

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

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Chapter One: Introduction

I would like to have a difficult conversation with you about the climate crisis and what it means to us as human beings. This, being text, the back and forth that is a normal part of a conversation is not possible. I will try to anticipate some questions and comments you might have as I go along to add to the discussion. To help with the feel of the back and forth I will use footnotes for further comments and not just references. This may not be typical for the books you read but I hope you can forgive me for the limitations of the book form. I am an academic by profession and a philosopher and theologian by training. I am not a climate scientist; my expertise is Social Philosophy, broadly speaking and Religion in particular (although I am not myself a believer). At this point I am not interested in the arguments of anthropocentric climate change deniers as the scientists themselves have concluded those arguments have no merit. That is what the big reports by large groups of experts mean – I take that issue as settled (humans have caused global warming) and now the hard questions start (what to do) or not, if we fail to ask them. What I will discuss with you involves what to do, but my specialty is in asking: What does it mean? As a social philosopher, I am interested in what it means to be human and to face what all reasonable people regard as imminent catastrophic climate change.¹ What does it mean

¹ I am tempted here to abuse a line from Douglas Adams: “Holding this view is a mark of being a reasonable person.” That is a bit circular, but humorous. More seriously, I will make extensive use of footnotes even though I am writing this book with a non-academic audience in mind. I would like to include details that are relevant and interesting (I hope) to academic specialists – primarily fellow philosophers – as well as technical details that ought to be included but might be tedious in the main text. I expect these notes to be longer than people are used to in a non-academically oriented book, but these are important details and in putting them in front of the reader I want to encourage you to read these too; but they are footnotes so that they can be glossed over if one is not interested in the

to us, to human beings living in the place in time we are where we know certain things? It means massive death and suffering and this calls for the deepest consideration, calls for an ethical response. I hope you will bear with me as this is obviously not an easy topic, but it is a necessary topic.

I want to have this conversation with you because I think humanity has a big problem and is not equipped to handle it. After this introduction I will review three categories of reasons why the most reasonable conclusion is that the battle to save civilization has been lost already due to the consequences of the climate crisis or what many call global warming.² This is difficult to admit but I think it must be admitted, morally. Ethics is not the first topic that comes to mind when we hear “global warming” or “climate change.” As humans, I think, it must come to mind. What also comes to mind, perhaps without the same sense of “must” is an existential response. What are we going to make of ourselves? Will that be morally defensible or morally monstrous?³ For a quick overview of how bad it is and what was predicted as of a few years ago see: *Hell and High Water* by Joseph Romm.⁴ This book is an ideal example for my point because it is about eight years old (as I write) and the details are out of date. It is an example of worst case becoming best case in just the time since it was published. One graphic example that comes from this sort of analysis is the very good possibility that the bottom 100 miles of Florida

deeper, more scholarly level of the philosophical details (which admittedly can themselves be tedious to non-philosophers).

² This does not mean that we give up! I will explain why more is called for than what others have called for, certainly not less.

³ I think it is prudent to take what is now called "worst case" as likely. I argue this is prudent behavior because in the last decade it has become clear that what was called worst case a few years ago becomes "the conservative estimate" over time. The science seems to be saying that as bad as they think things are now, in a couple years we will discover that even that was overly optimistic. I am not aware of any long term estimate of climate consequences that has become less dire with more knowledge, it is always more (even though short term things are more in flux regionally). Since we don't know for sure what is really likely and the estimates keep getting worse (from the experts) then it makes sense to assume their current worst case – which is a culling of the human population by 90% and the total collapse of civilization worldwide. This is the most prudent assumption, so I start there and then ask: “What are the moral demands that follow from that expectation?”

⁴ Romm, Joseph, *Hell and High Water: Global Warming – The Solution and The Politics – and What We Should Do*, New York: William Morrow, 2006.

will be underwater in less than four decades from now. How many people are planning to leave South Florida (e.g. Miami) in the next few decades because the city will be underwater? None I can find. But stop and ponder that for a second. Miami will be underwater in less than forty years. I do not know how to think about that, and this is the most basic expression of the problem that leads me say we must assume the worst starting now.

I will persist with this first person narrative, as if I am writing specifically to you even though I probably do not know you. I also hope that this format will encourage you to think critically about what I am saying. This is how philosophers normally interact with each other when discussing ideas. Philosophers can be very critical, even biting with each other and while I am not interesting in encouraging that behavior more generally it represents an attitude towards truth that is worth encouraging – a critical attitude. You should not believe anything I tell you simply because I told you. I will source claims that need a source, and other times I will try to follow logical implications. Not everything I say will be correct, as that seems impossible if one says anything complex. Language is always partial. You have to come to your own conclusions, and you also need to decide how best to act. I will have suggestions along with an analysis, but I cannot force anyone to do anything. I can only suggest and try to persuade people, like you, that particular actions are necessary, morally necessary.

The ancient prophetic figure Zoroaster is widely believed to have said, “The central problem of human life is discerning truth from falsehood.”⁵ It is easy enough to see this as a mystical statement but its application is much more ordinary. One example from the modern world is homosexuality. The truth, as far as anyone can tell, is that homosexuality is a

⁵ Zoroaster was the founder of Zoroastrianism, the world’s first monotheistic religion. He died, people think, in 583 BCE. This idea is found over and over again in religious thought, and motivates mystery cults as well as rational exploration. The most famous version of this idea comes from Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” in Book Seven of *The Republic*. The most famous version among my students is “The Matrix” movies. It is an old and widely circulated idea.

genetically driven trait and effectively amounts to just another way that humans are human. But in the past (and sadly not just the past) people believed that homosexuality was a sin, at first an ordinary sin and then a mortal sin. People came later to see that since it was not actually a choice that maybe it was a disease. This view persisted for some time but eventually gave way to rational science. Was homosexuality ever a sin? No, that is a mistaken understanding of reality reflected in some religious texts. Some religious texts suggest that people's hearts must be removed and offered up to the god lest the sun stop moving. Not everything in a religious text is true. Often the moral impulse in scripture is a good one but it can get off the track when the reader confuses current prejudice for actual knowledge.

In the case of global warming it is difficult to discern the truth for related reasons. Anything that challenges a person's sense of knowing and fitting in the world is a kind of threat and will be resisted. Some see homosexuality as such a challenge, for reasons that I think have more to do with social control (that they have fallen for) than actual deeply held religious beliefs.⁶ In fact it seems pretty clear that the most boisterous people worrying about homosexuality are people who are homosexual but unable to admit it. The culture even treats this as a cliché now ("latent"). With global warming the challenges are real and so at that level it is understandable that people resist the disturbing truths even as they are becoming too obvious to ignore. What Zoroaster may have missed, but Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx and Sigmund

⁶ In a very important sense anti-homosexual beliefs are idolatry and are more pernicious than most forms of idolatry. Idolatry cannot, by definition, be respectable in any sense, regardless of how deeply held the belief might be. Blind bigotry regardless of its source is not rational and therefore never respectable. Plus, as many have pointed out, if they were serious about their devotion to the text we would have to stone them to death for wearing cotton/poly blend fabrics, and they don't even talk about that. Such claims are obviously just a rationalization for immoral prejudices.

Freud noticed is that this discerning of truth is complicated by social forces that want people to believe certain things and do certain things that may have nothing to do with their own interests.⁷

More difficult than that is that natural human impulses, even properly informed, do not always lead to the best outcomes. This is what the Hospice movement has noticed and tried to communicate. There are times when death must be faced directly and decisions be made about how to proceed. In this case it is a problem civilization as a whole has, and while I will have more detailed thoughts further on I want to visit this idea briefly here now. David Suzuki, who is a prominent Canadian science educator, said: “To those who say it is too late, thank you for the warning, but now shut up and go away. Even if it is true we are going to fight to the end anyway!”⁸ He had earlier quoted Sir Martin Reese, the Royal Astronomer of the United Kingdom, from a BBC interview in which Reese was asked the likelihood that humans will survive the century, and Reese said, “50/50.” Suzuki also mentioned that Dr. James Lovelock, the scientist who coined the term Gaia Hypothesis, has written that, “by the end of the century 90% of humanity will be gone.”⁹

Let us think about that for just a moment. As of early 2013 the global population was 7,000,000,000 (seven billion and counting). If I just assume that number as the baseline for Lovelock’s estimate then he is saying that 6.3 billion people will be culled from the human population by the consequences of global warming in the next several decades. Reese seems to be saying that there is only a 50% chance that even 10% will survive. What does it mean for the population of the world to go from seven billion to a less than two in a less than a few decades?

⁷ Each of them has a different analysis of how society controls people in illegitimate ways. The specifics of their views do contradict but viewed more generally it is easy enough to see that all three made a really good point.

⁸ This and the next three quoted from the radio show “Alternative Radio,” broadcast the week of April 15, 2013.

⁹ See also: <http://reason.com/archives/2008/07/18/will-humanity-survive-the-21st> and http://jgmatheny.org/matheny_extinction_risk.htm for detailed but dated analyses (that they are old means the news is even more disturbing because the trends used in their models are mostly worse now than assumed).

It means horror and suffering on a scale that makes the Black Death of the Middle Ages look like a celebration of life! What fight does Suzuki have in mind? It is this question that philosophy, perhaps more so than any other discipline, can answer.

The fight that matters is to limit suffering! That must be our fight. I worry that Suzuki is too committed to the delusion that civilization can be saved. Sustainability is not possible – this must be admitted – none-the-less it is a goal all people ought to pursue to lessen the death toll not because it will save civilization. Our civilization cannot continue on in anything like our status quo. The planet has or is passing relevant tipping points that will cause catastrophe – this is my basic starting point as outlined above and seems to me the only morally defensible starting point. If 6.3 billion people (6,300,000,000) are set to die horrible deaths then people everywhere must radically rethink their approach to daily life. Humanity needs a *Hospice Plan for Civilization* to manage those 6.3 billion deaths. To fight any other fight, to not admit the reality of death, is to choose a most destructive and miserable delusion over reality. What does the world look like after 90% of the people around us today are suddenly and horribly removed? It is not responsible or moral to live in the delusion that our civilization can be made sustainable any longer. That game is over.

In 2009 The History Channel (a subsidiary of ABC) produced a documentary of an imagined future. The show was called “Earth 2100” and it serves as a useful visual model of the ideas that motivated my thinking. In the end the video is actually overly optimistic, but that is my point. It is very hard to confront these ideas and accept the obvious conclusions. After laying out a good deal of information on just how bleak the situation looked in 2009 (which by the way is still much better than things look now), the show asked columnist Thomas Friedman what he thought. His response, like, Dr. Suzuki, is to fight.

You know if you woke me up at two in the morning, injected me with truth serum and said, “Do we really have a chance, here, to change anything?” I would probably have to tell you the truth that it’s a long shot. I admit that. But, you know, as my head would clear from the truth serum and I looked up and saw the picture of my two daughters up there, I’d say, “Sorry, we may be cooked, we may be completely fried, but as long as I’ve got kids I’m going to keep at this until the last dog dies.”¹⁰

Does he have the right fight in mind?

Back in the early 1990’s an anthropologist and physician named Warren Hern published a paper titled, “Is Human Culture Carcinogenic for Uncontrolled Population Growth and Ecological Destruction?”¹¹ His conclusion was affirmative (but dire) in that he determined that we are a, “malignant epiecopathological process”.¹² His *diagnosis* is that the human species is a cancer (that is what “malignant process” means in ordinary English).¹³ There are some points to note about this that might confuse lay people. In modern medicine a diagnosis of a disease is the formal recognition of a process within an organic being that has a defined (perhaps not completely understood) behavior and outcome. Cancer is diagnosed by the situation meeting a few specific criteria. These are mostly to do with spreading out and making everything look like the cancer. Specifically cancer is: “rapid, uncontrolled growth; invasion and destruction of adjacent tissues (ecosystems, in this case); metastasis (colonization and urbanization, in this case); and dedifferentiation (less of distinctiveness in individual components).”¹⁴ To diagnose

¹⁰ The video can be found at (part one of nine) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bjmWivCTcvE>

¹¹ Hern, Warren, *Bioscience*, Dec. 1993: 43.11. I feel that it is important to note here that I met Warren Hern, MD, PhD in 1997 when I interviewed him for an hour long radio program on KGNU in Boulder, CO. Dr. Hern is the most principled and bravest individual I have ever met! He lives the difficult implications of the things he says, and does so facing death threats, assaults and regular intimidation in a practice done behind bomb-proof glass. He is an inspiration to our generation and beyond.

¹² Hern, 768.

¹³ During my interview with Dr. Hern he stressed that the word “diagnosis” is vital here. It is not an analogy that he is using but he literally means that human beings are, per the modern definition, a cancer. He means this as seriously as any Oncologist would talking about a human patient. The patient is simply larger in this case.

¹⁴ Hern, 768.

cancer the situation does not have to meet all four criteria, only two, but — ominously — we meet all four.

What I think matters more to my point here is this changing estimation of humanity's prospects. Scientists working across the globe have reached a consensus that human activity is causing climate change in a warming direction. But the vital point is that detailed projections have been made over the years, and what those projections show is that the predictions that sounded outrageously pessimistic in 2003 where by 2008 being offered as optimistic projections; and by 2013 what was pessimistic in 2008 is now a blissful fantasy. For even great detail I would refer you, Dear Reader, to The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the US Global Climate Change Research Program and their reports, these are available on the web. I would quickly add that my point is that these documents are very consciously trying not to seem too alarmist. Yet, if you read through them it is clear that the combined consequences of what is described (and the reports compartmentalize findings so the reader has to do that work) are fatal.

In remarks to Congress twenty years after he first testified about the dangers of global warming, James Hansen said the follow:

Now, as then, frank assessment of scientific data yields conclusions that are shocking to the body politic. Now, as then, I can assert that these conclusions have a certainty exceeding 99%. The difference is that now we have used up all slack in the schedule for actions needed to defuse the global warming time bomb....

...the safe level of atmospheric carbon dioxide is no more than 350 ppm....

Such phenomenon, including the instability of Arctic sea ice and the great ice sheets at today's carbon dioxide amount [385 ppm], show that we have already gone too far. We must draw down atmospheric carbon dioxide to preserve the planet we know.¹⁵

¹⁵ James Hansen, "Global Warming Twenty Years Later: Tipping Points Near," June 23, 2008. See: www.columbia.edu/~jeh1/2008/TippingPointsNear_20080623.pdf

That was 2008! Just to remind you: in May 2013 we past 400ppm. It appears, then, that Hern may be right, and in the most dramatic of ways. Philosophically there are issues with his presentation (e.g. if our population was spiking but we did not depend on oil for energy would we be malignant?) but that is a small point. Regardless though, his conclusions seem sound, as it happens, but not in some larger teleological sense that some might read into his language.¹⁶ I, and some others, have become convinced that we have past the most important of “tipping points” and the end of civilization is coming.¹⁷ This detail means that the point is not how to survive, but now it is how to die – “how to bring the plane down” in current parlance. The documentary quoting Friedman above is a good example. It ends on a positive note but it is quite clear there is no basis for that optimism in the predictions they reviewed. We cannot save civilization at this point and it is now only a matter of time and the open question is that of how much suffering.

In a 2010 interview a university researcher, Jon Foley of Minnesota, told *Scientific American*:

W[hat] we are finding though is that if we get to warming that is more than; right now, we warmed about, maybe six-tenths of a degree centigrade, about [one] degree Fahrenheit warmer than we would have been. Well, that is not that much; we are beginning to see the effects where we get to be 2 or 3 degrees warmer than we have been for the last 10,000 years. That is where we started to worry about irreversible damage.¹⁸

Just to make this more obvious, in mid-February 2012, Agence France-Press reported: “French scientists unveiling new estimates for global warming said on Thursday the 2C (3.6F) goal

¹⁶ “Teleological” means that it was designed with a specific end in mind. We were not designed to have that end; we were not designed to be cancer. We became cancer. Hern does not argue that this was a necessary development only that it is happening. However, in a later chapter I will explore an even more disturbing argument that though we were not designed to be cancer that end has always been with us.

¹⁷ For example: Haydn Washington and John Cook, *Climate Change Denial: Heads in the Sand*, London: Earthscan, 2011; and Clive Hamilton, *Requiem for a Species: Why We Resist the Truth About Climate Change*, London: Earthscan, 2010.

¹⁸ <http://www.scientificamerican.com/podcast/episode.cfm?id=are-we-pushing-the-earths-environme-10-03-19>

enshrined by the United Nations was ‘the most optimistic’ scenario left for greenhouse-gas emissions.”¹⁹ A 2C (two degrees Centigrade) increase is what most scientists had previously described as the disaster scenario. Now we are told this is actually very optimistic! Think about that for just a moment. In 2011 Agence-France Press reported:

Up to now, these and other impacts have been studied mainly in isolation. Only recently have scientists begun to understand how these forces interact.

"We have underestimated the overall risks, and that the whole of marine degradation is greater than the sum of its parts," [Alex] Rogers [of Oxford] said. "That degradation is now happening at a faster rate than predicted."

Indeed, the pace of change is tracking or has surpassed the worst-case scenarios laid out by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in its landmark 2007 report, according to the new assessment. The chain reaction leading to increased acidification of the oceans begins with a massive influx of carbon into Earth's climate system.²⁰

Also in 2011, MSNBC reported on new findings from the IPCC, NOAA, NASA and others looking at permafrost melting in the arctic.

The team predicted that by the mid-2020s the level of permafrost carbon emissions will mean that the Arctic will switch from being an overall "sink" that traps carbon to a "source." Moreover, the experts wrote, that "source" impact "is strong enough to cancel 42–88 percent of the total global land sink" absorbing carbon.²¹

The point here is that permafrost contains significant sources of both carbon dioxide and methane (which is much worse than carbon dioxide, in terms of its power to trap heat). That permafrost is melting and so those gases are being released into the atmosphere faster and faster. This report is saying that by 2029 the permafrost will itself have become a significant source of additional carbon, thus speeding up other global warming processes. These are called feedback loops, where one problem feeds into and makes worse other problems. We cannot see the destruction we have caused in front of us and so it is easy to put it off, but we have a good sense

¹⁹ www.physorg.com/news/2012-02-2c-goal-optimistic-french.html

²⁰ <http://www.commondreams.org/headline/2011/06/20-8>

²¹ http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/41625347/ns/us_news-environment/t/permafrost-name-only-thaw-adds-warming/

of what those numbers mean. We cannot see it yet but we know it is coming – still we do not act. I will discuss why this is very human (that is my central point, as well as the core explanation for why we are in this trouble) and I will argue that acknowledging the reality of all this demands a dramatic moral response from us.

In a prescient article years ago the British journalist George Monbiot wrote, “With a small, rational part of our brain, we recognize that our existence is governed by material realities, and that, as those realities change, so will our lives.”²² In that article he argues that human beings live mostly in a sort of dream world instead of the world that reason would reflect. As such we can very easily put ugly realities out of mind. To survive we would have to change the world, our social world. “This requires draconian regulation, rationing and prohibition: all the measures which our existing politics, informed by our dreaming, forbid.”

Clearly all people have to fight climate change, but as I have said I think that approach is partial. A short analogy might help here. Imagine a single father (mom died in an accident two years ago) with a four year-old special needs daughter. Dad goes to the doctor and discovers that those odd pains he was feeling are cancer of the pancreas. He is told he has two years to live. One possibility is that he could work very hard at fighting the cancer and making himself well and beat the odds. However, it would be grievously irresponsible of that father not to prepare simultaneously for his predicted demise (for the sake of his child). I am saying it is now time for us to talk about what it means to prepare for our civilization’s predicted demise. I have called this: “Philosophy at the end of civilization,” but the point is the plan we need is a “Hospice for Civilization Plan.”²³

²² www.monbiot.com/archives/2003/08/12/sleepwalking-to-extinction/

²³ Perhaps this plan should seem more complex but basically it is reduce suffering by reducing population, radically.

Some will object that this view does not leave sufficient room open for human creativity and technological innovation. One could say that, but that claim is deeply irrational, and contradicted by daily experience. As I type this section there are political primaries occurring and the most relevant statement on this issue is that most if not all of the politicians in the race believe, or claim to believe, that anthropogenic climate change is a hoax. More recently someone got a hold of documents from something called The Heartland Institute (of Chicago, there are a few with very similar names), which apparently exists solely to confuse people about climate change. For example:

Internal documents obtained surreptitiously from the Heartland Institute, a libertarian think tank in Chicago, have been made public. Heartland pushes for deregulation and is especially known for its opposition to scientists who have concluded human activity is causing global warming. The documents appear to show large donations from the liquor and tobacco industries, the General Motors Foundation and an anonymous donor who contributed \$14 million.²⁴

From one of those leaked documents:

Development of our "Global Warming Curriculum for K-12 Classrooms" project

Principals and teachers are heavily biased toward the alarmist perspective. To counter this we are considering launching an effort to develop alternative materials for K-12 classrooms. We are pursuing a proposal from Dr. David Wojick to produce a global warming curriculum for K-12 schools. Dr. Wojick is a consultant with the Office of Scientific and Technical Information at the U.S. Department of Energy in the area of information and communication science. His effort will focus on providing curriculum that shows that the topic of climate change is controversial and uncertain - two key points that are effective at dissuading teachers from teaching science. We tentatively plan to pay Dr. Wojick \$100,000 for 20 modules in 2012, with funding pledged by the Anonymous Donor.²⁵

By the way, this Dr. Wojick is an “epistemologist” (Epistemology is the study of knowledge in Philosophy), not a climate scientist. His expertise apparently is doubt, which is cheap and easy

²⁴ http://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2012/02/18/Heartland-Institute-documents-published/UPI-57751329549148/?spt=hs&or=tn. The Heartland Foundation maintains some of these documents were forged.

²⁵ <http://www.desmogblog.com/sites/beta.desmogblog.com/files/2012%20Climate%20Strategy%20%283%29.pdf>

(the Greeks knew this 2,500 years ago).²⁶ So apparently this organization takes in tens of millions of dollars from people who do not want any action taken on climate change, and they are very maliciously indoctrinating school teachers and children to disregard real science. They pay people like Wojcik very large sums of money to justify their lies for them.

In 2006 James Hansen told a conference audience that he had become aware that official “policy” at NOAA (the government’s leading scientific research body) is that increased hurricane strength in the Atlantic is due to periodic warming of the Atlantic and not global warming. Hansen, it should be noted, works for NASA. NOAA adopted this as policy rather than more responsibly adopt a scientific conclusion. Hansen refers to this “policy” as “irrational.”²⁷ He also goes on to note that scientists at NOAA understand that this “policy” is irrational, and they have been forbidden from saying so. He said, “A NOAA scientist cannot speak with a reporter unless there is a ‘listener’ on the line with him or her.” It appears the official policy of the US government is to deny climate science and forbid its own scientists from talking about this. And some people think this is a political culture that can make progress on this issue BEFORE it is too late? No, it is not going to happen, and we had better admit that to ourselves. Hansen is talking about the vital necessity of bringing carbon dioxide levels down and no politician is talking seriously about even cutting the increasing amount we generate. To think civilization can survive is magical thinking and denial, nothing more.

We are all going to die. That is just the nature of life. It comes to an end. The French Existentialists tried to teach us how to think about this. People often get confused and think existentialism is about despair or hopelessness. Nothing could be further from the truth, although Albert Camus started with what he called, “The Absurd.” Camus’ point was that our desire for

²⁶ This is what “Sophism” is about in the Greek context.

²⁷ Presentation at the New School, February 10, 2006; chart 25

meaning and the universe's refusal to offer any is a giant absurdity. That is our life. OK, that can sound bad, but it is just the start. He said life is absurd, and it is. The point, however, is what one does with life. The great hope (or curse) in existentialism is that humans are condemned to choose how to live. We cannot change "the absurd" but we can, in fact must choose how to live. Jean-Paul Sartre pointed out this causes anxiety. It is not easy to be free because being free is also to be responsible, so most people hide from the responsibility (thus our present predicament).

Humanity faces a different absurd now. Friedman and Suzuki, both quoted above, want to hope in spite of the evidence, and that is normal. I fear it is not helpful. We want to project ourselves into the universe, but are failing. Even Camus and Sartre assumed that civilization would continue on for some vast time. We all have assumed that, but now we must think about our society differently. Civilization is in question. The species will probably survive for some vast time, but civilization (that is our social worlds) will end sooner than expected.²⁸ This is *The New Absurd*. The response is much the same, however. We have the genius of the existentialists to help us think about *The New Absurd*. What is the goal? To live! Has that changed? No! Some basic assumptions about continuity have been called into question. We still must choose how to live, choose what we will do. As Camus would be the first to remind us, the primary choice is what sort of people we will be, even (or more especially) as we face the end. Will we be the sort of people who allow billions to suffer horribly as they are culled from the population? Will we be the sort of people who act to reduce suffering?

What does it mean for civilization to end? Some say that this is the wrong question. It is anthropocentric. We are a self-centered species. Life will go on. The late, great George Carlin

²⁸ Serious doubt has been raised about species survival. This doubt relates to deep ocean frozen methane deposits melting and bring the planet close to the conditions associated with the Permian Mass Extinction, 250 million years ago when 90% of all life on earth died out, and most large animal species went extinct. See: <http://lasthours.org/>

once said that the planet will just “shake us off like a bad case of fleas” and go on fine without us. When he said that I did not really take him seriously, and he was only talking about viruses at the time. He was right, just not in the details, but that is The New Absurd. How are we to live? It is the same question. How are we to live at the end of civilization? Well, it is a slightly different question. It is more complex. The first response is moral – limit suffering and to do that there must be fewer of us. We must stop reproducing! The fewer people there are on the planet as the end comes to our kind the fewer will suffer. But if most people actually did that that might solve the problem! This is ironic and a contradiction with which we simply must live.

There is much we ought to do. It is hard to know what to do since estimates keep changing and the problem is not really here yet. This is precisely why I suggest fertility control as the response. I think it is also obvious that this sort of change must be managed and that calls for a planned political economy. We must live but must also plan for fewer of us. This New Absurd tells us to try harder, because that is living well, though it might seem bleak at first blush. How are we to live well? That is the question that matters. It is mostly an individual question, the existentialists taught. There are some things that must be social, but at the core we all have to choose for ourselves. Yet we all live together; that is humanity is a collective (if failing) enterprise. We choose alone but live together. And now it is becoming clear we have to live with an awareness of not just our individual end but now our collective end. Camus took us through this. The response to the absurd (or New Absurd, as the case may be) is not to abandon ethics, but rather to notice that ethics are all the more demanded of us because all we have is our temporary experiences in this meaningless universe.

As I have said, the one very concrete suggestion that I think Philosophy demands is this moral imperative of limiting suffering by taking control of our population numbers. I have one

radical policy suggestion to offer that illustrates the gravity of the situation. I do believe that our current situation is such that this suggestion should, if we were completely rational, be one every government would adopt immediately. That policy suggestion is that it becomes law that every single new-born baby boy in the world be given a vasectomy shortly after birth, regardless of status, location or any other details. If done this would dramatically shrink the population in less than a generation. Ethics, it seems to me, demands nothing less than this sort of response. We have destroyed the possibility for our survival but we still have to choose not to be cancer, or at least choose to be a less aggressive type. The reason I focus on boys is because this procedure is easily done and can be reversible. Some boys would go on to have the vasectomy reversed and could reproduce, most others would not.

Some might object that this is unfair to the poor, who would not be able to afford the reversal. I think that complaint is immoral, pathetically so. If parents do not have the resources to get a vasectomy reversed why would anyone assume they have the resources to raise a child and guide it through what will be the most destructive and dangerous period in our species' history? As a society we do not take the needs of children seriously and have a shocking disregard for their wellbeing. If rich people are foolish enough to reproduce under these circumstances then that is their moral failing. What moral person would bring a child into a world undergoing massive destruction? Those who choose to reproduce are only condemning their offspring to misery and an early death – and that is not just an immoral, but truly reprehensible. I am therefore unmoved that poor people would be “deprived” of this experience. I am, frankly, offended by the abject depravity of this argument. To suggest such a thing is to claim that we have an obligation to cause suffering. That is just sick.

That this objection is so predictable is another indication of just how dire the situation is. People seem to think that ordinary life will always go on, and raising the next generation is generally thought to be a regular part of life. In our world, ideally, people choose to become parents because they want to. Parenthood is part of the human experience, not necessarily so but commonly so. We all now must choose more carefully and come to see parenthood differently. Procreation is not the primary value (it hasn't been for centuries, it is just obvious now). Remember that children are a profound obligation, not a right. Children are not the meaning of life – saving children from the most horrid forms of death is the meaning now.

Some might object that this plan is a gross intrusion into people's private lives. And it is an intrusion, but justifiable. The moral point is in the universality. What this suggestion really amounts to is changing the default setting on our reproduction. Instead of reproducing being an act that requires no intention, it becomes an act that requires great intention. And this intent is required of all, so in that way it is completely fair. It is an intrusion but needed for the sake of all, thus a reasonable imposition. It also strikes me as ridiculous to think that the minor intrusion of a medical procedure that will not be remembered is somehow a greater moral tragedy than billions of people dying from starvation and disease. What sort of perverse morality wants to limit inconsequential intrusions but tolerates massive starvation and disease?

More practically, it seems highly unlikely that such a policy will actually be adopted as doing so would require full admission of the scale of the problem – and that is not likely, thus the problem. So in the end this becomes a suggestion that individuals might follow in their own lives to whatever degree possible. I cannot control how many people will foolishly choose to reproduce in the face of the reality (admitted or not) that those offspring will die a horrible death. I can condemn those people as shallow, self-centered and immoral, and I can act to limit such

suffering among those I know and love. I think everyone should do this, as everyone works in whatever ways they can to create some dramatically new way of life. In the end, though, social problems require social solutions. We will eventually admit the problem. That won't happen until it is too late, but when we do admit it we will discover social policies that will help – it will just be too late to save civilization but hopefully from that point suffering will be lessened.

There have also been objections to this idea from surprising places. One journal refused to publish an earlier draft of this introduction on the grounds it was too pessimistic for an ecological journal that chooses to be optimistic – as if that is a rational response, and not just more evidence of the problem I am describing. Some claim that this focus on individuals misses the point that these problems are social and structural and require systemic solutions. But I agree with all that. The point is in what one does in the face of these massive structural problems. I would argue that facing the moral demand of defining our lives in terms of Hospice Care for Civilization raises the stakes. The Revolution, in radical parlance, is demanded more urgently than ever. I cannot force governments to change – although I can urge individuals to act. So I am. Thank you, Dear Reader, for coming along for this ride and considering these ideas.

Noticing that humans have poisoned the planet and doomed ourselves does not change the necessity of creating just social structures; rather it makes the task more urgent than ever. But will people be moved by the moral demand and actually act radically differently? Probably not. None-the-less one hopes some action will be motivated by this concern, since if there is to be any hope for future survivors it will come from the organizing efforts of the present. The best avenue for limiting suffering is by creating a more just, rational and democratic society that can discuss and decide how to proceed. But I want to insist that you not lose sight of the fact that the

primary goal is to limit suffering because it is already too late to save civilization. We have only a short time left.

The same people often will object next that, again, my analysis fails to leave room for technological innovation. The literature is already familiar with this sort of debate. It occurred in arguments with supporters of Thomas Malthus. It turns out that Malthus was wrong and we did not face near-term mass starvation from over-population. The actual reason for that was the discovery of the Haber-Bosch process to synthesis artificial fertilizers.²⁹ If it happened to be the case that it was not possible to synthesis ammonia then it is quite possible that Malthus would have been correct and we would have very different conversations today among fewer of us. But Malthus was wrong, not because his math was wrong but because science did step in with the relevant discovery. The same is said again with reference to the so-called Green Revolution of the 1970's in which industrialization of agriculture increased crop yields. But that is even less moving as an argument because it is now clear those same industrial farms have destroyed the total available farmland through policies that allowed excessive soil erosion and soil degradation. More industrial farming is not a coherent thought, let alone argument, in response to the climate crisis given the obvious failures of industrial farming (which are not just practical but even more profound in terms of ethics).

Does my view similarly have a hole into which science can step and save the day? No! This part is vital. It is not that science cannot help or could not at some earlier point have saved the climate; the point is that it is already too late. We have passed the point of no return and climate change and destruction on a scale we cannot yet imagine is coming. Now, logically, is it possible that this analysis is still mistaken, that it only appears that we have passed the most

²⁹ And, I should add, explosives and the poison used to murder millions of people in the Holocaust; Fritz Haber's lab invented Zyklon-A, which was later altered to create Zyklon-B.

relevant of “tipping points”? Yes, logically it is possible. Is that possibility sufficient to motivate us to think optimistically? Only if one is insane! Maybe it can happen, but to live in that delusion is only to invite more misery. There is no downside to following my and other suggestions, however radical. If we are wrong then everything will be OK, just for fewer people; but if we are right then we will have mitigated the worst possibilities.

When I present this material to my students one curious reaction is to be puzzled that this end bothers their professor so much. Many students report that they understand these consequences and expect that this end will make for “the greatest show on Earth.” (“Are they playing too many video games?” That thought occurs to me because of the lack of connection in video games between action and consequence.) I don’t know what to make of this response. Older teenagers (my primary student population) generally feel a sense of invulnerability that decreases with age. It is part of the developmental process. I worry that this population has the hardest time really grasping these ideas because of that sense of invulnerability. I feel that many do not really grasp my point about suffering as they do not seem as moved by the threat of billions dying horribly as (I think) they should. Perhaps they don’t have a large enough sense of the world yet to really understand the thought: billions of people suddenly dying from starvation and disease. Do any of us?

We are all mortal; there is no hidden meaning to the universe, but as humans we feel the need to give our lives meaning, at least unconsciously, through what we do. So, faced with impending catastrophe, we can and should be like Camus thinks of Sisyphus. Like the fabled figure, we must turn around, go back down, and roll that boulder right back up that hill, no matter how many times we see it roll back down. *The purpose of life resides in trying to make it*

better for ourselves, our fellow humans, and the rest of the species with which we share the planet. Despite a very grim future, we must continually reaffirm that purpose.

In the following chapters I will explore these ideas in more detail. As I said in the beginning, I am not a climate scientist. I am a philosopher and so I will try to understand what it means, what those scientists have been saying to us and how to respond. You have read the overview now and can anticipate to some degree what is coming. I will not spend much time on technical details about the current state of the world, because as I mentioned above those details keep changing and are not getting better. I will spend a great deal of time on reasons why I think simply changing regulations to limit global warming is not the answer, at least not the whole answer. That fight is part of what is demanded but it is a small part. You and I should fight warming to lessen suffering, not because we will survive if we succeed. We have to admit to ourselves that success, in terms of saving civilization, is not an option any longer. Humanity has failed in that task and must undertake the one that follows from that – to prepare for our end. It turns out there are more and deeper reasons why this seems to be our end. Hern offered one but it is not even the most disturbing view I will discuss. The next couple of chapters will discuss those issues and how they are understood philosophically. I will conclude with a return to a fuller discussion of what is demanded of us. I offer all this discussion and analysis not because I think it will change the world, but because it is what I must do. As a philosopher certain things seem clear to me, have come into focus, as these things have incredible moral significance they must be discussed. But I harbor no illusions about the power of philosophy or philosophers to change the world. Dear Reader, take what you can from this and please share it. It is not your life and suffering that are most at stake but our children's and grandchildren's lives and suffering.

