

# Foreword to Futures for the Third Millennium

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What a strange paradox confronts us - we, the apparently uniquely thinking, moralising, speaking species with the abilities of foresight, have applied very little of these talents in thinking seriously about our own futures. What, we might ask, have been the evolutionary advantages of intelligence, spirituality and speech, if, as many now figure it, there is cause for some considerable alarm about the very sustainability of our own species on earth - with extinction facing us perhaps even during the upcoming millennium? And what of the many hundreds or thousands of other species of living organisms whose extinctions have already occurred or are imminent, as outcomes of the activities of we humans? Do we care?

We do know enough about the way we go about treating the world about us, to realise that our present obsession with economic growth through technological innovation, has not led to that state of bliss that we hoped the great enlightenment leap forward would allow us to achieve. Indeed, so little of what we do is even focused on such a thought - at least from the perspective of a sustainable state of common good. It is true that each of us seems to have a sense of vision for a better future, and it is this that provides the incentive for our own personal development. Yet all too often, such visions are ego-centred, focusing only on ourselves and accommodating only the present or short-term future. Until very recently at least, we seemingly have had very little concern for others nor for the long-term implications of our actions on the world about us and on those others with whom we share it, human and non-human alike.

For intelligent beings, we sure act pretty stupidly.

In essence, our views of the future have tended overwhelmingly to reflect on the one hand that idealised state that we imagine would be best for us personally (or for our particular family, or for our particular organisation, or, at a push, for our particular country) or, on the other hand, that apocalyptic state over which we will have so little control that there is little point even thinking further about it. This is not to deny that there are people who would have us view the future differently. Throughout history there have been individuals who have extolled the advantages of thinking more crucially about the future: from 'seers' to prophets, through speculators to extrapolators, to secularists and other serious foresightful investigators of plausible future states. That we have not yet been convinced by such people of the need to take the study of the future seriously could well be a function of the limitations of our own intelligence.

All of our 'wondrous' technologies, all of our creative, imaginative expressions in the fine arts and literature, all of the institutional and organisational structures that we have developed, and all of our apparent ethical sensitivities, could be but artefacts of forms of thinking and knowing that are exceptionally primitive, and indeed dangerously inadequate - that while self-consciousness has evolved with us, it remains a very naive capability to this point. If this is so, the question is raised about whether or not we have the talent necessary to firstly recognise the limitations of these ways of knowing and caring, and then to do something to improve them, before we indeed wreak further havoc upon ourselves and much else on this tiny globe of ours.

That we need to think carefully about the future, to study it as it were, is without question. The real puzzle is how we are to go about that task. The primary focus of futures studies, as Richard Slaughter presents it, is not simply to encourage us to think about the future, but to think critically about the way we think about the way we think about the future! This is an extraordinarily difficult, yet essential, challenge to which we must respond if we are to take seriously our own plight, and that of the planet at large, as we seek to follow our bliss. Most of the time most of us are not even aware of the processes and perspectives that we engage as we go about our daily activities, let alone those that we use as we attempt to construct our visions of the future. We all blindly, uncritically follow one paradigm or another - all express some set of beliefs and values through the actions that we take - yet are quite bemused when it comes to the point of attempting to describe the nature of such a 'world-view in action'. Yet without a consciousness of that world-view, of the paradigmatic assumptions that we hold about the nature of reality (our so-called ontology) about how we come to know that reality (our epistemology) about what we value about reality and our knowledge of it (our axiology) and how we put all of this into practice (our methodology) how can we know of alternative positions to it?

Without a critical consciousness of our consciousness - a meta-consciousness if you will - we will be trapped into false expectations of what the future could hold for us, and severely limited in our hope for the future by the constraints of our imagination. Futures studies taken as seriously as meta-consciousness allows, can enable the forward view that seems so essential if we are indeed to take actions which are as ethically defensible as they are technically feasible, as aesthetically pleasurable as they are financially viable, as culturally amenable as they are socially desirable, as spiritually compatible as they are practically manageable, and as ecologically responsible as they are politically possible.

Now there's a paradigmatic framework for the future that's worth enabling.

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