

Olaf Stapledon: Wisdom in the Cosmos

Tom Lombardo, Ph.D.

One feature on *The Wisdom Page* is the *Profiles of Wisdom* section, containing essays on wise people from the past. My new book, *The Psychology of the Future* (to be published later this year), includes a section on Olaf Stapledon, whose integrative breadth of vision encompasses futures studies, science fiction, and philosophy, and whom I believe was an exemplar case of a wise person. Having just finished reading a biography of Olaf Stapledon (Robert Crossley's *Olaf Stapledon: Speaking for the Future*), I am even more convinced that Stapledon was a twentieth-century figure of great wisdom and immense philosophical significance. Below is my commentary on Stapledon from my new book. (There will also be an extended commentary on Stapledon's science fiction and futurist thinking in my other new book, *Science Fiction: The Evolutionary Mythology of the Future*.) Stapledon synthesizes the two key themes of our newsletter: wisdom and the future.

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"Beside his [Stapledon's] stupendous panorama, his vision of worlds and galaxies, of cosmos piled upon cosmos, the glimpses of the future that Mr. Wells and others have provided for us are no more than penny peepshows."

Christian Science Monitor

"Probably the most powerful work of imagination every written." Arthur C. Clarke

There are numerous examples of science fiction stories and novels that realize a high level of cosmic consciousness, inclusive of placing future humanity (or our descendants) within a broad and encompassing evolutionary vision of the universe. I am going to highlight just one writer and two of his novels, since perhaps more than anyone else in the genre, he realized a cosmic evolutionary vision of humanity, mind, and consciousness. Moreover, his cosmic perspective is intimately connected with the ideals and aspirations toward wisdom and enlightenment, and also exemplifies a powerful relationship between the personal and the cosmic. Stapledon clearly illustrates why it is essential to see ourselves within the context of the universe, and in particular, an evolutionary universe.

Among many other books, the British philosopher and science fiction writer, Olaf Stapledon (1886-1950) wrote two grand futures narratives, *Last and First Men* (1930) and *Star Maker* (1937), that were probably the most expansively cosmic visions of the future ever produced in Western literature. Although not clearly connected narratively, with the latter as the sequel of the former, *Last and First Men* speculates on the future

evolution of humanity extending two billion years into the future, culminating in the extinction of our species, while *Star Maker*, adopting a bigger canvas in both space and time, describes the evolution of intelligence in our universe, extending out roughly fifty billion years into the future. At the end of the latter novel, Stapledon ascends to a multiverse perspective on existence, including contact with the “Star Maker,” the ultimate Creator of an indeterminately immense array of universes, including our own.

In *Last and First Men*, we follow the evolution of humanity through eighteen different species, as humankind spreads through our solar system, first settling Venus and then, much later, Neptune. We follow the ebb and flow of human civilizations, while Stapledon chronicles diverse and imaginative ways in which future humanities attempt to purposefully evolve the species—through biophysical technologies, psycho-social practices, and the application of philosophical ideals.

In *Star Maker*, we move into outer space, where Stapledon chronicles the emergence of multiple forms of planetary intelligence and types of social order. We witness, too, the evolutionary struggles, involving both leaps forward and collapses backward, as conscious minds and advancing civilizations move toward first galactic communities and eventually a universe-wide collective mind in search of the “Star Maker.” In the grand finale of the saga, the integrated consciousness of our universe achieves a bedazzling and humbling enlightenment on the creative forces of existence.

What we experience through these two novels is supremely visionary grand futures narratives of humanity, the universe, and beyond, in which both cosmic consciousness and expansive temporal consciousness are extended outward to the limits of imagination and understanding, at least in so far as any modern writer has ever envisioned.

Moreover, humanity—and more broadly, conscious intelligence and social order—is placed in a cosmic evolutionary context. Stapledon describes both the history and the potential future of humanity, the earth, other forms of intelligence, other astronomical systems that populate the universe, the universe as a whole, and even the multiverse and the “Star Maker” in terms of evolution. Everything evolves; it is the pattern or form of time, uniting past and future.

In *Last and First Men*, the future evolutionary history of humanity is described through the perspective of a member of the “Last Men,” who attempts to connect the future saga of humankind to our present point of view and our inner and most intimate sense of our species; the evolutionary future reflects back on the present illuminating the nature of our contemporary existence.

In *Star Maker*, the story of the universe is told through the eyes of a human who eventually coalesces with numerous other minds in the universe. In the climax of the tale, all of intelligence is placed within an evolutionary theory of creation and its purpose. The “Star Maker,” it is revealed, is an evolutionary being.

In line with the general hypothesis presented in this book that the distinctive capacity of humans is to purposefully facilitate evolution (with an eye on the future), including our own evolution, Stapledon describes in his novels both future species of humans and multiple other alien intelligent species as purposefully engaged within both mental and social evolution. (There are also numerous external disruptions, self-inflicted setbacks, and periods of evolution through “unconscious” natural selection affecting the flow of events within the sagas.) As noted above, Stapledon envisions future evolution involving both technological enhancements and biological transformations, as well as transformations in intellect, emotionality, motivation, and social communion. We follow species, including our own, as various values, ethical virtues, and social ideals gain central importance and are actively pursued and cultivated. Values and ideals include communal, individualistic, aesthetic, compassionate, cosmic, and philosophical aspirations. Although Stapledon is highly inventive (for his time) on the technological possibilities of the future (for example, he seems to be the first individual to propose the concept of a “Dyson Sphere,” an artificially constructed shell surrounding a sun), his focus through both novels is purposeful psycho-social evolution: What are the possibilities for the evolution of consciousness, mind, self-identity, partnerships, and social communities? How can we hypothetically achieve such ideals? Within a cosmic, purposeful, and evolutionary context, Stapledon informs our contemporary imagination as to the many future possibilities of the mind, society, and ethical values.

One can, in fact, view both *Last and First Men* and *Star Maker* as *visions of preferable futures*, in which purposeful developments and transformations in human and alien minds and societies are driven by articulated values and virtues. As a philosopher and futurist visionary, Stapledon not only hypothetically chronicles such efforts to realize desirable goals of development, but he also presents ethical and rational arguments and considerations for why the values and goals being pursued are admirable, sound, elevating, and realistic. Further, such preferable futures are described within the context of imagined struggles, disasters, opportunities, and limitations. His narratives and visions are informed by philosophical argument and realistic considerations.

As such, Stapledon’s novels are wisdom narratives, global and cosmic in scope. The stories describe value- and virtue-driven futures narratives, the attempted execution of such inspirational narratives, and the struggles and consequent learning (and growth of wisdom) that take place as a consequence of living the narratives. For example, the ideal of realizing galactic and cosmic sentient community, a key value driving the evolution of intelligence in our universe, undergoes a significant mind-expanding struggle in coming to grips with the realization that the stars are conscious, intelligent beings, but of a whole different kind than biological intelligence.

As a point to highlight, with Stapledon as a clear and powerful example, contrary to the techno-gadgetry stereotype of science fiction, there are, in fact, numerous examples of wisdom narratives within science fiction (Lombardo, 2015). To recall, an important source of inspiration and guidance in creating a personal future wisdom narrative is existing wisdom narratives, and although such stories can be found among biographies of wise people, such inspirational wisdom narratives can also be found in science fiction

(or other kinds of fiction). But even more, it is of special value that the wisdom narratives in science fiction take place in imagined futures. Science fiction wisdom narratives provide guiding lights for the future.

Deep purpose is another one of the virtues of heightened future consciousness and wisdom, and in two distinctive ways, *Last and First Men* and *Star Maker* illustrate deep purpose. First, the various species and civilizations—human and otherwise—described in these books frequently exhibit deep purpose, indeed to degrees that transcend anything humans have either individually or collectively realized thus far in our history. Both the time scales involved in collective projects and the heights of philosophical and social aspiration are colossal. Humans repeatedly redesign themselves, often taking millennia to achieve the desired goals. The efforts of intelligence in the universe to achieve a collective and focused trans-galactic consciousness span billions of years and integrate numerous galaxies extending across the universe. In *Last and First Men*, out of both compassion and deep interest, our future descendants attempt to integrate the conscious lives of all humans who have ever lived into a collective and intimate appreciation of all our distinctive souls through time; the Last Men attempt to realize an intimate and personalized memory of all conscious human minds. In *Star Maker*, the collective mentality of the cosmos dedicates itself to an understanding of the cause of its own existence.

Secondly, as the writer, philosopher, and visionary behind these novels, Stapledon, shows a deep purpose in his own creations. He sees the novels not only as exercises in the most immense leaps in imagination but also as vehicles to enlighten and inspire the reader and humanity as a whole. His deep purpose is to place our present reality within a much broader context, both ontologically and ethically, and to give us a framework in which to gain a more enlightened perspective on our reality. During his lifetime, Stapledon used science fiction as a means for teaching philosophy, history, and the future. His novels are as much futures studies as science fiction, for his imaginative speculations are set in the context of thoughtful reflection regarding realistic plausibility and ethical desirability of the futurist scenarios.

One can view Stapledon as an exemplary personal synthesis of intellect, imagination, ethics, aesthetics, and compassion. As a writer, he pulls together in his literary creations all these dimensions of human consciousness. But further, one gets the clear sense that in reading his novels we are engaging a deeply ingrained mode of consciousness within the writer; there is an authenticity in the voice and thinking. The power and credibility of the futurist visions within his books derive from a person who attempted to integrate into his being and outlook on life the values and dimensions of consciousness displayed within the text. Again, the philosophical is intimately connected with the personal.

To illustrate more fully the holistic and integrative nature of Stapledon's mindset, visions, and personal character, consider the following:

- Stapledon was broadly educated, studying both the humanities and the sciences, inclusive of literature, art, music, poetry, history, philosophy, astronomy, evolutionary

theory, psychology, and biology. In his early education, his academic studies were combined with a strong program of character development and the practical dimensions of knowledge and life. One of his central aspirations was to unite science with art.

- He was a published “romantic” poet (in his youth), a philosopher of comprehensive scope and practical inclinations (how does philosophy apply to life), and a social-political activist and utopian theorist who wrote just as many philosophy books, often at a popular level, as science fiction novels. During his time Stapledon was especially concerned with articulating utopian visions and plans of action for creating a new and better human society in the future.
- He was a dedicated teacher and frequent speaker who, in many fashions and forms, attempted to bring philosophical and pragmatic education to the general population. He took the show on the road.
- He was an active member of numerous social, political, intellectual, and literary organizations and was deeply and actively committed to having a constructive impact on the development of new forms of government, education, and society.
- He was especially concerned with finding intelligent, enlightened, and practical ways to constructively and realistically transcend the stupidities and experienced horrors of two world wars. Through his senses and emotions Stapledon saw the need for enlightenment and wisdom within humanity.
- He felt the struggle and repeated frustrations in his own attempts to succeed as a teacher, writer, and influential thinker helping humanity evolve to a better place; his journey of wisdom was a journey of feeling, as much as a journey of intellect.
- He firmly believed, from early on his career, that a viable ethics and preferable way of life for humanity (inclusive of his own life pathway), needed to be anchored and inspired by a cosmic vision of reality. His immense cosmic imagination was frequently informed by the experienced particulars of his individual life.
- Especially late in his life he focused on educating young adults, focusing on the possibilities and opportunities of the future of the coming generations, rather than focusing his attention on humanity’s (or his own) accomplishments and mistakes of the past. His mind stayed future focused.
- All his life, he attempted to purposefully evolve himself as a writer, teacher, philosopher, utopian activist, and ethical human being, with a characteristically strong element of perpetual personal humility, and as noted above, perpetual dissatisfaction (Crossley, 1994).

My argument is not that Stapledon realized some level of perfection of character (though he did write a book on saints). As a general character trait, he seems to have been somewhat melancholy and depressive for much of his life, and on a number of occasions, rather impulsive and inconsiderate in his behavior. But among twentieth-century futurist thinkers and science fiction writers, he perhaps exemplifies better than anyone the synthesis of the cosmic and philosophical with the personal and pragmatic, and the way an individual could achieve a deep integration of heightened future consciousness into his personhood. Once, the former president of the *World Future Society*, Ed Cornish, asked me to consider who might have been the wisest futurist thinkers in history. Although I did not list him at the time, suggesting instead H. G. Wells

as one outstanding candidate, I would argue now that Stapledon should be at or near the top of the list (Lombardo, 2006).

At this point we come back to the idea that the wise person realizes a way to synthesize the virtues of wisdom with a unique and distinctive personality. We find, within a wise person, the capacity to live the values and virtues of wisdom, to connect the abstract with the particular.

It is through personal exemplars of wisdom such as Stapledon that the argument for the value and credibility of wisdom as the central ideal in human development is most strongly demonstrated and validated. It is through encounters with wise people, either directly in the flesh and blood, or indirectly through biographies and autobiographies, that we become inspired and informed in a very powerful and concrete way to lead a life in the pursuit of wisdom.

Moreover, it follows that the credibility and value of our own wisdom (and what we profess in our beliefs) is to be measured and assessed through our individualized consciousness, behavior, and way of life, through our lived narratives. To strive for wisdom means to strive toward becoming a personal exemplar of wisdom; one walks the talk.

The argument can be made that in teaching and counseling on the creation of preferable futures, both at an individual and collective level, it is paramount that the teacher demonstrates wisdom. It is wisdom, exemplified in a psychologically holistic and unique individual embodiment, that provides the most credible and valuable guide to the future. Wisdom, as personally manifested, is the key to helping others realize a good future.

In closing this section on Stapledon—philosopher, science fiction writer, and futurist—I want to highlight one last key feature of *Last and First Men* and *Star Maker*. Stapledon not only sets himself, his primary fictional human characters, and present day humanity within the context of an ideal future grand narrative for humanity—one informed by evolution— but in turn sets all of the above in the context of a grand future narrative for the cosmos, which is also informed by evolution. For Stapledon, the ground of reality that frames our individual and collective identities and our preferable futures is cosmic evolution. I am part of the whole of humanity and the whole of humanity is part of the cosmos; I evolve within the evolution of humanity and the evolution of humanity evolves within the evolution of the cosmos. This is the cosmic consciousness of wisdom, and the ultimate reality foundation of ethics.

The life of the self and the future life of the human mind are set in the context of the life of the cosmos, and the life of the cosmos is evolution. Purposefully evolving cosmic consciousness (and cosmic participation) means being informed and inspired by cosmic evolution and serving the process of cosmic evolution. This is a pivotal insight behind the achievement of a preferable future and the good life for each of us individually and for humanity as a whole. Although this may seem a rather ethereal and impractical

position to take on life, it is actually the most realistically grounded and self-empowering paradigm of life to embrace. Every other ethical position is, to varying degrees, unrealistic.

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But it is a real beginning. — Olaf Stapledon. Letter to Sister Mary James Power (1 October 1934); published in *The Wild God of the World: An Anthology of Robinson Jeffers* (2003), edited by Albert Gelpi, p. 189 - 190 Contexto: I think that one may contribute (ever so slightly) to the beauty of things by making one's own life and environment beautiful, as far as one's power reaches. This includes moral beauty, one of the qualities of humanity, though it seems not to appear elsewhere in the universe. But I would have each person realize that his contribution is not important, its success not really a matter for exultation nor its

William Olaf Stapledon (10 May 1886 – 6 September 1950) was a British philosopher and author of several influential works of science fiction. His best known, and what he considered as his best work, was *Star Maker* (1937), which included the first known description of a Dyson sphere. The Dyson sphere was later described by Freeman Dyson in the 1959 article "Search for Artificial Stellar Sources of Infra-Red Radiation" in *Science*, as one possible method of locating extraterrestrial intelligence.