Problems, Problem Solving, and Education:
An Inquiry into "Convention" as a Problem and What We Might Do About It

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Abstract

Adequately responding to our deteriorating environmental and social situation is a matter of increasing urgency. An obstacle to achieving a concerted response is the way that we have normalized "convention," or as some authors claim "thoughtless convention." The author takes on this obstacle (i.e., convention, thoughtlessness) as the primary subject of this paper. We all live in the everyday, averaged-off way things are done, understood, and thought about in our respective cultures (this is convention). Problems are typically framed, embodied, and emplaced from within convention using a "metaphysics of control and mastery or dominance" over the biophysical world. Conventionally, this is the doctrine of scientific positivism mixed with neoliberal capitalistic economics. It plays out in complex ways with consequences. Too often, this approach blocks what should count as our appropriate relationship ("sustainability," coexistence) with the world, including non-human life. Accepting convention (status quo), which is very widely accepted, absolves us from thinking too deeply or looking at ourselves and our problems. This doctrine keeps us in a certain kind of dialectic of the "practical," concrete, and literal. In turn, this translates into the present social and political organization of our culture, problem solving heuristics, and academic curriculums. As a deeply rooted psychological mindset and way to frame problems, convention serves as an existential coping mechanism to avoid examination of self and culture, actual problems, and a way to reject promising alternatives, especially integrative functional approaches. Perhaps convention is so widespread because of these evolutionary/psychological dynamics and because there are so many problems—personal to global—that we do not understand or know how to address. Consequently, it is extremely hard to even question the pervasive conventional framing of our situation and current entrenched thought and operations. Fortunately, some people move beyond convention integrating conventional and functional understandings to address problems. An integrative standpoint looks for connections, relationships, and systems properties across social processes and decision making. It offers a way to orient to problems more reliably than convention allows. Frameworks exist for integration that have proven helpful. As an inquiry into convention, the author looks at our contemporary problems, our evolutionary history, problem solving, the academy and education, and offers a brief overview. Recommendations are about (1) helping people, leaders, and institutions, (2) learning integrative concepts and operations for effectively orienting to problems, functionally in realistic and pragmatic ways, and, (3) developing education in the academy to upskill students and address problems. The future,

our global solidarity, and any global movements to address problems will depend on the learning and transformations we can bring about.

1. Introduction

There is no doubt that humankind is going through the most critical period in its history.[1] Since 1970, our problematic situation has become clear with irrefutable data supporting a growing and interconnected suite of diverse issues (e.g., climate change, disruption of ocean currents, massive extinctions, social and political unrest, rising expectations of violence, and a host of conflicting individual anxieties, demands, and movements). These issues and many more are interconnected and complex.[2] For example, the Alliance of World Scientists with 25,781 scientists has been a leader in characterizing our situation. They have a Scientists' Warning Publication Series with eleven new scientists' warning articles published or in press, in addition to the nine previously published articles.[*] There are many related assessments from other sources confirming these results.[3] Taken together, documents and sources firmly characterize the problem(s) we face.[4] Yet, we may not have a full enough picture of the problem to know how best to respond. Are we doing enough to address them?

At the end of the day, it appears our social and environmental problems are outpacing our good efforts to address them. First this paper introduces "the problem" of convention. Simply stated, convention limits our understanding of humans and how we should order our relationship with other humans and nonhumans. Further, it hinders effective problem-solving. And, it obstructs how we organize the academy and education retarding needed perspectives, knowledge, and skills for tackling social and environmental challenges. Second, this paper makes recommendations, focusing on people, leaders, institutions. It also offers integrated problem-solving concepts and operations to help us overcome convention's limitations. And, third, this paper discusses prospects for global solidarity, mass movements, and a different content to higher education. Finally, this paper contributes to the broader rivers of thinking and problem solving that have built up over the centuries.

2. Methods

I bring together the writings of many thinkers. This paper rests on the works of integrative policy scientists and allied scholars. It is based on my experience of diverse applied cases internationally and teaching over five decades at colleges, universities, workshops, and field trips. I welcome a constructive dialogue about these important matters.

The integrated method is grounded in my approach using a jurisprudential method.[5] This jurisprudential orientation is labeled the policy sciences or the configurative approach. Brunner summarizes and appraises this approach.[6] The term "integrated" in this paper is equivalent to the configurative or policy sciences. Terms in the educational literature and the "interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary" community are labels somewhat equivalent to the integrated approach, at least in intent. I use the term "integrated," yet I use these three terms interchangeably. The integrated method is grounded in pragmatism, functionality, and contemporary systematic legal, social, and political thought. This distinctive approach of configurative jurisprudence is focused on "human dignity" in healthy environments.

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3. "Convention," Its "Normalization" as a Problem

What might explain our "shortfall" in addressing diverse social and environmental problems? Hannah Arendt's label for the problem or arguably a big part of it is our overreliance on "convention," or "thoughtless convention." [7] The term, "thoughtless convention," means that we humans tend to just go along with the mainstream, averaged off thinking, status quo in our respective fields, communities, and cultures. It suggests that we do not question basic assumptions and we tend to stay within frames of accepted citizen, professional, and cultural thinking and practices.[8] Arendt's books and writing include *On Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), *The Human Condition* (1958), and the *Life of the Mind* (1977). Also, she wrote *Arendt and the Eichmann Trial* (1961-1963) and *Men in Dark Times* (1968). Can we move beyond this problem to the extent it exists?

> *"If we narrowly stay within the bounds of convention (as normalized), we likely miss much of the richness of the world, a deeper awareness of self and other life, and limit our understanding and options to respond to interconnected problems."*

Michael Bonnett's collective works, especially his 2013, "Normalizing catastrophe: sustainability and scientism", *Environmental Education Research,* 19(2), 187-197, is insightful. He offers reasons for the normalization of our views and work (convention). Bonnett notes that "normalization" constitutes our conventional (both thoughtful convention and thoughtlessness) views.[9] Convention tells us what to understand—ourselves, society, and the environment or nature—and what to make of our everyday experiences. It tells us who and what counts or matters in an appropriate relationship to nature, other people, and the world. It tells us what is ethical and practical. It tells us what problems we should recognize and attend to.

Both Arendt and Bonnett provide clarion calls to recognize and address sides of the same problem: thoughtless and thoughtful convention, hereafter convention. Convention vitiates effective engagement with the natural environment, ourselves and our cultural world, and our problems. It does so by subverting our sensitivity and attentiveness to our own existential, social, and value directed character (compared to our conventional selves).

This limits our understanding of our own perspectives and actions. Functional interconnections are often overlooked by those who uncritically and unreflectively use convention. Convention frames thought and reality in a way that collapses any questioning of them back into convention and as such questions appear absurd to conventional citizens and colleagues.[10] This normalized convention (thoughtless or not) leads to at least some of our problems. Bonnett develops this view more deeply than space allows.

When Arendt's accounting is combined with Bonnett's argument, we have an explanation for shortfalls in addressing our problems. Taken together, combined with other observations, this explanation says our underperformance is due to "normalized thoughtless convention." This is not to denigrate vast efforts by millions of people and national and international leaders and governments undertaking on the ground cases, policies, and activists' movements to address problems. Many gains have been made. Each of us can determine if "thoughtless convention" is really what we are up against.

Breaking the bonds of normalized convention is a meta-challenge for us to advance to more sustainable futures. Decades of research from different disciplinary perspectives have coalesced into the limitations in our capacity to recognize and move beyond convention. Underlying considerations include: (1) our limited self-awareness and self-understanding that is too often blocked by our own ego defensive psychology, existential coping, and conventional culture, (2) we are finding it hard for those reasons and others to deal with the discomfort we experience when we think about the magnitude of the problems we have created for ourselves and the scale and scope of what is needed to address them, and (3) our beliefs, expectations, and the lives—and cultures—that we have come to live within. I bring this literature together, although with the work of others, to interrogate a multi-dimensional convention. Thus, this paper helps explain why "convention" is a global problem, and based on this problem definition, proposes robust alternatives.

Convention instills a very deep, pervasive framing of who we are as a species, as individuals, and as cultures that set us in a particular version of reality or system of meaning making.[11] Our genetics, evolution, and social-conditioning through acculturation, socialization, and institutions, such as family, state, and educational and media systems all come together to shape views of reality. Views of reality—conventional or otherwise, serve as a metaphysics (i.e., an ontology, epistemology, axiology, ordination, and pragmatist approach).[12] As such, views of reality function to normalize both thought and thoughtlessness, which can come to dominate our sense of self, our agency, and our individual and collective efforts to address our social and environmental problems. If we narrowly stay within the bounds of convention (as normalized), we likely miss much of the richness of the world, a deeper awareness of self and other life, and limit our understanding and options to respond to interconnected problems. What are we to do?

4. Problems: Writ Large

Problems are really a reflection of how we view the significance of possible harmful futures. Or put another way, what are the foreseeable consequences of ongoing trends and conditions, if we do nothing? For example, what happens to humans and civilizations, if we do too little to address climate change? What happens if we change the North Atlantic Ocean currents? What happens because of all the extinctions? I clump interrelated substantive and process challenges into three sets: about people, social concerns, and environmental matters.

4.1. Standpoint Challenges

First are problems with how we construct our sense of self and meaning that prefigure or limit our understanding of the world and its problems. We typically do so conventionally.

We know that there is great variability among people's attentiveness, observations, and judgments across individuals and cultures. We know that people vary fundamentally in existential psychodynamics, personality and value commitments, education and experience.

"The lack of widespread shared basic knowledge about our own evolutionary, psychological, and cultural standpoint creates a highly fragmented and conflictual social situation."

Different forms of convention exist everywhere, as a kind of localized "uniformity" of perspective and it shapes how we see problems. Yet, "noise" exists in our lives and it affects our judgments.[13] It can lead to fragmented, divergent, and limited perspectives. Further, it can lead to divisive rancor and violent conflict as people act on how they see the world differently.[14] Importantly, it leads to dysfunction in problem recognition and solving. Whether individuals possess "democratic character" or not makes a difference in their interactions and collective outcomes.[15]

4.2. Social Challenges

The second theme concerns problems with goals. Much has been written on the overriding goal of humankind, ranging from secular (physical) to religious (metaphysical) texts. The goal is really about the meaning of life, human dignity, and human rights, at least in western nations.[16] The choice before us is between systems of public and civic order that promote a commonwealth of human dignity in liberal democracies or garrison police states as totalitarian regimes. Our goal is to understand our relationship to nature and all non-human life. Currently, there is disagreement on goals across humankind, (e.g., contrast ISIS - K in Afghanistan vs. social democracy in Sweden). I collapse these immensely complex matters into a short review below.

Global goals are in critical international documents of the "judicial revolution" of human dignity and rights, now underway since 1945 (post WW II). These include the Declaration of Human Rights 1948, the revised Geneva conventions of 1946, and the international convention of asylum of 1951. Goals address whether morality and values (e.g., respect, well-being, rectitude) are universal.[17] Individual, social, and political dynamics are typically based on deeply felt images of self, identity, authenticity, status, role, and power.

The third issue concerns problems with the social and political organization and institutions within and among societies. Fundamentally, social matters are about the basic educational and moral commitments that individuals, groups, and societies aspire to. This includes matters of population size, growth, and consumption. Questions arise, such as: What is the relationship between human rights, democracy, and constitutionalism? Ignatia (2001) suggests that human rights standards will be compromised by gulfs between universalistic declarations and national interests in our crises ridden world. The human "capacity to come closer to realizing aims is widely questioned, especially prospects outside of our now highly

organized communities of human rights activists," notes Gutman (1994., pp. vii-viii). Today the "human dignity" revolution is far from complete.

> *"The goal of our colleges and universities is or should be to cultivate graduates who are willing and able to be self-governing in their personal and social lives, and contribute to problem resolution—personal and societal."*

4.3. Environmental Challenges

Environmental problems are an outward manifestation of standpoint considerations and social and political problems. Today, humankind is divided into many parochial ideologies and cultures each with its own goals and modes of living. These are organized often as nation states to smaller, more localized kinship and tribal groups at varying spatial scales and degrees of control. Each shows a different life script for individuals and its collectives. Some have a long history, transmitted intergenerationally through oral history and traditional knowledge systems. Others have a long history of formal constitutions, bodies of law, and public and advanced institutions, especially governance and educational ones. Critical here is the problem of social and political fragmentation. Also, there are questions about the use of science, and even the validity of science itself in some social circles.[18] The ongoing COVID-19 case and the anti-science and anti-vax contingent well illustrate problems.

Take these few environmental problems. First is about climate change and its consequences for the human enterprise. Unless we rapidly address this problem, some observers think that the collapse of civilization is the most likely outcome. The Earth's poles are warming at two to three times the rate of the rest of the world. Second is about the extinction crisis. It also poses existential threats to civilization. Biodiversity is declining worldwide, wreaking havoc on ecosystems. Third is about changes in the Atlantic Ocean that may be heading for collapse because of climate change. The consequences of a collapse would be far-reaching. Currently there is a weakening of the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation, which transports warm, salty water from the tropics to northern Europe and then sends colder water back south along the ocean floor.[19]

Finally, there is the problem of the overall human environmental footprint on Planet Earth. The World Wildlife Fund says we are not on a sustainable path for our planet's future.[20] Another way to look at this is to say that it would take 1.6 Earths to produce all the renewable resources we use today. And worse, the growing human population is expected to use the equivalent of two Earths of renewable resources per year by 2050. NASA's data supports the conclusion that humanity would need five Earths to produce the resources needed if everyone lived as Americans.

"We are demanding nature's services—using resources and creating CO_2 emissions—at a rate 44 percent faster than what nature can regenerate and reabsorb," a NASA document

said. One article asks, *World's Population Booms, Will Its Resources Be Enough for Us*? New projections of escalating human population growth increase the tension between humanity's expanding needs and what the planet can provide. The Scientists-warning@ lists.oregonstate.edu effort tracks these and many other vital trends and conditions. Clearly, we need to upgrade our problem-solving knowledge and skill urgently, and take action.[21] And then there is war, which all people hope can be avoided.[22] In sum, history shows devastating disagreement among nations and cultures.[23] Conflicts stem from a lack of agreement on the overriding goal of humankind, the needed social, political, and economic organization, and our relationship to nature and all non-human life.

5. Humans, Problem Solving, Education

Problems derive from our thinking, social organization, and individual and collective actions—from personal existential matters to large scale policy processes. The evolution and psychology of humans, as well as our social and political organization, prefigure how we go about problem solving and educating the young, especially in colleges and universities, to recognize and attend to challenges. Briefly, I review these three dimensions, each showing the latent power of convention that encourages or forces people into a certain, often limited mode of thinking and behaving.

5.1. Humans – Us

The biggest problem we face stems from (mis)understandings about our basic nature, biology, cultural history, and our relationship to nature and all non-human life. This is a neurological, philosophic, social, and political matter.[24] We are no longer a secret to ourselves. In the last 50 years, a huge volume of hard evidence from paleontology, anthropology, psychology, and sociology has given us data into our basic nature and how that plays out in our respective societies, cultures, and individual and group behavior.[25] This data describes and explains why people behave the way they do. The ape that became human over the last 100 thousand years has retained its biology today while it invented and continues to evolve symbolic culture—systems of meaning.[26] We did so, one word at a time, over tens of thousands of years, but especially in the last 10 thousand years.[27] Our present science of humans is our knowledge about ourselves.[28]

As I see it, the lack of widespread shared basic knowledge about our own evolutionary, psychological, and cultural standpoint creates a highly fragmented and conflictual social situation—locally, nationally, and internationally. There are huge differences in perspective/ identities, political systems, and actions everywhere. Diverse views abound over what "humankind" is. And, what are our goals, ideal living arrangements, and responsible relationships? Also, these differing views vary about our responsibility to nature and all nonhuman life. History shows dramatically different, often hardened perspectives on all these issues, divergent systems of meaning, and social organization that cause conflict (e.g., WW1 and WW2, the Cold War, and proxies). Many differences seem intractable. This situation will likely persist.

We are a species with an individual termination date (death) struggling to come to grips with our highly complex symbolic, technological, cultural, and its proper relation to nature.

Reconciling all this is the basic problem we face.[29] This reconciling matter is proving difficult due to the hold of convention across societies, cultures, and time. The single best alternative is that we need to educate ourselves about these matters, especially about our evolution and psychodynamics, and actually use our best knowledge and skills to approximate the overriding goal of "human dignity" for all.

Today, the dominant conventional view of ourselves is anthropocentric and this fosters an instrumentalization of nature, other life forms, and other humans. These conditioning factors combine with our existential psychodynamics and conventional notions of ourselves, society, and the environment to make it easy for people to conventionally seek short term self-interest, ego enhancement, personal value commitments, and support existing social and institutional order. I realize what I just said is too simple of a problem definition.

5.2. Problem Solving

The next problem is that there is no clear agreement on what the problems are that we face or useful methods of problem solving—rational problem orientation.[30] Today the dominant, conventional view of knowledge and problem solving is positivistic. Its benefits and limitations are widely known. There are counter epistemologies in competition with positivism (e.g., pre- and post-positivistic, traditional and local knowledge, critical theory). Positivism reinforces anthropocentrism, materialism, and instrumentalization of nature, other life forms, and other humans. Yet, it has obvious material advantages.

Problem definitions are about meaning, implications, and often urgency. They reflect how we think and talk about our concerns, often implicitly and conventionally. Defining problems as discrepancies between goals and actual or anticipated states of affairs attests to the fact that problems are socially constructed.[31] Problems are really a reflection of how we make meaning and how we think and talk about our concerns. Perhaps the single most important task before us is to use and apply a problem oriented (integrative, functional) approach (noted below). All scholars and practitioners can do is help society produce realistic problem definition(s). Problem dentitions function as a "package of ideas that includes, at least implicitly, an account of the causes and consequences of undesirable circumstances and a theory about how to improve them."[32] Without a clear problem definition, there is NO basis for even talking about solutions (options), much less for appraising choices or implementing them. There are many obstacles to realistic and actionable problem definitions, including our presently normalized conventional thoughtlessness.

5.3. Education

The goal of our colleges and universities is or should be to cultivate graduates who are willing and able to be self-governing in their personal and social lives, and contribute to problem resolution—personal and societal. The academy is the chief training ground for future citizens, professionals, and leaders. Ideally, the academy is concerned about advancing education in the common interest and in ameliorating social and environmental problems through empirical enquiry and analytic judgement.[33] Yet, today the dominant, conventional view of education is scientism and economism—neoliberal capitalism, often.

Education is given through a mix of courses, books, discussions, and experiences that inspire and unite, ideally. It should, more broadly, education, done well, should teach us about our intellectual and social heritage, and our larger context over evolutionary time. It should teach us about our culture, foreign cultures and our human struggles across the ages. Sometimes, it falls short.[34] With Richard Wallace and myself, we noted that the goal muddle and dominance of conventional approaches in the academy "puts into sharp relief the inadequacy of some academic programs to address major social and environmental challenges." Are we both fragmenting and complicating education and actual problem solving by our overreliance on convention?

Last is the fragility of integrated problem solving, now in its infancy. It is in a weak position, status-wise, as are integrated scholars and educators themselves. There is a lack of a shared, grounding identity across members of the academy in many different departments, programs, and institutions, which is problematic. In response, some colleges and universities are going to the "big tent" model of education, wherein more and more disciplines, epistemologies, perspectives and ideologies are added to the curriculum. Is this thoughtless convention at work?

5.4. A Problem Overview

The UN Sustainable Development Goals dominate the global discussion currently. Regardless of how goals are stated, the ideal approach is to bring about constructive change in all the channels that we can influence, and quickly. Take the evidence of climate change or biodiversity extinctions, for example. How about our social and political problems? What are we doing and is it successful?

We collectively know the barriers to constructive change across diverse arenas. The world is full of conventional thought and inaction, normalized because of our own fears, unsustainable self-stories, and dysfunctional institutions that block promising ways of organizing our lives and living together. Among the obstacles to a transition are status quo cognitive, social, and political pressures. Convention has too often foreclosed our consideration of integrated approaches to challenges. This makes it difficult for us to provide a healthy future for the next generation (and all nonhuman life on the planet). The key question is what is our relationship to nature? In other words, what are we supposed to get out of nature, and do we relate to her and transact with her in order to get what we need? Perhaps we need to ask, what is our major social duty to renew depleted nature? Do we have an obligation to pass on healthy nature to future generations?

6. Recommendations

Numerous authors have offered recommendations that variously target individuals/groups, national and international leaders, mass social movements, and the academy. Others favor focusing on climate change, population growth, or substantive subjects (e.g., extinctions, oceans, or subnational to local issues). Still others prefer upgrading processes (e.g., problem solving, leadership, education). History is full of seemingly impossible change actually happening (e.g., ending of the Cold War). Future success depends on how people see problems (and themselves), define them, and act on them. What are some options?

6.1. People, Leaders, Institutions

Change is in the air, for better or worse. We must address problems commensurate with the content and size of the problems. What might we do if the underlying problem we face is conventional? What changes are needed on the part of people, leaders, and institutions to move us toward more integrative thinking, understanding, and action? If successful, change would alter our perspective on ourselves and nature, and our relationships with other humans and nonhumans.

> *"The rise of global movements seems to have come from a recognition of the interconnection of all peoples around a common cause."*

6.2. People

Targets for upgrading should include individual people (their standpoints, knowledge, skills) and our collective social outlooks. The question here is how can we best attend to future thinking and work "outside and ahead of convention," while reaping benefits out of the convention's advantages? How can we get down to specifics and actions that make a real difference for the better?

Considering recommendations, Bonnett argues that we are operating now with an impoverishment of experiences and perception with nature and ourselves. We are trapped inside a conventional concern for "mastery over nature" that insulates us from the world and knowing ourselves deeply. Convention, with its doctrine and formula, objectifies, materializes, and commodifies nature. He thinks this buries us in a particular form of untruth. It limits our understanding of engagement with problems—self, social, and environmental. He argues that this makes us insensitive and even dismissive of experiences of normative aspects of the natural world and our own lives. In an earlier paper, he asks what a new kind of awareness looks like, as part of our moral sensitivity to nature and non-human life.[35] In the end, his recommendation is a call for a "re-awakening" in and of ourselves about our environment.[36] Changing people's perspectives is an important target. The academy could lead such an effort.

6.3. Leaders and Institutions

Change targets should include national and international leaders too. For example, Falk argues that our way forward is to engage globalism and whole human communities at appropriate scale, including leaders. He says that we need to affirm that our shared collective striving for recognition and a dignified material, social, and political life is in the realm of the possible. We must reimagine a sense of our place in the universe. He argues that this can create a sense of solidarity, a kind of patriotism for human and nonhuman kind wherein all of us are contributing to an enterprise much larger than our individual lives. This is transcendence in action. Such a perspective would not blur differences among people;

however, it might set up a system to view ourselves as working in complementarity. Transformation is dependent on the kind of leaders we get.

This, he says, is a helpful place to start our needed transformation. Yet, as Falk notes, our current leadership and institutions (and views of ourselves), which are largely conventional, will remain impervious to change toward a more cooperative, peaceful, just, and ecologically sound world. It seems currently that we are paralyzed by normalized convention (thoughtlessness). I agree, the most urgent need is for integrated problem-oriented leadership and citizenry. There is a trend toward integrated undertakings by many people that are being carried out now, worldwide. Many of these are at the individual or small group level. They know what is to be done within their context of operations. The challenge before us is formalizing transformative education and the application of integrated problem-solving. Do we have time?

> *"All things are interconnected and the meaning of anything depends on its context."*

Another recommendation by Witter is that global mass movements present an opportunity for gains.[37] Global networks of activists can have influence well beyond national borders. He summarizes historic movements such as antislavery, the labor movement, socialist movement, the peace movement, environment movement, nuclear disarmament, movement against corporate globalization, and women's rights movement. True, all these movements have faced furious backlash and opposition. Nevertheless, the rise of global movements seems to have come from a recognition of the interconnection of all peoples around a common cause (e.g., human dignity in healthy environments). He argues that global movements need to be organized, focused, and (self-) empowered, as they seek transformative change.

There is much work ahead. Perhaps most important is to make a change in the world around oneself. This is the situation in which we can be most influential and constructive. There is no guarantee they will be successful in overcoming the powerful normalized convention that now dominates most everywhere. Nevertheless, there are promising avenues for constructive change that reinforce hope for the transformation needed.

6.4. Integrated Problem Solving

Perhaps the most promising way to bring about constructive change is to teach and use integrative problem solving. As a key target or opportunity, this is likely the most direct, transformative way to upgrade our actions. Here are five considerations that make up integrated problem-solving. This approach is being taught successfully in the academy now and in applied work.[38] These five considerations taken together function to help us overcome the limitations of operating within convention.

6.5. Five Key Perspectives

There are five important perspectives to take on any program or policy to understand it and ameliorate problems. By "perspective," I mean a distinctive way to look at the program or policy in question. Each perspective is important if you want to avoid being

misled by ignorance, convention, or by a promoter—a propagandist, lobbyist, or partisan promoter or salesperson, for example. These five and their foundation come from social and political thought and are abstracted into the policy sciences or configurative framework. The framework consists of a logically complete set of mapping categories that can help us understand and address policy problems. This framework is a practical means of organizing our thinking, our knowledge, and our problem-solving efforts, and therefore it allows us to define a problem usefully and understand its context. Doing so opens up options.

This *integrated, problem-oriented approach* permits users to:

- *find* the important pieces of information on a program or policy in a maze of reports that is typically incomplete and distorted;
- *identify* what pieces are important but missing in those reports and actions;
- *organize* the pieces into a coherent picture of the problem and response under inquiry;
- *evaluate* that picture from rational, political, and moral standpoints; and
- *construct* a more educated perspective of the program or policy or a new program or policy of your own.

The five perspectives follow. First is *standpoint clarification*, which is about your own perspective, assumptions, and viewing angle (see notes Clark 2002, pp. 111-126). Ideally, the standpoint is about self-awareness in psychological, existential, professional, and social sense. It is about you being both a participant and an "anthropological" observer.

Second is the *problem orientation*, which directs your attention to the rationality of the program or policy—and asks whether it is reasonable enough. Problem orientation is a strategy for constructing a more rational policy (see notes for Clark 2002, pp. 85-110). The basic concepts involved in it are:

- *Goals* are preferred outcomes—something you want to achieve.
- *Trends* are past and recent events relevant to goals.
- *Conditions* are factors that shape those trends, causes, motives, policies, etc.
- *Projections* are probable future developments under various circumstances.
- *Alternatives* are courses of action—what you can do to realize goals.

In these terms, the logic of sound policymaking is to choose the alternative that you expect (on the basis of trends, conditions, and projections) is the best means of realizing your goals.

Third is the *social process* (a mapping tool), which directs your attention to the people involved in any issue, their perspectives, and the context (see notes Clark 2002, pp. 32-55). It rests on the principle of contextuality (see notes Clark 2002, pp. 29-30). This principle recognizes that all things are interconnected and that the meaning of anything depends on its context. It is comprised of seven elements: participants, their perspectives—(identities,

expectations, and demands), the situation, the values involved, strategies in use, outcomes, and longer-term effects.

Fourth is the *decision process*, which directs your attention to the politics arising from conflicts among policies (see notes Clark 2002, pp. 56-84). The decision process is a means of reconciling conflicts and achieving consensus on policy and programs through politics. Politics are inevitable because people develop and promote different policies reflecting their special interests. This brings us to the fifth task that directs us to look at "basic premises."

6.6. Basic Premises

Fifth is about *basic premises*, or relationships among beliefs, worldviews, myths, and paradigms, which directs your attention as a problem solver to the morality of policies. That is, whether they are morally justified within the community, given the cultural myth (myth is used in anthropological terms) (see notes Clark, 2002, pp. 21-23). Premises in cultures are accepted largely as a matter of faith (not reason) through socialization and acculturalization of young children and adolescents.

The political myth serves to justify and explain the possession and use of power—whether or not its assumptions or premises are true.[39] Myth is used here in the anthropological sense to describe the basic beliefs of individuals, communities, and cultures. In conventional usage, myth means false belief. In our use, myth is what people see themselves to be ("who am I"), how they fit in, and an explanation of what and why their community does what it does. Myth has three components as we use it.

- *Doctrine* is the part of the myth that sets forth the basic aims and expectations of the community. Authoritative statements of doctrine are often found in preambles to constitutions and other formal declarations.

- *Formula* is the part of the myth that prescribes the basic rules for progress according to the basic aims and expectations of the community. This is the basic law or constitution, which may or may not be written.

- *Miranda* are the symbols to emulate and admire in the political myth. They include the heroes, flags, and anthems that are displayed on ceremonial occasions.

Premises are continuously reaffirmed and redefined through their use in social and political discourse. Conflicts over policies, programs, and politics (the uses and abuses of power) can become so acute that they threaten to disrupt or destroy a political system. The various meanings are located in the minds of people, who occasionally and with various degrees of skill express what they mean through the manipulation of signs and symbols.

These five concepts and operations comprise integrated problem solving. They open up a functional view on convention (see notes for Clark 2002, pp. 123-125). They are practically invaluable in application. Learning this problem-oriented approach, the framework, and its skillful use requires a great deal of practice and experience. However, it is possible to understand the basic concepts and operations, including how they have been used by other

people in a course or workshop.[40] The integrated problem-oriented approach can be useful to students, professionals, and leaders alike. This brings us to education and the academy.

6.7. Education and The Academy

Currently, there are problems with conventional education in colleges and universities. This is due to their struggle to organize and teach knowledge across disciplines and educate students to become problem solvers and leaders. Despite an interest in the academy in meeting these goals, many remained mired in goal muddles, an offering of a disciplinary hodgepodge, and a curricular smorgasbord. Criticisms of conventional education and programs include claims that they tend to emphasize narrow technical proficiency. Typically, it is disciplinary based. These sources reify convention. This in in contrast to education for more integrative, policy-oriented problem-solving knowledge and skills for real-world applications.

As to goals for the academy, among them should be: (1) education should aim to develop the skill of critical, independent thought, (2) it should induce attentiveness, sensitiveness of perception, receptiveness to new ideas, and imaginative sympathy with the experiences of others, (3) it should strive to cultivate an intelligent, thoughtful loyalty to the ideas of the democratic society, and (4) it should really empower those inner resources and attributes of character that enable the individual, when necessary, to stand alone.[41] Targets of educational efforts should attend to these goals and support curricula. Successful academic programs could produce both disciplinary and interdisciplinary (integrated) knowledge, as well as developing students with the wisdom and skills to address complex problems and complex social and environmental matters.[42]

6.8. Goal Clarity

We recommend explicitly adopting the overriding goal of "human dignity," including the requirement for mutual respect and other values essential for people to live full lives in healthy, sustainable environments. "Human dignity, which is both a value position and a moral aim, is a summative symbol that represents a desired state associated with certain basic human values (such as respect, health, well-being, freedom, rectitude, and education). Environmental conditions and human dignity are tightly linked. Human dignity cannot be achieved without conservation of nature, protection of environmental quality, and thriving in all non-human life.

My colleagues and I have recommended three principles for improvement education: goal clarity, integrated problem orientation (interdisciplinarity), and skill-based pedagogy. They are: (1) an understanding of how the policy-making system works and how human value interactions constitute the core of professional work, (2) mastery of skills in critical thinking and the development of an integrated (interdisciplinary) "procedural rationality" for analyzing problems and evaluating potential solutions, and (3) development of influence and responsibility within policy and programmatic systems.[43] Seminars, case studies, and field trips are among the tools that can develop these skills in students and others. All these should be teaching us to be free and that human dignity is worth striving for. Finally, the educational community has great potential to improve the utility and relevance of education.

6.9. Skill-Based Education and Effective Programs

Graduates will carry out diverse tasks in their work lives, whether academic or applied, hopefully for the public good. Problem-solving activities overlap and interact with the work of public policymakers and leaders. Graduates figure into and influence social and decision process, including conducting research (basic and applied), writing and publishing technical and popular articles, monographs, and books, lecturing to professional and public audiences, commenting on matters of civic and public interest, teaching short courses, leading field trips, in-service training short courses, and formal academic courses, participating in professional and civic organizations, preparing, reading, commenting on, and reinterpreting agency and other documents and decision, advising organizations and leaders, or serving on boards and formal advisory organizations, consulting and negotiating with allies and adversaries, bringing out fact (or concealing) facts or policies that decision-makers need, and serving as ordinary or expert witnesses.

What knowledge and skills do graduates need to take responsibility in these roles? Three specific bodies of knowledge would contribute to educating students to be policy-oriented. They are: (1) understanding human interactions, (2) developing professional skills, and (3) influencing policy.[44] In sum, for many college and university programs these require changes from existing education. Many authors have laid out what they see is needed for establishing college and university programs that educate for these three in the service of "human dignity" in healthy environments. These require effective delivery of knowledge and skills via curricula.

Understanding problems and problem-solving concepts, operations, and skills must grow case-by-case over time. Among recommendations, Brunner's *Raising standards: a prototyping strategy for undergraduate education* is important. Bammer recommends uniting, organizing, responding, and fighting for such programs. She sees that institutionalizing "transdisciplinarity" requires its practitioners to co-construct a big-picture vision.[45] Unfortunately, she notes that many people who have pioneered such an approach have often fought draining battles for even the smallest gains. She recognizes the barriers cited earlier in this paper to both her and my recommendations. And for the record, my colleagues and I, and many others, have been struggling against this conventional syndrome, which has foreclosed promising opportunities for imagination, learning, and experimenting with our own individual development and the "integrity" problem convention causes.[46]

The integrated approach I recommend invites us to "reimagine a future by exploring what might be possible. This requires an initial willingness of the imagination to let go of the trappings of the present [convention] without engaging in wishful thinking," says Falk. He sees that our shortfall or failure to date to bring about the needed transition is due to convention.

7. Discussion

This paper examined our current conventional (thoughtful or thoughtless) approach to problems, problem solving, and education in different ways as a major problem in the world today. Currently, we are all faced with huge social and environmental problems that portend

catastrophe unless we address them effectively. "More than ever, we must face the question; can the peoples of Earth, doomed to share a ravaged planet, learn to live together in a way that encourages our species to flourish in the emergent future?" says Falk (2021). What do we need to do?

> *"Can our gifted and educated youth, using rationality, modern science, and technology, foster a wave of mass social action? Can they overcome parochial interests, misinformation, and conventional arrangements?"*

7.1. Global Solidarity

Will a new kind of global "solidarity" help us?[47] Some authors see that a global "movement" is needed. I argue that the academy could front integrated problem solving as a means to explore this option. There is much to do to get us to a shared global identity to tackle climate change, species extinctions, and widespread ecosystem degradation, much less ramped human indignity. Global solidarity is well outside conventional, parochial identities currently. There is much activism, science, and movement currently appealing to individuals' identities, loyalties, and institutions, some helpful, some not.

What is a new global "solidarity?" Lasswell's (1972) treatise on the *Future systems of identity in the world community* is helpful here.[48] For global solidarity to become reality, we need to understand "identity" and foster a new shared human identity of solidarity. Public civic order and social movements depend on many factors, identity being a major one. Our future will continue to be affected by the predispositions of people whose identity and loyalties are expressed in the kinds of institutions they support. People who share identity, share a self-image, a cognitive map of themselves and others.

At present, these features are organized from the tribe to the national level supporting unifying identifications and security, including nationalism and war-fighting capabilities. These are factors affecting our future and our present system of world public order. Despite the UN, European Union, and many other constructive efforts, people's perspectives and identities are dominated by a structure that produces division and sustains the institutions of nationalism and war fighting. Just look at the present global picture of vying national states, the level of resources going into the military and security alliances.

7.2. Mass Social Movements

Will mass social movements help and are they likely to happen? The task before us is to mobilize and organize mass action in favor of decisions and institutions that can bring about the change and transformation needed to avert disaster. What the future holds will be influenced by the attitudes and actions of the young. Clearly, many youth in the world today

are disturbed by events. This can lead to alienation as problems become clearer and our ability to address them seems to recede.

Can mass social action be organized across classes, education levels, and many other features of our current divisions? In some localities, youth are poised for collective action on varying scales. Yet some are busy cancelling people they feel are opposed to them and engaged in other diversionary actions. Are the preconditions present or can they be constructed to mobilize the outpouring of the emotionality, intellect, and energy needed by youth today for constructive social action?

We need to find ways to render contingencies more vivid. In doing so, we must address injustices, as they currently fuel conflict, fragmentation, and division. Can we accelerate a convergence of lifestyles and identities without obliterating nature, other life, our individuality, and the resources on which we depend? This brings up questions of population size and consumption patterns. How do we overcome status quo interest coalitions and build new coalitions to address our urgent shared problems? Will today's youth catalyze and lead a transformation toward the needed new identity, solidarity, and action?

Successfully motivating mass action in the face of powerful, restrictive interests and forces (the status quo) is ongoing. Can we mobilize enough people/identities to make a difference in time? Can we change global and civic order to stave off disaster? Communications can help, as we now live in a world where the internet/social networks reach millions in an instant. Yet, there is much misinformation afloat—fake facts. Can our gifted and educated youth, using rationality, modern science, and technology, foster a wave of mass social action? Can they overcome parochial interests, misinformation, and conventional arrangements? Many youth think they can. How can the academy help?

7.3. Higher Education

The conventional view of problem solving and education, according to some authors, has been 'conventionalized" and "normalized"—disciplined (and hybridized). Problems, however, cannot be understood or addressed using convention or one or a mix of disciplines or hybrid disciplines alone. A combined functional and conventional approach (taken together the integrative approach) permits us to better assay a problem (using problem orientation) by interrogating the content and context (social process), and exploring options (via decision process), all the while we are aware of our standpoint (values, knowledge, skills).

Further, the academy could engage with the deep knowledge and skills that the academy now generates and transmits. Some authors argue that the academy should be featuring personal experiences of nature as a transcendent other. We should learn to see nature as an inherent value. Further, we should develop moral sensitivity. This amounts to a kind of attentiveness and ethic.

My case in this paper is to support science; in fact, we need more of it in our integrated problem solving, yet we must learn to use science in a fully integrative, contextual, and problem-oriented way. The distinction between conventional and functional perspectives and problem solving that I use comes from anthropology, psychology, sociology, and

professional policy analytic understanding of human interactions. A functional approach, can in fact, confront convention in problem solving. Presenting the functional value-added approach to otherwise conventional problem solvers can open up much insight and many opportunities for improvement. The academy can be the chief agent in doing so.

8. Conclusion

One big problem we face seems to be "convention," thoughtless or not. We are immersed in the all-knowing, averaged-off, common sense of the anonymous "they"—what everybody knows and understands—convention. This paper included contemporary, wide-ranging literature to introduce and illustrate challenges we face across social and political organization situations, especially in the academic arena. Convention likely has deep existential and psychological origins and is thus not easily recognized as such or successfully addressed either in our individual or collective lives. We are loath to recognize or engage in these because doing so reveals our precarious situation and our anxieties. In fact, we have generated hugely successful defense mechanisms—personal and cultural—to avoid confronting them. Thus, convention dominates our thinking and actions. These blinding mechanisms are little discussed today for reasons of fear, ego maintenance, individual and collective coping in our uncertain and complex world, and because institutionalized rewards favor those that maintain the status quo. These block a deeper understanding of ourselves, the world and what to do about problems.

Addressing the problem of convention might allow us to thrive and live in a free, sustainable way with each other and the material and living environment on which we totally depend. We create problems and at the same time solve them. The basic concepts and operations in the integrated problem orientation, the social and decision process, and basic premises are tools for critical thinking and can help us address problems. With some effort, a person can expect to understand the concepts—including how they have been used. A functional problem solver looks for connections, relationships, and systems prosperities in social and decision processes. Often, this view makes connections that are frequently overlooked by those who uncritically and unreflectively use conventional, ordinary ways of understanding, talking and doing. Functional understanding depends explicitly and systematically on a comprehensive mode, map, or image of the social process to guide attention to the value and significance of details. The integrated problem solver sees the same events and processes as other people who are limited to convention, but has the added capacity to develop a richer, more complete, and more useful understanding of the meaning of things. The conventional approach assigns ordinary meaning to concrete circumstances, whereas the functional analysis looks for special meaning depending on the contents. Good problem solving integrates what is rational, authorized under law, and justified under basic premises.

Personally, as a member of the academy and interested in critical scholarship grounded in long experience and pragmatism, I hope this article can lead to improved integrative and cooperative problem solving. This paper points to promising integrative concepts and operations, and integrative education in the academy and in the field on multiple fronts. In the end, can we as a species vitalize and act toward our dreams (global goals of realizing

a commonwealth of dignity in healthy environments) for humanity by taking pragmatic actions?

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