

Philosophy, Wisdom, and the Future

Tom Lombardo, Ph.D.

Philosophy, from the ancient Greek, means the “love of wisdom.” What I wish to propose is that futurists should become philosophers in this sense: The primary guiding mindset and aspiration for futurists should be the pursuit, development, and practice of wisdom. My argument is simple: Wisdom is the highest expression of future consciousness and therefore should be the standard relative to which all thinking about the future and all approaches to the future are modeled and judged.

Let me begin by presenting a definition of wisdom, an evolving definition since wisdom itself is not some static capacity or trait, but a dynamic reality in evolution. I draw this definition from various articles I have written on wisdom, education, and the future.¹ Wisdom can be defined as the highest expression of self-development and future consciousness. It is the continually evolving understanding of and fascination with the big picture of life, of what is important, ethical, and meaningful, and the desire and ability to apply this understanding to enhance the well being of life, both for oneself and others. This definition has been distilled from contemporary psychological research and philosophical discussion, reflecting both Eastern and Western thinking, on the nature of wisdom.²

Now I will unpack this definition and enrich it with certain important details and implications, demonstrating why all of the central features of productively thinking about and successfully dealing with issues of the future are captured in this definition.

First note that wisdom is the pinnacle of human self-development. Numerous psychologists who have studied human development identify wisdom as the highest level of cognitive, emotional, personal, and ethical development that can be realized in humans. If futurists wish to walk the talk – to live their lives as exemplars of what they argue for – to intuitively understand what the ideal possibilities of human evolution in the future are - then futurists should aspire to wisdom in their own personal development.

Further, regarding this opening point, I should highlight that wisdom is a holistic psychological trait – it is not simply a cognitive capacity or storehouse of knowledge. There are emotional and personal features associated with the trait. Now it seems to me that our conscious attitude or general mindset relative to the future – what I refer to as “future consciousness” – involves emotional, motivational, and personal features, for example, the qualities of hope, fear, optimism-pessimism, and self-efficacy.³ Further, I would argue that constructive thinking and action relative to the future necessarily involve positive emotional and personal qualities. A negative emotional orientation, e.g., depression and pessimism, inhibits creative thinking and generates self-fulfilling negative prophecies. People who are afraid of the future run away from it or attack those who wish to embrace it. On the other hand, wisdom tends to be associated with the positive qualities of hope, compassion, and self-efficacy. To inspire and teach

others about the future requires a positive emotional set relative to the future. To find constructive solutions to problems facing us requires optimism, hope, and other affective qualities. Hence, constructive future consciousness can not be seen as just a cognitive capacity; it is not simply a set of skills or body of knowledge. The holistic quality of wisdom captures this quintessential feature of constructive future consciousness.

Next, as already mentioned above, wisdom is dynamical and growing; in particular wisdom, as a form of knowledge and understanding, does not stand still – it keeps expanding and enriching itself. Whatever type of knowledge base we use to approach the future, that knowledge base must be conceived of as transformative and evolutionary. We can not understand the future from a static or stable position. (“The future ain’t what it used to be, and it never was.”) I have argued elsewhere that a key element of wisdom is that it continually incorporates new ideas and discoveries, for example, from contemporary science; one can’t be wise and stand still epistemologically. Part of any viable knowledge system is that it is open to revision, that it is tempered with doubt and humility, or how else would it transform and grow? Openness and epistemic humility are qualities of wisdom, and clearly these qualities are necessary in thinking about and conceptualizing the future.

Wisdom is comprehensive and integrative knowledge about life and the diverse aspects of human reality. For one thing, any viable approach to the future must be holistic, incorporating ecological, global, and even cosmic considerations and perspectives. This broad and synthetic picture of reality embodied in wisdom also includes the temporal dimension of things – of past, present, and future. Wisdom connects the heritage and lessons of the past with the thoughtfulness, openness, and creativity needed for the future. Wisdom involves an expansive synthesis of temporal consciousness – it combats the excessive narrow “presentism” of today. Predicting the future is based upon understanding the patterns of the past; guiding the future is based upon having learned from the mistakes and successes of the past. The futurist and the person of wisdom see outward into space and time and pull it together.

In the next part of the definition, I want to highlight the term “ethical,” for wisdom is a capacity focused on doing what is ethically best (or being guided by what is ethically best). Wisdom is ethically informed knowledge – wisdom is applied ethics. Again, wisdom is not just a cognitive capacity. Wisdom is also a virtue – an ethical character trait.

In considering the main types of thinking about the future, thinking about preferable futures occupies an important position. It is not enough to imagine possibilities or predict probabilities; it is just as important to consider the most preferable direction for the future. Thinking about the future must be ethically informed. Ethics ties in with choice; if the future is seen as an arena of possibilities and different choices, then it is ethical considerations that should determine which choices (or decisions) are made. To think and act ethically with respect to the future is just another way to define wisdom.

Wisdom is also connected with other virtues such as courage and compassion, which are also important factors in approaching the future. The

future is uncertain, hence courage is required in making decisions and carrying out actions regarding the future. Compassion is part of wisdom because wisdom is concerned not only with personal betterment but the betterment of humanity. One will not be concerned about others and their well being unless one has compassion for others.

The last part of the definition indicates that wisdom is practical knowledge; it involves the capacity to positively impact reality. Analogously, futures thinking, or more broadly future consciousness, should have practical relevance; it should provide guidance regarding how to act. Action connects with ethics, for it is ethics which guides the choice of actions, but as a starting point, we must have the know-how and capacity to produce desired effects in the world through our actions. Wisdom is efficacious future consciousness.

Futurists argue that thinking about the future and becoming informed of the possibilities and probabilities of the future is of great benefit, the least of which, if we follow Francis Bacon's dictum that "Knowledge is power," is that we will be better able to constructively cope with and effectively direct the future unfolding of events. Yet, what normative model is provided regarding how best to realize the capacity of future consciousness? I have proposed that wisdom, as a virtue, a character trait, and a form of knowledge, provides the best model for describing heightened, efficacious, and constructive future consciousness. It is the ideal we should aspire toward in our own self-development and in guiding the development of others. Futurists should become philosophers in the true sense of the word.

¹ Lombardo, Thomas “The Pursuit of Wisdom and the Future of Education” *Creating Global Strategies for Humanity's Future*. Mack, Timothy C. (Ed.) World Future Society, Bethesda, Maryland, 2006; Lombardo, Thomas “Developing Constructive and Creative Attitudes and Behaviors about the Future: Part IV – Wisdom, Virtues, and the Ideal Future Self-Narrative” in World Futures Study Federation *Futures Bulletin*, Volume 32, No. 3, June, 2007; Lombardo, Thomas “Wisdom and the Second Enlightenment” in World Futures Study Federation *Futures Bulletin*, Volume 32, No. 3, June, 2007b; Lombardo, Thomas, “The Evolution and Psychology of Future Consciousness” *Journal of Future Studies*, Volume 12, No. 1, August, 2007.

² Macdonald, Copthorne *The Wisdom Page* - <http://www.wisdompage.com/>; Sternberg, Robert (Ed.) *Wisdom: Its Nature, Origins, and Development*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990; Sternberg, Robert and Jordan, Jennifer (Ed.) *A Handbook of Wisdom: Psychological Perspectives*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

³ Lombardo, Thomas “The Value of Future Consciousness” in *Foresight, Innovation, and Strategy*. Wagner, C. (Ed.) World Future Society: Bethesda, Maryland, 2005; Lombardo, Thomas “Thinking Ahead: The Value of Future Consciousness”, *The Futurist*, January-February, 2006; Lombardo, Thomas “Developing Constructive and Creative Attitudes and Behaviors about the Future: Part I – Deep Learning, Emotion, and Motivation” in World Futures Study Federation *Futures Bulletin*, Volume 31, No. 6, November, 2006.