

Functional Collaboration as Futurology

by

Dr Sean McNelis

Swinburne Centre for Urban Transitions

smcnelis@swin.edu.au

artfulhousing.com.au

presented at

2023 Australian Lonergan Workshop

Melbourne, Australia, 28 – 30 April 2023

I would welcome your comments on this paper either on my website
or via email to: smcnelis@swin.edu.au

ABSTRACT

The future has always had a fascination to us humans; we are oriented to the future, we hope for a better future; we are inspired by utopias and fear dystopias; we do things now in anticipation that they will be of benefit in the future; we like to know what is going to happen so we can adjust or take action to mitigate or alter it or avoid it. Each religious tradition has its own eschatology.

The future of humanity, however, looks grim as we are confronted with an unparalleled number of major world crises – ecological, economic, political, cultural and religious.

How can we hope to deal with these seemingly hopeless and discouraging challenges?

Futurologists such as Richard Slaughter (Slaughter 1998; Slaughter 2008; Slaughter 2021), Sohail Inayatullah (Inayatullah 1998; Inayatullah 2013; Inayatullah 2017) and Wendell Bell (Bell 2002; Bell 2003; Bell 2004) are seeking to develop a method for future studies which is holistic, multidisciplinary, practical and creative. But how successful are they?

In *Method in Theology: An Organon for our Time*, Fred Crowe (1980) describes Lonergan as a theologian who sought to build the future and the functional specialties as relevant to any human studies that investigates a cultural past to guide its future. But can the functional specialties deal with the complex of issues that challenge the future of humanity and that are raised by futurologists? How is functional collaboration futurology. Does it provide a new global hope? This paper seeks to address these questions.

Preamble: an acknowledgment

I want to begin with an acknowledgment that last year was the 50th anniversary of the publication of Bernard Lonergan's, *Method in Theology*.

Introduction

Fred Crowe in *Method in Theology: An Organon for our Time* (Crowe 1980) describes Bernard Lonergan as a theologian who sought to build the future and the functional specialties as relevant to any human studies that investigates a cultural past to guide its future.

Now it would appear that first four functional specialties - Research, Interpretation, History and Dialectic – are about understanding the past and, that second four – Foundations, Policies, Systematics and Communications – are about looking to the future (Lonergan 2017). I'm proposing here that all the functional specialties are in some way oriented to the future.

I will begin with a brief view of futurology and then talk about functional collaboration as futurology.

This is a very compact presentation of a much larger paper.

Futurology

Human fascination with the future

The future is fascinating to us. We are oriented to the future and hope for a better one. We do things now in anticipation of the future – like learning a trade, educating ourselves. We make sacrifices for future generations. We like to know what is going to happen so that we can take action to mitigate, alter or avoid the future.

Such is the perennial interest throughout history that we have turned to readers of the future - astrologists, soothsayers, fortune tellers, different forms of divination.

We have a literary and movie tradition of utopias/dystopias. Cosmologists debate the future of our world, the sun, the stars, the universe. Are we headed for extinction? Is the universe headed for the big freeze, the big rip or the big crunch?

Each religious tradition – Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism and Christianity - has its view of the end times – the eschaton. In our tradition we are familiar with the eschaton being described as the Kingdom of God, the second coming of Christ, heaven, hell, the new heaven and the new earth, the coming of the Messiah, the resurrection of the dead and the last judgment.

Futurology as a new discipline

Building upon the post-war focus on policies, planning and strategies and given a major boost by developments in statistics, futurology has developed into a new academic discipline.

UNESCO has established Chairs of Future Studies and regards “futures literacy” as an essential competency in the 21st century (UNESCO 2023).

Futurologists have moved from predicting the future to mapping alternative futures to shaping desired futures. They work closely with organisations. They have a democratic bent and want to empower people to think about and realize alternate futures.

The future as a tool

These visions of the future are highly imaginative, symbolic and speculative and, rely heavily on a personal and cultural worldview. They are appealing. They arouse deep feelings within us.

We can imagine the future in individual or social terms. We can envision it in terms of reward or punishment. We can use it to control another person or a group... if you do this, you'll go to heaven, if you do this, you'll go to hell. We can envision the future as full of terror or as being enveloped in love. Visions of the future change what we do and how we do it.

Functional Collaboration as futurology

A parable

As a preliminary to talking about functional collaboration, I want to present you with an image.

No doubt you are all familiar with the parable of the sower from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke –

A sower went out to sow. Some seed fell along the path, some on rocky ground, some among thorns, some on good soils and thrived.

But here I want to put a twist on this parable.

Recently I've been reading a fascinating book – *The Age of Seeds: How Plants Hacked Time and Why Our Future Depends on It*. Fiona McMillan-Webster describes the amazing characteristics of seeds:

- they grow in all sorts of environments;
- they are distributed by wind, animals, water, and even by birds;
- some have a relatively short life span whereas others are long lived;
- some have short dormancy while others can wait long periods for the right environment;
- some germinate with water, some require the right temperature and soil, others require smoke after bushfires (McMillan-Webster 2022).

All you gardeners know how difficult it is to germinate seeds and cultivate trees, flowers, bushes, grasses and fruits.

Image as seed, a sunflower seed. Do you know what it will grow in to. Yes, under the right conditions, it will stun us with its bloom.

The right conditions? With technology, i.e., with our know-how of sunflowers – we can ensure that the environment is just right to ensure success, the germination and growth of the sunflower.

But let us think about the seed that is humanity – we've only been around a relatively very short time. What of us? What will we become? Unlike the sunflower seed, we do not know what we will become. Indeed, we are still working out the conditions that will promote our flourishing and development into this unknown reality. But how do we do this? How? Knowing-how?

Functional collaboration: some preliminary comments

In support of my contention that functional collaboration is futurology, I will begin with three preliminary comments and then talk about each functional specialty.

Functional collaboration – linking theory and practice

As Fred Crowe illustrates Aristotle's organon held sway for many centuries. In the early 17th century, Descartes "imposed a requirement of rigorous method" (Lonergan 1992[1957], p.553) and Francis Bacon's new organon proposed an inductive method which focused on empirical evidence.

In the early 19th century, Hegel obliged philosophers "not only to account for their own views but also to explain the existence of contrary convictions and opinions" (Lonergan 1992[1957], p.553).

Further, Marx's famous dictum: 'Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is to *change* it' (Marx [1845]2002) marked a new demand and, many disciplines began to orient themselves towards their practical implications.

Functional collaboration incorporates all the demands of history: Descartes for a rigorous method; Bacon for empirical evidence; Hegel that philosophers not only account for their own views but also for contrary view; Marx that we not only interpret the world but change it. In this way, functional collaboration links theory and practice.

Functional collaboration as technology

One of unique characteristics of humanity is our capacity and ability to put in place the conditions necessary for the occurrence of certain events. So, having worked out the environment that particular types of seeds need – the technology, the know-how - we put in place the conditions that will promote their growth.

Functional collaboration is also a technology, one underpins all other technologies. It is the knowing-how in understanding, affirming and deciding how to make progress in any area of human endeavour. As such it is integral the structure of both practical action and history.

Functional collaboration as emergent probability

Functional collaboration is a conditioned series of schemes of recurrence. As such, it is dynamically oriented to the future. Each functional specialty is not just for itself. Each is providing the conditions for the occurrence of the next functional specialty. Each is leaning forward towards the next functional specialty, indeed towards introducing new ways of living.

The functional specialties

Now I want to illustrate this by briefly talking about each functional specialty.

FS Research – empirical questions

I have been talking about the future. But what are the data on the 'future'? There is no data on the future. The data we have is data on manifold events in time and place in our past and present.

Our problem is twofold: on the one hand, the many variations in data in different societies, cultures and religions; on the other hand, a heuristic for selecting, organising and understanding the relevant data. All inquiries begin with some heuristic, however inadequate, with some understanding of what it is being investigated. The FS Research, however, throws up time and place data which disrupts the current heuristic. In this way, the FS Research sets the conditions for the FS Interpretation.

FS Interpretation- Theoretical/definitional questions

A heuristic is the current answer to a what-is-it question. The current answer is disrupted by new empirical evidence and the role of the FS Interpretation is to adjust the current heuristic or to develop a new one altogether.

In the social sciences, as in theology, answers to this type of question tends to be woefully inadequate, usually in terms of how a word is used, a dictionary definition, or in terms of how a particular group use the word, or, an imaginative framework which gathers together different aspects of the term.

If we go back to those images of the future that I spoke about earlier, most, if not all of them, are imaginative projections of the future that take a perception of or feeling about the world now, usually one particularly aspect of it, and projects that forward.

Again, let's think about the analogy of sunflower seed that I also spoke about earlier. Can we understand what a sunflower seed is without some grasp of its future possibilities as a fully grown smiling sunflower?

Is there not a parallel with humanity? How can we understand who we are without some grasp of our future possibilities, who we will become?

A heuristic selects the relevant, significant and essential elements and their relations that constitute humanity. It seeks to incorporate, in some way, all the variations, all the possibilities into a single viewpoint. It seeks to be a universal viewpoint from which the data can be understood. It will relate in an integrated holistic way all the dimensions of humanity – physical, chemical, biological, psychological, technological, economic, political, cultural, personal and religious - not just one or other of these dimensions. As such it is a guide to understanding what is actually happening in any particular society, culture and religion at any point in time and in any place, both now and in the past. In this way, the FS Interpretation sets the conditions for the FS History.

FS History - Historical questions

Throughout the world, there are many different societies, cultures and religions. Each has a different history. Each has developed in its own way. Each is informed by its own set of values that are realised through its institutions, the taken-for-granted ways of meeting needs. But what values are vectors of ongoing change in the society, culture or religion? The FS Interpretation provides an integrated holistic heuristic from which the FS History can identify the particular set of values at different points in time in order to work out what values are the vectors of ongoing change. These values are taken-for-granted and deeply embedded. They are the actually operative presuppositions about who we are and who we want to become. They are the worldview, the horizon within which a society, a culture and a religion changes.

By identifying those values that are the vectors of ongoing change, the FS History sets the conditions for the FS Dialectic.

FS Dialectic - Evaluative/critical questions

The values that are vectors of ongoing change differ between societies, cultures and religions. But identifying them is not enough if we want to plot a way forward.

These vectors are the horizon within which our decisions and actions take place. The FS Dialectic is about stopping and reflecting upon these vectors. It is about “retracing our steps”, coming to terms with what we have done and assess what we have achieved. It is only by retreating to our base that we can fully understand the nature of our journey; that we can see it in all its consequentiality.

For the most part, we are largely unaware of the presuppositions of our society, culture and religion. It is only when confronted by other societies, cultures and religions that we are challenged at our very roots. The FS Dialectic assembles the vectors of many different societies, cultures and religions; it appreciates and critiques each. The FS Dialectic seeks to work out which vectors are

worthwhile and promote social, cultural and religious development by showing they proceed from authentic subjectivity: from a process of learning and coming to know through experiencing, understanding and judging; from a process choosing what is worthwhile; and, from a process seeking to become fully alive as being-in-love.

The FS Dialectic discovers and integrates the best of these vectors from our collective past. This becomes a guide to the future and set the conditions for the FS Dialectic.

FS Foundations - Transformative/visionary questions

We can make discoveries about our past. Through the FS Dialectic we can discover what is worthwhile and what is not. Discovery is one thing. Deciding to live by that discovery is another. The FS Dialectic sets the conditions for deciding to live in another way, to transform one's horizon.

Decision changes us by introducing into our horizon, into our understanding of ourselves and who we aspire to be, that discovery, that something new. Lonergan speaks of conversion – intellectual, moral and religious. We can discover the way in which we come to know, the way in which we realise what is good and worthwhile and, that we are being-in-love, in short, the way in which we go beyond who we are now. But it is only through a decision to live according to these discoveries that our lives are transformed. There is however the residual – the habits of how we used to live, the values that still continue to inform our living. 'The existential gap' as Lonergan calls it. Ongoing transformation requires further discoveries about our lives – gaps between who we aspire to be and what we continue to do – and so further decisions to live accord with those discoveries.

FS Policies - Policy questions

The FS Foundations provide the horizon within which we aspire to live. But this raises a question as to how concretely we are live and give expression to our decision to live in that way.

The FS Policies are about values. Value is what is intended in questions for deliberation. It is what we intend to bring about, it is future oriented. Policies are about future directions.

Where the FSs Research, Interpretation, History and Dialectic is about understanding and evaluating the values that were previously intended and have already been realised, the FS Policies is future oriented. It is about setting new directions, new vectors, new values, ones that will best promote the development of humanity into the future.

The FS Policies sets directions but leaves open the question as to what courses of action will achieve this direction. Thus, the FS Policies sets the conditions for the FS Systematics.

FS Systematics - Strategic questions

It is not enough to aspire to become someone different and live in a new way. It is not enough to decide on new directions, on new vectors. We have to work out how, within the complex series of contexts that constitute humanity – technological, economic, political, cultural and religious context - what course of action will integrate this new direction, this value, this vector?

FS Communications - Practical questions

A decision to aspire to a new vision of humanity, to set some new directions, to work out a course of action, then raises a question as to what practices/activities in this time and place will achieve a strategic course of action which will realise a new actual operative future for humanity.

This sets the conditions for the implementation of something new. But once implemented, we now have a new set of data that sets the conditions for the FS Research.

Functional Collaboration is a scheme of recurrence that continues to recycle a cultural past as a guide to the future.

Concluding remarks

In his book, *Futurology Express*, Philip McShane describes futurology as, “the conception, affirmation and effecting of the integral heuristic structure of history. Futurology is caring as best I can, as best we can, for the pup, the shoot, called history”.

Functional collaboration is futurology, it is the best technology for plotting our way forward. Functional collaboration is a scheme of recurrence that aligns science with emergent probability as world process.

It links theory and practice, it builds on our understanding of the past, the lessons we have learned, the best of the past to work out who we are, what to do and how best express that. Functional collaboration is dynamic rather than static. It does not understand the past for the sake of understanding it. It is always leaning forward into the future.

Bibliography

- Bell, W. (2002) Human Values, Social Change, and the Future, in R. Bachika (ed.) *Traditional Religion and Culture in a New Era*, Routledge, London.
- Bell, W. (2003) *Foundations of Futures Studies: Volume 1, Human science for a new era: history, purposes, and knowledge*, Routledge, London.
- Bell, W. (2004) *Foundations of Futures Studies: Volume 2, Values, Objectivity, and the Good Society*, Routledge, London.
- Crowe, F. E. (1980) *Method in Theology: An Organon for our Time*, The 1980 Pere Marquette Theology Lecture, Marquette University Press, Milwaukee
<https://archive.org/details/methodintheology0000crow/page/n3/mode/2up?view=theater>, Accessed 6 September 2021 .
- Inayatullah, S. (1998) 'Macrohistory and futures studies', *Futures*, vol. 30, no. 5: 381-394, doi: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0016-3287\(98\)00043-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0016-3287(98)00043-3).
- Inayatullah, S. (2013) Futures Studies: Theories and methods, in F. González (ed.) *There's a Future: Visions for a better world*, BBVA, Madrid, 37-65.
- Inayatullah, S. (2017) *Causal Layered Analysis: A Four-Level Approach to Alternative Futures*, Prospective and Strategic Foresight Toolbox, Futuribles International, <https://www.futuribles.com/en/causal-layered-analysis-2/>, Accessed.
- Lonergan, B. J. F. (1992[1957]) *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, Volume 3, University of Toronto Press, Toronto.
- Lonergan, B. J. F. (2017) *Method in Theology*, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, Volume 14, University of Toronto Press, Toronto
- Marx, K. ([1845]2002) *Theses on Feuerbach* [Online], <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/index.htm>, Accessed 17 February 2010.
- McMillan-Webster, F. (2022) *The Age of Seeds: How Plants Hacked Time and Why Our Future Depends on It*, Thames & Hudson Australia, Port Melbourne.
- McNelis, S. (2014) *Making Progress in Housing: A Framework for Collaborative Research*, Routledge, Abingdon.
- McShane, P. (2013) *Futurology Express*, Axial, Vancouver.
- McShane, P. (2019) *The Future: Core Precepts in Supramolecular Method and Nanochemistry*, Axial Publishing, Vancouver.
- Melchin, K. R. (1999) *History, ethics, and emergent probability: ethics, society, and history in the work of Bernard Lonergan*, The Lonergan Web Site, Toronto.
[http://www.lonerganresource.com/pdf/books/6/Melchin, Kenneth - History, Ethics, and Emergent Probability.pdf](http://www.lonerganresource.com/pdf/books/6/Melchin,_Kenneth_-_History,_Ethics,_and_Emergent_Probability.pdf), Accessed 28 August 2023
- Slaughter, R. A. (1998) 'Futures studies as an intellectual and applied discipline', *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 42: 372.
- Slaughter, R. A. (2008) 'Integral Futures Methodologies', *Futures*, vol. 40, no. 2: 103-108, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2007.11.011>.
- Slaughter, R. A. (2021) 'Stumbling towards the light: Four decades of a life in futures', *Futures*, vol. 132: 102794, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2021.102794>.
- UNESCO (2023) *Futures Literacy* [Online], <https://en.unesco.org/futuresliteracy/about>, Accessed 15 April 2023.