

Enlightened Doomsaying and the Concern for the Future

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It has now at last become plain that the same spirit of Promethean humanism that gives our world its astonishing and unprecedented dynamism also imperils the future of human society itself. We are living today in the shadow cast by the prospect of catastrophes that, separately or in combination, threaten to bring about the disappearance of the human race from the earth. Our responsibility is all the more enormous as we are the sole cause of what will happen to us. And yet there is a danger that our sense of our own responsibility will increase, rather than diminish, the very arrogance that gave rise to it. Once we have persuaded ourselves that the salvation of the world is in our hands, that humanity owes it to itself to be its own savior, there is a risk we will throw ourselves with renewed energy into a headlong rush toward the abyss—that fatal impulse compounded of pride and panic, which with every passing day comes nearer to being the outstanding emblems of our age.

The German Jewish philosopher Günther Anders (1902-1992) was the most profound and the most daring of the thinkers who contemplated the great catastrophes of the twentieth century. He is less well known than two of his classmates at Marburg, his friend Hans Jonas and his future wife Hannah Arendt, no doubt a consequence of both his own stubbornness and the fragmented character of his writings. Anders abjured great systematic treatises in favor of topical investigations that not infrequently resorted to parable. More than once, for example, he recounted the biblical tale of the flood in a distinctive and original way. [[Noah, in his telling, had grown tired of being a prophet of doom, forever announcing a catastrophe that never came and that no one took seriously. One day,

he clothed himself in sackcloth and covered his head with ashes. Only a man who was mourning [the death of] a beloved child or his wife was allowed to do this. Clothed in the garb of truth, bearer of sorrow, he went back to the city, resolved to turn the curiosity, spitefulness, and superstition of its inhabitants to his advantage.

Soon he had gathered around him a small curious crowd, and questions began to be asked. He was asked if someone had died and who the dead person was. Noah replied to them that many had died, and then, to the great amusement of his listeners, said that they themselves were the dead of whom he spoke. When he was asked when this catastrophe had taken place, he replied to them: "Tomorrow." Profiting from their attention and confusion, Noah drew

himself up to his full height and said these words: "The day after tomorrow, the flood will be something that has been. And when the flood will have been, everything that is will never have existed. When the flood will have carried off everything that is, everything that will have been, it will be too late to remember, for there will no longer be anyone alive. And so there will no longer be any difference between the dead and those who mourn them. If I have come before you, it is in order to reverse time, to mourn tomorrow's dead today. The day after tomorrow it will be too late." With this he went back whence he had come, took off the sackcloth [that he wore], cleaned his face of the ashes that covered it, and went to his workshop. That evening a carpenter knocked on his door and said to him: "Let me help you build an ark, so that it may become false." Later a roofer joined them, saying: "It is raining over the mountains, let me help you, so that it may become false." ¹⁾

The tragedy that awaits anyone who dares to prophesy catastrophe is beautifully condensed in this magnificent parable, which nevertheless indicates to us the way out from an apparently paralyzing impasse.

The prophet of doom is not heard because his words, even if they issue from sound knowledge and true information, do not manage to penetrate the system of beliefs held by those to whom they are addressed. It is not enough to know in order to accept what one knows and then to act on it. This fundamental reality is foreign to the so-called precautionary principle, which maintains that we do not act in the face of catastrophe because we are not sure of knowing enough to act effectively. It is plain, however, that even when we know something with certainty, we may be incapable of believing what we know. The existence and dramatic consequences of global warming were known, and made known to the world, more than a quarter-century ago. But scientists were crying out in the wilderness. It is true that their predictions suffer from one great imprecision: nobody can exactly locate the average rise in global temperature, by the end of the twenty-first century, within a broad range of between two and six degrees Celsius (or about four and eleven degrees Fahrenheit). And yet it seems not to be generally understood that half of this uncertainty is the result of uncertainty about the type of action that will be taken to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions. Is it really because we do not know how we would react to a forecast of impending doom that we do not act? The suggestion is absurd. Moreover, there is this one thing of which we are quite certain: if China, India, and Brazil go on pursuing the course of development that we have given them as a model to be imitated, we will enter into a looking-glass world in which surprises (not only regarding the climate, but many other things as well) will be routine, in which the exception will be the rule and our capacity to act in and on the world will have become a power of destruction.

Searching for the reason why many European Jews refused until the very end, even on the railway

platform at Auschwitz-Birkenau, to believe in the reality of industrial extermination, Primo Levi quoted an old German adage: "Things whose existence is not morally possible cannot exist." Our ability not to see when faced with the obviousness of suffering and atrocities is the principal obstacle that the prophet of doom must at least find a way around, if he cannot actually overcome it. The precautionary principle is ritually invoked not only in support of the view that more must be known, and therefore more research carried out, before we can act; it is also accompanied by an appeal to our sense of ethical obligation. But ethics, if it is to be of any help to us, must prompt us to call into question an idea that is so commonly accepted it has already become a cliché, namely, that we are obliged to answer to future generations for our actions.

The recourse to the language of rights, duties, and responsibility in examining our moral relationship to future generations presents conceptual difficulties that Western philosophy has proved incapable for the most part of clearing up. A recent and eloquent example of this failure may be found in John Rawls's magnum opus, *A Theory of Justice*, imagined by its author and his admirers to have both summed up and superseded all previous works of modern moral and political philosophy. Having rigorously stated and established, at least to his own satisfaction, the principles of justice that must order the basic institutions of a democratic society, Rawls nevertheless cannot avoid concluding that these principles do not apply to questions of intergenerational justice. He is aware that this is a serious problem, but the remedy he proposes is vague and, at best, provisional.

The source of Rawls's difficulty is the irreversibility of time. A theory of justice based on contractual obligation embodies, by definition, the ideal of reciprocity. But there can be no reciprocity between generations, at least not after some rather brief interval, for whereas later generations inherit the works of those who have gone before, they are unable to give anything in return. But the trouble goes deeper than this. In the Western perspective of linear time, itself inseparable from eighteenth-century ideas of progress, it is assumed that future generations will be happier and wiser than previous generations. But Rawls's theory of justice, precisely because it formalizes a fundamental moral intuition, that priority should be given to the most disadvantaged members of society, leads to the paradox that the first in a line of generations is the worst off and yet its members are the only ones able to confer benefits on those who come after them.²⁾ Kant, who had already detected the problem in *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View* (1784), found it inconceivable (*rätselhaft*) that the course of human history could be imagined to resemble the construction of a home that only the last generation would have the privilege of inhabiting. And yet he was unable to free himself from the spell cast by the ruse of nature, or perhaps of history, by which prior generations are led to sacrifice themselves for later generations—the height of the very same instrumental conception of practical reason he rejected.

Our situation today is very different, for our main concern is how to avoid global catastrophe. Is this to say that we must substitute for the idea of human advancement one of decay and decline? Stating the matter in this way, as a choice between progress and decadence, has not the least interest. One can say the most opposite things about the age in which we live and they will be equally true—itself an exhilarating and frightening thing. We must keep two things in mind at once, the possibility of catastrophe and the possibly cosmic responsibility that falls to humanity of trying to avert this catastrophe. At the table where the parties to Rawls's social contract sit, all generations are equal according to him: the claims of no one generation have greater weight than those of others. But plainly generations are not equal from the moral point of view. Ours and the ones that will follow us have a considerably higher moral standing than previous generations, of whom it may be said today, by contrast with our present situation, that they did not know what they were doing. We are now witnessing the emergence of humanity as a quasi-subject, the dawning awareness that its destiny is self-destruction, and the birth of an absolute responsibility to avoid this self-destruction.

As for our own responsibility, it is not addressed to future generations—these anonymous beings whose existence is purely potential, and in whose happiness and welfare it will never be possible to believe that we shall have any reason at all to take a genuinely personal interest. To cast our responsibility in terms of a requirement to achieve distributive justice across generations lands us in a dead-end.³⁾

It is in relation to the fate of humanity that our duty must be conceived, which is to say in relation to ourselves, here and now. Thus Dante, in the tenth canto of the *Inferno*:

So you understand how our awareness
will die completely at the moment when
the portal of the future has been shut.⁴⁾

If the door to the future were to close, as a result of our own actions, the very meaning of human history would be forever destroyed, not only in prospect but in retrospect as well: "The day after tomorrow, the flood will be something that has been. And when the flood will have been, everything that is will never have existed."

Can we find the conceptual resources we need by looking outside the Western tradition? Amerindian wisdom literature has bequeathed to us this very fine saying: "The earth is loaned to us by our children."⁵⁾ It expresses a cyclical conception of time that seems strange to our way of thinking. And yet the maxim takes on even greater force in a linear perspective, I believe, once the necessary mental adjustment has been made. Notwithstanding that our children—that is, the

children of our children, and their children, and so on indefinitely—have neither physical nor legal existence, we are enjoined to reverse the flight of time’s arrow and imagine that it is they who bring us the earth—which is to say everything that we value. We do not own nature, we have only the usufruct of it. From whom have we received it? From the future! Anyone who objects, “But the future is not real—it does not yet exist!” will have done nothing more than draw our attention to the stumbling block that confronts every philosophy of future catastrophe: we fail to recognize, or do not recognize as we should, and as we must, the reality of the future.

Notice that the maxim is not content to reverse time; it reconfigures time into a loop. The maxim invites us to project ourselves into the future and to look back at the present from a point of view that we will ourselves have created, since we are the ones who make our children, biologically and, above all, morally. Through this act of imagination, by splitting time into two parts and then joining them together in the form of conscious experience, it may perhaps be possible to establish the reciprocity between present and future that is wanting. Whether or not the future has any need of us, we, for our part, need the future, for it is the future that gives meaning to everything that we do.

Noah’s purpose in Anders’s parable is to devise just such a reciprocity. In mourning deaths that have not yet occurred, it reverses time, or better it gives it the shape of a loop, and so, in effect, denies the future by transforming it into an eternal present. But the doomsayer’s misfortunes have not yet come to an end. Either his prophecy proves to be true, and yet we show him no gratitude for having given us warning (if we do not actually accuse him of being the cause of the calamity he has rightly foreseen); or his forecast goes unfulfilled, the predicted catastrophe does not take place, and afterward he is mocked and ridiculed for having struck the pose of a Cassandra. But it was Cassandra’s fate that her prophecies were never to be heeded. It seems not to have occurred to anyone that, if a catastrophe does not take place, it may be because warning was given beforehand and the warning was heeded. “The prophecy of doom is made to avert its coming,” Jonas observes, “and it would be the height of injustice later to deride the ‘alarmists’ because ‘it did not turn out [to be] so bad after all.’ To have been wrong may have been their merit.”⁶⁾

The paradox of doomsaying arises from the fact that the prospect of catastrophe can be made credible only if we can be persuaded first of its reality—of its existence as part of a fixed future. In this conception, the predicted sufferings and deaths will *inevitably* occur; they are the unmistakable marks of an implacable destiny. The present preserves the memory of them, as it were, as a result of the mind’s having projected itself into the time following the catastrophe, conceiving of the event in the future perfect tense: there exists a moment in the future that we may look forward to, and say of the prophesied catastrophe that at that moment it *will have taken place*; thus, for example, in Anders’s parable, the flood is something that will have been, the day after tomorrow. If we succeed too well in doing this, however, we risk losing sight of our purpose, which is to heighten public awareness and bring about concerted action so that the catastrophe *does not* occur: “Let me help

you build an ark, so that it may become false.”

The same paradox is at the heart of a classic figure of literature and philosophy, the killer judge, who “neutralizes” all those of whom it is written that they shall commit a crime—with the result that their crimes will not be committed.⁷⁾ Intuitively one feels that the paradox derives from the failure of the past prediction to be joined with the future event in a closed loop. But the very idea of such a loop makes no sense in our ordinary metaphysics, as the modal logic of prevention shows. Prevention consists in taking action to ensure that an unwanted action is relegated to the ontological realm of non-actualized possibilities. The catastrophe, even though it does not occur, retains the status of a possibility, not in the sense that it would still be possible for it to take place, but in the sense that it will forever remain true that it could have taken place. When one announces that a catastrophe is imminent, in order to avert it, this announcement does not possess the status of a prediction, in the strict sense of the term: one does not claim to say what the future will be, only what it would have been had preventive measures not been taken. There is no need for any loop to close here. The announced future does not have to coincide with the actual future, the forecast does not have to come true—for the announced “future” is not in fact the future at all, but a possible world that is, and will remain, non-actual.⁸⁾ The temporal logic of prevention makes sense to us because it corresponds to what might be called common-sense metaphysics, in which time assumes the form of a branching tree within which the actual path of events can be traced. Time is a *garden of forking paths*, to quote Jorge Luis Borges, the most metaphysical of poets and the most poetic of metaphysicians.

The metaphysics implicit in Günther Anders’s parable is obviously of another type. There time takes the form of a loop in which the past and the future reciprocally interact and determine each other. On this view, the future is no less fixed than the past: “When he was asked when this catastrophe had taken place, he replied to them: ‘Tomorrow’. . . . The day after tomorrow, the flood will be something that has been”. One of the consequences of likening the future to destiny or fate is that any event which belongs neither to the past nor the future is impossible. From this it follows that precaution cannot take the form of prevention. Prevention supposes that an undesirable event, once prevented, is a non-actualized possibility; in other words, an event must be possible in order for us to have a reason to act to prevent it; but if our reaction is effective, the event does not occur. Such a state of affairs is impossible in the time-world of the prophet of doom.

The paradoxical character of catastrophe under the interpretation that I am urging is highly paradoxical, but it resonates with patterns that are familiar to the western mind. The idea that a catastrophic event not only belongs to the future as something that is fated to happen, but at the same time is contingent and accidental, something that might not happen—even if, from the perspective of the future perfect, it appears to be necessary—is perfectly familiar to the man in the

street, the common man, as he used to be called. It is the metaphysical attitude of the naïve and the unclever, who find it altogether natural to suppose that if a memorable event occurs, for example, a personal tragedy, it was somehow bound to occur, while feeling at the same time that so long as it has not occurred, it is not inevitable. It is therefore the realization of the event—the fact that it actually occurs—that makes it necessary. Accordingly, the metaphysics that must serve as the basis for a precautionary doctrine adapted to an age of catastrophes requires us to project ourselves into the time that follows the dreaded event, and to see it in retrospect as an event that was both necessary and improbable. This is not indeed a new idea: when Oedipus kills his father at the fatal crossroads near Delphi; when Meursault, Camus’s “stranger,” kills the Arab under the blazing sun in Algiers—these events appear to the Western mind as both accidents and inevitabilities, in which chance and destiny coincide. The metaphysics of doomsaying is the very same metaphysics that informs our understanding of tragedy, this Greek invention that is still with us today.

Notes

- 1) Quoted in Thierry Simonelli, *Günther Anders: De la désuétude de l'homme* (Paris: Éditions du Jasmin, 2004), 84-85. The emphasis is mine. Simonelli very closely follows Anders’s German text, found in the first chapter of *Endzeit und Zeitenende* (Munich: Beck, 1972), a work that has not yet been translated into either French or English.
- 2) See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, § 44 (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 284-93.
- 3) One thinks in this connection of a well-known joke told by astronomers. Following a lecture someone in the audience asks, “How long did you say it would be before the sun burnt the Earth to a crisp?” On hearing the reply, “Six billion years,” the questioner sighs in relief: “Thank God for that, I thought you said six million.” The story is repeated by Sir Martin Rees, the Astronomer Royal of Great Britain (who also occupies Isaac Newton’s chair at Cambridge), in *Our Final Hour: A Scientist’s Warning: How Terror, Error, and Environmental Disaster Threaten Humankind’s Future in This Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 182.
- 4) Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*, 10:106-08, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 91.
- 5) I am very grateful to David Chavalarias for bringing this maxim to my attention.
- 6) Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, trans. Hans Jonas with David Herr (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 120.
- 7) One thinks here of Voltaire’s *Zadig* (1747). Philip K. Dick contrived a subtle variation on this theme in his 1956 short story “The Minority Report”; the 2002 film by Steven Spielberg that it inspired falls short of the standard set by Dick’s story, unfortunately.
- 8) Thus, for example, highway and road reports on the radio informing drivers about rush-hour traffic have the obvious but unacknowledged aim of discouraging them from taking the most congested routes.

