15
ACCESSING THE FUTURE THROUGH IMAGINATION

Anthony Hodgson

The conventional deterministic view of the future is that it is caused by the past. The traditional view gives rise to techniques like forecasting where historical trends are extrapolated from the present into the future. With the development of complexity science things moved into the view that aspects of the future are inherently unpredictable through emergent properties of complex adaptive systems. So, at a time when our desire to remove uncertainty and predict and plan the future, in contrast, the turbulent conditions of the Anthropocene reveals our historical planning methods as no longer fit for purpose in relation to the most significant challenges including climate change, pandemics, and geopolitical unrest.

One of the human characteristics which appears to break out of determinism is imagination. Imagination is taken largely to be fantasy and delusion which is one of the reasons for taking up more evidence-based deterministic methods. Forecasting proves more reliable than fantasy, but the question here is, have we thrown out a baby with the bathwater? In this chapter, I propose that there are aspects of imagination which may be what we need to access, develop and harness to better navigate uncertainty and turbulence. But the plausibility of this proposition requires that we step out of the usual assumptions about a number of key things, namely the nature of time, the range of psychological capacities, and nature of anticipatory systems.

Anticipatory systems are different from feedback systems. Feedback is essential for adaptability and resilience but is essentially information from the past. But the range of that adaptability is limited in situations where there are no precedents inferable from the past. Anticipatory systems have an additional information pathway called feedforward which is generating signals for the future (Hodgson, 2020; Rosen, 1985). Viewed from the conventional perspective, this is nonsense. However, if we expand our notion of the nature of space and time based especially on findings in the quantum world, such possibilities are real.

To open up the implications of feedforward, we need to review the ways in which we might be able to access signals from the future. This is where our capacity for imagination takes on new possibilities. There are three aspects to imagination: fantasy, creative expression, and time transcending perception. Fantasy is the production of images which create alternative interpretations to presented facts and knowledge. It may be anything from misinterpretation
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to fake news. Creative expression is where function is created as an art form or generates hypotheses in science yet to be tested. The third category, time transcending perception, is not recognized but precognition may be one aspect of this. The importance of the latter is that it is a precursor of a way to use imagination that could be consciously cultivated as a faculty of anticipation.1

Before we can look at the positive role of imagination in accessing the future, we first of all need to notice the different ways the future shows up in the present, without any initiative on our part. This perspective only makes sense if we attribute the future to existing in some sense (Hodgson, 2013; Poli, 2019). Then we can ask, in what ways does the future intrude into the present? I am using the word intrude to imply that the kind of futures we are looking for are those which are not following the general run of things. Here are some examples:

• We find ourselves in a new pattern of existing that changes the meaning of our lives
• Some sense repeatedly asserts itself in a way that shifts its meaning from trivial to valuable
• A new pattern, for example, an innovation, displaces an old pattern
• Something obscure and not noticed affirms its characteristic and becomes real
• The belief in a currently non-existing future imposes a will on the situation that makes it real
• A creative act renders the impossible possible

The important thing about these six conditions is that they have not come about through futures thinking and planning. It is as if a domain of potential not available to the present for unknown reasons becomes available. We need a wider framework of interpretation of the meaning of time and the future to make sense of this (Hodgson, 2013). From this framework, we can also create an approach to deliberate access to new futures. We need a way of relating the perceptual relationship to these dimensions to be clarified with a model as to how our experience relates to them in ways that explain the “accidental” recurrences. With these in mind, we can then open up how the experiences can be invoked in a useful manner.

To make the “accidental” perception of unexpected futures available as a conscious technique, we need to reframe our understanding of time. Seeing time solely as a linear process in which we are “caught” at a given instant offers no room to maneuver. We are trapped in the cage of determinism. If, however, we introduce the view that we live in a multidimensional world, then there are additional aspects to understanding the future that break out of the cage. I will introduce here such a theory developed from the explorations of John Bennett (1966a). He was exploring five- and six-dimensional physics which took into account potential and realization beyond but including Einsteinian space-time. This was well before quantum cosmologists posited the necessity for multidimensional frameworks.2 His approach, which is experiential as well as mathematical, requires us to consider, in addition to linear clock time, two further time-like dimensions. One is related to the real presence of potential patterns; the other is related to the way in which aspects of those patterns come selectively into the experience of sequential time.

Opening up our view of time

To loosen the associations with the usual terminology, I will use Greek names which facilitate a different conception of time. They also have some correlations inherited from the more observational and reflective Greek philosophy. In addition to three-dimensional space we add four further time related dimensions.
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• **Time as Succession**—*Chronos*
  - The sequence of events and cycles as measured by methods from the rotation of the earth to atomic clocks by what are conventionally called time intervals. Chronos also has the connotation of duration as experienced.

• **Eternity as Potential**—*Aionios*
  - The inherent patterns of everything lying outside of chronos. This also includes the aspect of latency that relates to our sensing of unmanifest potential.

• **Beingness as Realization**—*Hyparxis*
  - Actual specific occurrence, ableness-to-be which is the structural coupling that brings potential into manifestation even contrary to temporal processes, such as the second Law of Thermodynamics.

• **Undivided Unity**—*Henosis*
  - The cosmos as one inseparable Subject penetrating the six other dimensions and therefore unrestricted by what are normally called space-time constraints (Bohm & Hiley, 1993).

**The four basic continua**

Beyond the abstract definitions of the dimensions, there is the possibility of actually experiencing inter-dimensional complexes. In western thought, we have become used to the expression “space-time continuum” where time is no longer treated as independent of mechanical motion in three dimensions. In relativity theory, time cannot be separated from the three dimensions of space as it depends on an object’s velocity relative to the speed of light. This idea can be extended to relativistic coupling of space to all the non-spatial dimensions forming three additional continua and a total unity. As conscious, space-embodied beings, we acquire our experience from the combination of the three dimensions of space with the four remaining dimensions in parallel and in combination. Each continuum is a container of a crucial aspect of reality. It is the combination of the additional time-like dimension with space that provides the content of experience usually hidden from view (Table 15.1).

Our conventional conception assumes a four-dimensional existence **SC**—space/chronos or space time. However, each of the other combinations is itself an aspect of experience. Thus we have:

- **SC**—the succession of events
- **SA**—the patterns of potentiality
- **SH**—the power of unique realization
- **SN**—the indivisible whole

**Table 15.1 The four continua**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Continuum</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>SC continuum</strong></td>
<td>Sequences of manifest events in a location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SA continuum</strong></td>
<td>Latent patterns in space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SH continuum</strong></td>
<td>Local realization of the individual and the particular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SN continuum</strong></td>
<td>Unity beyond space and time but omnipresent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The diagram Figure 15.1 represents the total space continuum composed of the three time-like determining conditions of chronos, aionios, and hyparxis. The whole is contained in the universal whole referred to as space-henosis. This continuum is everywhere and nowhere as the undivided totality.

Our awareness of the continua is contained in the present moment (Hodgson, 2013), which embraces all three continua. Our experience is taking place in the complex center where the three aspects are mutually congruent in a manifestation. Space is neither inert nor empty. The deep nature of space—of which our regular space is but a projection—is understood as a plenum, a highly varied structure-process which includes potentially infinite qualities. Thus space itself is understood as a multidimensional ordering medium (Smolin, 2013).

These four continua—SC, SA, SH, SN—provide a much richer framework to consider how we might intentionally access the future. There are several steps to setting this up. Firstly, we extend the meaning of “future” to three types as shown in the diagram. Space-chronos (SC) is the familiar notion of future as some kind of change following measurable time. In addition, there is space-aionios (SA) which is the future as latent patterns of potential. The third type of future is in space-hyparxis (SH) which is characterized as the open creative future. All of these are included in a wholeness without separation, the undivided totality. However, our direct experience of this is determined by the scale and scope of the present moment, the breadth and depth of awareness. The state of any given present moment determines a field of possible access to potentials of the future.

In this framework, accessing the future then goes beyond simply trying to see what will happen next to also seeing what potential futures are available within the bandwidth of the consciousness making the inquiry and also to sensing the presence or absence of the power to realize a manifestation of that potential. But these additional modes of future consciousness require different ways of working to the dominant discursive methods of knowing.

Deterministic science excludes the possibilities of these additional modes and concentrates on verifiable facts. But facts are always “after the fact” and have limited value for seeing the
future except where they can be simply extrapolated. Alternative ways of knowing are needed and imagination is the capacity we can develop as an alternative way of knowing. But it must be an appropriate form of imagination. Here I am not referring to fantasy. Even though, for example, some science fiction can be a signal of future trends and events, it is not a reliable version for decision-making. Creative imagination plays a role in the action of making a future, but it is to that extent self-made and is accessed from within the person. The form of imagination that offers possibility for conscious probing of the unknown future is visualization. This has the possibility of transcending time.

Imagination as a futures faculty is a means of detection of latent patterns that have not yet been expressed in chronological time. They “exist” in space-aionios. Normal perceptual channels are too conditioned to have freedom outmaneuver in that continuum. As a practice, visualization also has a component of will in space-hyparxis that discriminates as to which latencies have been noticed that are pertinent to the needs of the present moment.

### The latent power of guided imagination

To access the future through imagination, we need to get into a state where we can be guided by intuition. Intuition is a function of emotional intelligence combined with cognition and is capable of locating zones of the latent pattern which are outside of the linear progression of time. We can sense intuitively that something is possible, but we cannot bring that pattern into our minds effectively unless it is brought through our imagination. The mode of imagination required is active in how it is directed but receptive or passive to pick up the latent information. The mental image is held gently, as in a sensitive screen, so that it can be informed directly by the latent pattern which intuition has homed in on. It is like shining a torch beam that illuminates the terrain it is pointed at but does not itself shape that terrain. Another analogy would be that of chemical photography, where the sensitive surface is able to react to the patterns of light and shade. But like an exposed film, the imagination needs to stabilize or fix the pattern so that the discursive brain can link to recognizable images and words and become communicable (Scharmer, 2009).

We can understand this process as a threefold relational system. Firstly, there is the power of inquiry and intention directed toward the search for undiscovered latent patterns. Secondly, there is the receptivity of the mental screen to the encounter with a new latent pattern. Thirdly, there is the cognition and anticipation of possible significance in what has come to mind. These three components are represented in Figure 15.2.

![Figure 15.2 The Triad of Access](BK-TandF-DONELLO_9780367897185-220705-Chp15.indd 133)
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Table 15.2 The six modes of access

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formal relationship</th>
<th>Access modes</th>
<th>Illustration</th>
<th>Access catch phrase</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1—2—3 (expansion)</td>
<td><strong>Discovery</strong>—imagining a latent pattern evokes location of a potential and enables possibilities of realization to be anticipated through to new possibilities</td>
<td>Lateral exploration of speculative future changes</td>
<td>Fantasy to fact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2—1—3 (concentration)</td>
<td><strong>Evolution</strong>—potent potential excites creative intent and breaks through to new possibilities</td>
<td>Recognition of a completely new priority domain relevant to the future</td>
<td>Feeling the looming issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1—3—2 (interaction)</td>
<td><strong>Learning</strong>—creative observation of unfolding future events shows where to put attention</td>
<td>Carrying out mental or actual role plays of improbable situations</td>
<td>Rehearsing the unlikely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2—3—1 (identity)</td>
<td><strong>Recognition</strong>—the active intrusion of potential through observation confirms the field for imaginative exploration</td>
<td>Cognitive priming—science fiction alerting recognition of new facts</td>
<td>Imagining the unimaginable future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2—1—3 (order)</td>
<td><strong>Necessity</strong>—the act of anticipation orients imagination to focus on a previously unrecognized domain of potential</td>
<td>Circumstances demanding new views of the future</td>
<td>Encountering unavoidable truth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3—2—1 (freedom)</td>
<td><strong>Serendipity</strong>—random, capricious, or speculative anticipatory acts open up potential for creative imagination</td>
<td>Certain forms of “what if?” simulation</td>
<td>Consulting an oracle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The diagram emphasizes that these three components stand in parallel relationship rather than as sequential in time. There is a dynamic mutual influence taking place which accounts for the variety of ways in which the future shows up. These modes of access are characterized as discovery, evolution, learning, recognition, necessity, and serendipity. They arise from the six ways that the dynamics of the threefold system can operate (Bennett, 1961). Table 15.2 summarizes this.

The six aspects of future consciousness

The practice of extending our experience of the present moment to highlight future consciousness requires relating our psychological states to different aspects of experience as shown in Figure 15.3 (Hodgson, 2019). The dimensional structure described in Figure 15.3 corresponds to or is isomorphic with our experience of causality in the present moment. To visualize this, we need to suspend any idea of time flowing from past to future and consider that each dimension enters into the present moment. Three appear to be entering from the past and three entering from the future.

At the center of our mind is the total set of immediate “mental objects” that constitutes the conscious experience of the present moment. The horizontal dimension (x-axis) refers to the way the content of the present moment, in the form of traces, memories, expectations, and hopes, creates the experience of the flow of time. The span of this set the distinction between a “thin” and a “thick” present moment. The thin present moment is the precise instant measured on the clock. The thick present moment extends into the chronological past and future and has a richer structure than just linear time. The vertical dimension (y-axis) represents latency in
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The form of potential patterns and appearance as passive forms. The diagonal dimension (z-axis in three dimensions) represents what we might call living commitments entering from the past but differently from causal time. It also represents, intriguingly, influences from choices or creative insights not yet made but held as possibilities in many minds.

The richness of a given present moment is a function of the extent and quality of these different types of influence. Each dimension is an influence entering and enriching the now. To visualize this, we need to suspend the convention that time flows only from left (past) to right (future) and consider the six influences converging on “now” at the center. The spatial axes x, y, and z enable us to visualize three time-like dimensions, each influencing the present. In the figure 15.3, all the arrows point into the sphere of the experienced present and impact the mental experiential content implying several forms of causation. This is the enrichment brought through future consciousness.

Conventional time is experienced through the traces and memories in the mind that imprint the present from the past. Retrocausality, whether imaginary or real, is experienced as expectations and hopes. The passive form is the constellation of relatively enduring forms. The active side of form is the vast superposition or latent multiple presence of potential patterns and states (Bohm & Nichol, 2003). The additional degree of freedom of the third time-like dimension is the sense of meaningful interacting commitments that still prioritize in the present. Its future aspect is the region in which the present moment is open and creative and evokes choices and decisions. Thus, there are six sources of insight that can contribute to

Figure 15.3 The Multiple Influences on the Present Moment (Hodgson, 2019, Based on Bennett, 1966a, p. 15)
future consciousness. Conventional knowledge constraints to using extrapolation and continuing commitment. Without the additional influences of perspectives, extrapolation can leave us vulnerable to unanticipated trend breaks, and commitments can trap us in confirmation bias (Kahneman, 2012). Without openness, we are trapped in memory and the creative potentialities are shut out.

**Practicing access**

The practice of access to the future through imagination requires self-development as a special ability. The aim is to take the fleeting experiences of access and cultivate an intentional capacity. This requires us to be in a suitable state of mindfulness and be able to work with attention and visualization. The primary guiding principles of creative thinking apply equally here: suspension of disbelief; not jumping to conclusions; holding a space of ambiguity; entertaining contradictions and allowing incubation time while living with the questions.

The stages to be built up are (1) calm state, (2) tuning in to the present moment, (3) scanning future potentials, and (4) alertness to emerging insight (Hodgson, 2016, 2020).

**Calm state**

The practitioner can use techniques from any number of relaxation and mindfulness methods. Foundational are posture, breathing and a sense of openness embracing past, present, and future, readiness to reflect. An approach called presencing (Scharmer, 2009) has also been applied here.

**Present moment**

The interpretation of the present moment in Figure 15.3 indicates six modes of influence and information access into the present moment. Below is a set of questions where each question addresses a causal influence. This should be practiced as a “tune up” rather than as a way of getting answers.

1. What is likely to come about by momentum from the past? Chronos past
2. What seems to be new not coming from the past? Chronos future
3. What is a positive potential beyond the above events? Aionios past
4. What tangible forms are likely to dominate? Aionios future
5. What has the most promising life in it for the future? Hyparxis past
6. Can you see/sense/imagine a desirable outcome that would be surprising? Hyparxis future
7. What now is the essential value of this future in the present moment? Holistic intuition

This often works best done in three cycles. Cycle 1 is to reflect on the questions remaining in the calm state. Cycle 2 is to jot down any points that come to mind. Cycle 3 is to repeat in the calm state but be alert to any emergent clues.

**Review of access modes**

This is based on Table 15.1. The emergent future suggests itself as it becomes apparent to future consciousness. This is a delicate and unpredictable process with no guarantees. It works on the principle that creativity favors the prepared mind. But favoring is not in the control of
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the favored. The six dynamics are mentally scanned and reviewed, and can also be explored as questions.

1. Discovery—Has any new pattern of possible events come to mind?
2. Evolution—Is a new domain of significance being suggested?
3. Learning—Is there something that needs investigating in a deeper way?
4. Recognition—Is there something I have failed to notice?
5. Necessity—Is there something imperative that can no longer be ignored?
6. Serendipity—Has something surprising and previously ignored come out?

Relationship to general futures methods

There is a popular figure of speech used especially by politicians, “going forward.” Viewed literally, this is a rather curious expression in relation to time, as if there was a choice as to whether we remain stuck in an instant, a kind of “groundhog day” or whether we see the passage of time not changing anything, which is a self-contradiction. Time is change. Perhaps what is meant by using this expression is that “going forward” is meant to convey the choice of a pathway which changes the kind of change that will be at that particular time. Since this is the popular language of decision-makers, we need to clarify its possible deeper meaning. We can substitute the word “facing” for “going,” so we might speak about “facing forward.” Clearly this is better but assumes that forward is future time. We might contrast this with “going forward facing backward,” the way some Indigenous cultures speak about the experience of time. The past arrives from the front and the future comes up from behind. However, this still does not leave room for choice. Since most futures methods and futures studies tend to be stuck in the linear deterministic assumption, it is helpful to have a wider framing for futures methods. In this way, we can better position the need for and role of access through imagination.

The first step of this framing is that any futures method is being applied by a practitioner. The way a practitioner experiences this is colored by their state of future consciousness and the intentions embedded in the field of practice, the client system (Minkkinen et al., 2019). There are two aspects to consider. In Figure 15.4, the vertical dimension is the degree of agency of the principal actor. This is usually an enterprise or organization. The second dimension is the degree of uncertainty in the situation. A state of low agency indicates that we are trying to see the future of a system that we have little direct influence over. This is the domain of predictive futures methods such as forecasting and most kinds of modeling (Morlidge & Player, 2010). If the agency is greater, meaning the actor has scope to shape the future, then the domain is that of road maps into the future. This is particularly used in technology enterprises where a given product line may have several generations planned and under development to succeed the current product in the market (Ackoff, 1981). If the agency is low and the uncertainty is high, then neither forecasting nor road maps are appropriate and the future method is testing in multiple scenarios which cover a range of uncertainties in different combinations (van der Heijden, 2005).

Where the agency is high (or needs to be high as in dealing with climate emergency) and the uncertainty is also high (as in climate change), then the three previous categories have very limited value for effective decision-making. A fourth category is needed. In this domain, not only are specific distinct methods needed such as the three horizons (Sharpe et al., 2016) but the capacities and state of the practitioner become crucial. The assumptions behind “going
"forward" decisions are too easily subsumed in evidence-based methods unsuitable for navigating unknown complexity. Navigating indicates charting a pathway in situations where both the terrain is difficult to map and also changing in ways that need continuous revision of the map.

So this is where the field of accessing the future through imagination offers the chance to break through deterministic limitations and realize that the uncertainties are not without hidden structure and new patterns of action can be discovered that do not depend on previous patterns that are rendered ineffective by changing circumstances. If this capacity is not realized, then we are condemned to the Anthropocene of our own ignorant making; with it, we might evoke the qualities of the Synergic Epoch (Bennett, 1966b) that transcend the way things are heading at the moment and find a truly new future in the present, a viable third horizon.

Figure 15.4 Types of Futures Methods

Notes
2 Note from the author: I was privileged to be a senior research fellow at his research institute in the 1960s.
3 KHRONOS (or Chronus) was the Protogenos (primeval god) of time, a divinity who emerged self-formed at the beginning of creation in the Orphic cosmogonies. Khronos was imagined as an incorporeal god, serpentine in form, with three heads—of a man, a bull, and a lion. He and his consort, serpentine Ananke (Inevitability), circled the primal world-egg in their coils and split it apart to form the ordered universe of earth, sea, and sky. Khronos and Ananke continued to circle
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the cosmos after creation—their passage driving the circling of heaven and the eternal passage of time. http://www.theoi.com/Protogenos/Khronos.html

4 The pattern of eternal nature—(panta aiona estin on) “Aion is what is properly eternal, in contrast with a divine imitation of it in ages of time, the result of the creative action of God which imitated the uncreate as nearly as He could in created ages. It is a careful opposition between eternity and ages; and aion and also aionios mean the former in contrast with ages.” “For the completeness which embraces the time of the life of each, outside which there is nothing, according to nature, is called the aion of each” Aristotle “in eternity nothing is passed, nothing is about to be, but only subsists” http://stempublishing.com/authors/darby/DOCTRINE/31003E.html. Accessed March 6, 2021.

5 These are also referred to as “latents.” http://www.philosophos.com/philosophical_connections/profile_056.html and others. Accessed March 8, 2021.

6 Bennett (1956, pp. 169–170) introduced the term hyparxis for this dimension, after hyparcho—“to make a beginning,” which he interprets as the free will to create.

7 Henosis (Ancient Greek: Ἑνωσις) is the word for “oneness,” “union,” or “unity” in classical Greek.

References