

Essays

Wisdom, Responsibility and Futures: Introduction to WiseFutures N.0

Simone Arnaldi^a, Esther Eidinow^{b,*}, Johan Siebers^c, Josefin Wangel^d

^a University of Trieste, Italy

^b University of Bristol, UK

^c Middlesex University, UK

^d Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Sweden

A B S T R A C T

As part of the 50-year anniversary of Futures, three themed special issues were commissioned, each one exploring different aspects of futures fifty years from now from a different perspective. This issue focused on a theme of ‘responsible futures’, asking contributors to answer the question: what futures should humanity strive for? What might be considered responsible and wise in 2068, and why?

1. Introduction

What could the generation born in 2018 plausibly experience at the age of 50 years? How different might this be across the globe? As part of the 50-year anniversary of *Futures*, three themed special issues were commissioned, each one exploring these questions from a different perspective. This issue focused on a theme of ‘responsible futures’, asking contributors to answer the questions: what futures should humanity strive for? What might be considered responsible and wise in 2068, and why?

The central theme of the issue was inspired by Max Tegmark’s (2017) call for debate on the Futures of Life, with explicit reference to artificial intelligence, gods and ‘apocalypse’. But while AI is an increasingly significant factor in global futures, the editors encouraged—and actively sought—contributions that considered other, less foregrounded and perhaps more surprising trends and possibilities. WiseFutures N.0 calls futurists to attend to human wisdom in the evolution of intelligence. The numeration system ‘N.0’ is used to signify the nature of claims of techno-centric paradigms and, in doing so, to invite critical reflection.

The four guest editors hail from very different disciplinary backgrounds, as well as bringing diverse international perspectives. Simone Arnaldi is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Trieste, Italy: he studies the relations between science, technology and society and how technology can be managed responsibly. Esther Eidinow is Professor of Ancient History at the University of Bristol: in her research on ancient Greek culture she explores technologies for managing uncertainty (oracles and magic, for example) but she brings a background in strategy, having worked as a scenario writer for 10 years before turning to academia. She publishes on futures thinking—both ancient and modern. Johan Siebers was educated in the Netherlands and is currently Director of the Ernst Bloch Centre for German Thought at the Institute of Modern Languages Research, School of Advanced Study, University of London. He is also Associate Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Middlesex University London. His work focuses on Bloch’s utopian ontology of not-yet-being and its ramifications for contemporary philosophy. He also works on philosophical and theoretical

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: esther.eidinow@bristol.ac.uk (E. Eidinow).

approaches to communication: in the dialogic encounter the future as the openness of the world can become the wellspring of both separateness and togetherness. Josefin Wangel is an undisciplinary researcher and educator at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Sweden. Her current research focuses on examining and developing futures studies methodologies and using these to study energy transitions and urban sustainability.

Despite our multiplicities, the editors shared commonalities, and with Ted Fuller agreed on the origins of wisdom as being participatory. As a result, and hoping to avoid single dominant voices and rhetorical polemic, we agreed that the articles on normative futures submitted to this issue should be co-created, produced by and presented as collaborative dialogues. In shaping the issue in this way, we hoped to capture not consensus or conclusions, but well reasoned, well informed explorations of normative images of 2068, recognising both points of agreement and points of difference. As with all publications in *Futures* they should contribute new knowledge to our understanding of the future and our relationships with the future: each paper should also provide information about the context of the dialogue; its participants, guiding questions, dynamics and flow; a summing up by participants; and the rapporteur's conclusions as to the contribution to the questions.

We were open to different kinds of groups or perspectives, and called on multi-disciplinary groups (for example social scientist, politicians, religious leaders, entrepreneurs, young people, consulting practitioners, AI researchers, philosophers and etc.); actors in multi-disciplinary futures research studies; new generation futurists, e.g. recent post doctoral researchers or students in futures related areas; members of futurist networks and futures institutions; AI systems and people; differing and diverse communities. We prompted our potential contributors to consider organising dialogues on Wise Futures in a number of ways, i.e. as part of a related futures event, as a stand-alone workshop with an audience, or simply as a discussion by invited contributors. A mix of synchronous and asynchronous dialogue processes could be used, in physical locations and/or via networks. We asked contributors to consider the wisdom of the future, and the future of wisdom; we were hoping for new insights into the modern currency of a very old idea...

2. Wisdom: a social construction?

Historically, conceptions of wisdom in western philosophy have mostly been developed on the back of a metaphysics that sought to capture an eternal order of being, an order replete with a fixed finality. The more successful we are in penetrating the unchanging order of things, the wiser we can be. Already for Aristotle this led to a distinction between *sophia*, the kind of wisdom that deals with atemporal, eternal reality (this was the proper province of philosophy as theory, the contemplative life) and *phronesis*, or 'practical wisdom', the kind that deals with the right way to conduct one's life, in society with others (this form of knowledge, practical wisdom, concerned the active life). As the distinguishing feature of human beings was often seen to lie in their capacity for pure, rational thought, in other words to understand and dwell in their understanding on the truth of being, on the way things are, the former kind was generally held to be the ultimate goal and the ultimate source of happiness for human beings.

Aristotle begins his *Metaphysics* with the remark that all people by nature desire to know. We can see the metaphysical level of knowing as the final fulfilment of this intrinsic desire as it runs its course. Practical wisdom relies on a mix of theoretical knowledge and experience of life; an entire body of literature and psychosocial self-management practices have arisen since the beginning of philosophy and they have been central to the cultures of care for the self that form a continuous history in literature, religion, medicine and psychology. A part of this traditional thinking on the practicalities of daily life dealt, of course, with the problem that unexpected things may happen, that life is full of surprises and accidents, fortunate or unfortunate, and that sometimes fate seems to have the upper hand. For the classical practical philosophical tradition, however, the unpredictable was to be contained as much as possible. When we look back at the centuries of wisdom literature, what stands out most is the implicit, often unconscious or unreflected, desire for control within the measure of what is humanly possible in a teleologically fixed universe.

A curious and significant exception to this mentality can be found in Christian literature. It seems to have paved the way for the demise of the relevance of the discourse of wisdom in the modern period, in tandem with the demise of the idea of a fixed, eternal order in reality that could be discovered via contemplation alone. St. Paul speaks of the folly, in the eyes of the world, of the belief in the resurrection of Christ, that ultimately unpredictable, undeserved and freely given event, incomprehensible except by the heart, which has reasons reason cannot grasp. The Christian, the idiot, knows of a revolution in the order of things that springs from the most private, inner part of the soul. It at once redeems the world as it is and at the same time has no relation anymore to it.

In Erasmus' *In Praise of Folly* the madness of the good news of the Gospels is presented as the highest wisdom, praised by Folly herself; for what is crazier than to sing your own praises and speak well of yourself? The truth can present itself only as madness, the opposite of wisdom. The wisdom of Erasmus' apology of folly echoes the apology of the master of ignorance, Socrates. You will go on to live, after having judged me, Socrates tells his judges, I will go on to die. Who has the better fate, he says, we don't know. The wisdom of Socrates was the wisdom of knowing about your own ignorance. A radical questioning and openness was brought into view there which, in a way, turned out to be too radical, not just for Athens at the time, but for the discourse of wisdom as it developed in the centuries after Socrates. Philosophy has to retrieve it again and again against the tendency towards the complacency of perceived wisdom. Two opposing forces, control and openness, form a creative tension that animated European thought and made the encounter between Greek philosophy and Judaeo-Christian faith so fruitful.

We can see the rise of scientific thinking as another form of this creative tension. Francis Bacon's *Nova Atlantis* expressed the promise of technical control (*homo faber*) while Descartes's *Discourse on Method* laid out the provisional philosophy of science necessary for man to become, as Descartes himself said, 'masters of nature'. But provisional it was, for Descartes' animating insight was the awareness that we do not already know what reality is, but we can formulate a method by which we might find out. One of the great moments in the *Discourse on Method* is when Descartes applies his scientific, theoretical method of unprejudiced observation and analysis also to practical morality. For the purposes of daily life it is best not to ignore prevailing customs, but to not take these to

have any intrinsic justification or consider them to be beyond revision. In the quiet progression of these pages, a revolutionary ethic is born that brackets out once and for all any notion of an intrinsic legitimacy to traditional views, customs and morality. All liberation movements since the beginning of the modern period owe a debt to this book. In abandoning teleology for scientific explanation the contingency of the world was brought to awareness; the world was an open, vast place in which humanity could build forever. Wisdom had been substituted definitively by method.

As eternity was more and more substituted by temporality, discourses of wisdom (where they survived in any but a nominal sense) emphasised the moment, the serendipitous, the wisdom of oblivion, living in harmony with the passing of the times, in our own lives as well as in history. Nietzsche's Zarathustra was perhaps the central figure to rekindle a sense of the sage and infuse it with the ability to live without asking for grounds and ends. But existentialist freedom, from Kierkegaard onwards, found little use for even a reference to wisdom, while the defining movement of scientific progress with respect to our knowledge of nature, society and psychology had no use for it at all. That the future remains open, that new and unpredictable things can still happen, that we do not colonize the future by our fiat or stubbornness, this became, in the late twentieth century, the most recognisable remnant of a discourse of wisdom.

Derrida understood justice, traditionally the cardinal virtue and therefore the pinnacle of wisdom, as centrally organised around this principle. Wisdom had become a wisdom of the event and its method in the practical sphere had become therapy and psychoanalysis, which aim at the freeing of the individual from stifling patterns of control in thinking and feeling so as to put people in touch with a renewed sense of agency and the ability to relate freely to others. Lacan remarked that antiquity knew nothing of psychoanalysis, the attentive and transformative listening to the way our speech manifests our unconscious desire, how we are not even in control with respect to the words we use. One of his formulations of the goal of analysis is for the analysand to 'speak well' of the unconscious and to change her attitude to her desire. Analysis as a practice of speech can be seen as the heir of eloquence and rhetoric, the shadows of wisdom for so long in European culture, precisely because of its acceptance of the full spectrum of human desire. In the light of Erasmus' choice of the rhetorical genre of the eulogy as the wise mode for folly to speak (not the philosophical treatise), we may begin to see how the very notion of wisdom itself is a historical construct, part of a larger historical dynamic of human beings on the way to a more authentic relation to themselves, their desire and their freedom.

3. Wisdom: looking forward...

Part of the inspiration for a special issue of *Futures* on 'wise futures' grew from the familiar dialectic of mastery and incompetence, control and destruction. Our dominant modes of relating to reality, both cognitive and practical, have exposed humanity to threats of an unprecedented scale. It makes us, as wannabe masters of nature, cut an awkward figure indeed. The temptation is strong to look back at old traditions of wisdom and see if there might not be something there that we have overlooked. So many attempts to introduce measure into the madness of technology-fuelled capitalism have sought, and are seeking, to do that. We want to live in harmony with nature, tune in to the Dao of things, not overstep our natural place anymore in the living, moving great chain of being. We want to become sages again, wandering into the future instead of being hurled into it as one great catastrophe, in the words of Walter Benjamin's haunting description of Klee's *Angelus Novus*. We want to square the free, creative advance into novelty with the safety of the order of things. It is how futurology once started, with Pierre Wack's comparison of the aware corporation and the zen archer who becomes one with the action of the bow and arrow and in that way hits the target without looking.

Wisdom and responsibility: are these overlapping concepts? No, but, for obvious reasons, the call tries to relate them. From a philological point of view, 'responsibility' derives from the Latin verb *respondeo* and from its root *spondeo*. This origin links the notion of responsibility to two related meanings. On the one hand, responsibility is related to the idea of responding to somebody for something. On the other hand, this concept is connected to the idea of committing to someone for something. The latter follows from the technical legal meaning of the Latin verb *spondeo*: standing in court as a guarantor, providing a guarantee for the debts of somebody who is summoned before a court, or even standing as a guarantor of the commitment of a spouse to a husband. Responsibility is, therefore, a relation, a bond: a commitment that I assume to something or somebody, or the obligation to respond to the consequences of my actions or of the actions of others.

While this description emphasises the individual, in fact, it always takes a village to have responsibility: responsibility is taken in front of others, for instance, such as other people, another family, the community, the gods. Responsibility is, therefore, social, in the sense that activates broader social meanings, bonds, belongings, practices, and institutions, which are mobilized to foster, support, and judge responsibility, assumptions and attributions. In anticipation, responsibility is asymmetrical: what we can do is to *take responsibility for our futures*, but we cannot expect that our futures will hold us accountable for what we have done, as we know from the debate on intergenerational justice.

In a sense, when we talk about our responsibility towards the future, we look at ourselves in a mirror: the future for which we commit to be responsible is what we can figure out in the present, be it what we fear, hope for, or expect. We shape our future in the present, often inadvertently, before we understand the ramifications of the consequences of our actions, either because we disagree on their salience and direction, or simply because we do not listen early enough to the warnings about what these consequences may be. The present shapes powerful paths, both material and intangible, on which the form of our future depends.

If looked at in conjunction with responsibility, wisdom is the notion that provides content to the relations that responsibility outlines. As such, wisdom seems to have enjoyed mixed reviews as long it has been seen as a part of received knowledge and 'common sense', in a Modern world that preferred scientific explanation to tradition. As a form of 'localised' knowledge, intimately linked with practice, wisdom has been regarded as something to be overcome by the new, generalised knowledge of the social. And yet, the adaptation of general rules to specific circumstances, the combination of generalized knowledge claims and of context-bound

pragmatic discernment, is of great value in situations of irreducible uncertainty, such as now when we confront turbulent and volatile futures. Acting wisely means acting modestly, where acting modestly means: prudently acknowledging the limitations of our knowledge and of our capacity to act. This involves seeking awareness of the importance of subjective elements in how we experience and define ‘us’ and the world around us; as well as understanding the irreducible context dependency of our knowledge itself and, therefore, of the ways in which we define problems and their solutions.

For this brief description, we can, perhaps, derive some ideas about what the process of reflecting on wisdom and its close cousin responsibility, may involve: (1) acknowledging uncertainty as an irreducible characteristic of futures knowledge; (2) being open about divergent and even conflicting knowledge; (3) combining pragmatically and creatively such diverse knowledge; (4) considering prudence and care as guiding principles of your action; (5) acknowledging the moral significance of responsibility towards the future and acknowledging the fragmented morality in pluralistic society.

4. The Issue...

In short, wisdom is much more than scientific knowledge—and so our contributors have discovered. Wisdom is ‘crafted’, according to the Fourthland art collective (Sayerer, Knutsdotter, Harrod, Cranfield, & Sherwin, 2019): it is not abstract, but is a form of embodied knowledge, able to connect old myths and present cultures, today’s people with the future changes they aspire. As Sandford (2019) argues, futures are rooted in our pasts: they are not abstract and ‘portable in the same way’, but they are specific to places and groups, who live them in the present and through the lenses of what they inherited from the past. Wisdom is seen as art, as ‘fine art’ also by Irwin and Te Haumoana White (2019): it is the art of combining traditional, non-Western knowledge and values with a pragmatic, perceptive, and future-oriented approach to modern and contemporary worldviews, in a way that preserves and fosters our agency in a changing world. Wisdom is inseparable from normative questions about what constitutes a good life in the futures and what is moral action.

As this suggests, sustainability is, unsurprisingly, a recurrent theme in these articles, as they explore what ‘good’ futures could look like. For Irwin and Te Haumoana White, wisdom is the capacity to steer us towards sustainable futures. This explicit normative characterisation of ‘wise futures’ characterises other papers in this collected issue. For example, discussing responsibility in management education, Henderson, Wersun, Wilson, Mo-ching Yeung, and Zhang (2019) equate responsible management with management for sustainability, in a context in which ‘Humanity’s very existence in 2068 may be considered to be uncertain’. Pansera, Ehlers, and Kerschner (2019) define wisdom as ‘the capability of being prudent, discreet, experienced, having the power of discerning and judging rightly’, but, ‘wise’, as an adjective, describes the futures one hopes for. This article establishes four main criteria to assess which (technological) futures are wise: feasibility, viability, appropriateness and conviviality.

By focusing on individuals and their mental health, Engelen et al. (2020) shows that a crucial aspect of practical wisdom has to be the concern for the basic feelings, the fundamental, in some aspects unconscious, emotional processes that determine our thoughts, actions and our relations to others and to ourselves. Contemplating the structural factors that place heavy burdens on the mental health of many groups in society in a way that is unparalleled in history, she argues that a wise future is one in which we may be able to free ourselves creatively and imaginatively from the destructive drivers of greed and fear, and from the basic forgotten anxiety that there is not enough for everyone, which has driven so much devastation, alienation and oppression. Finally, and in alignment with this insight, Pargman et al. (2019) and Ramirez, Ravetz, Sharpe, and Varley (2019) remind us that wisdom is not only an individual virtue, but a practice to be performed across diverse societal levels and domains. The practice of wisdom should reach out to others as well as within ourselves.

5. In Praise of Folly...

There is a tinge of madness, and perhaps more than just a tinge, about this endeavour. For the problems are huge, the known unknowns, the unknown unknowns, and perhaps even more the unknown knowns: those things we hide from ourselves; the areas where we make fools of ourselves. They range from the future of the economy, to climate change, to wise media, to education, to intercultural life in a globalising world, to the demise and much needed restoration of the public sphere, and indeed to what will be needed from the private sphere and individual psychology; Stoic imperturbability, individuality and independence may still speak to us at some level, but not without translation and modification, which is manifested even in the dialogic and collaborative format chosen for the contributions here.

It might be said that this special issue—taking on such a topic—could be described as folly. But let’s take a leaf from the book of history, follow Erasmus, and speak in praise of folly. In Hasidic Judaism the righteous persons, the *tzadikim*, are anonymous and not even known to themselves. Their wisdom can manifest itself in the transgression of the law rather than in keeping the law. And yet, for their sake only the world is not destroyed. Their hidden wisdom guards the future of the world, and it appears as foolishness: wisdom manifests itself as folly, which, once understood, becomes, in Ernst Bloch’s words, *docta spes*, ‘learned hope’.

And hope gives agency. The history of wisdom has had several stages: from hope gained by insight into the eternal destiny that lay ready in nature; to a hope that armed itself with a method and a desire for progress on a planet and a temporal horizon big and indifferent enough to always be there as the stage for our building; to the hope that is born in the moment we leap into our absolute, necessarily contingent freedom; to the frail hope that perhaps is arising today as we become aware that our collective actions do not leave the world we live in unmoved, that we need to refine our methods and take more responsibility for our freedom, which has its own frailty. All this is history, up to the present, dark moment. What future might be, and how therefore to rethink our relation to the place where we live and the place where we are alive, is perhaps one of the central motivating questions at the heart of the idea of

wisdom today. The future of wisdom will be a wisdom of the future.

As the articles demonstrate and in a way that is coherent with our understanding of wisdom and responsibility, 'WiseFutures N.0' is intended as a provocation. These articles are not definitive: the dialogues they evoke are presented here as what the editors hope will become a larger conversation about the nature of wisdom in the future. What would be wisest for humanity and for life more generally? What *should be* normative? In imagined worlds of 2068 and their explicit dominant paradigm(s), what is virtuous? What forms of institution, governance and social practices would be best for humanity and human flourishing? How should we live? What could possibly go wrong?

References

- Engelen, M., Liangi, I., Klingler, J., Clay, A. D., Shechter, A., & Walden, R. A. (2020). The infant. *Futures*, *115*, 102477. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2019.102477>.
- Henderson, L. H., Wersun, A., Wilson, J., Mo-ching Yeung, S., & Zhang, K. (2019). Principles for responsible management education in 2068. *Futures*, *111*, 81–89. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2019.05.005>.
- Irwin, R., & White, T. H. (2019). Decolonising Technological Futures: A dialogical tryptich between Te Haumoana White, Ruth Irwin, and Tegmark's Artificial Intelligence. *Futures*, *112*, 102431. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2019.06.003>.
- Pansera, M., Ehlers, M.-H., & Kerschner, C. (2019). Unlocking wise digital techno-futures: Contributions from the Degrowth community. *Futures*, *114*, 102474. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2019.102474>.
- Pargman, D. S., Eriksson, E., Bates, O., Kirman, B., Comber, R., Hedman, A., & van den Broeck, M. (2019). The future of computing and wisdom: Insights from Human–Computer Interaction. *Futures*, *113*, 102434. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2019.06.006>.
- Ramirez, R., Ravetz, J., Sharpe, B., & Varley, L. (2019). We need to talk (more wisely) about wisdom: A set of conversations about wisdom, science, and futures. *Futures*, *108*, 72–80. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2019.02.002>.
- Sandford, R. (2019). Thinking with heritage: Past and present in lived futures. *Futures*, *111*, 71–80. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2019.06.004>.
- Sayarer, I., Knutsdotter, E., Harrod, T., Cranfield, B., & Sherwin, S. (2019). Crafting a future of knowledge. *Futures*, *114*, 102443. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2019.102443>.
- Tegmark, M. (2017). *Life 3.0: Being Human in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.