

(This was published on the main editorial page of the *Honolulu Advertiser*, December 18, 2000, under the headline, "Forecasts useful, morally right", Subheadlined, "An 'if-then' contingency statement can help society make the best choices for future generations." The sections in brackets were omitted in the version the *Advertiser* published).

[Right on!] I agree one hundred percent with the headline given to the article by Cliff Slater [in the *Honolulu Advertiser* of December 5, 2000:] "Don't try to predict the future." My forty years in futures studies have reinforced my judgement that THE future cannot be PREDICTED--that is, foretold with accuracy. But it has also reinforced my understanding that alternative futures can and should be forecast and that preferred futures should be envisioned, created, and constantly re-created on the basis of new experiences and new visions. I also believe these futures-oriented activities are useful to individuals, families, communities, corporations, governments--to everyone and every group.

I think it is important to distinguish a prediction from a forecast. A prediction attempts accurately to say what will happen before it happens. A forecast is simply an "if...then" contingency statement. Unlike a prediction, a forecast does not attempt to describe what "will happen", but rather what might happen under certain assumptions.

One of the purposes of a forecast is to help people determine how to act by first clarifying their own image of the future and then comparing and contrasting it with different views of the future held by other individuals and groups around them. They may change or improve their image of the future, and actions in the present, as a result.

Another purpose of a forecast is to help prepare individuals or groups for the many otherwise-unanticipated twists and turns that lie ahead by "pre-experiencing" some of them in the present. That is the purpose, for example, of the war games the military engages in routinely. Many economic decision-makers, among others, find alternative scenarios similarly useful.

Another purpose is for the forecast to become either a self-fulfilling or a self-denying prophecy--that is, by making the forecast, to cause action in the present that is intended either to prevent or to hasten the thing forecast.

Throughout the article, Mr. Slater uses the term "forecast" to mean "prediction." He then ridicules what were meant to be forecasts (with one or the other purposes just mentioned) as though they were false predictions. Each of the authors he mocks [--especially of *The Limits to Growth*--] repeatedly made it clear they were not predicting anything, but rather were trying to encourage action that would prevent something from happening [(something whose main consequences they placed in the mid 21st Century, I might add, and not in 2001)].

[Now, even though responsible futurists do not pretend to predict the future, it is the case (Slater's article to the contrary notwithstanding) that many future developments have in fact been usefully anticipated, hastened, forestalled, or prevented. Indeed, sometimes people who have examined the reasoning behind the forecasts and then tracked developments towards them, have profited handsomely from their foresight in ways I would have expected Mr. Slater to admire. This is most spectacularly the case in the area of electronic communication technologies, in spite of Mr. Slater's curious comment about Peter Drucker. It is also true in the case for biology and genetic engineering, just now emerging pretty much as anticipated. Responsible concerns about the continued use, as well as abundance (and cost) of fossil fuels have recently been raised that seem to me to be worthy of serious consideration and not sneering derision, it seems to me

Certainly, exaggerated (sometimes, yet-to-be-realized) statements can be found, if one looks for them. But, given the fact that "prediction" is not the intention of responsible forecasts, I remain as impressed by the developments which have been accurately anticipated as I find it useful to reflect on why other trends or events (which did come about) were not included in past forecasts.]

But all of this would be idle academic nitpicking vs. ideological naysaying were it not for the fact that humans have developed

technologies and processes that either require “information from the future” in order to make useful decisions now or (more importantly from my point of view) that have very long-lasting effects--impacting the lives of unborn humans for many generations. It is this asymmetrical relationship of many of our present actions that has convinced me that we must try to find ways to take the needs and desires of future generations into account before we act.

Once upon a time, human actions seldom had long-lasting consequences. Now more and more of them do. The Golden Rule (in varying forms, the moral basis of almost all cultures) says that we should do unto others as we would have them to do unto us.

The Golden Rule was easy to follow in small face-to-face communities where everyone shared the same values, and fate. It is difficult to follow in our global neighborhood where the perpetrator of an act may not feel the negative effects of her action at all while others are severely impacted, with no gain.

But it is truly tragic if we impact the lives of the unborn (who cannot “get back at us”) by simply ignoring the future, as Mr. Slater would have us do, and live selfishly only for ourselves, with no thought for the consequences, good or bad.

Shame on you, Mr. Slater. Where are your family values? Is this what you teach your children: ”Just do whatever you want to do now and don’t even think about the tomorrow. It is all too complex to figure out, so don’t even try”?

I can’t imagine that you do. I suspect you have very firm beliefs that you want your children, and the readers of the *Advertiser*, to follow. All that futurists are trying to do is to get each of us in all of our activities, first to consider the futures to be a resource for our present actions, and then to ask and answer, as best we can, “what would future generations have us do?” before we act. It is not easy to do. It may not even be possible for humans to do. But it is our only ethical response under the circumstances, it seems to me.

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