

“An Inconvenient Truth” is the film version of Al Gore’s slide-show presentation on global warming. Near the end, Gore shows a picture of the Earth as what he calls a “pale blue dot.” The Earth is a single pixel on a huge cosmological screen. The picture was taken from a distance in space of 4 billion miles. Gore says, “Everything that has ever happened in all of human history has happened on that dot. All the triumphs and tragedies, all the wars and all the famines, all the major advances. That is what is at stake—our ability to live on planet Earth, to have a future as a civilization.” He concludes the film with this conceit: “Future generations may well have occasion to ask themselves, ‘What were our parents thinking? Why didn’t they wake up when they had the chance?’ We have to hear that question from them now.”



Fundamentally, human cognition is designed to work at human scale. For example, we are very good at understanding a few agents interacting in familiar expanses of space and time. We are much less equipped to think about and understand phenomena that do not fit human scale. Through the basic cognitive operation of "blending" (also known as conceptual integration), we can blend what is not at human scale with what is at human scale and so, in the blend, work on those issues at human scale. Familiar forms of ethical thought and response that operate at human scale (what do you do when a child falls down and cries?) are not available outside of human scale. Blending can induce ethical consideration by bringing the issue

to human scale. Gore blends our everyday experience of the visual field as we move away from an object - the percept diminishes in size in the visual field - with our knowledge of the earth in space, so as to create a visual representation in which we perceive the entire Earth as a tiny dot in our visual field. No human being could literally see the visual field represented by the photograph, but we can see the photograph and conceive of the Earth as something at human scale, something compressed and unified that humanity (compressed to single agency) directly acts upon. At this scale, we are more likely to have access to a sense of responsibility for our action. He performs a similar compression to human scale of time over generations. Non-existent members of future generations are blended with an actual living person, so that, in the blend, the unified members can think and voice their questions to us. "We have to hear that question from them now." In the human-scale blend, there is a normal human mechanism for ethical consideration: we are challenged by those we have harmed.

Visual representation is particularly useful in achieving human scale because vision is a major basis of embodied cognition. Fifty per cent of human neocortex is implicated in vision. Blending is commonly used to create human-scale conceptions that conduce to ethical consideration. For the most part, the blending goes unnoticed. I have selected a pyrotechnic example so as to put the process and its consequences for ethics on stage.

