so on.

Second, and this is an important complement to the first point, while seeking always to be fair to whatever material from which we are seeking to build a narrative, we can allow purpose to shape the story. We need a way out of the crisis we are in. The pluriverse needs a way to move in a somewhat coordinated manner to save (or re-create) itself. Given a range of viable interpretations of different strands in the narrative, which ones serve the aim of collective flourishing across our diversity? Even this determination would need to be made by including diverse perspectives. Being explicit about purpose and process also helps to build a narrative without overstating its claims.

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## About the Author



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## About the Publication

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