

The Climate Crisis and Moral Obligations – A Call to Global Action

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Chapter Five – Conclusion

As we now know, we are facing the end of civilization as we know it. This end will happen because of a massive reduction in the human population, either through our plans or through the consequences of the climate crisis. Human civilization cannot be saved and now what matters is preventing the worst consequences of our previous history of not taking the problem seriously enough. I have referred to the response to this as *Hospice for Humanity*. I have also used the phrase, *Philosophy at the End of Civilization*. Each phrase implies different details that I believe must be part of our thinking about and planning for this most dismal future.

The other day I was watching a NOVA show about comets and asteroids. In late 2012 a large asteroid was predicted to make a close approach of the Earth. Astronomers all over the world were watching and their predictions worked. That object just grazed the outer atmosphere. Ironically, at the very same time a different asteroid came from behind the sun and actually hit Russia. That object was described as the size of a small apartment building and it had the capacity to be massively destructive but luckily landed in a part of the world, and a part of Russia, that is not densely populated. These events happen all the time but usually with smaller objects. What worries astronomers are big asteroids that come by only rarely with great destructive force. The show talked to a former astronaut who founded a non-profit organization to fund satellite construction for the purposes of detecting these threats from space. This is a

very serious project and has profound implications. After all the dinosaurs died out as a result of a large asteroid. If we can detect them then perhaps we can move or destroy any that could be a similar threat. But that will take a lot of money and quite some time.

I tell you all of that in order to say this: I don't think that is a good use of resources. That much is not exactly controversial although people obviously disagree. What is perhaps more controversial is the reason. Space based telescopes are not an urgent need because we do not have enough time left as a technologically advanced society. We need to put resources into planning and mitigating climate catastrophes that we already know are coming.

That much is easy enough to say, but now I have to imagine a conversation with that very well-meaning astronaut. How do I tell him that this life's work he has chosen is a waste of precious resources? Just saying that is also easy, but it is not easy for people to hear. I can say it but will anyone listen? What I am at pains getting to here is that most of our life is oriented towards perpetuating the present. We project the present into the future in our imagination, and then dream up some changes we might like and then try to actualize a plan. What happens when the planning has to suddenly shift to a place where a similar future is not assumed? We assume the future will very much resemble the past. It is not entirely clear that it is even possible to live another way. Yet we have to. We have to find a way to talk about like that incorporates a plan for the end. Thus Hospice for Humanity, is one of the terms I have begun using.

We know that mortality itself is a difficult concept and it takes a couple of decades for most people to being to wrap their minds around the idea of their own death. In our social lives this problem is magnified many times over. We have experiences of people dying, of losing loved ones. Over time we can imagine that we will not always be alive, just as we recognize that we have not always been alive. That symmetry makes sense and can even be comforting. I

personally feel that way. I am not worried about the ages before I was born and similarly do not worry about me not being here for ages into the future after I die. Well, I worry about the people I know but if they were fine I would have nothing to worry about. We do not have experience of cultures dying. This happens in the world but not all the time. We can find historical records of collapses but we do not have accounts of what those people thought or what they did in moving (or dying out, but it is the moving on cases that are relevant to us here).

One contributor to a 2013 National Academy of Sciences report on Global Warming, Tony Barnosky, said: "If you think about gradual change, you can see where the road is and where you're going. With abrupt changes and effects, the road suddenly drops out from under you."¹ One day you are working on the farm and the next day you pack up belongings and leave. We know what it looks like for some people to force other people to do this, as in "Fiddler on the Roof." But I am here interested in cases where we all have to move, there is no one forcing us out other than our own realization that we must change somehow. I do not know how to live a life that does not involve the repetition of daily existence, in the manner I have always known.

Of course what we do to prepare does not and cannot happen overnight. We will have time to watch the tragedy unfold before us as we figure out that it is real and we have to act. Of course my point here is that this realization will come too late to save us, but it will come. As the facts on the ground become more and more undeniable people will slowly shift their thinking. How much time do you spend planning for retirement? I am presently 48 years-old. I expect that if all works out well I can live another forty years. When people my age prepare for retirement they are thinking about what does it mean to live in the world I know given that I will have to pay for food, housing and medical care somehow. All of that thinking assumes that the world we live in will be mostly the same. It will have, for example, the same system of property

¹ http://www.nap.edu/openbook.php?record_id=18373&page=1

that says this house is mine and that retirement account is yours. The plan assumes that what is called wealth will be relatively constant, that in saving US dollars I am saving something with value. On what is that assumption based? A great deal of continuity. What if what counted as a US dollar disappeared? We know what some versions of this look like from the fiscal disasters of the 1930's. In Germany it was suddenly the case that what counted as money was suddenly worthless. But the world as whole stayed constant and the systems of relations that rely on concepts like money continued on and Germany even recovered, after a long war.

That is the kind of crisis we know from historical memory. Having children because society would eventually recover and go on was a reasonable thought for most people even in the midst of war. One would hope that in the midst of war people chose to have fewer children. But those people could reasonably imagine an end of war and then recovery, even if they were not personally going to see it (as in Roberto Benigni's "Life is Beautiful"). This is not hard for us to imagine, even if it is horrific to imagine. But now having children is itself called into question. Life will be very difficult for humanity by the time I am an old man. What deeply worries me is how difficult the world will be when my youngest daughter is an old woman. I do not believe that her generation will die of natural causes. They will die as a result of the very unnatural choices of previous generations to not confront our cancerous nature. It is easy enough to see, but harder to admit that we have poisoned the planet. It is almost impossible for us to conceive civilization itself being destroyed due to these actions in the fairly distant past (relative to nature human life spans). In fact, in trying to discover what resources exist for planning a future that involves fewer people I discovered that every article I can find related to the topic does not actually include fewer people but merely a decline in the rate of increase. This seems to be the

grand policy goal that organizations working in the field think is possible. Thus far, I cannot find scholars writing on actual decreases in the population but there must be some out there.

This is astounding. There is a great deal said about decreasing the rate of increase of the population. That is a very lively topic and has been since the group Zero Population Growth coined the name. But that is not going to do the trick. We need an actual decrease in the population. This I insist is the moral conclusion from the climate crisis. We must, morally must, find a way to decrease the population in an intentional, democratic and ethical manner. This is what the world demands of us now.

There are two levels at which we might think about responses. The Hospice for Humanity Plan must include provision to decrease the global population. It also must include a radical change in the way we get and use energy. The two are, of course, interconnected. The more people there are the more energy they need to use and the more carbon is released into the atmosphere. We need fewer people as a solution to the problem as well as a moral response to the world changing. It is practical and ethically necessary. How would large social actors, like governments, go about this? I suggested vasectomies for every baby boy, in the Introduction. Were this to be required as a matter of law in every society we would easily solve the problem of human suffering caused by the climate catastrophe. As I said, this can be done in a way that is fair by virtue of being universal. It still leaves open future choices as individuals could, against all sound advice, decide to have the vasectomy reversed. This might not work in all cases, but that is just a natural lottery like fertility itself. Some are fertile and others not. Some reversals would be successful and some not. People might object that this is not fair to the poor, who could not afford the vasectomy, but that is hardly a moral claim. If someone does not have the resources to get an inexpensive medical procedure then they surely do not have the resources to

responsibly care for a child. I am not moved by any sense of unfairness that is raised by that objection because it is in fact depraved itself. That objection has the whole moral relationship between parent and child backward. Children are not a right but an obligation. No one has a natural right to have children, but children have a natural right to prepared and competent parents. Children have gotten virtually no respect as a class in human society and still do not, as evidenced by the fact that I had to anticipate this abjectly immoral objection to my suggesting that children are not a right.

Other people worry that we have to have more people to protect the standard of living of existing old people. But that is just another example of the depravity with which some/many people think about children. It is not within our rights as an existing generation to impose hardship on future generations for our own benefit. The actual moral thought in this direction is that existing generations have a profound obligation to future generations to make their lives as comfortable as we can. It may be true that a falling birth rate in Japan, for example, will lead eventually to a lower standard of living for old Japanese. But that is hardly obvious, regardless of how often it is repeated. Efficiency can more than accommodate the change, even if it cannot do not do so completely. Regardless, our existence is our problem and it is not ethical to foist it onto a future generation simply because we lack the imagination to solve our own problems. This is true regardless of how often people say the opposite without any reflection, moral or otherwise.

Immediately implied by all this is the need for a planned economy. It is curious, and deeply depressing, that both this issue and the population control one are so deeply buried ideologically. You and I talked about this in an earlier chapter and we noticed that some say it is more difficult to imagine the end of capitalism than our deaths. Even though this may be true we

still must. Capitalism is not capable of managing society in a way that benefits the majority, in general. It is obviously incapable of managing crises and especially global crises that threaten every form of stability upon which capitalism now rests. Our system of markets will fail in the face of chaos. This seems obvious but what I think we often do not consider is exactly how fragile capitalism is, especially now in its Late form of Finance or Imperial Capitalism. This financial form relies on global transportation and communication systems and these will be among the first large scale victims of the climate crisis. If we were rational about the problem we would immediately abandon air travel as a common means of transportation. Airplanes do not just use fossil fuels, they dump their pollution into the lower levels of the upper atmosphere. This gives them a couple decades head start in moving up into the upper atmosphere where they become part of the greenhouse effect. Keep in mind that the atmospheric sciences suggest that these greenhouse gases stay active and dangerous for fifty years after they are released. Air traffic is the most destructive form of transportation we have.

Electrical systems are themselves highly vulnerable to shocks to the planet. The sun itself can and has knocked out power and communications. This is because the Earth is itself an electrical system and depends on balancing charges between the upper atmosphere and the surface. When those natural relationships are out of whack electrical systems fail. That much is just ordinary problems. Now we layer on top of that the threat posed by large storms and we see just from recent experience that electricity is not something that can be assumed to always be reliable. These systems also rely on vast distribution networks that are physically vulnerable to storms, in that they can be knocked down or flooded. The more we pollute the larger and more dangerous tropical storms will be, including hurricanes and cyclones. The more dangerous those storms the more vulnerable our infrastructural systems. Our Hospice Plan has to include

managing and distributing electricity resources in a way that can reliably recover from destructive weather events. This will require new levels of planning and safety redundancy.

What is most difficult to consider and to plan for is that decreasing population. If the decrease is accomplished via some planned mechanism then planners can work out social needs and plan to match resources, productive capacity and need. What makes this complicated is that we have to move away from a world of global trade to one in which every locale is much, much more self-sufficient. Global trade has been a reality since the 1500's, in small ways at first. We have "always" had international trade, in terms that matter to you and me. It is a constant part of the world we know as well as the one our grandparents knew. To move away from global trade is to introduce a change to the global economy that it has never known, in its current form.

Capitalism has always relied on international trade, but now we have to find a way to do without that. Somehow. We cannot manufacture our cell phones in a nationally based way as the rare metals used in their computers come from around the world. All of our sophisticated computer technology, and battery technology relies on metals extract from places that will themselves become unstable (as in bauxite mines in central India), let alone unavailable to the rest of the world because our freight ships will eventually not be able to use existing ports. The climate crisis will cause some well-established problems like sea rise and the loss of ports but it will also include unimagined problems at the human level (who mines the stuff?) that come from a loss of crops and increased disease.

Every study done on reproduction (at least that I have ever hear of) has found that people naturally have fewer children as the society develops. We have to use that sort of information in making a Hospice plan. This is another reason that we must move away from a market economy. We have to find ways to encourage development and migration to areas that will be

more stable. We have to create social stability in addition to finding places where some ecological stability might exist. But social stability is key. This will require a very different sort of economy than we have ever had. It will be a crisis economy that demands people come together to cooperate and find large scale solutions to the coming problems. This newly empowered democratic culture must create and follow a plan to provide for people, provide family planning resources, and it must plan for its own end rather than its growth.

I feel that I need to take another run here at this population issue. The idea that we have to keep the population growing is, of course, a matter of dogma for the most powerful of our organized religions. Both Islam (in all major forms) and Catholicism (and some Protestants) view having children as a divine obligation, and seem to be almost completely unconcerned with the actual lives of those children. This is a long standing critique of anti-abortion thinking – it ignores real life for the fantasy of some beginning. What ethics demands of these religious institutions is that they rethink what they take to be Dogma. Religious dogma is supposed to be unchanging but that is not just unproductive but ignorant. The world is now changing in ways that previous generations could never have imagined. Thus they never gave any thought to the sorts of problems we now face. We cannot rely exclusively on intellectual resources, no matter how valuable, from the past because the core assumptions driving the awareness of real needs is radically different now. It is the radical change that makes this problem so difficult, precisely because we had not previously imagined such things.

The work ahead will be very hard additionally because we have to confront the fact that many people work in jobs or industries that are either focused on reproduction, have no real utility in a planned economy, or they assume population growth (or at least a steady state). How many medical professionals work in fertility? That is an entirely senseless use of resources.

Someone has to tell those people that and they are not going to want to hear this. How many people work in marketing or public relations? The vast majority of these jobs are entirely useless and we will have to get rid of those professions, with some exceptions as a democratic society still needs to find better ways to communicate internally and this can be a public relations sort of exercise. How many people work in sales? The vast majority of these jobs will be completely unnecessary in a planned economy. People will need to sell things but that will become exclusively about information and the transaction itself, not about selling people things they do not need or want. We also have tremendous redundancy in many sorts of occupations because of our market based economy. This detail is widely discussed with regard to health care as it is so obvious to most that a single-payer system has no need for multiple insurance companies and all their staff (from the CEO on down). This will be true for a planned economy in many ways. Our tax system would be radically simplified eliminating the need for tax accountants. Not having corporate buy outs would eliminate vast numbers of functionally useless finance professionals and all their staff. But a planned economy has the benefit of being able to plan what to do with those people and can match talents with needs. Obviously there is great need for educational changes such that our colleges and universities would switch from teaching “capitalism” and “business” to teaching real economics and management planning. We would also need a profound change in the whole character of our existing educational systems away from training drones to work in factories to sovereign citizens who need to collectively manage their society.

The Hospice Plan for Humanity must, then, include the transition to a planned economy, a much more democratic structure to all of our politics, and the introduction of wide-spread birth control mechanisms. Do you think that is possible? No, neither do I! What then do we do, as

individuals? I think we need to start by talking about this, and this is what I do. It is vitally important to have a social conversation about what it means to transition from an accidental sort of life to one that has a plan. Individually the answer comes from the existentialists and Albert Camus in particular – Rebel against the absurdity of it!

The point here is that social problems require social solutions. It simply will not do to try to manage on your own. Sure, you can become a survivalist but what does that really get you? You can build a bomb-shelter and live in for a few months, fending off angry and jealous neighbors, if there are any left. Does that really help anyone, including you? No, not really. What sort of life is that? Mere survival is not our goal, and never should be. Humans are more complicated than that and survival itself is not relevant if life has no social context. Anything I suggest that has individual relevance must be understood as a very sad compromise that is undertaken only because the social has failed.

Our societies will one day recognize the problem and start to respond. At some point this will involve the necessity of a planned economy as well. I am saying through this book that I think it will be too late by the time that happens. This is the hardest thing to admit to ourselves, let alone admit and act. Yet we must. We must respond socially, but until that happens we rebel individually. That is the individual level of the response.

What does this rebellion look like? Individually it is your own rebellion and no one can determine its course for you. That is the universal element of the existential situation that Camus discussed. We live alone as individual consciousnesses confronting a world that refuses to cooperate with our desires. Yet we all do this together. We are existentially alone, but alone with everyone else in the same situation. In Sartre's language this is about essence. Human

beings do not have a predefined essence and so we must determine it for ourselves, individually but in a social environment.

What does my rebellion look like? It looks like this book. Writing this book is an exercise in absurdity. Why write a book advocating confronting a dire future that I am convinced most people will not face? That is absurd! Why write a book suggesting massive fertility control on a level never even contemplated when I know people will ignore me? That is absurd too! What else can I do? What else can you do? You can share this book and its ideas with people you know. In my experience a lot of people will not want to talk to you, but you will probably be surprised at how many people do want to talk and do share our concerns (assuming by now that you do share my concerns). They are out there and are very worried, as we all should be.

This is a problem that comes slowly and in surprises. We do not know when things will get really difficult for people or what form that will take. Will Europe warm or freeze? It seems likely that Europe will enter a mini-ice age as a result of this climate catastrophe. Some place will see heat waves and unrelenting droughts. Others will flood with a depth of water and power we have not known since the great floods of ancient literature, flood events that boggle the imagination. Heat and cold, drought and flood. How does one prepare? This is the problem. The future seems too chaotic to plan for any specific outcome. We simply have to get ready for trouble.

Individually you simply must find or build a community, and ideally networks of communities. We will need each other more profoundly than we have in many generations. You must find people who can be that community to you and you to them. This community might be religious, and that is a natural place to start for many. It might be your neighborhood. The

communities that will be most relevant to us will be those that are most local. That needs to be your focus. But there may also be natural communities that come from work, and those people you spend so much time with. We are all in the same boats together and the great task of community building is to identify all the various boats (communities) that relate to your life. Find those like-minded people and talk with them. You will need to build systems of mutual support that can come to the aid of individuals as crises build.

As part of a larger Hospice Plan you will want to specifically build resources into these communities that can respond to basic needs. Where does your electricity come from? How much of that can be moved from a distant source to a local source? How many buildings in your neighborhood have solar power or some sort? How many can? How do you get that done? Where does your food come from? How can you get closer to those sources? Small farmers and networks of farmers are cropping up that connect people in cities with farmers in a way that the two entities build a lasting relationship. In the most involved versions of these schemes the neighborhood helps with the costs of planting and then gets first choice of the crops. This cuts down on capital needs for farmers and frees them to be more creative about responding to local needs and wants.

How much of what you use every day comes to you via ship? You will have to learn to do without. What I think might make this hit home for a lot of people is this: there will come a day when you can no longer get coffee beans outside the regions where they grow. When international commerce by shipping is disrupted by a loss of ports and difficult seas we won't have that morning coffee. Are you prepared for a world in which you don't have coffee? Now this is an almost trivial example in terms of literal human needs. But I think it provides a stark example of how profoundly things will change. I would bet that you have a hard time thinking

about a world in which your coffee has disappeared, never to return. How much else will you have to learn to do without?

Sartre had another useful concept here – facticity. By that he meant those aspects of life that cannot be changed. He called Bad Faith those efforts to hide from this and pretend that something cannot change when it can. For the existentialists this was the vital issue: identify that which can change and confront it. What is my actual desire in this situation and what do I accept that need not be accepted. But our challenge is slightly different. The Hospice Plan demands that we identify that which cannot change because we need to attend to those aspects of life. I need food but do not need coffee. I need water but do not need wine. In Europe there are still a great variety of hot beverages made from locally sources ingredients (those things coffee and tea replaced). Where I live one can make wine but the point is that is not universally the case and we need to rediscover the cultural resources for living closer to our immediate context. I love close to an ocean but do not like fish. Perhaps I need to learn to like fish as they are likely to be available to me on a small scale into the future. Sugar is something that comes from the tropics, but did not always. We will want to rediscover sugar beets when shipping fails to bring sugar to our shores. There is a great deal people who farm or fish or otherwise work with natural resources know about how to life with what we have around us. People did that for most of our history, it is just that we happen to live in a time when we have gotten used to the benefits of a globally interconnected world. We forgot the old ways, but our Hospice Plan demands that we find them anew. Farming is, after all, about facticity. Farmers know what is real because they live it. We all used to but got away from that intimate relationship with nature that sustained our ancestors. We made great progress with big cities and fancy cars, but all of that will go away

one day, and much sooner than anyone thought a century ago. As they go away we have to be ready to replace what was left to the degree it was actually necessary.

In the end I do not have a Hospice Plan to offer you. I only have the sense that it is time to get to it and relevant experts need to be found and encouraged who can help all of us prepare. And do not forget the one thing everyone can do is not reproduce. It is easy enough to not raise children; it is very hard to watch them die – so don't have any. If there is anything that you take away from reading this little missive of mine it should be that. There are too many people on the planet and we have to ethically reduce our numbers dramatically. The only approach I have ever encountered that can be ethically defended is fertility control. Limiting fertility does not hurt us. It may be that our natural desires to reproduce are frustrated but living does not require children. A future generation requires that there be children to become that future but we do not have a future any longer. It is senseless to try to populate a planet that is not hospitable to human life, as ours is becoming. Reason and ethics demand that the population be radically reduced.

We cannot let billions of people die from disease, exposure and starvation simply because we lack the moral courage to confront the destruction humanity has wrought.