

# Wisdom, Enlightenment, Science, and the Future

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## Introduction

What are the connections between wisdom and the future, and wisdom and enlightenment? And what do wisdom, enlightenment, and the future have to do with science? These are the central questions I address in this article. I will answer these questions in a narrative form, recounting how I progressively developed my ideas on these inter-related topics through a series of papers and presentations I created over the last seventeen years.

The main ideas presented are: Thinking about the future is the most enlightening and practical topic the human mind can entertain, therefore the enhancement of future consciousness is essential in higher education. The best way to enhance its capacities is through the strengthening of character virtues, and in particular, wisdom. Wisdom is the highest expression of future consciousness and should be the main goal of higher education – central to a preferable future vision for education. Contemporary study indicates that key features of wisdom include holistic, evolutionary, and contingent modes of thinking. These modes of thinking are also fundamental to modern science. Given the challenges facing humanity, many writers propose a new mindset – a “New Enlightenment” – in order to flourish in the future. Theories of this “New Enlightenment” highlight holism, evolution, and contingency. Wisdom, which captures these principles and goes beyond them, should be at the center of the “New Enlightenment.”

## The Future

In 1992 I created a course on the future. I needed to identify a topic that would provide an integrative and comprehensive format for undergraduates completing their associates’ degree, pulling together the humanities and sciences, and the future dawned on me as ideal for creating this synthesis. All major dimensions of human reality, from the environment, human relations, and technology to culture, religion, and society could be examined and integrated in the context of the future.

As I read different books on the future it became apparent that the possibilities were vast and mind-expanding. Creativity and imagination are stretched to the limits and beyond in thinking about the future. Further, since all of our goals and plans and the total remainder of our lives pertain to the future, the future is also the most practical of all topics. Finally, as I considered how the future impacts human psychology, I realized that people can be more or less capable and constructive in dealing with the future. They can be optimistic or pessimistic, responsible or fatalistic, imaginative or habitual, depressed or elated, courageous or fearful, and so forth, about their own future or the future of

humanity. There is a whole psychology of future consciousness and it seemed reasonable that there must be ways to enhance it – to help people become more constructive, imaginative, responsible, and goal directed in guiding their future.

All the following key elements could be taught: Imagining expansive possibilities; synthesizing these possibilities; learning how to address one's goals and challenges in life; and overall, facilitating the psychological growth of future consciousness. Life is approached as an integrated whole, as flow, change, and possibilities, and as contingent on choices, capacities, and values. Thought and imagination are connected with action. In a given future situation, one asks, "What will I do if this comes to pass?" In the coming years, I repeatedly organized my thoughts on teaching the future and presented and published my ideas on numerous occasions (Lombardo, 1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2006a, 2008a, 2009a).

### **Future Consciousness and the Future of Education**

I wrote a textbook for a course on the future around 1996 and taught it for a number of years; at one point I had five sections going simultaneously with five different instructors, including myself. I coupled the course with introductory philosophy, and got philosophical about the future and futuristic about philosophy, enriching both courses.

I came to see many values and benefits connected with the study of the future. I outlined these values and benefits in the textbook and discussed with students the values connected with future studies, asking them to identify any additional values. Some of the values I listed were the following: Future studies improves creativity, imagination, and higher cognitive skills; it facilitates the development of planning and goal setting; it fosters self-responsibility; it enhances preparedness and readiness for change; and it contributes to mental health – for example, in working against depression. Eventually, I would publish several articles articulating the values of future consciousness (Lombardo, 2005a, 2006b).

Because the future is such an important topic, I came to the conclusion that future studies and the development of future consciousness should be essential features in all education.

### **The History, Psychology, and Value of Future Consciousness**

The study of the future is immense in scope covering all the major dimensions of human existence, and even beyond, taking in questions such as the future of the environment, the earth, the solar system, and the universe. Further, it is an integrative and holistic topic. Moreover, not only have people been thinking about the future throughout recorded history and certainly even before, there are many different theories of the future, theories that emphasize particular perspectives, such as religious, scientific, or socio-cultural. There is a great history to the evolution of future consciousness and a great diversity of different approaches that have emerged. In our own day, different theories compete for our attention and allegiance. To provide a comprehensive overview

of the development of futurist thinking, the multitude of areas covered, and the great plurality of competing viewpoints would give students an expansive framework for understanding humanity and life. After writing my textbook, which only reached students who took the course, I published a series of additional books and articles, reaching a much larger audience providing ever more comprehensive overviews of the future and futurist theories (Lombardo, 2001, 2006c, 2006d, 2007a).

There are a number of key features to future studies and my particular approach to it, all relevant to my soon-to-emerge interest in the nature of wisdom: Future studies provides a holistic framework for understanding reality; it creates a temporally expansive vision, bringing in the past as well as contemporary trends and future possibilities; it is both theoretical and imaginative as well as practical and personal; and it facilitates pluralistic and open-minded thinking through comparing different approaches to life, reality, and the future. All these factors have something to do with wisdom.

### **Evolving Future Consciousness through the Pursuit of Virtue**

In 2003 I began a conversation with my colleague Jonathon Richter regarding the central challenges facing humanity today and into the future. Various futurist researchers and writers including Jerome Glenn, Theodore Gordon, and *The Millennium Project* had compiled lists of major challenges, but there were also innumerable popular books highlighting challenges to higher education, problematic psycho-social trends, and failings and stresses within pop culture at the time (Lombardo and Richter, 2004). We synthesized these different sources and arrived at a list of central contemporary problems and challenges in modernized society:

- Presentism (Including Relativism, Nihilism, Immediate Gratification, and the Loss of Long Term Meaning and Purpose)
- Speed and Information Overload
- Chaos (Including Mental Pandemonium and Info-Media Noise)
- Monetization, Commodification, and Consumerism (The Selling and Buying of Happiness and Self-Worth)
- Egocentricity, Individualism, and Narcissism

Now at the time I was reading Martin Seligman's new book on *Authentic Happiness* (2002) and had absorbed the previous year his book *Learned Optimism* (1998) – two classic works in positive psychology. What struck me about his book on happiness was his central argument that deep, long-term happiness depends upon the cultivation of fundamental character traits (or character virtues). Jonathon was also reading Seligman and in our conversations the mental leap occurred: Perhaps the solution to our contemporary problems and the road to a positive future involved the development of character virtues. As I would come to put it years later, "The quality of the future will reflect the future quality of human beings."

Numerous philosophers, such as Aristotle and Spinoza, had proposed that virtue was the key to human happiness, personal growth and self-actualization, and finding meaning and purpose in life. What we were adding was a futurist spin on this: The key to a better future was the cultivation of character virtues. We proposed that there were a specific set of virtues that would constructively address the set of problems we identified.

- Self-Efficacy and Self-Responsibility
- Order, Discipline, and Direction (Including Purpose and Connectedness of Past, Present, and Future)
- Courage, Faith, and Freedom (Including a Sense of Possibility and Adventure)
- Wisdom and the Love of Thinking (Including Self-Awareness and Critical Thinking)
- Reciprocity and Balance
- Evolution and Transcendence (Including Optimism, the Pursuit of Flow, and an “Evolving Self”)

We published an article based on these ideas, synthesizing positive psychology, the ethical philosophy of character virtues, and the study of the future (Lombardo and Richter, 2004). But I should add that there was one other key component to our argument, an idea that would grow in importance in the years to come. I had been studying future consciousness and how to enhance it. In this article, I proposed that the best way to enhance future consciousness was through the development of character virtues. That is, enhanced future consciousness will lead to a better future and the best way to enhance future consciousness is through the development of character virtues.

### **Character Virtues, Wisdom, and Education**

Around the time I was thinking about character virtues and the future, I was also thinking about character virtues and education. As chairman of the psychology and philosophy departments at my college, I had been discussing with my faculty the importance of critical thinking skills in our students. In researching the topic, I came across the idea that critical thinking is associated with a core set of intellectual virtues, including honesty; a love of learning and concern for the truth; openness to change and alternative points of view; standards of logic and clarity; and an ongoing effort to transcend egocentricity and bias in one's thinking (Lombardo, 2006e). Hence, the insight occurred to me that good thinking was supported by character virtues. Further, as teachers we were encountering numerous cases of plagiarism among our students, along with the further complication that when students were accused of such unethical behavior they would either deny or rationalize it. It was apparent that many of our students needed to understand, embrace, and practice various ethical standards relevant to education. During that time I read Parker Palmer's *The Courage to Teach* (1998) and Howard Gardner's *The Disciplined Mind* (1999) and both

books emphasized the centrality of modeling and teaching core character virtues within higher education. Out of this work on critical thinking and educational ethics I developed workshops on both themes, further evolving them in the coming years (Lombardo, 2005b, 2008b).

The key character virtues I proposed that were necessary for academic excellence and success were:

- Excellence, Standards, and Ideals – The Validity and Value of Values
- Self-Responsibility
- Love of Learning – Curiosity and Wonder
- Love of Thinking
- Truth, Honesty, Integrity, and Authenticity
- Self-Awareness and Understanding
- Open-Mindedness
- Discipline
- Justice and Fairness
- Holism and Balance
- Growth, Optimism, and Evolution
- Social Conscience and Responsibility
- Mutual Respect
- Courage and Creativity
- Wisdom (The Application of Knowledge and Ethics to Life)

My idea that virtue was critical to the good life was broadening, bringing in more elements of life. Of special note, the virtue of wisdom came to occupy the final place on the list – the summation and culmination of all the other educational virtues.

## **Wisdom**

In 2005, the academic dean at my school asked me to investigate how we could assess deep learning (as opposed to surface learning) in our students. I already knew that deep learning was connected with practicing critical thinking. In my further studies of deep learning it dawned on me that descriptions of deep learning showed considerable overlap with wisdom. The following model soon emerged in my mind: Critical thinking leads to deep learning and deep learning is a stepping stone to wisdom. Hence, after having already thought about wisdom in the context of the future and educational ethics, I was primed and dove into contemporary research on wisdom. Wisdom was emerging as a guiding light – a point of central significance throughout my studies. What I discovered was that there was a renaissance of renewed and re-energized work in both psychology and philosophy regarding wisdom (Lombardo, 2006e; Trowbridge, 2005).

Inspired by this new thinking, I came to the conclusion that wisdom should be the central goal and ideal of higher education. It is what we, as educators, should facilitate in students and model in our own behavior. Wisdom is not simply the accumulation of broad knowledge but a character virtue – an ethical quality

that integrates knowledge with action, unites heart and mind, and works toward the betterment of humanity. In the coming years I would write a number of articles on wisdom and refine a general definition of its nature (Lombardo, 2006e, 2007b, 2008c, 2009b). Presently, my definition is:

Wisdom is the highest expression of self-development and future consciousness. It is the continually evolving understanding of and fascination with the big picture of life, of what is important, ethical, and meaningful, and the desire and ability to apply this understanding to enhance the well being of life, both for oneself and others.

I state above that “wisdom is the highest expression of ... future consciousness.” To recall, my approach to futurist education included holistic thinking, temporally expansive consciousness, theoretical and practical knowledge, and openness to multiple points of view. All of these qualities are, in fact, qualities of wisdom. Further, as Copthorne Macdonald notes, wisdom is not a “man-on-the-mountain” smugness, in possession of all the answers, but growth seeking; wisdom is a dynamical, never-ending searching for deeper and deeper understanding and the ability and willingness to correct ones’ mistakes. Wisdom is the capacity to apply deep learning and understanding to the challenges and problems of tomorrow. This capacity seemed to capture the essence of what I had meant by heightened future consciousness (Lombardo, 2006e).

In fact, after my immersion into the study of wisdom, I developed an extensive workshop on “Evolving Future Consciousness.” I anchored the workshop to the development of character virtues, such as self-responsibility, courage, and optimism, but wisdom emerged as the central virtue that all the other virtues contribute to (Lombardo, 2007c, 2007d, 2009c). Wisdom, virtue, and future consciousness all connect.

### **Evolution, Holism, and Contingency: Science and the New Enlightenment**

In my presentations and publications on wisdom, I stated that holistic and evolutionary thinking and humility are all important qualities of wisdom. As Macdonald states, wisdom needs to reflect contemporary knowledge and, in fact, evolutionary, holistic, and contingent thinking are key features of modern science (Lombardo, 2005c, 2005d, 2005e).

First, applying these ideas to future consciousness, the future should be conceptualized as a dynamic evolutionary development, reflecting but transcending the past history of nature, human civilization, and the cosmos; future consciousness should be holistic, for nature reveals interconnectivity and wholeness; and finally, future consciousness should be open to growth and change, for the history of science and the study of epistemology reveal the contingency and fallibility of human knowledge – in fact, this capacity for growth and change is a strength of science. The future is not certain, we are not certain, and this adventure into the realm of surprises is a good thing. In fact, since first articulating the key virtues of future consciousness, I have always listed

character virtues connected with these themes. Heightened future consciousness includes evolutionary optimism, courage (in the face of uncertainty), and reciprocity (acknowledgement of the interconnectivity and interdependency of all things).

Since wisdom is heightened future consciousness, all these points apply to wisdom as well.

Similar themes emerge in looking at the contemporary call for a “New” Enlightenment. It has been argued that a new way of thinking is needed to deal with the challenges of today and to flourish in the future. Walter Truett Anderson has outlined an evolutionary theory of enlightenment and has proposed a synthesis of Eastern and Western thinking to counter-act the excessive egocentricity of today – which he identifies as the core problem within modern human society and psychology. Rick Smyre, arguing for a Second Enlightenment, argues that a new set of key principles, derived primarily from contemporary science and the Integral Culture movement, are needed to think differently about human affairs. In his list, he highlights evolution and dynamism, interconnectivity, and contingency (Lombardo, 2006d, 383-395; Lombardo, 2006e).

### **Wisdom, the Future, and the New Enlightenment**

In comparing the common features of wisdom and theories of the New Enlightenment, it struck me that the pursuit of wisdom should be at the center of the New Enlightenment. Grounded in the holistic and integrative insights of the past, bringing in both Western rational and Eastern intuitive modes of understanding, and informed by contemporary science, the pursuit of wisdom provides the perfect ideal for the New Enlightenment. Again, aside from its cognitive strengths, wisdom is a virtue which also highlights emotion (such as compassion and love) and ethics (attempting to apply knowledge for the betterment of oneself and others). Wisdom therefore gives the New Enlightenment a humanistic dimension and a moral compass for the future. One could argue that wisdom, since it is holistic, is concerned with the well being of all of nature and all life – it is ecological in its mindset.

In summary, the enhancement of future consciousness is critical to education and the improvement of human life. The cultivation of character virtues is central to heightened future consciousness, academic success and human happiness. Wisdom is the central virtue in both regards, the ultimate goal of all education and the core of enhanced future consciousness. Further, key qualities of wisdom resonate with key themes in both modern science and theories of the New Enlightenment. These key ideas are evolution, holism, and contingency. Wisdom, therefore being grounded in contemporary science, and possessing the key additional feature of ethical consciousness, provides the appropriate underpinnings for both future consciousness and the New Enlightenment.

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