

## **Global and Ecological Dimensions of an Age of Wisdom**

### **Thomas Lombardo**

I am going to select two key issues relevant to evolution of human civilization, the ecology of the earth and globalization, and illustrate how wisdom can be seen as the central guiding principle for the future at the social and collective level of humanity. I am going to explain how a vision of an “Age of Wisdom” can inform and inspire us both globally and ecologically.

One of the key dimensions of wisdom is an integrative understanding of reality—to see the whole and how the whole fits together and not just see the parts. Wisdom entails expansive consciousness, both in space and time. Wise people go beyond the immediate here and now and the egocentric and self-serving, and can look outward into the grand panorama of things.

Thinking ecologically entails integrative thinking; we are part of nature, in a dynamic state of reciprocal interdependency. Everything in nature is interdependent and interwoven together in modes of cooperation, symbiosis, and even competition. It is one of the great insights of the last century that we must learn to think in terms of the whole world as one huge and complex ecological system—perhaps even as Gaia, a single living organism—and whether we like it or not, given our growing awareness of the whole and our technological capacities to monitor, assess, and affect the whole, we are increasingly responsible for managing the planet (Lombardo, 2002).

One big piece of our ecological understanding is the realization that human civilization clearly depends upon the natural environment for a multitude of resources and fundamental conditions of life support. Our economy derives off of our ecology. A second big piece of our ecological understanding is that civilization and human population, industry and technology, and all the diverse ways of life that make up the human condition, significantly impact the environment in multitudinous ways. These two points together constitute the circular interactivity of humanity and the environment.

Part of ecological wisdom is to understand the holistic and complex dependencies humans have with respect to the environment and ensure for their preservation, if not further development, whereas a second big part is to appreciate the global and complex impact human society has on the environment and to ensure that we do not destroy the world of nature.

There is an ethical dimension to such considerations. The emergence of environmental ethics as an area of study and purposeful action reflects the growing world-wide concern that we behave ethically toward nature and life. Ethical principles, such as respect for nature, the rights of animals (if not all of life), and equality and justice for all of life, inform and guide the study and application of environmental ethics. It is not enough to understand the complexities of nature and our interdependencies with it and

act with such knowledge in mind; it is equally important to act ethically with respect to nature and life (Boylan, 2001).

Environmental ethics looks at consequences, regarding how our actions will either benefit or harm life and the earth. That is, environmental ethics is ethically informed future consciousness. In general, when we consider our varied relationships with nature and natural resources, as the foundation for human civilization, or our varied effects on the environment, we move into thinking about the future. Will the resources persist or run out? Will we damage or transform nature in ways that can not be fixed? Will we leave a ruined earth and a depleted repository of resources for future generations? On the positive side of things, how can we develop technologies and way of thinking and behavior, that will mutually benefit both humanity and nature? These are all futurist questions pertaining to our interactions with the environment. In the coming century, just as we will be obligated to think holistically, we will be obligated to think futuristically. In fact, we will need to combine the two perspectives, thinking about the future of the whole and then placing this expansive consciousness in an ethical context (*Earth Charter Initiative*; Myers and Kent, 2005).

Given my definition of wisdom, it is clear that this complex capacity is exactly what we need in addressing the environment and our relationship with it. Since we need to integrate holistic, futurist, and ethical considerations, wisdom seems the appropriate foundation for ecological awareness. Wisdom is expansive consciousness: it considers the whole and it considers the future. Wisdom is ethical consciousness: in thinking about our ecology we should incorporate environmental ethics. Wisdom is practical knowledge: in addressing environmental issues we need to come up with practical solutions to problems. Moreover, referring to the theme of “Being One with Nature,” ecological wisdom brings in an emotional component of caring, if not love, of nature, which impassions and motivates ecologically informed action. And finally, ecological wisdom involves aligning our ideal future narrative of humanity with a more encompassing narrative of the ideal future of the earth. Ecological wisdom is at the core of informed, efficacious, and ethical ecological awareness.

Globalization is a pervasive and powerful trend in our contemporary world and, in all probability, will continue to impact human life in numerous ways in the coming century. Given that globalization is such a deep and long term trend, stretching back thousands of years in human history, and is presently being amplified through the accelerative growth of information and communication technologies, we should realistically expect that in the twenty-first century we will far surpass our present level in the integrative globalization of human life (Friedman, 1999; Bloom, 2000; Anderson, 2001).

For a variety of reasons, globalization in the twenty-first century needs to be guided by wisdom. First, globalization is a holistic phenomenon involving the total social network of humanity across the world. Hence, it needs to be understood within a holistic perspective, which is part of the nature of wisdom—to see the whole. Second, part of our global awareness needs to take into account ecological awareness and ecological wisdom: How does human society as a whole depend upon and impact nature as a

whole? Third, we need to view globalization from a futurist perspective: Where is it leading? What are the long term consequences? How should the process be guided? This futures component to our thinking about globalization is also part of wisdom. Fourth and connected to the last point, we should be guiding the process of globalization from an ethical point of view, and this again, is part of wisdom. Of course, a big part of the debate over the process of globalization has to do with the world economy—how to insure for maximum growth and equal opportunities among all people and all nations. But this is fundamentally an ethical question. Indeed, many of our global futurist concerns pertain to ethics. Can we realize a just world for all? Can we realize and enforce equality and human rights for all? And connecting economy, ecology, and ethics, how can we effectively address all the social ills that beset large portions of the human species—ills such as poverty, hunger, unsanitary living conditions, and poor education and health care—through our economic and technological systems without destroying the environment? In answering such questions, we have to holistically pull together fact and value, economic values and ethical considerations, and the potentials of technology, and place it all in the context of our relationship with the earth and its resources. This is big picture ethical thinking. This is holistic well being for humanity and nature. This is wisdom (*The Millennium Project, Sustainable Development Goals*).

One special concern regarding the ongoing process of globalization is the preservation of human cultural diversity amidst the potentially homogenizing effects of the world's progressive integration into an economic and technological whole. Our distinctive identities, our distinctive futures, our individual freedoms, may be wiped out and swallowed by a global mono-culture that is perhaps too Westernized, if not Americanized, in its values and ways of life. As Ziauddin Sardar (1999, 2005) has stated, we need to “rescue all our futures” against the colonization of the Western vision of the ideal tomorrow. A globally balanced vision of wisdom clearly comes into play in addressing this issue.

A viable global conception of wisdom needs to incorporate and integrate both Eastern and Western modes of thinking and understanding as described by Nisbett (2003). As one important criteria regarding how we guide the process of globalization through wisdom in the twenty-first century, we should strive toward a culturally broad and encompassing conception of wisdom that incorporates multiple modes of understanding derived from various cultures worldwide. This is not to say though that we will not find commonalities across diverse cultures; there is significant evidence that humanity shares many values and esteems similar virtues, such as evidenced in *The Earth Charter* and *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Part of the challenge of wisdom in the future will be to identify, embrace, and act upon common ideals regarding the betterment of human society without negating cultural and individual diversity.

Also in line with the principle of balance, Sternberg (1998) has proposed that a key dimension of wisdom is to find a balance between individual and collective concerns regarding well being, and similarly, in my definition of wisdom I include both a concern for individual well being and a concern for the well being of others. At a global level, this principle translates into finding a balance between individual cultures and their values

and collective concerns and values for all humanity. The principle of interdependency, revealed within the workings of nature and the complex interactions between humanity and the environment, applies at the social and global level as well. Postmodern relativism will not work as a viable philosophical framework for humanity as a whole, since no individual, no culture, no nation is an island in and of itself, and whatever each of us does impacts the whole. We can't all just do our own thing based on our own distinctive points of view and values. We need to protect our individual rights and ways of life, but we are also responsible to each other, for we are all in this together. The Taoist principle of complementarity between the whole and the parts, which manifests itself in the workings of nature, also needs to be applied to the workings of society: individuality and diversity coupled together with collectivity and unity hold each other up or fall together. This is critical to the functioning of a wise global society and an "Age of Wisdom."

The principles of an evolutionary, future-focused vision of wisdom can be constructively applied to all major human challenges and issues, as well as key areas of growth and development within the multi-faceted complexity of human civilization. Wisdom pursued and engaged at a collective social level, provides an informed, inspiring, and ethical paradigm for efficaciously realizing ongoing purposeful self-evolution within humanity and the world as a whole. The idea of an Age of Wisdom provides a grand narrative and guiding light for our personal development; the future of education; the future of humanity and technology (the wise cyborg); ecological consciousness and the future of the environment; globalization; our future psychological evolution; and even, as examined in other writings, the future of love and marriage and the significance and value of space travel (Lombardo and Lombardo, 2008; Lombardo, 2009).

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