

# Is Experiencing the Overview Effect a Human Right?

By Frank White

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***We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of happiness.***” (Declaration of Independence)

***Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world...*** (United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights)

While the Founders of what became the United States considered certain truths to be self-evident, the fact is that we rarely think that way in the modern era. Instead, we ourselves endow certain entities with rights, and it happens more because our consciousness evolves, rather than because of something inherent in those people, animals, or something else.

In contrast to this dramatic statement in the Declaration of Independence, the history of the U.S. is rife with examples of marginalized groups who were not recognized to have rights but attained them in a variety of ways. Among the most notable examples are, of course, people of color and women, who have been fighting to have their rights recognized since the very founding of the country. Most would say their struggles continue to this day. Furthermore, today advocates for animal rights are making progress in their efforts to protect both domestic and wild animals from abuse, and there are also those pushing for similar protections for trees. As we move out into other parts of the solar system, the question is arising as to whether planets have rights!<sup>(1)</sup>

Historian Noah Yuval Harari argues that, in fact, no entity inherently has any rights. Harari suggests that we humans endow people, animals, and other things with rights and that is where these privileges come from. He also seems to think that the myths we create about rights help society to evolve.<sup>(2)</sup> Regardless of whether rights are created by a divine force, by human beings, or in some other way, they only have any practical meaning if they are recognized by human society.

This may happen because a deliberative body like the United Nations engages in a debate about what a human right might be, and then publishes the results of that conversation. That is the case with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In other situations, someone like my friend and colleague Rick Tumlinson gives a lot of thought to an issue and then publishes the results, which is how his Declaration of Human Rights in the Universe came to be.<sup>(3)</sup>

There is also the approach of simply declaring something to be a human right and repeating it over and over again, until most people accept it as a truth. This is how Senator Bernie Sanders from Vermont has made healthcare into a right, not a privilege. At every opportunity and with his distinctive Brooklyn accent, he simply says, "Healthcare is a right, not a privilege." The more you think about it, the more sense it makes. Why should someone who is wealthy have better healthcare than someone who is poor? We're all human, aren't we, so shouldn't all of us have access to good healthcare, or at least some basic level of treatment?

In the United States, this idea has made a lot of progress, and as Bernie himself says, his ideas were once radical, but have now become mainstream. Whether you agree with Senator Sanders or not, you have to admit that his approach has worked.

### ***Experiencing the Overview Effect as a Human Right***

Since the mid-1980s, I have been conducting research into the experience of astronauts when they view the Earth from space and in space, from Low Earth Orbit or on lunar missions. <sup>(4)</sup> My colleagues and I have suggested that the experience results in a profound shift in worldview, one in which the astronaut clearly sees the extent to which the Earth is a unified whole, a system where everything is interconnected. They often say the experience convinces them that "we're all in this together."

I have come to believe that it is a human right for everyone to experience the Overview Effect, either by going on a suborbital hop, into orbit, or through a virtual reality experience, because it reveals to us the truth of who we are and where we are in the universe. I can simply say it, like Bernie Sanders, or I can offer some reasons why we should think of it this way. I can also argue that adopting this attitude will help human society to evolve.

The truth is that the Earth is in space, it has always been in space, and it will always be in space. To use a popular metaphor of our times, we are the astronauts of Spaceship Earth and we are constantly exploring space as the Earth moves through the universe at an unbelievably high rate of speed. However, although we know that we are on a planet and this planet is in motion, our senses tell us that the Earth is a stable platform with the heavens revolving about us. We experience the world as our ancestors did, 100, 1,000, even 10,000 years ago.

We are like the people described in Plato's *Republic*, who live in a cave in which there is a great fire. They stare at shadows reflected on the wall by the fire and take those images for reality. When one of them leaves the cave and goes out to the "real world," they can't understand what he is talking about on his return.

Is it any wonder that we are destroying our spaceship and making it almost uninhabitable? Is it so puzzling that we kill one another over borders and boundaries that cannot even be seen from orbit or the Moon? Is it really a surprise that we cannot work together, even to save ourselves from catastrophe?

No, how can we correct any of these behaviors if we do not know the truth? And isn't it every human being's right to know the truth?

The truth is that the astronauts do not "go into space," since we are already in space. In fact, they leave the planet and view it from a new vantage point. Fewer than 600 people have had this direct experience, and most of them feel a compelling need to share it with the rest of us. Why? Because they think we might use this new knowledge to make the world a better place.

It won't happen by accident, which is why a number of us have established a worldwide movement to "bring the Overview Effect down to Earth." In my opinion, the only way to have the full experience of the Overview Effect is to have the same experience as the astronauts, which will require people to make use of the commercial spaceflights soon to be available through Virgin Galactic, Blue Origin, SpaceX, and others. However, virtual reality also offers an opportunity to simulate the experience and a number of people are working in that domain as well. <sup>(5)</sup>

At another level, we have the "Down to Earth" series being offered by NASA <sup>(6)</sup>. While the astronauts themselves say that pictures and videos don't fully convey what they saw and felt, these "reports from orbit" are a good start for surface dwellers.

It will take an enormous effort to make the worldview of the Overview Effect "the worldview of the world," but we must begin where we are, undaunted by the odds, just as rights campaigners have done in the past. Success will benefit not only those who have the experience but our home planet as well.

A great teacher once said, "You will know the truth and the truth will set you free." Isn't it time for humanity to set itself free? Isn't it time to declare that experiencing the Overview Effect is a human right?

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## Notes

1. F. White, "The Need for a Planetary Engineering Ethic," April 22, 2018, 2211.world, <https://2211.world/the-need-for-a-planetary-engineering-ethic/>
2. Y. N. Harari, Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind, Signal Books, 2014.
3. R. Tumlinson, "A Declaration of the Rights and Responsibilities of the Rights of Humanity in the Universe," Earthlight Foundation, <https://2211.world/the-need-for-a-planetary-engineering-ethic/>
4. F. White, The Overview Effect: Space Exploration and Human Evolution, Multiverse Publishing LLC, 2021.

5. Annahita Nezami is planning to use the Overview Effect and virtual reality in psychotherapy and other applications: <https://www.vr-overview-effect.co.uk/about-us>;  
Ryan Holmes and Space/VR are working to reproduce the Overview Effect experience using flotation tanks and VR: <https://spacevr.co/book-your-orbit/>;  
Jeremy Nickel offers an Overview Effect meditation twice a week at his online spiritual community: <https://evolvr.org>.
6. [https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=down+to+earth%3A+the+astronaut%27s+perspective](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=down+to+earth%3A+the+astronaut%27s+perspective)