**Developing Constructive, Optimistic, and Creative
Attitudes and Behaviors about the Future**

**Part IV: Wisdom, Virtues,
and the Ideal Future Self-Narrative**

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This article is the fourth and final paper in a series dealing with future
consciousness and ways to enhance it. Aligned with a series of workshops
presented at Rio Salado College in Tempe, Arizona, the first three articles
covered topics ranging from motivation and emotion to thinking, imagination, and
self-identity.[1] In this article I examine the connection between enhanced future
consciousness and character virtues, a topic I have been discussing through
earlier papers in this series as well. I begin by summarizing some significant
themes from earlier articles relevant to the concept of the self-narrative and then
I discuss how certain key human virtues are of central importance in creating an
ideal self-narrative for the future. The ideal self-narrative should also be informed
by an awareness of contemporary trends and future possibilities in the world; I
review a variety of key trends and possibilities, and also discuss the question of
what a preferable future for humanity would be. Finally, I connect the themes of
an ideal self-narrative and a preferable future for humanity.

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At the beginning of the final workshop on enhancing future consciousness,
I restate and expand upon the central goal of the entire workshop series:
Participants are to write and act upon a realistically grounded ideal self-narrative
for the future. At the conclusion of this final workshop, participants are expected
to have created an outline of the main features of this self-narrative and are
asked to complete a more fully developed version to be turned in later for review
and feedback. Many of the key features behind the concepts of a self-narrative
and ideal self-narrative have been introduced in previous workshops and I
highlight the following for review:
  • Everyone has a self-narrative – a self-created story of his or her life –
    which defines his or her personal identity. Damasio calls this narrative the
    "autobiographical self." The self-narrative ties together past experiences,
    present reality, and future expectations.[2]
  • Based on our interpretations of past experience and key life events, self-
    narratives usually contain elements of hope and fear, our two primary
    emotions regarding the future. (Memory informs and colors our attitudes
    about the future.) The attitude of optimism is associated with hope, self-

confidence, and exuberance; the attitude of pessimism is associated with fear, helplessness, and depression.

- The self-narrative contains both an ideal self for the future, as well as a negative self – what we hope for regarding ourselves versus what we fear we might become.
- Self-narratives contain elements of self-efficacy associated with a sense of internal locus of control (master of one's fate) and elements of helplessness/victimization associated with a sense of external locus of control over one's life.

Participants are asked to examine their present self-narratives, identify and face areas of fear and pessimism, and consider how these inhibiting elements could be re-written or re-interpreted. Participants are referred to Seligman's *Learned Optimism* as providing exercises for rationally challenging pessimistic and depressive patterns of thinking.[3] They are also asked to consider to what degree their self-narrative highlights internal versus external locus of control. Finally, each participant is asked to describe his or her ideal self for the future.

Next, I review certain key virtues that I propose are essential to an ideal self-narrative for the future.

- As Seligman points out, character virtues are accomplishments, requiring effort to develop, rather than being innate skills, talents, or dispositions.[4] That is, virtues are built on sustained and determined acts of self-responsibility requiring a sense of self-efficacy and internal locus of control. Hence, I list self-responsibility as the cardinal virtue necessary for all other virtues to develop. Whatever goals one sets for the future, which would include the realization of an ideal self-narrative, the belief and practice of self-responsibility is essential.
- The future is uncertain and that includes, of course, a person's own life journey and self-development. Courage and faith are necessary virtues for dealing with and living through the risks, challenges, and general uncertainty of the future. As noted in a previous article, long-term deep happiness comes through meeting challenges (which by definition are risky) and achieving success. A person's ideal self-narrative for the future should be sufficiently challenging to test one's courage and determination.
- Seligman identifies transcendence as a key virtue in realizing authentic happiness; Csikszentmihalyi agrees and also believes that transcendence is essential to a more evolved self in the future.[5] Transcendence is broadly defined as being dedicated to some worthy ideal or reality that goes beyond one's self. Transcendence could involve a deep reverence toward God or great love and concern for humanity or nature. As I explain below, transcendence provides a way to connect one's ideal self-narrative and one's vision of a preferable future for humanity.
- The pursuit of truth and honesty are essential to an ideal self-narrative. One can not transcend one's fears about the future or oneself unless one is honest with oneself. One can not realistically and effectively deal with

the problems and challenges within the world without pursuing the truth. Real courage involves acknowledging and facing the problems, risks, and uncertainties of life.

- Finally I touch again on the virtue of wisdom (examined in earlier workshops as well). Wisdom involves many qualities. It is expansive in conscious scope (attempting to get the big picture of things), integrative and synthetic, imaginative and creative, thoughtful, and constructive. It also is connected with other virtues such as truth and honesty, courage, and compassion. Wisdom could be described as the capacity to ethically apply deep and comprehensive knowledge for the betterment of oneself and humanity in the future. It has been described as the highest level of human development and I have identified it as the highest expression of future consciousness.[6] Any ideal self-narrative should include the pursuit of wisdom.

Participants are asked to describe how each of these virtues could be included in their self-narrative for the future. I also offer a supplemental list including love, compassion, and humanity; temperance; justice, fairness, and reciprocity; evolution and growth; loyalty, and gratitude as other important virtues that could be integrated into a person's future self-narrative. The main point is that an ideal self-narrative for the future should be structured around human virtues, providing ethical direction and value and personal meaning, fulfillment, and happiness within one's life. Including the basic virtue of self-responsibility emphasizes the active role a person needs to take in determining who she or he will become in the future.

An ideal self-narrative for the future should be guided and informed by an awareness of trends and possibilities for humanity and the world as a whole, since all of us must realize our personal visions in the context of the world around us. Yet it is not simply a question of adapting or accommodating to potential changes in the future; it is perhaps more important to consider how, through the realization of an ideal self-narrative, one may positively contribute to the future direction of humanity. We need to see ourselves as active in the future and not simply passive. As my colleague, Jonathon Richter, and I have proposed in an earlier paper, the pursuit and enhancement of various critical virtues for humanity (such as wisdom, reciprocity, and self-responsibility) would constructively address many of the problems of today, enhance future consciousness, and have a positive impact on our future evolution.[7]

Drawing upon a variety of sources[8], I present to the workshop participants a list of contemporary major trends and future possibilities for humanity. I note that for many of the items listed, there are both optimistic and pessimistic interpretations; for example, globalization as a trend, depending on whom you read, is seen as a good thing, a bad thing, and frequently some combination of both. In general, there are value judgments associated with all the various trends and possibilities. What follows is a sample from the list:

- Globalization, which is occurring at economic, governmental, cultural, and technological levels, is in ways bringing us more together and opening

opportunities for many, but it is also generating what Edward Cornish refers to as deculturation and conflict as, for example, argued in Barber's *Jihad versus McWorld*.[9]

- There is continued economic growth worldwide but there is a growing inequality of wealth, power, and resources and the overall quality of life may not be improving. Though it may be argued that the world is "flattening," it appears that the world is "spiky" and getting more so. Though overall growth continues, it may not be sustainable.[10]

- All major spheres of technology continue to grow, including computer, robotic, industrial, medical, and bio-genetic. Technology is infusing into everything. There appear to be innumerable benefits, but there is also great controversy over many of these supposed benefits. According to some, we are approaching the "technological singularity" and we will be surpassed by or uploaded into our machines. We increasingly live in a "Technopoly" where the values of technology control our lives.[11]

- There is an ongoing transformation and deterioration of the environment. Humanity is fundamentally affecting multiple dimensions of the environment and increasingly monitoring and controlling its dynamics; there is growing ecological consciousness and ecological concern. There has been great controversy over what is happening and what to do about it, and there are doomsday predictions regarding this general trend.[12]

- There is immense improvement of health and increased human longevity for many in the world (and the promise of even greater advances ahead) but a large percentage of people in the world suffer from disease, malnutrition, and high mortality rates.[13]

- Identified by some as the most fundamental trend of all, the "acceleration of everything" is bringing increasing speed, innovation, and "accelerative evolution" into all spheres of human life but instigating increasing stress and numerous negative psychological reactions. This trend is connected with accelerative information growth and information and stimulus overload.[14]

- There is increasing surveillance and transparency, supporting more accountability, but also producing a deterioration of privacy, as well as more information overload and ambiguity.[15]

- There is continued, if not increasing concern, that at least in many industrialized countries we are becoming excessively individualistic, egocentric, and narcissistic. Excessive individualism spawns moral relativism. Yet, the opposite trends toward increasing authoritarianism, absolutism, and conformity are also occurring in the context of the rise of religious fundamentalism.[16]

- Commercialism continues to grow, where all aspects of human life are commodified, and consumerism has become for many the central defining activity of life.[17]

- As Eamon Kelley argues, there is ongoing tension between the "sacred and the secular" which promises to only intensify in the future. This

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tension is connected with a conflict of values, which spills over into military conflicts and terrorism.[18]

The list of trends and possibilities presented to participants is intended to broadly cover multiple major dimensions of human life, ranging from technology, ecology, and economics to culture, psychology, religion, and human values; all of these dimensions of change will impact our lives. The idea is to provide a "big picture" in which to consider one's personal development in the future. As noted earlier, expansive awareness is an essential feature of wisdom. A future self-narrative must be realistically informed about the future. Participants are also asked to contribute additional trends and possibilities to the list – things that they see happening that they believe are important and will affect them in the future.

After discussing the contemporary state of the world and where things might be headed, within this context, participants are asked to identify what they hope could happen in the future; how might the current state of affairs move in a positive direction? What might be a preferable direction for humanity along any or all of the dimensions of change being considered? Hence, it is important to consider values and ideals in thinking about the future, providing a sense of preferred direction, rather than just some passive acceptance of how it appears that things are heading. (The same could be said in considering one's personal future.)

At this point, participants are asked to connect their ideal self-narratives and their visions of a preferable future for humanity. They are asked to imagine and describe a future self-narrative, anchored and guided by a set of virtues that would contribute to the realization of a preferable future for humanity. How could they positively impact human society, the environment, human values, or the mental health and well-being of other humans? Strengthening which particular virtues would contribute positively to which particular trends or problems? As noted earlier, a key virtue is transcendence where the individual identifies a concern beyond him or herself. How can one contribute to the betterment of humanity or the world? This question counter-acts self-absorption and narcissism in the development of an ideal self-narrative. The virtue of wisdom also enters in, for wisdom is the ethically guided application of knowledge that benefits others as well as oneself. And note also the emphasis on self-responsibility and self-efficacy: Participants need to see *how they can* and *that they can* contribute to a better future. I also highlight again that the ideal self-narrative must be sufficiently challenging, requiring some level of risk (and hence courage and faith), but of course, promising the possibility of authentic happiness and deep self-fulfillment.

The final step, bringing another idea in from a previous workshop, is to ask participants to identify immediate and concrete steps toward living this ideal future self-narrative in the now. The future needs to be actualized and grown in the present.

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