

## **Ethical Obligations and Futures Studies**

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With a certain periodicity a particular discussion arises in Futures Studies circles, the debate about futurist' commitment to a better future. Generally, the question is posed along the lines of two arguments:

First, futurists have an obligation to work for a better future.

Second, this duty implies some degree of effective achievement.

What I will try to argue here is that these two arguments are based on wrong assumptions, apart from the fact that is quite questionable that futurists have a greater commitment to the future than any other professional, academic or cultural community. The final purpose of this essay is to postulate that, as a general rule, is better to opt for an ethical low profile approach to the future.

Now let us examine the first arguments that futurists have an obligation towards the future. Whenever someone advocates that futurists should work for a better future the implication is that they have a particularly binding obligation, that they have a greater accountability than other people individually or collectively considered. Yet, why is it so? Why futurists should have a stronger duty than politicians, cooks, farmers, teachers, plumbers, lawyers, tailors, actors or musicians to name a few? It could be argued that it is because of an implicit "discipline-centrism". In other words, whenever it is argued this futurists' superior commitment, what transpires at the core is the wish to be acknowledged as the higher authority in future matters. This is an extremely alembicated way to say that futurists should be consulted in any future question because they are the main experts in the topic. Maybe it is some kind of non-admitted nostalgia of the time when prophets, oracles and shamans were the unchallenged advisers in future affairs. However, the question here should be: are truly futurists the major authority in future

themes? Under any realistic analysis the answer should be no. And there are two reasons to support this posture:

The first one has to do with the fact that some people operate under the wrong assumption that Futures Studies aim to predict the future. The truth is that Futures Studies are not about foreseeing the future, they have never been and, even more, they deem such endeavour as impossible (1). Futures Studies real objective is to proportionate information about future events to ground present decisions, which is not coincident with predicting. In the first place there is a fundamental distinction in terms of scope, if predicting implies to know all the future possibilities and be certain of what will happen, Futures settles for quite less. In full accordance with their principle that considers unfeasible to foretell the future, Futures Studies do not expect to uncover all the future alternatives; on the contrary, they try to select the portion of the future that is relevant to the decision under scrutiny and, then, they try to understand what may occur there. In many senses, applying Futures Studies to understand the future is like using a flashlight to move into a dark space. A lantern will provide a bundle of light that can be pointed in the desired direction, and that light will probably give a good enough image so it could be possible to advance with a reasonable confidence. However, the image can be distorted by shadows depending on the angle of the flashlight or, also, if aiming for the ground it is likely to miss a high obstacle and vice-versa. In short, even with a powerful lantern it will be advisable to take precautions. Which is exactly the case with futures, the flashlight simile is particularly fitting because futures also give a fragmented and deformed image of the future. But, as long as that image is helpful enough to ground present decisions (to move on), it is viable to work with that. Of course, it may be objected that if Futures Studies would be able to foretell all the future in its entire diversity it would be a much more useful tool to asses current decisions. The reason to refute this objection has to do with the second reason.

The conviction in future's unpredictability is not a mere faith dogma in the discipline. It derives from an epistemological standpoint that was enunciated by Bertrand de Jouvenel in his founding work *The Art of Conjecture*. He stated there that if the future is predetermined, then it is possible for us to arrive to know it, but if we know the future we can change it, and then we no longer know it. What de Jouvenel was referring to is that the future is essentially fluid, it is constantly affected and influenced by our actions, values and preferences and, thus, it is in a permanent state of flux until it becomes fixated as present. Therefore, the only feasible pretension Futures Studies can aspire to is to be in a dynamic dialectic with the future, incessantly trying to unveil its mechanism and permanently responding to its ceaseless alterations in a feedback loop. In other words, it is an utterly futile enterprise to try to master the future as the object of our research will keep mutating because, among other things, of our own efforts to understand it.

However, and before leaving the part devoted to the first argument (futurists' obligation to work for a better future), there is a much more fundamental question here to be made, Why a futurist should know the future better than anyone else? Such a pretension can only be sustained by a biased, "discipline-centred" standpoint according to which only the knowledge that comes from the discipline orthodoxy is acceptable. But since Futures Studies is not really attempting to know the future it should not be so readily refused that inputs from other disciplines, traditions or practices can not be equally, if not more, valuable

Regarding the second argument, the obligation to achieve tangible results, there are two kinds of objections to be made. The first one has to do with this simplistic perception according to which thinking is not really doing anything. It is hard to say what is more ridiculous the attempt to negate the undeniable evidence that reflecting, analysing, considering and other intellectual practices are forms of activity indeed; or the fact

some people still adhere to this old fashioned *cliché*. No more time will be spent on this point.

The second counter argument, though, deserves more space. The first point to be considered here is why is there such a need to attain effective results? This is an extremely relevant question if we take into account that this issue derives from the duty of improving the future. The stress to get some "real" work done boils down to two kinds of justification: either there is the need to get some proof for the record or there is the wish to obtain recognition for the work done. Both justifications are quite questionable.

Take first the emphasis on tangible results; this is a quite coherent aspiration in a discipline that claims to follow the scientific method. However, when connected to ethical questions like the betterment of the future, it has to be acknowledged that quantitative indicators related to subjective preferences are, at best, contingent. Granted that it can be a legitimate approach to normative subjects but, at heart, they also denote an empiricist bias in the standpoint from which it is considered that improvement of the future. Nonetheless, a more relevant point has to be raised, if the previous point about the fluidity of the future is accepted, it has to be admitted too that it would more advisable to focus on the process rather than on the results. A result implies a sense of completion, of success that can be counterproductive when chances are that you will have to keep reassessing your conclusions time after time. That is why so many futurist insist on that the main value of Futures Studies lies in the fact of engaging in a continued process of inquiry about the future more than in the outputs of that process.

Yet, there is a reason why a futurist, even being aware of the previous, may be interested in attaining those results: in order to get credit for them. The wish for recognition is a very humane aspiration, but if this aspiration is embedded within a duty to better the future, then it has to be strongly opposed. First of all, and as pointed in the previous point,

there is a great deal of uncertainty about what it may be a "better future" and good intentions are no guaranty of anything. Some of the worst deeds in human history were originally conceived as improvements for humanity (like eugenics). If nothing else, experience should teach us that the road to hell is paved with "good intentions". The point is, however, that the only recognition we can really expect to get while alive is that of our contemporaneous. Therefore, if your work is celebrated in its own time it would be because it deals more with the present than with the future. That is to say that chances are that the more recognition you get from your contemporaneous peers the less relevant that your work would be for the future.

Finally, and from a strictly ethical point of view, there is a severe objection to be made: any moral obligation is absolute, it cannot be conditioned by anything and it cannot be done to generate gratitude or appreciation; you do it because you must.

Despite all what I have said so far, I do not mean that Futures Studies should be approached in an amoral way. On the contrary! Normativity is a central aspect of Futures and ethics are intermingled with our values and preferences. We cannot ignore this but we have also to strip Futures Studies from any messianic inclination. Here I will advocate for The Ethical Low Profile Approach to the Future, which consists of three principles:

First: be humble, despite the best efforts and intentions there is no guaranty that you could get to know what is the best for the future.

Therefore, and in the second place: always direct your intervention so as to try to cause the minimum harm in the future.

Finally, and third: accept that failure is always a possibility, but learn from the mistakes and try not to repeat them.

Someone may think that this is not enough, that we cannot settle for such low expectations. Yet, it may be good to keep in mind that, quite frequently, less is more.

**Notes:**

(1) There are many authors that have expressed this impossibility, but maybe the strongest argumentation is that of Jim Dator, who in his first law about the futures specifically states that "The future cannot be predicted, (...)" Among other places, Dator's laws can be found in Slaughter, Richard (ed) *The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies*, DDM, 1996