The Megacrisis and the New Master Paradigm: Toward Shared Understanding

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I wish to thank Jose Ramos for agreeing to embark on this exercise, and I completely agree with his comment, once underway, that "futurists are more difficult to herd than cats." And I would like to thank the 13 responders for their efforts, some thought-full, and some not fully thought out, in my view. This "may be the most significant conversation on the planet today," as Richard Slaughter noted, but it is only a beginning of a more diverse "planetary conversation" that Anita Kelleher looks forward to seeing. It is sufficient, however, to indicate the sticky problem of shared understanding and "getting on the same page."

In putting our debate out for public comment, I had hoped that respondents would benefit from our simplified scheme of four scenarios on a single pessimist-optimist axis, and that they would follow our simple request to assign a rough probability on the likelihood of each scenario over the next decade or so. This did not work out very well, with only 4 of the 13 responders (Marcus Barber, Ronald Havelock, Vuokko Jarva, and Rakesh Kapoor) playing our game. In contrast, Anita Kelleher explicitly said "0 to each of the four scenarios," viewing them only as possible stages in global transformation, and forecasting (or hoping) that "after the breakdown, the rise to maturity." Ryota Ono could not see "any merit in assigning probabilities to negative futures" which might make "self-fulfilling prophesy work in a negative way." (Apparently he is unaware of self-denying prophecy, which is widespread in trying to avoid perceived threats.)

The Pessimists

The three veteran responders, who have thought about futures for many decades (and whom I know quite well), along with Sesh Velamoor of the Foundation For the Future and Vuokko Jarva, are all confirmed pessimists, with various twists and descriptors. Velamoor accepts an emerging planetary Megacrisis "unlike any other in human history... the threshold of a plethora of planetary issues of our own making." Jarva describes "a temporal telescoping of unfavorable events." Richard Slaughter writes of a "planetary emergency" in his book, and describes "a crisis that has been steadily emerging for decades," with many warnings about the planetary condition ignored. Oliver Markley describes "a cascading series of STEEP disruptions, which together trigger a tipping point

toward mega-systemic disruption and/or disintegration" (and assigns a probability of 70% by 2015 and 98% by 2030). Jim Dator views "indicators of collapse now so prevalent and powerful that it is absolutely necessary that everyone assume that collapse will occur and prepare for it," indeed, "welcome it, rejoice in it, look forward eagerly to it" because life during and after collapse can be good and peaceful if we anticipate and prepare for it (a mighty huge "if").

Dator then goes on to exclaim that "it is distressing to me that Marien and Halal do not even hint at this alternative in their discussion." We do hint at it, however (Box 3, first paragraph, on "What Will Happen When Megacrisis Arrives), but we don't go into any detail. Personally, I think Dator and the other solid pessimists are too certain about widespread collapse in the near term ("Down to Disaster"), and I still think – but with no firm conviction – that slow collapse overall ("Muddling Down") is more probable. As for collapse being "a great opportunity for a new and better life," as Dator puts it, I see this as a possibility, but not probable for most people. Dator proclaims, perhaps as conscious provocateur, that his view is "the only responsible way for futurists to act now." Au contraire, my more nuanced view is the more responsible way to view the near future, and thus to act accordingly in trying to prevent collapse (a self-denying prophecy), because there are too many possibilities that "we" won't be better off after the Megacrisis clearly arrives, especially if global warming accelerates, as some climate scientists suggest.

Marcus Barber reminds that there are winners and losers within each scenario, but when I refer to "we," I'm suggesting that the great majority of Earth's 7 billion people are likely to suffer or perish long-term, if not all of us. His hoped-for value of "enoughness" is not likely to flourish, because too many people have far from "enough" as presently defined, the definition keeps expanding (especially as regards education, health care, and living arrangements), many of those who have "enough" still want more (does anyone think the advertising industry will disappear?), and most of those with more than "enough" want to keep what they have rather than downshift toward comfortable frugality.

The Others

I fully agree with Rakesh Kapoor that "it matters where you are looking at the global megacrisis from: the South is much less shaken up by the current global crisis than the North." Similarly, Marcus Barber correctly notes the "US centric lens" that shades our assessment and that "one size fits all ignores variations across geography." But, there are three qualifications. First, the BRICs and other developing/emerging nations still have many problems ahead, especially as concerns inequality, corruption, and pollution. Second, to the degree that we're all connected in an increasingly interdependent world, the stagnation or decline of the developed nations of the North can have many global ramifications. Thirdly, global warming is likely to have different impacts in different regions, but will nevertheless significantly affect all nations.

Kapoor, incidentally, is the only one of the 13 responders who even acknowledged my "Four I's" argument based on growing Infoglut (including both knowledge and, increasingly, entertainment), leading to Ignorance (of the accelerating worlds of infor-

mation/knowledge), Indecision (due to complexity and political polarization between those who are reality-based and the ideological simplifiers), and Inadequacy (of most compromise decisions). I still think that the ever-growing "flood" of information (Gleick, 2011), especially in the last two decades, strongly supports the pessimistic outlook.

One red herring argument for pessimism is the fear of "Peak Oil," which, according to Michel Bauwens, "was reached in 2006." Jim Dator finds Peak Oil as "a very curious omission" in the Halal/Marien argument, but it is absent because it is a false assessment. Daniel Yergin, widely seen as a leading expert on the oil industry, goes to great lengths to demolish the "peakist" forecast that has been around since the discovery of oil (Yergin, 2011). New discoveries of oil (e.g., off the coast of Brazil) and new technologies for accessing it, will result in plenty of oil in the decades ahead. The same is even more so for natural gas, where new and unexpected discoveries in just the past few years, combined with the controversial hydrofracking process, have greatly changed the energy outlook. This is not necessarily a cause for optimism: gas is better than oil insofar as emitting greenhouse gases, but is nevertheless a fossil fuel. Bauwens also thinks that the current crisis of capitalism is correlated with Kondratieff cycles, a dubious explanation that deflects attention from the consensus explanation of lack of adequate regulation and foresight.

The three outright optimists differ considerably in their positions. Kuo-Hua Chen acknowledges a "global megacrisis we are very likely facing," but hopes that the younger generation of global citizens will have a long-term perspective and create green alternatives (certainly desirable and quite possible, but the older generations will still be in power for the next few critical decades). Vahid Motlagh opts for >70% chance of realizing his "Rosy" sci/tech scenario in the long run, citing techno-ecstatic physicist Michio Kaku and conservative Max Singer of the Hudson Institute to support his view. He is blind to the very high probability of global warming and incapacitating infoglut, while imploring me to consider the "chance, however miniscule, that Rise to Maturity may occur." (OK, I'll concede: in my view, there is a <1% chance, rounded to 1% for convenience; in turn, I ask Motlagh to read a few books on ruinous climate change and admit that this is very probable.)

Finally, there is Ronald Havelock, who makes a spirited argument in his recent book for an "acceleration" of progress, continuing the views of the late Julian Simon (a back-cover blurb on the book is from Simon's widow). I am currently having an extensive private interchange with Havelock, who mocks the "doomsday scenarios" of Paul Ehrlich and the Club of Rome from 40 years ago and argues that positive trends "will not stop or even slow down for the foreseeable future." It all depends on which trends are considered. Havelock looks only at upbeat trends over the long term, and ignores downbeat trends (especially in the last decade, which suggest possible tipping points). His insistence that global warming is merely a "theory" keeps his cognitive system intact. I have yet to get his response to **America's Climate Choices**, the latest of many authoritative overviews of the unfolding climate crisis (National Research Council, 2011).

Toward A New Master Paradigm?

Arguably, the most significant comment among all of the 13 responders was made by Sesh Velamoor, who fingered the "Operant Paradigm" as "a devastating combination of ideas that are squarely responsible for the current state of affairs and, what is worse an unquestioned continuation of faith and belief in them." This master paradigm, or paradigm of paradigms, is described by Velamoor as a combination of old ideas (humans as apex of creation, humans and nature apart, nature to be exploited) and newer ideas (scientific method and progress measured as GDP and seen as unlimited).

But what, then, is the new "operant paradigm" that is needed, and how can it displace the old paradigm of science, narrowly defined and fragmented? I would venture that the new master paradigm must extend the notion of "science" to include all truth-seeking activities in all of the disciplines and professions, and it must consciously promote more integrative thinking (and integrations of the integrators) so as to have better overviews of complex issues and sectoral management and options in a globalizing world. How to successfully promote this new paradigm is another matter, but education of "billions of humans," as suggested by Velamoor, "that presents the truth as reverse of the ideas of the dominant paradigm," ignores the wicked problem of who will re-educate the educators to change their cognitive systems. As Ryota Ono aptly notes, one of the key internal problems of human nature is the "obsession with carrying a system forward" or, simply, self-interested resistance to change. And, as amply illustrated here by the problem of shared understanding of the "Global Megacrisis" (what it is and what may come after it) there may be equally difficult problems in getting agreement on a new operant paradigm and how best to get it widely accepted.

Nevertheless, several of the responses in this issue all point in the same general direction. Rakesh Kapoor and Marcus Barber respectively complain of "a global wisdom deficit" and the lack of "sufficient wisdom" to guide humanity away from its current trajectory. Can "wisdom" be somehow inculcated, promoted, and included as an essential part of the new paradigm? Kapoor advocates "a public education program for scientific and complex systems knowledge to flow from the citadels of expertise," which would certainly seem to be part of the new paradigm. Oliver Markley calls for "a formal process to elicit, assess, and publicize positive STEEP surprises/wild cards," as well as creative resilience and an optimistic outlook, which should also be part of the paradigm. Richard Slaughter insists that we have to deal with all domains and their interactions – "a profound rebalancing of our efforts" – which echoes the seminal 1990 report on *Scholarship Reconsidered* (Boyer, 1990). For many years, Slaughter has promoted his complex and idealized four-quadrant model of an Integral Perspective (however, there are many integral perspectives, and Slaughter appears to not have considered all of the integral alternatives). Anita Kelleher proposes "a complex systems map to provide a deeper understanding and better appreciation of complexity."

Kelleher also advocates "an agreed worldwide approach to humanity's common challenges" as a new form of Global Governance. Sesh Velamoor points to "the overarching need" for Global Governance, emerging in all matters of significance. But this

is much easier said than done: my recent overview of 150 recent books on global governance clearly illustrates the chaos and fragmented thinking on this important matter, reflecting snail's-pace progress or gridlocked indecision in critical matters such as the global economy, managing climate change, arms control, and human rights. (Marien, 2011)

Finally, Ronald Havelock is concerned that the world brain created by the IT revolution has so far evolved in "a mindless way," and that the problems we must solve are in the realm of social, not physical science; thus, "our rise to maturity depends to a great extent on the rise to maturity of the social sciences." He might very well support a new "truth-seeking and path-finding" paradigm that encompasses not only social sciences, but futures studies, policy studies, the professions, and the humanities (especially history), with emphasis on effective integration and outreach (Boyer, 1990). However, it cannot be more of the same. As Marcus Barber wisely notes, "the myth that more knowledge will be sufficient to help us overcome our current trajectory" is a key factor impeding sustainable progress.

Update

The Halal/Marien four-scenario scheme is a framework for learning. In a complex and dynamic world, the probabilities should be in flux, as new events, technologies, and insights appear. My earlier estimations of the four scenarios were 20% Down to Disaster, 60% Muddling Down, 20% Muddling Up, and 0% Rise to Maturity. In light of recent trends and events, my current estimations are somewhat more negative, 30% Disaster, 60% Down, 9% Up, and 1% Maturity (responding to Motlagh ' s entreaty; no big deal).

Since the earlier estimations, the Arab Spring has toppled or shaken several dictatorial regimes in the Middle East, but there are many scenarios as to what can develop. Similarly, the Occupy Wall Street movement, begun just a few weeks ago and now worldwide, could have significant and lasting positive impacts, or could fizzle out. Many butterflies have been set free, to use the hopeful metaphor of small catalysts of change provided by Anita Kelleher, but many other butterflies are also in the air that may accelerate these changes or impede them.

Meanwhile, dark clouds of European economic crisis becoming a global crisis are on the near horizon, and the earlier Halal/Marien exhuberance about an accelerating transition to renewable energy appears to be impeded if not reversed by the resurgence of oil and especially gas. "Sustainability" is nowhere close to the agenda of American presidential politics, and "jobs" have emerged as the dominant political issue – an issue for which there are no simple answers to provide any jobs for the unemployed and underemployed, let alone decent jobs that offer a living wage. Add this concern to the list of Megacrisis drivers worldwide.

The Megacrisis conversation is likely to continue in a public discussion at the 2012 World Future Society conference in Toronto, July 27-29. Although not confirmed at this writing, Bill Halal, Richard Slaughter, Michael Marien, and perhaps several others will lead two proposed sessions on the topic. Please join us if you can.

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