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# Sense making, futures work and the global emergency

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – *The purpose of this paper is to discuss and take forward several themes in two earlier papers by Ogilvy and Miller. After summarising their main points it seeks to consider different approaches to “sense making” in the work of future-relevant theorists and practitioners; then to consider the case of sense making through integral approaches and then to explore implications through several themes. These include: a view of changes in the global system, generic responses to the global emergency, the critique of regressive modernity and how responses to “Cassandra’s dilemma” (to know the future but not be believed) might stand in relation to the views of both authors. The paper aims to conclude with a view of the benefits to be obtained from the use of a four-quadrant approach to understanding and responding to the human predicament.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *This is a discussion paper that questions some of the views and assumptions of the earlier papers and explores some implications of an alternative view.*

**Findings** – *While supporting the drive to improve upon the theoretical foundations of futures studies and foresight, the paper questions whether such developments are as central, or will be as influential, as the authors suggest. A different view of “how to approach the future” is recommended, in part through four “domains of generic responses” to the global predicament.*

**Research limitations/implications** – *The paper presents an argument supported by evidence. Both should be reviewed by others in pursuit of extending the conversation beyond philosophical questions to implications in practice.*

**Practical implications** – *The essence of a methodology to understand, approach and even to resolve many aspects of the global emergency is outlined here. As such the paper has many practical implications for the way that futures and foresight professionals operate and towards what ends.*

**Social implications** – *The paper provides a substantive basis for qualified hope and engagement with a range of future-shaping tasks. Specifically, these relate to the necessary shifts from “overshoot and collapse” trajectories to options for “moderated descent”.*

**Originality/value** – *Much of the work carried out on the perspective and issues discussed here has been carried out by those working outside of the futures/foresight domain. The value is both in affirming positive ways forward and extending the professional reach of futures/foresight workers to embrace new ideas and methods.*

**Keywords** *Sense making, Global system, Generic responses, Global emergency, Regressive modernity, Critique, Human development, Forward planning, Forecasting*

**Paper type** *Conceptual paper*

## Introduction

“The future” is in some respects the “ultimate problem” and part of the conundrum of time itself. Such challenging topics provide no single or satisfactory answers, even though the desire for such lies deep within the human psyche. Rather, there are many different contexts, questions and questioners. The latter draw on diverse sources and devote their efforts to exploring answers that emerge from their own needs, perceptions and practices. This helps to explain the enormous diversity within future-oriented enquiry and practice as well as the occasional conflicts that arise when different assumptions, values and worldviews collide.

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Two papers in the Vol. 13 No. 4 issue of *Foresight* are worthy of close attention as they seek to explore ways that futures and foresight professionals understand and carry out their work. For, make no mistake these papers raise fundamental issues. In so doing they challenge earlier practice and seek to refresh and renew the profession. Yet the question as to whether these efforts are as useful or successful as they are intended to be remains open.

This short essay was prompted by my responses to this work and can be considered a kind of extended footnote. As such it is part of a broader conversation around the collective need to clarify and reformulate the substantive nature of futures/foresight theory and practice. As a former professor of Philosophy and a distinguished scenario practitioner Ogilvy's work is articulate, informed and challenging. Over the years anything by him is always worth considered attention[1]. I am less familiar with Miller's work but recent correspondence has helped me better appreciate his contribution.

I think it is fair to say that Ogilvy and Miller are both seeking to bring clarity and insight to futures and foresight work through reflecting on their own thinking and practice. So I should state clearly that my own focus in recent years has been directed to somewhat different ends. It is less on the attempt to upgrade the theory and practice of futures *per se* than on how humanity as a whole can deal with the exceptionally demanding and, by now inevitable, transitions ahead (Slaughter, 2012a,b). In that process I found myself venturing a long way beyond the field and its literature. So, jumping in at the deep end, as it were, with these two pieces was a stimulating and challenging experience. I emerged with a new appreciation for the diversity of meaning making, or sense making, within futures and foresight work and with a number of questions that are outlined below.

### Overview of the papers

In his articulate and stimulating paper Ogilvy brings his extensive knowledge to bear on what I think really amounts to an attitude to futures, a way of managing the stresses and contradictions of contemporary reality. It is a posture that goes back to his earlier *Living Without a Goal* and the action philosophy outlined there (Ogilvy, 1995). He wants to look beyond current economic issues and tell a "larger story" by way of an historical overview of four broad stages in the evolution of attitudes to the future. This achieved, he uses Thom's "catastrophe" model to exemplify shifts in the dynamic environment in which we live where events take place rapidly and often unpredictably veer between disastrous and benign outcomes. The "fold" on the surface of this model becomes a metaphor for facing uncertainty in ways that he argues are dignified and empowering, ways that lead to the capacity for "resolute action." His aim in all this is to create mind spaces that are capable of holding different options in creative tension. He wants to see "both threats and opportunities shining forth in rich and vivid scenarios" (Ogilvy, 2011). Beyond this is a need for the "restoration of hope," a goal that I wholeheartedly endorse. To this end he takes a fresh look at the span of Utopian possibilities and rightly in my view identifies "digital utopianism" as the current front-runner in a somewhat attenuated field. His critique of this form of utopianism is exemplary and should be considered by all who are tempted to see the much-heralded "singularity" as anything other than technological narcissism. Overall, he sets out a strong case for us to recover or up-grade our collective capacity to "reconstruct" our worlds, in part through holding in place a sense of the overall dynamism and uncertainty without feeling overwhelmed.

Miller then builds on this piece and quite dramatically ups the ante, as it were. He is looking for "new solutions to how people think about the future." While he finds much to admire in Ogilvy's "scenaric stance" he argues that it needs to go beyond a long-standing preoccupation with epistemology in the futures/foresight arena. One of the issues that is certainly received too little recognition is a need to allow for the unavoidable fact of our "not knowing" about the future. Another, more fundamental, one is that the field needs to extend its intellectual and operational reach beyond questions of how the future can in any sense be "known" to ontological questions, i.e. what the future is. For scenarios, or any other methodology, to be able to address future indeterminacy requires a combination of ontology and anticipatory systems.

Here is where Miller drops the proverbial bombshell. For, hitherto, the main efforts of futures theorists have been invested in the belief that “present possibilities for the future are real” (Bell, 1997). But, reaching back to the mid-twentieth century, he quotes the philosopher Bergson who argued that “it is the real which makes itself possible, and not the possible which becomes real” (Bergson, 1946). I had to read that several times and re-read the explanatory material surrounding it. Miller also quotes Adam, for example, on the long-standing fact that “the social future has eluded social science study at the level of both theory and methodology (Adam, 2009)”. Then Bergson again that “the idea immanent in most philosophies and natural to the human mind, of possibles which would be realised by an acquisition of existence, is (. . .) pure illusion” (Bergson, 1946).

“Natural to the human mind.” These five words could overturn many of the working assumptions embedded in several decades of futures work. Yet in challenging the received wisdom of the past Miller is also asking us to open to the possibilities of a reinvigorated field. He draws on work by Rosen and Poli (among others) to suggest that prevailing notions of the future can be replaced – or at least augmented – by the use of “anticipatory systems.” These “provide a practical analytical way to hold simultaneously the closure of the now [ . . . ] and its constant creative novelty.” He also identifies “three ontological dimensions of the present” that he refers to under the headings of “contingency,” “optimisation” and “exploration and discovery.” Among the many outcomes are that “by treating the present as the locus of emergent novelty, the possible as the past revealed, the burden of cognitive and reflexive processes become at once more focused and lighter” (Miller, 2011). These are certainly elegant and suggestive observations.

In Miller’s view what this heralds is a possible “turning point” for the futures community which, fundamentally, is all about “changing the way we use the future.” He again turns to Ogilvy who is quoted as saying that “the point is not to find methods for attacking, overcoming or reducing the unknown. Rather the goal is to accept and use the unknown, to sustain it and still exercise our intention and volition” (Ogilvy, 2010). He adds, “the bottom line is that to meet our desire to respect the moral imperative of acting to create a better world we need to change how we think about the future not what” (Miller, 2011, p. 29).

### Sense making and futures

Perhaps the first thing to note about sense-making in general is that it is a huge subject and one that involves a continual process of construction and reconstruction. It has personal and social aspects, some of which are well understood while others remain shrouded in mystery. One thing is certain – no two people construct their inner worlds in exactly the same way. Or, to put it differently, different worldviews and values disclose different truths. Take, for example, the contrasts between three people who have each contributed very different gifts to the futures enterprise – Joanna Macy, James Hanson and Ken Wilber. Macy’s view derives from three main sources – group processes for empowerment, deep ecology and Buddhist philosophy and practice. Her strikingly successful workshops have helped countless people find courage, confidence and capability to face up to the most dire and devastating futures imaginable. This is a form of futures practice *par excellence* that depends less on intellectual rigour than it does on spiritual insight, humility and commitment to the service of humanity. It contrasts quite markedly with the “educated irony” espoused by Ogilvy since he begins from quite different assumptions and eschews a role for spiritual truths or any kind.

Hanson is a climate scientist who saw the early signs of climate change and global warming. He was involved in briefings for high level decision-makers in more than one US administration. His reasoned and evidence based support for early action to prevent the worst outcomes was, however, broadly unwelcome and, as in Rachael Carson’s case in the early 1960s, he was subjected to sustained personal and professional abuse. This radicalised him, drove him out of a comfortable sinecure in NASA and, apart from many scientific papers, led to the publication of *Storms of My Grandchildren* (Hanson, 2009). Hanson’s sense making was obviously not based on any formal futures thinking *per se* but on a growing understanding of the global climate and the way it was changing under multiple

human impacts. He saw the potential for quite devastating climate change outcomes and acted accordingly.

Wilber's case is different again. Equipped with a restless, first-class mind, he spent a number of years working systematically through multiple fields of knowledge, enquiry and practice. Though he is sometimes misidentified as a "New Age guru" he is really nothing of the kind. Rather, he is an outstanding contemporary intellectual. His error in the eyes of some was to create an ambitious metaperspective from the embrace of Western and Eastern sources. In this process the wisdom traditions of the past and present (with their distinctive ways of knowing through the "direct perception of suchness") came to play a greater role than is usually the case. Some find the resulting Integral perspective and the AQAL map liberating while others consider it "hegemonic" and overbearing[2]. Central to this worldview and the cosmology that accompanies it is the primal reality of a transcendent dimension within the universe. In this view spiritual truths are held to permeate everything. The point here is that each of these contributions emerged from different starting points and embody different assumptions. Equally, however, they each take on forms of practice and expression that have their own value and their own "zone of applicability." All therefore have a place in the wider span of knowing and acting that comprise and sustain the broad span of futures work.

In terms of sense making, the two papers under consideration here are quite closely related. The writers are both advanced foresight practitioners who are steeped in Western philosophy. As such, both tend to assume – and perhaps overlook – the fact that very high levels of intellectual capability are required to enter this territory let alone to make meaning out of its welter of sources and resources. Schumacher referred to this as "adequation." He saw it as a *sine qua non* of advanced work in any field (Schumacher, 1977). It follows that, while these worlds of meaning may indeed be vitally significant for the further evolution of the field they are unlikely to be understood, appreciated or shared by any but the most advanced thinkers and practitioners. One of the major questions that arise, therefore, is how insights from such abstract and rarified domains can be translated, made useable, and what their applications in practice might look like[3]. For this to occur on a non-restrictive basis suggests that closer attention will need to be paid to the multiple and varied ways that different people and groups construct their own inner worlds. I will return to this below.

The above helps to account for some of the dissonances that emerged as I engaged with these papers. Contrasts between my own favoured processes of sense making and these rather different ones sparked a long process of reflection. But, rather than falling into dichotomies of right/wrong and agree/disagree, what started to emerge was a sense of the diversity and richness of difference. For example, Miller's view that, from a philosophical point of view nothing at all can be known about the future can be seen less as a universal truth than as a handy provocation. It forces those of us who see things differently to ask why. We pretty much agree that there are no future facts. But, Bergson notwithstanding, I see no reason to conclude that practices such as horizon scanning, searching for signals of change and the like are without considerable merit. It is unnecessary to abandon the view that provisional understandings (of varied quality) about the future emerge from interpretations of past and present knowledge and assumptions about the future[4]. Given the real threats facing humanity it makes no sense to retreat to notions of the present (even that of a "creative universe") that effectively disable forward views or, indeed, to lapse into irony. However appealing that may appear to some it is unpromising territory from which to contemplate the human predicament or generate effective responses to it. One might as well abolish prospective thinking and the futures professions entirely and prepare to embrace the chaos that would follow. Even though such provisional knowledge is never sufficient, to feel that one may at times be able to grasp the "drift of events" establishes a past/present/future context within and towards which one must act, despite the obvious dangers. So in my view the dangers of not acting are greater. It is at least possible that the "unknowability" of the future may, in fact, not be such a big deal. For many practical purposes it may actually be a diversion, a red herring.

Throughout history humanity has seen the benefits of successful foresight and now is certainly not the time to set it aside. The story of the human and institutional response to the

thinning of the ozone layer is relevant here. In summary, the process went something like this.

- 1974: The first scientific papers were published suggesting a possible problem.
- 1978: A law was passed in the USA forbidding use of Chloroflourocarbons (CFC's) as propellants.
- 1984: The first scientific evidence was obtained of an "ozone hole" over Antarctica.
- 1987: The Montreal protocol was signed, freezing production of the most common CFC's at 1986 levels and progressively reducing them thereafter.
- 1990: Representatives of 92 countries met in London and agreed to phase out CFC's entirely by the year 2000 (Slaughter, 1995, p. 52).

What this demonstrates is that the global community can occasionally mobilise, to act in concert when the issue is well defined, the need is clear and the key actors can reach broad agreement. Had this not occurred then there is a very good chance that the ozone layer would, by now, have been destroyed, the incidence of cancers would have sky rocketed and the global ecology subjected to severe and irreversible damage. In other words, while it may be true that we can never "know" the future in any final sense; also that we can never know the full results of the interventions that we attempt, still we cannot avoid acting. So, rather than recoil from this or any other "unknowable" future, it makes sense to build our capacity to act wisely and in ways that are future-informed. I think we can agree that there are multiple ways of doing so.

As noted above, many of the conflicts that arise in virtually all fields are related to our own favoured modes of sense making, preferences and habits as well as the often quite specific social interests that we choose to represent. These, in turn, arise from interior factors that include biography, worldview and values. Sometimes our perceptions are congruent while at others they exhibit quite major contrasts. The point is, I think, to accommodate as much breadth, depth and diversity as possible. As one who has long argued that foresight needs strong theoretical foundations I can only welcome Miller's attempts to further ground it by pushing the boundaries, as it were, and extending their range to cover ever deeper and more encompassing topics. The question that kept emerging in my own mind, however, is based on a view that the changes before us (e.g. in technologies, resource use and human impacts on the wider global system) are more serious, more subversive and likely to be more devastating than most people – including philosophers – may fully appreciate. How to respond to such challenging foreknowledge may well be the central question of our time and one that needs greater attention from everyone – not merely those working in futures and foresight professions.

### Sense making through integral futures

For some time now I have attempted to explore how some of the more accessible aspects of Integral thinking and methods apply to futures and foresight work. Responses have been divergent. Some are moved to bestow valued recognition while others get deeply offended and strike out at imaginary threats[5]. Clearly the approach is not for everyone. I have never believed in "one right way." In essence Integral thinking, integral methodology, is just a map and is not to be confused with the territory it reflects. Nevertheless, this period has been a time of deepening insight and, from my point of view, ever more productive discovery.

In the *Biggest Wake-Up Call in History (BWCH)* (Slaughter, 2010) I employed what might be called a "critical and integrally informed scanning frame"[6]. This proposed that we recognise four irreducible domains of reality, all of which need to be included in any credible forward view. A four-quadrant approach is by no means universal but it is certainly becoming more widely used because it works. It is functional. It reminds us to pay equal attention to the interiors and exteriors of society and the interiors and exteriors of human agents within them. This means that we recognise and try to account for the different interior worlds of individual people, the shared interior worlds of cultures, the exterior actions of people and the exterior physical realm in which they are located[7]. A big ask? Too broad or complicated? Maybe.

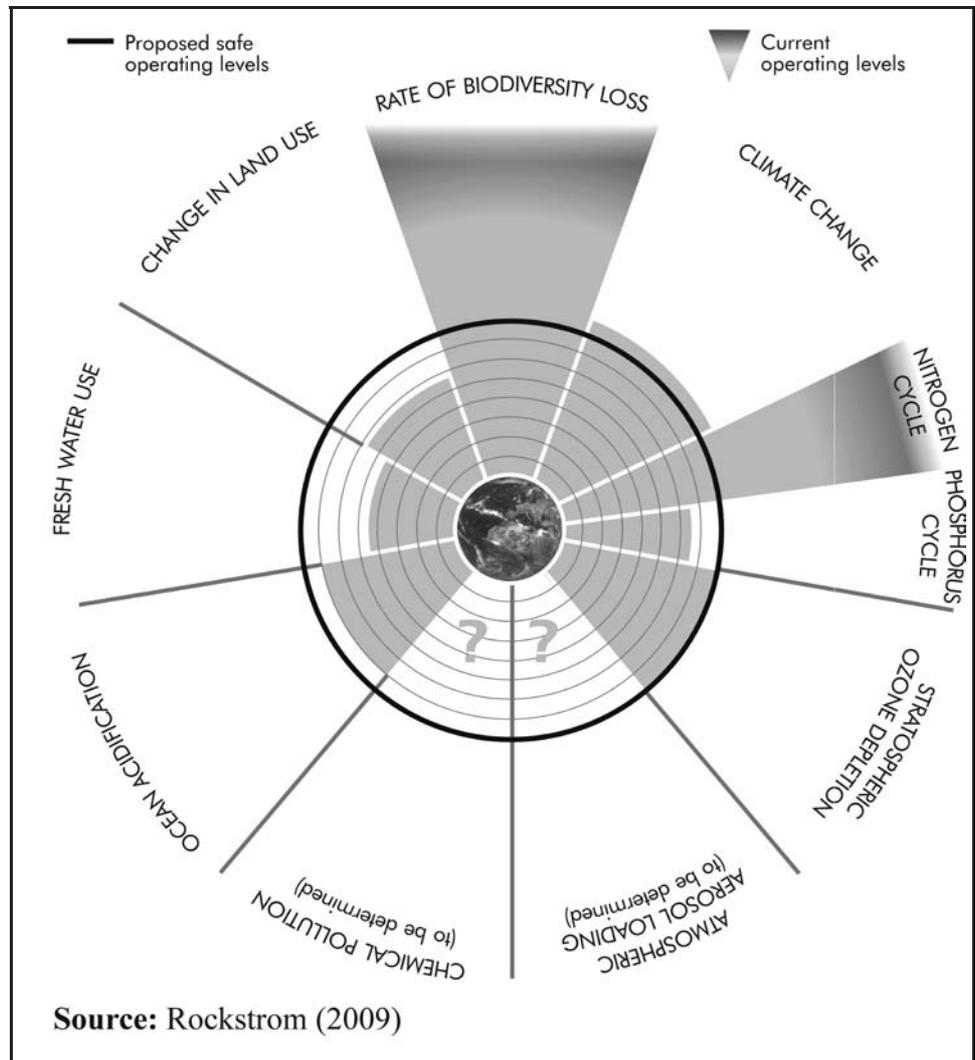
But to omit any of these domains “thins out” our views of reality and reduces the value of any insights we might acquire or interventions we might wish to undertake.

### Changes within the global system

Recent research has brought new clarity to the danger that humanity has created for itself through its careless expansion and colonisation of the Earth. While many philosophical and other issues can be raised here, the fact is that humanity now looks set to exceed not one but nine global boundaries. It has already exceeded three. A further three more will be crossed by mid-century and three more beyond that as illustrated in Figure 1 (Rockstrom, 2009).

As with the ozone example above, humanity cannot wait for futures enquiry to resolve deeper philosophical concerns. It needs to respond while there remains time to do so. Bertrand de Jouvenel summed up the rationale for early action some years ago when he suggested words to the effect that “the proof of improvidence lies in falling under the empire of necessity” (De Jouvenel, 1967) To be able to act in these circumstances raises questions to which theory and philosophy must contribute but which they are unlikely to resolve any time soon. Endemic differences of perspective and the extended nature of philosophical debates mean that we cannot hope for their direct, broad or immediate applicability. While

**Figure 1** Beyond the boundaries



theory and philosophy have a great deal to offer they need to be seen in the wider context of other, perhaps more practical, innovations and developments[8].

The point is that any approach to sense making in futures has, at some point, to be expressed in and through a range of embodied and replicable practices. For Ogilvy this is scenario planning[9]. For Miller it is a stance that seeks to create a different sense of the future that builds on novelty and creativity in the here and now. For myself it is in the further development and up-take of embodied action through areas such as futures in education, the creation of Institutions of Foresight and the facilitation of social foresight in a multitude of applied forms (Slaughter, 2012a).

In the *BWCH I* devoted several chapters to exploring the substantive character of the many sided dilemma we face. I drew upon scientific accounts of global change, various social indices as well as accounts of human psychology and development. Even now I am often surprised at how so many observers seem to overlook this vital domain. One chapter was devoted to answering the question “Is overshoot and collapse credible?” I concluded that it is credible but not inevitable. The greater the understanding of the dynamics of overshoot and collapse contexts, the more likely that a plethora of opportunities to influence them can and will emerge. The key is to pay attention and respond. Miller is right to sound a warning about the limits of knowledge and our ability to grasp the long-term implications of our intended interventions. We can never be certain that we are doing the right thing and history is indeed replete with well-intentioned disasters. That said, I do not think that we are helpless. Human agency need not be stymied and overwhelmed at the thought of momentous events/processes/system changes or, as he notes, fall back on “magical thinking” in the form of “technology will save the day.” We need to face these testing circumstances with as much intelligence, humility and courage as can be found. A depth understanding of “where we are” within the global system provides a starting point toward the development of capacities that we require along with the stimulus and to some extent the motivation, to change what we are doing in numerous practical ways.

Various observers have, of course, been attempting to say something similar for some time. Many have devoted their lives to the task of providing insights into the state of the global system[10]. This is what Elise Boulding would have called “our space in time.” Even a small sample suggests that we have a great deal of understanding about macro changes in the global system. Yet there is a serious “problem of reception” at both cultural and individual levels. On the whole the essential messages in these and similar works have been widely ignored. This shows up in the fact that, while there have been many courageous attempts to counter the indifference, the stupidity and the greed of mainstream players, further growth of the secondary (and dependent) human economy remains a near-universal goal. In Australia, for example, we currently have the spectacle of a small number of very rich people attempting to exert excessive influence on the media and in politics (i.e. social perceptions and national decision-making). This is not primarily being undertaken in pursuit of any notion of the public good but simply so that they can continue making vast amounts of abstract symbolic and ultimately unusable money from mining and related activities regardless of the overall costs. This form of madness is abroad nearly everywhere and shows no signs of abating any time soon. It is profoundly inscribed within the current socio-economic system and requires critiques of commensurate depth and power (see below).

### Generic responses to the global emergency

While one never finally “arrives” at a final perception, it seems to me that an Integral perspective allows us to, in effect, consider the global predicament with “fresh eyes”[11]. I do not want to push the potential of the metaphor too far. That is, I do not claim to understand how, in fine and fulsome detail, the human race can stop short of the abyss and recover the future prospects that it once may have had. It is increasingly likely that we will go over the edge to a lower level “system state” and take a vast amount of evolutionary history with us. But I do believe that we can identify some of the pre-requisites that will assist us in moderating and perhaps changing our collective direction. That is why in the second part of *BWCH I* go to some lengths to evaluate a number of “descent pathways” that provide

options for taking us beyond the peak of industrial civilisation (Slaughter, 2010, chapter 7). Such pathways recall Ogilvy's preference for holding the "high" and "low" roads together since both are clearly interrelated here. They also have multiple implications for resource allocation and where/when/how we direct our shared time and our attention.

Figure 2 summarises some of the main aspects of this approach. Here the four basic domains of Integral enquiry are employed to suggest in a highly compressed form the sorts of agendas that can be pursued[12]. In this view interior human development is accorded equal status and value with exterior actions. Similarly, the interiors of cultural development are seen as co-equal with the exterior collective domain (the global system, cities, infrastructure, technology and so on). This, in itself, seems to me to offer a profound re-balancing of views away from the frequently over-hyped surfaces to the processes of meaning making and social construction that underlie them.

This is, in other words, a way of gaining clarity, of providing a coherent overview of the types of work that humanity as a whole needs to undertake if "overshoot and collapse" is to be moderated into "descent pathways" that retain greater degrees of freedom and more empowering options for human agency. That shift is perhaps the best we can hope for. It is also notable that "descent" perspectives have largely been developed and explored through the work of people who have few or no connections with futures studies and foresight work *per se*[13]. Why is this?

### Regressive modernity requires in-depth critique

One feature of what might be called the "philosophic gaze" that can limit its value in practice is its distance from contemporary reality. Such "virtual worlds" can become compelling in their own right, in part due to their inherent attractions, but also because they lose touch with some of the divergent and uncomfortable realities around them. Ogilvy would probably say that his elegant version of action philosophy recognises and deals with this. Yet in the case of both papers under discussion there are very few references to credible notions of social, economic or cultural critique[14]. I am not suggesting that the authors are, in fact, uncritical

**Figure 2** Domains of generic responses

<p><b>Interior human development</b></p> <p>Human developmental factors that frame perception and condition motivation and capacity have primary role. Options for translation and transformation. Re-focuses debate, strategies, on fundamental issues and opens up basis to resolve them.</p>	<p><b>Exterior actions</b></p> <p>Focuses on what people actually do: their habits, behaviours and strategies. Strategies of avoidance. Also the efforts they put into 'make a difference.' Behavioural drivers and inhibitors. The many applications of design.</p>
<p><b>Interior cultural development</b></p> <p>The role of cultures, ideologies, worldviews and language that mediate self and other. Embody socialisation frameworks with embedded presuppositions and hierarchies of values. Establishes foundations of economy. Actively selects specific options from much wider range of possibilities.</p>	<p><b>Global system, infrastructure</b></p> <p>The physical environment, its cycles of matter and energy. The types of infrastructure(s) superimposed upon it. The kinds of technologies that are employed and their impacts (resource depletion, pollution, ecological simplification, etc.) on the global system. The consequences of value, cultural and design choices.</p>

**Source:** Slaughter (2010, p. 153)

of the many dysfunctions around them. What I am suggesting is that any useful notion of futures enquiry must surely include a sturdy critique of existing social and economic conditions.

It is inarguable, I think, that some of the most regressive and damaging forms of modernity have emerged from and through the US during its now-receding period of global leadership. Think of the abolition of the Glass-Steagall Act (designed to keep “high street” banking and the kind of speculative trading that led to the global financial crisis separate). Think of the one-off gift of oil squandered in thoughtless mass consumption. Think of psychology itself being systematically subverted into advertising and marketing. Think of the barren but influential wasteland of network TV, violent computer games and internet trash that moment-by-moment propagate multiple debased notions of what it means to be human. Given these facts it has always puzzled me that futurists and foresight practitioners who live in affluent cultures appear to have so little to say about what are clearly major drivers toward unsustainable futures[15].

To raise the spectre of “anti-Americanism” – or anti-anything – here is counter-productive and diversionary. Incisive critiques of such issues cannot but be a vital part of any long-term process of recovery. Rather than ignore social and economic dysfunctions, we need to inhabit them, understand and deal with them[16]. The widespread uptake of various foresight techniques and processes to help business and commerce in their unending attempts to compete for the future (or rather the future that emerges from their continued dominance) also needs closer attention. Where are the radical and truly innovative expressions of disciplined and incisive futures enquiry and practice? Beyond a number of governmental administrative contexts, where do we find high value implementation of advanced foresight practice unambiguously serving the public interest? Does it even exist?

An example of the kind of work that is needed can be found in Herb Kemph's book *How the Rich are Destroying the Earth* which deals with the drivers of chronic over-consumption (Kemph, 2008). Drawing on insights from sociologist Saint-Simon, Kemph shows how patterns of consumption are created and sustained by the most affluent social groups. A powerful dynamic is then established through the ceaseless efforts of those who are less well off to emulate those “above” them in the social and economic pecking order. Along with the ceaseless drumbeat of advertising and marketing, this helps to explain why consumption levels remain unreasonably and unsustainably high when, in a wider view, it's clear that they need to be reduced[17]. Kemph, however, believes that “the system does not know how to change trajectory” in part because “we don't succeed in seeing the interrelationship of ecology and society.” He then goes on to suggest a number of other factors that help to explain this. They include the following:

- the dominant framework for explaining the world today is the economic representation of things;
- leadership elites are ignorant (especially) of science and ecology;
- the lifestyle of the rich prevent them from sensing what surrounds them; and, overall,
- if nothing happens even as we enter an economic crisis of historic seriousness, it's because the powerful of the world want it that way (Kemph, 2008, pp. 22-5).

These are questions that are vital to the work of futures and foresight practitioners everywhere but, so far as I can tell, they are seldom addressed[18]. If we turn to a peak international body such as the United Nations, the record is scarcely more encouraging. Gray Southon attempted to sum up its record in relation to sustainability. He concluded that:

For 40 years now there have been authoritative warnings of the global unsustainability of the lifestyles of developed countries, but the message was contrary to common expectations of progress and the powerful interests that were promoting it. The message was dismissed, distorted and denigrated. The experts trying to warn people of the threats were dismissed as doom-sayers, and the public preferred to listen to those who denied the risks. Few governments have been able to respond adequately, because the political risks have been so great. Now that the threat is starting to impact on our life, many nations are at a loss of what to do. In fact some of

the more coherent constructive responses seem to be associated more with the developing countries, rather than the developed (Southon, 2012).

Such examples could be multiplied almost without limit. The point is that you cannot get from the current state of affairs to any version of a viable future without a thorough and well-grounded cultural critique that is grounded in the past and present context. We ignore signals of distress and change at our peril.

### Responding to Cassandra's dilemma

Ogilvy and Miller have separately and together produced two powerful and coherent accounts of their views of advanced futures/foresight work. They have raised questions that need to be raised and debated more widely. The foundations of the discipline must be strengthened for the rigorous tasks ahead and we know that the signs are not encouraging. Thus far, the hopes that many – including myself – had placed in foresight work being able to exert some pressure for “adaptive change” upon or within catastrophe-prone societies have not been sustained. A project I managed a few years ago on the State of Play in the Futures Field (SoPiFF) found encouraging evidence of influence in public policy and sustainability (Riedy, 2009; Slaughter, 2008). But we found no convincing evidence that futures and foresight work had made the slightest dent in the graphs that point toward “overshoot and collapse” futures[19].

Cassandra's dilemma is said to have been to have foreknowledge of the future but not to be believed (AtKisson, 1999). Those involved in futures studies and foresight work understand more clearly than most how a variety of futures concerns permeate and condition the here-and-now. They are also familiar with the human tendency for discounting the future. The simplest (but by no means only) explanation for the universality of such discounting is that, beyond casual and unreflective uses, it requires an expansion of consciousness and capability to move beyond the here-and-now. It also assumes that basic needs have been taken care of – which is patently not the case for the majority of humankind.

Those of us for whom the satisfaction of such needs is routine and unexceptional have vastly greater opportunities. But, at the same time, we are also subject to all the forces of self-deception, induced not knowing, avoidance and the like that have thrived in hyper-saturated media environments. Many – perhaps most – appear to be lost in constructed illusions that have few or no connections back to the real world that supports and threatens at the same time. What is involved here is a primal confusion of purpose and the consequent undermining of human agency itself that hinders our collective ability to rise to the occasion and deal proactively with the rising global emergency. As futurists and foresight practitioners I think we have to deal with this.

In the current context Cassandra's dilemma may not fit particularly well with Bergsonian precepts, yet is far from being a trivial concern. It may be an ontological conundrum and a pivot upon which civilisation hangs. Yet there are many ways forward, some of which are perhaps counter-intuitive. For example, Ogilvy rightly seeks the rehabilitation of Utopian impulses and notes that what he calls the “gifts” of utopia and dystopia are “more generous when held together” (Ogilvy, 2011). One little-explored option would be to make the consequences of our not knowing less avoidable. It is neither beyond wit nor technical capacity to provide clearer views of the lived character of “overshoot and collapse” futures and the various more moderate and intriguing “descent” pathways that currently remain effectively hidden from the public realm. Instead of treating Dystopian futures as mere entertainment, as diversion, or even as scenarios for the privileged few, they need to be opened out, made accessible. Seen in this manner they become mainstream possibilities that are open to the critical gaze and judgement of millions. The salience of “descent pathways” then becomes clearer and more accessible.

## Accelerated development

Then, back within the individual human interiors, we need to recognise how human development is fundamental to our shared prospects beyond overshoot and collapse futures. Ogilvy rightly seeks to defend the primacy of human will, autonomy and action. One way to do is to recognise that a careful and critical reading of “stage development theory” (upper left quadrant) brings something new and vital to the table. I can best explain this by referring back to a well-known and well-respected Australian commentator who identified “a disconnect” between the facts (in this case of climate science) and the response (to global warming). He concluded that “climate change demands more of politics and international relations than I think they can deliver” (Manne, 2008). That is quite a statement. It implied not only that humanity is indeed headed for disaster but also that not much can be done about it. At first sight it appeared to be a recipe for fatalism and loss of hope.

Then in *Requiem for a Species* Clive Hamilton writes about the stresses, the inner turmoil, felt by many thinking people as they encounter, and begin to come to terms with, the scale and complexity of the encroaching global emergency (Hamilton, 2010). As Ogilvy also makes clear, adequate responses cannot be fashioned merely from advances in technology and social organisation. He wants a heightened role for human agency but I am unclear about what he means by that in practice. It seems to me, however, that Hamilton nails the core issue in a few words. In a moving passage about the rigours of internal struggle and adaptation he puts forward the notion of “accelerated psychic development” (Hamilton, 2010, p. 215). This, again, points toward more advanced notions of futures literacy, more capable notions of foresight capability. At minimum these seem to imply or require: systems understanding, high order post-conventional thinking, advanced values and world-centric worldviews. The limiting factors and the most potent sources of hope and capability are therefore shown to be human in their very essence.

It follows that, beyond any conceivable technology, the future(s) of humanity may well turn on what is meant by “accelerated psychic development,” that is, what these words are pointing towards. This is where we need more attention, more focus and more insight. It is really of little concern how one gets into this domain or which sources any one individual prefers. In *BWCHI* I used several common indices of capability including values, worldviews and lines of human development. I then provided examples to show how in practice near future concerns take on fundamentally different meanings according to the ways they are framed within the hearts and minds of different people[20]. I attempted to summarise some of the implications for action in relation to global warming, but the implications are obviously wider.

Very briefly we can perhaps say that we act by gaining clarity about the global context and our own capacities for growth and development. We seek to act with all those others who are also awakening from the slumber of taken-for-granted immersion in social and cultural contexts. The ends are both to do with moving on personally while, at the same time, engaging in acts of cooperation, grace and purpose whenever and wherever they are needed. So, to paraphrase Faris, just what global warming will mean for the world depends on how serious we become in confronting it – and ourselves (Slaughter, 2010, p. 188).

## Conclusion

Perhaps the main reason I embarked upon this response was that accompanying the intellectual virtuosity of these two papers I detected elements of despair and hopelessness – or at the very least “making do” – in the face of adversity. My own sense of meaning making is somewhat different in that, unexceptionally, it draws on other human and cultural sources. I think, for example, of Schumacher’s pivotal insight that “at the level of man there is no discernible limit or ceiling” (Schumacher, 1977, p. 48). For me this is one of those great truths that changes everything.

At the same time I have argued that sense making in any field should be seen in terms of diversity and productive difference, not adherence to any single orthodoxy, tradition or view. Hopefully, therefore, this account extends, rather than contradicts, what Ogilvy and Miller have written. Both separately and together we have a great deal of work to do. In that process

well-grounded critiques of the extremes of modernity are as vital as wider access to reliable maps, or overviews, of states and stages of human and cultural development. We need to clearly understand how some of the latter open up certain possibilities and extinguish others. I would go further and suggest that, quite literally, our shared future depends on it.

If it is important not so much to change what we think about the future but how, then the most promising ways forward may not, in fact, be at the most advanced and abstract levels of sense making and philosophical enquiry. Shifts in core values across a very wide spectrum and on the part of many more people, coupled with those from “conventional” to “post-conventional” thinking and also from “socio-centric” to “world-centric” outlooks seem to me to be among the most significant and catalytic developments imaginable. Underlying this “qualified optimism” is a view that developments of this kind provide genuine grounds for enhanced hope and vastly expanded notions of capability.

Such developments would also pave the way for a more widespread in-depth cultural analysis that pays full and equal attention both to the high points of human achievement and the dysfunctions alluded to above. Nor should we forget that prevailing infrastructures are, to a considerable extent, outgrowths of these human and cultural factors and the ways they are expressed in particular worldviews and operating systems. They all require our focused attention.

Finally we need to develop new strategies, processes and enabling contexts that will help us to pay closer attention to the ever-shifting empirical dimensions of global systems and the change processes occurring there. We still lack an adequate infrastructure comprised of what Robert Jungk called “lookout institutions” staffed by well-trained and alert foresight practitioners who are respected and heard by political leaders and decision makers.

Philosophy has a clear role to play but, taken alone, I fear it will not cut it. On the other hand a judicious and constructive engagement between some of the elements I have outlined here just might begin to do so.

## Notes

1. I re-published what I consider to be a landmark essay he wrote back in 1992 on “Futures studies and the human sciences,” interviewed him in Sydney in 1998 and wrote an in-depth review of his book *Creating Better Futures* (Ogilvy, 2003).
2. The term “perspective” can be misleading here since it is, in fact, a dynamically evolving structure that has evolved both as a result of Wilber’s work but also through the multiple critiques and contributions of many other people over an extended period of time. For an overview of a resulting controversy see (Slaughter, 2011). Also see note 5 below.
3. See the special issue of *Foresight*, Vol. 12 No. 3, 2010 edited by Miller and Poli on Anticipatory systems.
4. Wendell Bell’s account of the role of critical realism in futures enquiry is relevant here (Bell, 1997).
5. What I termed the “Integral futures controversy” took place during 2008-2011. See (Slaughter, 2011), [http://integralfutures.com/wordpress/?page\\_id=98](http://integralfutures.com/wordpress/?page_id=98)
6. This had emerged from earlier work where I showed that environmental scanning had overlooked certain vital domains That is, the interiors of individuals and cultures; also the role of individual human agency as expressed through human action (Slaughter, 1999).
7. Such terms are not greatly used by Ogilvy and Miller. Our worlds of reference therefore diverge in this respect, as in others.
8. For example, after “theory and method” Senge and Sharmer identify “futures tools” and “practical know-how” as two equally vital areas of professional activity (Senge and Sharmer, 2001). In their view there needs to be a constant flow of activity and influence between them.
9. Ogilvy rates scenarios more highly than I do (Slaughter, 2008, pp. 125-28).
10. See Figure 2.1 in (Slaughter, 2010, p. 28) and also reproduced at: [http://integralfutures.com/wordpress/?page\\_id=135](http://integralfutures.com/wordpress/?page_id=135). Also Randers (2012).

11. To see with fresh eyes is the title of a new book. The subtitle is: "Integral futures and the global emergency" (Slaughter, 2012b).
12. Also critiqued, extended, visioned and re-visioned, tested and re-tested, applied and revised etc.
13. An exception is O.W. Markley. See Markley, 2011. Others outside futures and foresight per se include James Kunstler, John Michael Greer, David Holmgren, Paul Gilding, Tony Fry and Paul Gilding, to name but a few.
14. Ogilvy's first paragraph is replete with terms from economic discourse ("real estate," "GDP", "recession" and "the economy") but seems to overlook what I depict here as a necessary critique of, for example, the market and market-led ideology.
15. The question of whether America can be considered as "the land of the future" was debated in earlier issues of Foresight. Yet with the exception of people like Hazel Henderson, Wendell Bell and Jim Dator it seems that to openly critique the powerful cultural and economic drivers of overshoot and collapse futures that were invented in, and forcefully exported from, the US remains too difficult.)
16. That is why I introduced the notion of a "collective shadow" and the rise of organised crime in *Biggest Wake Up Call* (Slaughter, 2010, chapter 5).
17. The blurb for a 2012 book on the scramble for the world's remaining natural resources puts it this way: "With resource extraction growing more complex, the environmental risks are becoming increasingly severe; the Deepwater Horizon disaster is only a preview of the dangers to come. At the same time, the intense search for dwindling supplies is igniting new border disputes, raising the likelihood of military confrontation. Inevitably, if the scouring of the globe continues on its present path, many key resources that modern industry relies upon will disappear completely. The only way out, Klare argues, is to alter our consumption patterns altogether – a crucial task that will be the greatest challenge of the coming century" (Klare, 2012).
18. Exceptions include Hazel Henderson, Jim Dator and Dennis Morgan.
19. Convenient illusions proliferate. For example, while government PR handouts almost everywhere mention "environmental improvements," in reality these are exceptionally rare. Currently, for example, Australia's Great Barrier Reef is facing the largest expansion of industrial activity ever. If this is allowed to go ahead as planned by certain coal mining and other extractive interests these new pressures, in combination with ocean acidification and global warming, look set to herald the demise of this singularly precious reef system. This is not an isolated example – it is happening virtually everywhere.
20. Mike Hulme's book *Why We Disagree About Climate Change* is a *tour-de-force* exemplification of this process as applied to that issue (Hulme, 2009).

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