



The Calling of Futures

Joseph Voros

Background

I am an Australian by birth, ethnically a Hungarian, the child of parents who each escaped from occupied Hungary after the Second World War—my mother in 1950, my father after the revolution of 1956—and who met here in Australia. As a child I was always interested in both science and science fiction—the probable and the possible, the factual and the fanciful. My studies included science, mathematics and philosophy, and I received a PhD in theoretical physics for work on Einstein's attempt to unify gravitation with electromagnetism, his so-called 'unified field theory'. Following this, I spent a few years working in organisations which had recognised the potential of the Internet, ending up at Netscape Communications. After Netscape's decline, and re-assessing my career options, I realised that I had always intuitively been a futurist; the audacious idea which occurred to me at this time was to actually try to make a living as one. When I started to ask about how to go about this, people kept mentioning the name of Richard Slaughter, so I phoned him up one day saying something like 'I hear you're a futurist. I want to become one; what do I do?' He suggested we meet at a local coffee shop to discuss it, and the rest, as they say, is futures. I immersed myself in the futures literature and held the intention of becoming a professional futurist.

Influences

Nearly two years later and soon after the Australian Foresight Institute (AFI) was set up at Swinburne University, Richard invited me to come and do some work on a small short-term project. When that ended, I applied for a job at Swinburne working in the similarly-new Foresight and Planning Unit as a 'strategic foresight analyst'—a practitioner role, not an academic one. This afforded me the opportunity to learn about how one actually does foresight work in an organisational context. During this time, I also helped with some of the teaching at the AFI, so when another academic role was eventually created there it was natural for me to apply for it. Thus, I returned to AFI to teach what I had learned, as a practitioner and in my continuing studies.

Naturally, being my mentor, Richard has been a strong influence, and I have had the great good fortune of being able to study with and work alongside him for several years now. Through him I have met with other futurists, such as Andy Hines, Sohail Inayatullah, Christopher Jones, Ziauddin Sardar and others. This has been invaluable in broadening my perspective on FS and how different people approach it.

Key texts include *The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies*, which I bought (and read!) in its earlier original book form, and Wendell Bell's *Foundations of Futures Studies*. There are many other texts and sources, too numerous to mention, which I have also found highly useful, many of which are referenced in these two works. I continue to struggle to acquire and read all of the futurist works which arouse my interest.

As a scientist, my two main influences were, obviously, Albert Einstein, whose thinking I spent nearly a decade examining and learning 'from the inside', as it were; and Carl Sagan, who rekindled my interest in science after my early experience of university extinguished it. From them I learned that all knowledge is provisional and conjectural, including 'scientific', so that a certain humility and openness of mind to

provisional and conjectural, including scientific, so that a certain humility and openness of mind to novelty is called for in sincere exploration. I also continue to read science fiction because, as Einstein remarked, 'imagination is more important than knowledge'. I think this is especially true for a futurist.

Another influence has been Buddhism, which has led to a very strong interest in understanding consciousness and the way it constructs knowledge and models of 'reality' (whatever that is!). In fact, I think that consciousness is really the main game in town, because it is our consciousness which gives rise to all of our other activities, including our knowledge quests, morals, ethics, values, forms of knowing, aesthetics, science, religion, art and spirituality, to name but a few.

Because consciousness is so central to the human knowledge quest, it is, I believe, of the first importance to seek to understand consciousness in all its many and varied expressions as we strive to increase our knowledge. And, because FS is such a broad inter-, multi-, trans- and meta-disciplinary field of enquiry—after all, its starting point is the sum total of all knowledge!—the object of our interest cannot be less than the entire universe and everything in it. I am thus particularly drawn to perspectives on the universe that seek to integrate and unify our understanding of it—as is clear from my physics PhD work. I am therefore also drawn to attempts to take a unifying, integrating or 'integral' view of consciousness in all its manifestations and nuances.

The most recent in a long line of such integral theorists and synthesists is Ken Wilber, who has produced an overall map of human consciousness and its knowledge quests at the very broad level of 'orienting generalisations'. As FS attempts to take a very broad integrating view, I see a natural affinity between integral approaches—of whatever form or kind—and FS. Part of this approach is to seek to expand the range and type of frameworks of understanding we use. And, since all knowledge frameworks are provisional, this includes seeking to transcend whatever is the current temporarily most integral perspective available, even as we use it to guide our further explorations.

Work

I believe it is vital to the field that the contribution made by each orientation and approach to futures work be recognised, appreciated and valued by all futurists. There is a need for both rigorous intellectual discipline as well as practical pragmatic utility in the real world. Neither of these should be considered the exclusive province of one or other orientation. This belief is at the heart of my approach to FS.

There are at least five broad dimensions which I try to keep in mind during the course of doing my work: ontology; logic; epistemology; axiology (which encompasses both ethics and aesthetics); and methodology. I use these as broad 'mindfulness reminders', rather than rigidly separate categories; they are so interdependent that thinking about any one of them necessarily leads to thinking about the others.

These five dimensions obviously correspond to some of the major branches of philosophy, and there is a good reason for this—in the business of envisaging and creating the future, we need to draw upon whatever we can in order to provide ourselves with robust means for moving into the future with as much wisdom and compassion as we can possibly muster. As well, the themes covered by these and other branches of philosophy go to the very heart of our attempts to understand the universe and our place in it. The approach I learned as a physicist leads me always to seek after the foundations of any form of knowledge creation. FS is not exempt in this regard—it is, at its best, a field of disciplined inquiry for developing useful knowledge about alternative futures. The provisional, conjectural and non-empirical nature of this interpretive knowledge calls for the most rigorous care in how we construct it. Let us therefore be humble and allow ourselves to learn from the very best of those who have gone before us.

Part of the role of FS is to make assertions about how the future might turn out to be, so it is not only 'prospective' in outlook, but also 'ante-dictive' or 'pro-vocative' by nature. It is the serious consideration of the philosophical bases upon which FS rests which lays the groundwork and provides the foundational justification for assertions about the future. Without a solid footing upon which to stand our ground as we make our ante-dictive and provocative statements, we will, to quote Donald Michael, have 'both feet planted firmly in mid-air'.

My basic ontological stance is that a ‘reality’ exists independently of our subjective experience of it, that there are realms of this reality which are distinct from the physical realm, and that alternative futures ‘exist’ as potentials which could be unfolded and enacted. For example, I think that the ‘mental world’ exists as a distinct domain of inquiry in and of itself. This is why the techniques of physical science are of such limited utility in understanding how human beings make meaning. Rather, we need methodological approaches which are based in the mental realm itself, such as hermeneutics, to properly navigate and investigate this realm. It is how we navigate the non-physical realms of existence which gives meaning and guidance to our lives. But these realms are not ‘actual’ until they are enacted and actualised—that is, they are not simply lying around waiting to be found; rather, they exist in potential until we bring aspects of them forth by our actions.

It is our action which makes manifest that which is unmanifest or which yet exists in potential. This is the same view I hold of the future. This post-metaphysical ontological stance guides my uses of different systems of logic and epistemology. My axiological stance is informed by the Buddhist precept of seeking to liberate all beings, be they present or future generations. And thus, my approach to methodology is one of ‘methodological pluralism’, because different methodologies reveal different aspects of the universal tapestry of existence. One should not only have mastery of tools suited to different forms of inquiry, but one should also be ready to adapt existing tools, or to create new ones, as appropriate to the nature of the investigation being undertaken.

Future evolution of humanity

I take a view of the world which looks beneath trends and below the deeper driving forces to the mental models, mindsets and worldviews through which we perceive the world. And, indeed, below even these to the very structures and processes which shape the extent and scope of what particular contents our consciousness can hold. From this perspective I see history as an unfolding of the potentials inherent in consciousness so that history is, so to speak, the ‘writing large’ in a collective sense of that which occurs in individual human development. I have found a great deal of resonance with the evolutionary views of Rudolf Steiner, Sri Aurobindo Ghose, Clare Graves, Duane Elgin and Ken Wilber.

In this view, individuals as well as cultures and civilisations pass through several stages, the broad outlines of which, but not the specific details, are governed by the basic structures of consciousness. Every newly-emerged stage of consciousness produces a new worldview, yields newer and more creative ways of solving problems, and also introduces the possibility for newer and more severe pathologies. Contemporary critique of the rational-industrial (often incorrectly identified solely as the ‘Western’) worldview highlights many of the ways this structure of thinking became dysfunctional, even as it simultaneously brought forth democratic ideals, universal suffrage, and the end of institutionalised slavery.

Various versions of the ‘end of history’ thesis—from Comte to Fukuyama—tend to regard the mental-rational structure of consciousness—and its associated political and economic forms—as the pinnacle of human evolutionary development. But this is not the end of the story, not by a long shot, for there are structures which are known to lie beyond this, and whose broad outlines have been mapped. Gebser called the first such post-rational structure ‘integral-aperspectival’, Wilber’s term is ‘vision-logic’; Aurobindo’s is ‘higher mind’. This implies that an even greater freedom is available than that provided by mental-rational consciousness operating in its healthy form; a freedom to perceive and ‘re-cognise’ even more of the world; a freedom to choose our actions even more wisely; and the freedom thereby to act with an even more enduring and skilful compassion. And this freedom requires an even greater responsibility for vigilance to ensure healthy forms of expression of this structure of consciousness.

My view of the future of humanity is framed through this evolutionary perspective. If we are to survive as a species we will need to not only find ways to grow beyond our ‘technological adolescence’, as Sagan put it, but to grow, individually and collectively, into newer capacities of consciousness. As Einstein said: ‘the significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them.’ I take this statement to be self-evident and literally true.

My dreams for the future evolution of humankind share a common theme: a humanity which is

increasingly cognisant of how the structures of our consciousness are foundational to our construction of knowledge, ideas, ideals, values, morals, ethics, principles and, indeed, to everything we do, or think we are.

I dream of a humanity which has come to an accommodation with itself, with its many and varied members, and with the planet which is our birthplace and current home. I hope for an emerging planetary civilisation informed by a worldview founded on an appreciation of the individual differences of local cultures as nuances of a greater whole—an integrating planetary culture which values our differences, rather than a simmering collection of ethno- or socio-centric cultures barely tolerating them. I hope that the re-integration of mind and body possible in individual development beyond mental-rationality translates into a collective worldview more in tune with, and transcending each in, their greater unity. And I hope for the emergence of a deeper wisdom with which to chart the course of humankind's further evolution towards, as Abraham Maslow put it, 'the farther reaches of human nature'.

As we are all born into ignorance and delusion and must find our own way out of it, I dream of a humanity where this journey is one of the most fundamental operating principles upon which societies are based—societies where each person is afforded the opportunity to grow, develop and evolve to the degree they are able; to seek and discover their own truth and to find their own peace with the human condition; to recognise the 'bright spark of divinity' which lies within each of us and which is our true nature; and to participate in and thereby contribute to the further evolution of consciousness, for the benefit of all of the many generations to come, in whatever way makes personal sense to them.

How much is humankind willing to grow? How great, as a species, are we willing to become? Our futures are calling us forth; will we listen to the promise that they hold?

An enlightened Master once summed up the essence of Zen Buddhism in the following way:

Infinite gratitude to the past.

Infinite service to the present.

Infinite responsibility to the future.

Is there a better set of operating principles for a futurist to follow?

About the author

Joseph Voros is a senior lecturer in futures studies and strategic foresight at the Australian Foresight Institute, Swinburne University of Technology, John Street, Hawthorn, VIC 3122, Australia. Email: jvoros@swin.edu.au