

Wisdom and Futures Studies

Vahid Motlagh

Book Review

Wisdom, Consciousness, and the Future by Tom Lombardo. 461 pages. Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2011. ISBN13: 978-1-4628-8360-8. \$23.99 paper.

In a world where students feel outraged to see that illustrious professors were bought by the ultra-rich tyrant of Libya and his son to ghostwrite some intellectual book and dissertation; where the bridal industrial complex is profiteering from people's search for authentic happiness; and where analysts and experts work on quick yet unwise solutions to tackle global challenges—solutions that often backfire—Lombardo reaches out and asks you to wait a moment. He invites you to do a magnificent soul-searching, thorough uncovering of your life story with the purpose of monitoring how well you live a set of ethical virtues that can connect your personal future with the future of humanity.

Lombardo, a perceptibly liberal yet spiritual thinker, is impressively well versed in cutting edge philosophy, anthropology, psychology, and high technology, all knowledge enterprises that, according to him, can be integrated under the interdisciplinary discipline of futures studies. In his view, however, one big thing missing from this growing knowledge enterprise is a synthesis of Western and Eastern schools of thought. While the former focuses on science, reason, and analytical thinking, the latter highlights insight, intuition, and holistic thinking. Lombardo's goal is to strike some resonance with the readers of his book, *Wisdom, Consciousness, and the Future*, (a collection of thematically connected essays written from 2004 to 2011) and help them embark on a secular Ark which may save them from the vast inundation of fragmented

and senseless information chunks, bringing them to a land of integrated, ordered wisdom also identified as heightened future consciousness.

The future in Lombardo's view is all about the possibilities ahead. In essays such as "Developing Constructive and Creative Attitudes and Behaviors about the Future," he helps readers apply this model to their own lives through one important tool—story telling. A word of caution here, however; the reader may qualify to come on board if and only if he or she remains committed to a set of character virtues, among them the following: self-responsibility (necessary to escape perceived helplessness about the future); discipline and commitment (necessary to combat chaos and relativism); transcendence (necessary to care about the future of humanity and not only one's ego); courage (necessary to face uncertainties and make decisions); hope and optimism (necessary to avoid depression); love (necessary to pull the individual out of solipsistic isolation and recognize the interdependence of all entities in reality); temperance/balance (necessary to synthesize analytical skills with intuition and insight); and wisdom (necessary to make intelligent and informed ethical decisions about the future). These virtues are shown to have a solid link with mental health, and clearly one target audience for this book is all people who feel unfulfilled living in contemporary society.

Two main themes connecting the essays in this book are wisdom and heightened future consciousness, the latter a psychological capacity for approaching the future creatively and constructively that Lombardo finds critical to human flourishing. Using a comparative method, he demonstrates that wisdom and heightened future

consciousness are almost identical. Though focused on the future, wisdom is grounded in an understanding of patterns of change across time, applying broad cognitive, emotional, and evaluative capacities to future possibilities and the progression of complexity. Lombardo asserts that wisdom is “the highest expression of future consciousness” for a number of reasons: Wisdom brings ethics to bear on the future; it has a holistic quality, reflecting a synergy of heart and mind (we feel about the future as much as we think about it); and it is a personal capacity that is nonetheless applied not only to the betterment of one's own future and but to the betterment of the future of others as well.

The list of Lombardo's character virtues may seem so challenging that one must wonder if there have ever been or currently are any people who can qualify to be wise—and to possess heightened future consciousness—based on his definition. Whereas most of Lombardo's discussion on character virtues and wisdom is about rules, when asked to identify some wise living futurists—people he personally knows well enough to evaluate on his list of criteria—he nominated notable futurist, Wendell Bell; *Wisdom Page* creator, Copthorne MacDonald; and renown feminist and cultural critic, Riane Eisler. Clearly Lombardo feels that wisdom and heightened future consciousness are within the grasp of real people.

Although you cannot spot any reference to the works of Nietzsche, and in particular the idea of the *Übermensch*, you can easily find a resonance with the book *Thus spake Zarathustra*, where it is said that “you must overcome yourself” and “let the future and the furthest be the motive” of your present. Pantheism (the call of connecting

your own consciousness to that of people, nature, society, and the cosmos) and extrinsic finality (aiming at beyond yourself) also serve as the warp and weft of Lombardo's fabulous mystical carpet. The "wise cyborg," a concept he extensively discusses, seems the best possible update in the early 21st century of who will qualify to be Nietzsche's *Übermensch* in the future. A cyborg, as Lombardo envisions, is a "functional synthesis of biology and technology" and a wise cyborg, guided by the ideals of wisdom, will draw his or her extraordinary and potentially limitless power from "intellectual, informational, and communicational capacities of computer technologies."

In the hot contemporary philosophical debate on the mind-body problem, Lombardo, in several essays, rejects both idealism and materialism. However, he is not satisfied with interactive dualism, which suggests that both consciousness and the physical world are, in ontological terms, "individually self-sufficient," but can interact and causally affect each other. Instead, the fundamental ontological truth in Lombardo's framing of the mind-body problem is "Ecological Reciprocalism." In this "new theoretical scheme of inquiry" (new, of course, for the majority of Western scholars) it is presumed that the physical universe and consciousness are interdependent realities. In other words, "each realm literally requires the other for its existence." Such a philosophy is informed by the Eastern school of thought, and in particular, the Taoist Yin-Yang, a recurring theme throughout the book. Seen in this light, on the one hand, consciousness will remain always embodied and "locally situated within the physical universe"; and on the other hand, the meaningful manifestation of the physical world will always remain a "selective differentiation relative to an embodied consciousness."

According to Lombardo, in the coming decades we will witness a new collective enlightenment which many futurists describe as a “significant jump in the collective mental functioning of humanity”. As expected by many writers, contemporary challenges and evolutionary forces will push humanity to a new level of “cosmic consciousness.” And for Lombardo, a core feature of this evolutionary transformation is heightened future consciousness. If you take into account that “the future will increasingly be purposefully guided by human ideals” as Lombardo does, then it is obvious that this is going to be a wise evolutionary journey without any final destination whatsoever. Such a new enlightenment, in my mental model, resonates with the metaphorical narrative in the one of the most celebrated examples of Persian literature, *The Conference of the Birds*, a collection of mystical poems in a religious context that captures the idea of why and how people should connect their consciousness to each other so that they can achieve a cosmic consciousness, or a transcendent totality, called mythical Simurgh (much like the mythical Phoenix.) Given my resonance with the Persian Sufi, I would say that all spirituality is but footnotes to Attar of Nishapur.

This book would be a valuable resource for a wide range of readers. For foresight workshop facilitators whose aim is develop collective preferable futures, Lombardo generously shares his experience as a professional educator in running such workshops. Potential future leaders will find the book a must read because he provides compelling theory and evidence on how to use narratives to motivate yourself and others while building a better, more beautiful future. And young persons who care a lot about sex, love, and marriage, will hardly find any other scholarly work that deals with

these issues better and more deeply than Lombardo. Knowledgeable about history and contemporary trends in society and culture, he not only sheds light on how a feminist outlook is essential to the future of marriage but presents endless possibilities well beyond the contemporary controversial debate about same sex marriages, culminating in his most visionary scenario, called conscious fusion, where two or more minds become one, the ultimate romantic-carnal union.

Although the themes Lombardo explores in this book run from the philosophical to the pragmatic, and from the ontological to the epistemological, one central thesis is clear: attention and commitment to the character virtues the author identifies can equip us with an enhanced capacity to wisely choose among the often confusing and competing alternatives that life presents to us. Certainly the publication of this thoughtful and articulate book is testament to the value of applying such virtues to one's own life.