

Discussion paper: Nine principles for practising embodied foresight—a work in progress

Joshua Floyd

First draft: 9 February 2004

This version: 4 September 2011

This discussion paper is based on reflections from early 2004. I had just finished reading the first edition of The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies (Slaughter, 1996) prior to commencing the Master of Science in Strategic Foresight then running out of Swinburne University's Australian Foresight Institute. Having been immersed for some weeks in foundational material for the field, I was interested in drawing out what seemed to be the motivational essence for its established theoreticians and practitioners. Of course, this reading reflected my own interpretations influenced by my own interests and motivations—so as an extremely high level summary of what others working in this area seemed to be on about, please take it with a grain of salt. Even so, on returning to my earlier reflections from time to time since then, I continue to find them highly congruent with subsequent learning and experience.

The world is OK as it is right now—and improving our present situation requires that we pass through this juncture. We can problematise, criticise, analyse and deconstruct our present situation without demonising it. We can, in a sense, regard it as humanity's adolescence, the transcendent potential of which is humanity as wise and compassionate elder citizen. *Any* path forward from this point—our creation, for better or worse, and our only reality—will necessarily transcend and *include* this world (Wilber, 2000). So our present situation forms the basis of what we will become; what we have today is an integral component of humanity's existential project on Earth and in the wider *kosmos*—whether or not we actually like what we have! Re-vitalising and re-owning our relationship with the present is a critical first step in our enactment, in the present, of worlds that we'd prefer to inhabit.

Depending on the perspective I adopt, things can appear to be getting better, things can appear to be getting worse, or they can appear to be getting both better and worse simultaneously. This is no basis for complacency. It is, rather, a call to action based on loving acceptance and embrace of the world we inhabit today. If I like the way things are, then what will I do to foster the continuation of this situation? If I don't like the way things are, what will I do to foster improvement? Re-owning the world, by taking responsibility for our current situation, is part of the process for dissolving the good-bad, attraction-aversion dualities that can be located at the heart of any present sense of discontent.

Central to assessing the quality of our present reality, and understanding the macrohistorical contexts that have led us here, is the recognition of *suffering*. Our perspectives on suffering—or its inverse, happiness—underpin the notions we hold about the quality of our existence. Perception of suffering forms a foundational basis for our moral-ethical viewpoints. If we are to find shared moral perspectives in the contemporary world, it seems that this will involve at some level and in some respect shared perspectives in relation to suffering: its nature, causes, course of development and transformation.

For those who perceive that our present evolutionary trajectory has in some respects gone “off the rails”, such perception seems to rest in turn on a perception that the degree of suffering in the present is unacceptable or that our current direction runs counter to the amelioration of suffering that is yet to arise. With constant, continuous change an axiomatic feature of our

existence, and the arrow of time ensuring that past and present states will not be revisited, our steering actions tend to be directed towards those futures in which suffering is seen to be reduced—or conversely, happiness increased. This, then, seems to form a prime directive for foresight action: to identify and navigate those paths of becoming that reduce suffering in the kosmos, or that improve the quality of existence.

But how can we measure such intangibles as “quality of existence”? Does a future where the suffering of some agents, or some parts, increases while the net suffering of the “kosmic whole” decreases constitute progress in such an index (in a vein related to the utilitarian or consequentialist view)? Or does a net improvement require that the suffering of all sentient in this kosmic whole be reduced? The history of contemplating such questions seems to suggest that a 'calculus of suffering' is unlikely to yield to a purely rational approach, in the way that a calculus of economics is today expected to.

A key question that these considerations raise is: Can individuals be genuinely free if other individuals continue to suffer? Ethical approaches such as that offered by Mahayana Buddhism seem to answer such a question in the negative, proposing the Bodhisattva Path as the appropriate route to what might be characterised for present purposes as “improved futures”—the commitment to delay one’s own freedom from suffering until all others are similarly free.

Taking the amelioration of suffering as a driver for action provides a window on others' perspective-making. Actions that are subjectively untenable or even abhorrent can be reframed in terms of the particular existential situation of the actor. This need not be seen as justification for or condoning of particular actions, but it does provide a basis from which to begin to understand why particular decisions are made, and why certain reactions arise.

Discourse in the futures studies field, from which foresight practitioners draw philosophical and theoretical foundations, highlights the growing community of practice that is motivated to engage head on with such questions. In volume 1 of his *Foundations of Futures Studies*, Wendell Bell (1997, p. 73) offers the following statement of purpose for the field:

The most general purpose of futures studies is to maintain or improve the freedom and welfare of humankind, and some futurists would add the welfare of all living beings, plants, and the Earth’s biosphere for their own sakes even beyond what is required for human well-being. Thus, at the most general level, the goals of futurists are to contribute toward making the world a better place in which to live, benefitting people and the life-sustaining capacities of the Earth...

A distinctive contribution of futurists is prospective thinking. Through prospective thinking, futurists aim to contribute to the well-being both of presently living people and of the as-yet-voiceless people of future generations.

The emergence and growth of the field clearly indicates that there is increasing concern that the degree of suffering in our world, whether the boundaries of that world be seen as personal, local, regional, national, global, or kosmic, is unacceptable. The world is the way that it must necessarily be at this present moment, in fact it is the only way that it can be. But it *can* also *become* better. There seems little value in regret, given that the moment of regret is now fixed as “historical fact”. In light of the choices that *were* made, of the actions that *were* taken, this moment, and the state of our world right now, is inevitable. Futures are not so, in fact nothing about temporally distant, as-yet unrealised circumstances is inevitable, until the anticipated unfolds as the present. Upon unfoldment it becomes, in the present moment, nothing but inevitable.

In light of the challenges we face as a humanity, it seems there would be some benefit in developing a collective transformative practice for improving our situation. For those of us who perceive suffering at some level, and on the basis of that perception feel compelled to act to reduce that suffering, what should be the basis on which we proceed? I have proposed the development of *embodied foresight*—foresight practised as an ethical skill, or spontaneous right action—as one approach to such transformative practise that seems worthy of consideration.

My purpose here is to outline a set of working principles through which to practise such foresightful action in the present. A premise for the development of these principles is that they will be of most pragmatic value where they reflect the shared bases for our common humanity. Such shared bases are the foundations that might be considered “universal”, in the sense of sharing characteristics that unite us as a humanity. By formalizing—very provisionally—a contextual base for endeavour in the foresight field, a frame of reference is available in relation to which any position can be oriented and in light of which the relevance and relative merit of particular choices may be considered.

Setting out a contextual base can provide a set of orienting guidelines for evaluating the adequacy of our actions in the present. By formalizing this contextual base as a set of principles, its application becomes effortless, facilitating wider and more rigorous use and development. With regard to this development, a process of continual review, examination and revision should be built in from the outset. Dissonance between one’s intended action and the working principles for embodied foresight should initiate a process of examining the system for previously hidden partial commitments. Transparency is paramount and an inherent strength.

The following high-level working principles for embodied foresight are proposed (so far):

- 1. *The Responsibility Principle:*** Renewing relationship with the present. Owning one's current situation with a specific view to recognising the origins of aversion to that whatever is unwanted; and
Following from this, recognising that any improved situation will necessarily transcend *and* include the situation that is to be improved upon.
- 2. *The Principle of Ongoingness:*** Recognising existence as comprising continuous change processes underpinned by an irreversible 'arrow of time'; and
Recognising that this implies continuously depreciating benefits for present action—as our situations change, so must the nature of our practise.
- 3. *The Causal Principle:*** Recognising that present circumstances are influenced by past action and all temporally remote, as-yet unrealised circumstances will emerge from a field of potential under the influence of present action.
- 4. *The Principle of Rights:*** Recognising action as being oriented by the extent of suffering (or its inverse, 'quality of being') to which those actions potentially contribute; and
Recognising that all beings act primarily with the intent to alleviate their suffering (or enhance their 'quality of being').
- 5. *The Principle of Inclusion:*** Recognising all relative knowledge as valid within its own frame of reference, and hence partial (frames of reference by nature being finite).
- 6. *The Principle of Non-exclusion:*** Accepting that assessment of the extent of suffering (or 'quality of being') requires multi-perspectival approaches and the engagement of multiple ways of knowing.

8. ***The Principle of Transcendent Interest:*** Recognising that the extent of one's identification with what is arising moment to moment informs the extent of the embrace of one's actions taken with the intent of ameliorating suffering.
9. ***The Principle of Nested Realities:*** The ultimate nature of reality is not as it conventionally appears to us; there is a possibility of us distinguishing between the conventional appearances of things in a relative sense (institutions, conventions, tendencies and habits) and “things as they are”. Recognising this—and the ultimate limits it places on any system of concepts—enhances the legitimacy and hence utility of a set of principles such as this.
10. ***The Principle of Transparent Fallibility:*** Following from the previous principle, recognising any set of principles, especially one as provisional as this, as partial and open to interpretation, assessment and review.

References

- Bell, Wendell. (1997). *Foundations of futures studies: human science for a new era* (Vol. 2: Values, objectivity and the good society). New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.
- Slaughter, Richard A. (Ed.). (1996). *The knowledge base of futures studies*. Kew, Victoria, Australia: The Futures Study Centre.
- Wilber, Ken. (2000). *Sex, ecology, spirituality: The spirit of evolution* (2nd ed. Vol. 6 of The collected works of Ken Wilber). Boston: Shambhala.