

Responsible Futures

A study of responsibility in the processes of foresight and anticipation

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World Futures Studies Federation conference 2023

**The continuing story of the future as a liminal
ethical space for the present.**

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... Better understanding of the ways in which responsibility is manifest in the processes of anticipation and foresight as future-making activities

Leading to a body of knowledge that informs and supports practices of responsible future-making

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Key points

Ethical concern has a futures orientation AND anticipation is inherently ethical

The establishment of Futures Studies addressed an imperative of responsibility – to save humanity from itself

Ethics and responsibility in FS are dominated by western worldviews (e.g. agency, freedom, exceptionalism, “techne” ...)

Norms and values change over time and are contested

In anticipatory processes ethics and responsibility have presence, but likely to be implicit in actions

The concept of “Future generations” gives substance to future obligations

Does reframing Anticipation as ‘life itself’ (Rosen) offer a *transitional critical life change for epistemology*.

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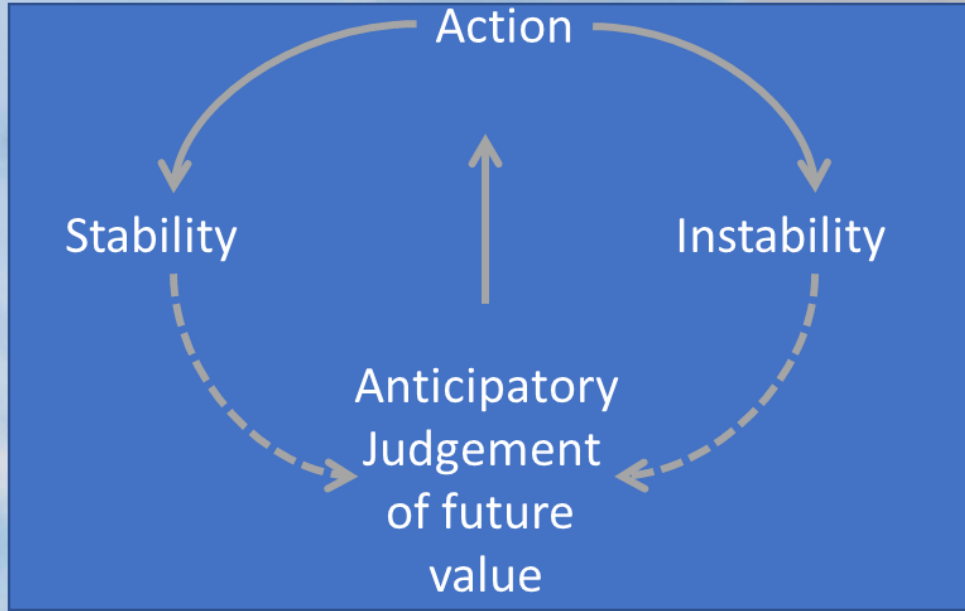


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Disposition to act on anticipation is a causal mechanism



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Zadra's reference to liminality

Zadra, D. (1973).
*Technological
Abstraction and
Religious Liminality* Vol
IV p 156 World
Conference on Futures
Research: Human
Needs, New Societies,
Supportive
Technologies Rome.

“Liminality here indicates a state of *absence of structures*, of concrete structures of the vital milieu, capable of connecting and defining the *structural identity of the subject, individual and collective, with their unitary identity and intentionality*.

Liminality could be the *intermediate state of a ritual process of change*, between two states, deconstruction and restructuration (V. Turner, *The Ritual Process, Structure and Antistructure*. Chicago: Aldine, 1969, pag. 94 ss. Ital. Trans. 1972), or *the consequence of a diffused state of deconstruction of a new kind [...]*”.

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Is there liminal space between present actions and future consequences?

Anticipation ↔ Responsibility ↔ Action

Action ↔ Anticipation ↔ Responsibility

Responsibility ↔ Anticipation ↔ Action

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Responsibility

OED: moral obligation, as well as legal or contractual requirement, obligation, or accountability.

Normally responsibility is for something and/or to other beings. Hence 'responsible futures' as a term covers the ethical quality of actions regarding something or someone that has effect on their future.

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Responsibility may be considered through these entwined research directions for Futures Studies:

- The making of the future from decision and action processes, stressing the responsibility of acting and of developing capacities to act, i.e. *relating responsibility with agency*.
- The assessment of the *sustainability* of stakeholders' actions over time in giving importance to the responsibility for the future consequences of decisions, i.e. locating and evaluating responsibility in future creating practices.
- The engagement in ethical or unethical foresight processes, i.e., addressing the *responsibility* of the Futures Studies community for shaping responsible, or anticipating irresponsible, futures.

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Responsibility of foresight – “guiding star”?

Images of the future, however they are manifest, are used to guide present action. They are a “guiding star” for responsible choices as Polak put it – ““The formation of images of the future depends upon an awareness of the future that makes possible a conscious, voluntary, and responsible choice between alternatives” (Polak & Boulding, 1973, p13)

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Responsibility of foresight?

A predictive model (as located in anticipatory systems), “[...] assumes almost an ethical character even in a purely abstract context. We might even say that the models embodied in an anticipatory system are what comprise its individuality; what distinguish it uniquely from other systems. As we have seen, a change in these models is a change of identity...” (Rosen et al., 2012, p370).

“why humans are so often willing to die, i.e., to suffer biological extinction, rather than change their models.” (Rosen)

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Ethics of future-oriented responsibility

“... all ethical thinking necessarily contains some futures thinking. For example, such as when considering consequences, which occur in the future in a time later than the action. (Bell, 1997, p95 et seq).

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Ethics of future-oriented responsibility

(Wendell) Bell argues that most, perhaps all, theories of ethics contain an inherent futures orientation. *Contractarianism*, e.g. (Scanlon, 1998), involves future obligations; *Utilitarianism's* greatest good for the most people, e.g. (Bentham, 1823; Mill, 1867), is a future state.

And with respect to the wider interpretations of *consequentialism*, Bell quotes Sumner (1987, p 207) “For a consequentialist, the future must matter”.

Even non-consequentialist theories, engage with the future. For instance, Bell argues that *deontological* ethics – doing the right thing - may involve expectations of reciprocity from a shared moral community.

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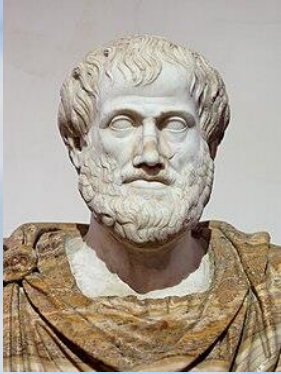


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Virtue ethics, Utopian thought...



One could extend Bell's argument to consider the responsible future orientation of virtue ethics, originating in the Greek philosophy of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Stoicism. (Anscombe, 1958); (MacIntyre, 1981); (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). *Phronesis* or practical wisdom *is developed through experience*, for example learning what might happen in a given situation, and acting with that wisdom, even if the main driver of the behaviour is not its consequences.



Bell also draws attention to *utopian* literature, which he says has influenced what the future means to people. Utopian literature explores what constitutes an ideal society, perhaps most famously by Thomas More, or a predecessor to his work, Plato's *Republic* *De optimo rei publicae statu deque nova insula Utopia* (Of a republic's best state and of the new island Utopia) published in 1516.

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Utopian thought

Utopias carry with them implicit, if not explicit, responsibilities as ways of being (Bell, 1997, p19-22)

“There will still come the inevitable emancipation of humanity by technology, and its now irresistible consecration of life, namely the potential abolition of poverty and the emancipation, compelled by the revolutionary proletariat, from all questions of economics.” (Bloch, 2000, p267).

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Futures Studies and moral imperatives

Jenny Andersson refers to the Moral Imperatives of 20th century “thinkers of concern”, which was the **survival of humanity** (Andersson, 2018, p30).

“human rationality had gone astray”

There was a moral and political imperative to constrain the human capacity to do evil.

It is what **Hans Jonas** (1984) refers to as the *Imperative of Responsibility* which was to address a paradox of the human capacity to act and the incapacity to control the effects of such action over time.

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Foreknowledge as governance

“The responsibility of futurists, and decision makers, was to prevent the further occurrence already observable negative consequences” (Daniel Bell in “The Year 2000”)

“In the liberal regime of the future an important position should be allotted to anticipatory discussion of intentions and a reduced position to authoritarian prescriptions” (De Jouvenel 1967 p248)

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Activism

For some actors, the focus is on being active in changing the future. Here the responsibility of the actors was to bring about change with participatory futures processes, such as workshops, as a medium for learning and re-imagining.

The *responsibility to act* prescribed by Galtung (1970) or Berger (1957) reflects the extended role, which is to connect to action, as well as not constraining other's capacity to act.

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Professional Ethics

“Professional ethics for futurists”, Bell (1993) is to reinforce the responsibilities to peers and clients already latent in the futures community, thereby improving the professional excellence of futurists”.

Slaughter details what constitutes ethical professional practice and its governance. The lists run to several pages. In short, the implied responsibilities are to act professionally, to raise the quality and legitimacy of the work and extend the reach of futures practices.

APF/WFSF on the same mission

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Moral futures

Ethics, as a meaningful framework for action, change as social values change. Such changes are not always viewed by all society as desirable but have effect on social institutions and practices (see e.g. Danaher – “Normatively speaking, there is no guarantee that our current moral paradigm is the correct one”.)

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RRI and Pluralism (Sophie Pellé 2016)

“..in practice RRI approaches “borrow from elements from each [philosophical position]”

Proceduralism, focussing on process and deliberation, allows for pluralistic definition of responsibility, but lacks “practical relevance” as this approach does not specify particular norms of responsibility.

Being able to make explicit the responsibility for different outcomes of RRI, as in a *consequentialist* approach, is more easily applied, but require forms of social consensus on the outcomes to be attained.

A *virtue ethics* approach, which takes account of context and is focussed on a norm of “good care” is, Pellé says, provides a normative horizon that can guide specific norms, allowing for practical application (p248).

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Care ethics

The ethics of care is a form of virtue ethics in which care is a virtue. The ethics of care is about the relationships between people, as individuals, rather than as some generalised normative scheme. According to Sander Staudt , normatively, “care ethics seeks to maintain relationships by contextualizing and promoting the well-being of care-givers and care-receivers in a network of social relations”

The development of this as a distinct moral theory that asserts the “voice of care” as a legitimate alternative to the “justice perspective” of liberal human rights theory, is attributed to Carol Gilligan, e.g., (Gilligan, 1982) and Nel Noddings, e.g., (Noddings, 1984).

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Future generations

Narratives of concern for the care of future generations can be found in Futures Studies literature of course (Tonn, 2018)

Masini (2013) concludes that she has strongly advocated intergenerational responsibility as part of the “ethical component of futures studies

Richard Slaughter, “caring for the future generations is ethically feasible and as human activity had compromised the global commons, restorative action was needed (responsibility)

Tonn suggests there are ‘perpetual obligations’ to future generations and articulates political mechanisms to fulfil this responsibility. His approach is based on Rawls principles of justice.

Jones et al base their position on the political need to represent future generations in political decision making on “several theories of intergenerational justice” (after Gosseries 2008)

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Care and obligations

Groves, (2014) argues that the social imaginary of *generations* being somehow territorially free of each and demanding of justice does not reflect the real nature of society. “Instead, there is a flow of care and concern that plays a role in shaping the future worlds that future people will inhabit” (p185). Groves points out that future generations are dependent on the previous generations. Hence, care for those future generations is virtuous and is consistent with Jonas position that an imperative of responsibility for the future is a nonreciprocal relation.

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Liminality as an intermediate state

Musing:

Does reframing Anticipation as ‘life itself’ (Rosen) offer a *transitional critical life change for epistemology*. (What we take as human knowledge)

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Thank you!

Copies of background paper
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