

Ben Ware

Nothing but the End to Come? Extinction Fragments

01/12

e-flux journal #111 — september 2020 Ben Ware
Nothing but the End to Come? Extinction Fragments

1. The Blindness of “Enlightened”

Doomsaying

Let us begin by setting the artist Gustav Metzger alongside the philosopher Günther Anders. In his 1960–61 manifestos on auto-destructive art, Metzger speaks of an art that “re-enacts” capitalism’s “obsession with destruction.”¹ His vision is of artworks – lasting a few moments or as long as twenty years – which contain within themselves agents that automatically lead to their own destruction. Auto-destructive art is, Metzger says, “primarily a form of public art for industrial societies”; the only form of art which, following “the drop, drop dropping of HH bombs,” is able to launch an attack against the continued “drive [towards] nuclear annihilation” by bringing “destruction into the centre of [the viewer’s] consciousness.”² If Metzger’s art was a direct challenge to the threat of global destruction, then Anders took a similar path through philosophy. His concern was to reveal “the roots of our apocalyptic blindness” (*Apokalypse-Blindheit*) and to suggest new ways of fighting against, and thinking beyond, “man-made apocalypse.”

Writing in the aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Anders argues that we have become “inverted Utopians”: while “ordinary Utopians are unable to actually produce what they are able to visualize, we are unable to visualize what we are actually producing.”³ This Promethean Gap – the distance between our capacity to produce and our power to imagine – defines the moral situation facing us today. Our society of machines and technological devices (the quintessence of science, and hence of “progress” and “morality”) has allowed the great dream of omnipotence to finally come true.⁴ This dream, however, turns out to be the very nightmare from which we cannot awake, precisely because “we are [now] in a position to inflict absolute destruction on each other.” With these new apocalyptic powers, we enter what Anders calls “The Last Age”: an age in which the old Socratic question “How should we live?” has been replaced with the altogether more terrifying “Will we live?”⁵

For Anders, surviving the threat of extinction will entail, at least in part, expanding our capacity for fear and anxiety and cultivating a renewed sense of the apocalyptic. He distills this message into a short parable that inventively retells the biblical story of Noah:

One day, [Noah] 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,

THE CASE OF THE HIROSHIMA PILOT CLAUDE EATHERLY TOLD IN HIS LETTERS TO GUNTHER ANDERS

BURNING CONSCIENCE



Cover of the 1962 edition of *Burning Conscience: The Case of the Hiroshima Pilot, Claude Eatherly, Told in His Letters to Gunther Anders*.

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."⁶

For the philosopher Jean-Pierre Dupuy, what we discover in Anders's Noah is a form of "enlightened doomsaying," which signposts a way out of our current impasse when it comes to thinking the planetary catastrophe. According to Dupuy, in Anders's parable the catastrophe is both *necessary*, fated to occur, and a *contingent accident*, one that need not happen. The way out of this paradox, based on a new understanding of the relation between future and past, requires us to act *as if* the catastrophe has already happened – or is fated to happen – in order to prevent it from becoming true. By acting *as if* the catastrophe has already taken place, we are able to project ourselves into the postapocalyptic situation and ask what we could and should have done otherwise. "Let me help you build an ark, so that it may become false."⁷

Both philosophically and politically, however, Dupuy's metaphysical "ruse" (inherited from Anders) is a dead end.⁸ To advocate acting "as if" the catastrophe has happened is still to

posit catastrophe as an existential dark cloud looming on the horizon. But this is like the case of the neurotic patient who anxiously awaits the occurrence of a terrible event in the future (a mental breakdown, perhaps), forgetting that they have entered psychoanalytic treatment precisely because this terrible event has *already occurred*.⁹ We don't need to act "as if" the catastrophe has happened or will happen, because – as the Covid-19 pandemic has made abundantly clear – the future of recurring disasters linked to climate change and ecological destruction has *already arrived* – indeed, they are all part of one and the same crisis. Our task is thus not to try to avert the worst by prophesying it, but rather to find ourselves *within* the current moment of crisis and catastrophe, to take the reality of extinction as our starting point, and, in this context, to recall Walter Benjamin's words that revolutions aren't necessarily the locomotives of world history, but rather "an attempt by the passengers on [the] train ... to activate the emergency break."¹⁰ What needs to be halted, immediately, is capital's war against the planet and all living things which inhabit it.

2. If Fools Should Tempt You

Finding one's feet and knowing how to proceed is, however, no straightforward task. Kafka's short stories and parables are populated by characters who have lost their way and who are seeking advice from those they hope will know how to guide them. The late short story "Give it Up!" ("Gibs auf!"), written between 1917 and 1923, and unpublished during the author's lifetime, is a good example:

It was very early in the morning, the streets clean and deserted, I was on my way to the station. As I compared the tower clock with my watch I realized that it was much later than I had thought and that I had to hurry; the shock of this discovery made me feel uncertain of the way, I wasn't very well acquainted with the town yet; fortunately, there was a policeman at hand, I ran to him and breathlessly asked him the way. He smiled and said: "You asking me the way?" "Yes," I said, "since I can't find it myself." "Give it up, give it up!" said he, and turned with a sudden jerk, like someone who wants to be alone with his laughter.¹¹

This parable provides a neat description of the kind of psychic disorientation that one might experience when forced to consider current extinction threats. Time is running out. In what direction should one make haste? To whom should one turn for help? Who is the supposed



Illustration from Georges Cuvier's book *Recherches sur les ossements fossiles de quadrupèdes* de Georges Cuvier (1812). Photo: Public Domain.

subject of knowledge?

The first and second demands of the group Extinction Rebellion (XR) are that “the government” should “tell the truth” about the climate emergency and “act now” to halt the destruction of the biosphere.¹² Here, on the part of XR, there is clearly a belief in the existence of a big Other – a potentially benevolent (paternal?) agent (in this case, the UK government), who, having heard the ethical arguments and having seen the committed protests, will be moved to lead the way, protecting citizens against the danger of an extinguished future. But the situation here is precisely like the one in Kafka’s tale. The figure(s) of authority being appealed to for help are those whose sole function it is to preserve existing economic and power relations and who are therefore not only ethically but also ideologically incapable of providing any kind of direction; indeed, requesting them to do so is enough to raise a smile. “You want help from me?” “Me?” “Really?” “Well, if that’s what it has come to, I suggest you give it up!”

To whom, then, might one turn? In one of his last letters to Gershom Scholem, written on June 12, 1938, Walter Benjamin observes that Kafka was absolutely sure about two things: “First, that someone must be a fool if he is to help; second, that only a fool’s help is real help.”¹³ The fool here is not simply the idiot, but rather one who is able to voice certain truths critical of the established order, precisely because of their relative lack of power or their position *outside* of dominant power networks. But, as Benjamin points out in the letter, the uncertain issue is whether the fool’s help can really do human beings any good. The answer, sadly, is probably not.

Bringing the notion of the fool into the contemporary political context (and building upon comments made by Lacan in his *Seminar VII*), Jacques-Alain Miller says that “the fool plays at being the angel.” He or she stops at the ethical exclamation “it’s not fair”; and while the fool certainly aspires “to end injustice,” they are fundamentally incapable of doing what is necessary to take power and thus to *actually* change things for the better.¹⁴ (We are reminded here of the recent failed campaigns of Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders.) The fool, as Lacan points out, can be contrasted with the *knave*: the bitter cynic and “unmitigated scoundrel,” whose truth – which is always spoken from a position of authority and in the name of “realism” – is that things should carry on (more or less) *just as they presently are*.¹⁵ While the fool proposes a “fairer world,” the knaves sharpen their knives and wait for their moment.

In another of Kafka’s micro-stories, “A Little Fable” (“Kleine Fabel”), a tiny mouse (a fool) does

something *utterly foolish*: he turns to a fat cat (a knave) for help. The outcome: the cat tells the mouse he must “change direction” before eating him up. Let this stand as Kafka’s lesson on the pitfalls of hoping that knaves might provide some meaningful assistance in the face of our current extinction emergency. If the future is to be salvaged, it will only be through a mode of revolutionary activity that combines the strategic cunning of the knave with the ethical commitments of the fool, while simultaneously *breaking free* from the political logic that holds both of these positions in place.

3. Truth Is an Old Bone

Benjamin’s thought can help us to think about extinction in a variety of new ways, triggering unexpected chains of association. Halfway through his 1931 radio broadcast on the devastating Lisbon Earthquake of 1755, he reminds listeners that “no one was more fascinated by these remarkable events than the great German philosopher Kant,” who “eagerly collected all the reports of the earthquake that he could find, and [what] he wrote about it probably represents the beginnings of scientific geography in Germany. And certainly the beginnings of seismology.”¹⁶

Kant’s response to the earthquake comprises three essays published between 1755 and 1756 in the *Wöchentliche Königsbergische Frag- und Anzeigungs-Nachrichten*. These essays, though still little discussed, mark a vital turning point in the philosopher’s thought. In contrast to his contemporaries Voltaire and Rousseau, Kant is clear that the earthquake has no religious significance whatsoever: although devastating and disastrous, it is certainly not divine punishment meted out for “evil deeds,” not an expression of “God’s vengeance.”¹⁷ The only way to understand the event is as part of a complex picture of natural phenomena. In the concluding part of his second essay, Kant makes two crucial observations: first, “Man is not born to build everlasting dwellings on this stage of vanity,” as life surely has a “far nobler aim.” And second, the earthquake may be only the start of a larger terrestrial “catastrophe”; indeed, in the “destruction” of “those things that seem to us the greatest and most important” what we come to glimpse is “the transience of the world” – that is to say, *its possible extinction*.¹⁸

Here, it is as if Kant has stumbled across something so alien, inexplicable and strange, that he is immediately forced to retreat, to repress the very truth he has just caught sight of – which in this case he does with a homespun piece of moralizing: “The goods of this world cannot provide any satisfaction for our desire for happiness!” If Kant’s initial response to

05/12

e-flux journal #111 — september 2020 Ben Ware
Nothing but the End to Come? Extinction Fragments



Jacques Philippe Le Bas, *Ruins of the Sé Cathedral in Lisbon after the 1755 Earthquake*, 1757.

encountering the real of extinction is to avert his gaze, he has good historical reason for doing so. Up until the late eighteenth century, the very idea of extinction remained almost unthinkable. The generally held view was that all the bodies of creation were bound together in a “great chain of being.”¹⁹ The chain was a single linear series, beginning with God, angels, and man and descending to animals, plants, and rocks. This deeply held idea brought together the notion of plenitude – the belief that the world is full, complete, and perfect – with the notions of continuity and gradation – the view that all things could be lined up on a vertical scale with no discernible gaps between them. The species comprising the great chain were seen to exist in a mutually dependent relationship: if a single link was broken, the entire edifice would collapse, with disastrous consequences for nature. As the English poet Benjamin Stillingfleet writes in the 1760s:

... each moss,
Each shell, each crawling insect, holds a rank
Important in the plan of Him who framed
This scale of beings; holds a rank which lost
Would break the chain, and leave behind a gap
Which Nature's self would rue.²⁰

While the idea of the great chain has still not vanished from history – “a highly articulated version of it still exists as a contemporary unconscious cultural model,” as George Lakoff and Mark Turner point out²¹ – in 1796 the French zoologist and paleontologist Georges Cuvier takes a step towards decisively breaking it. Having carried out extensive examinations of what look like elephant fossils, Cuvier finds that the fossils are “absolutely [not] from the same species” and that “these [fossil] animals differ from the elephant as much as, or more than, the dog differs from the jackal and hyena.” Cuvier thus arrives at a devastating conclusion: “All these facts ... seem to me to prove the existence of a world previous to ours, destroyed by some kind of catastrophe.”²² It is, then, through what Cuvier describes as “some half-decomposed bones” that extinction comes to be established as a scientific fact.

For Cuvier, every organized being forms a whole, a functionally integrated “animal machine” perfectly adapted to its specific mode of life. It is therefore impossible to imagine any species gradually becoming extinct; rather, extinction must be brought about by a sudden catastrophe: a disruption in ecological homeostasis effectuated by a “natural” crisis such as a flood or earthquake. With this theory of

“catastrophism,” Cuvier presents not only a revolution in scientific understanding, but also a kind of poetics of extinction. Balzac describes him as the greatest poet of the nineteenth century; Goethe credits him as being one of the leading intellects of the times; and Byron and Percy Shelley both mine his theories in the course of their own romantic literary experiments. There is something not only modern but also distinctly *modernist* about Cuvier and his ideas. His invitation that we follow “in the infancy of our own species, the almost erased traces of so many extinct nations” finds itself echoed nowhere more clearly than in the First Letter of Paul Valéry's 1919 essay “The Crisis of the Mind.” As Valéry writes: “We later civilizations ... we too now know that we are mortal ... And we see now that the abyss of history is deep enough to hold us all. We are aware that a civilization has the same fragility as a life.”²³

4. A Perverse Dialectics of Nature

While Cuvier was carrying out his scientific research, Donatien-Alphonse-Françoise de Sade (better known as the Marquis de Sade) was languishing in a cell in the Bastille. Having successfully appealed a death sentence for sodomy and poisoning, Sade remained in indefinite detention due to a *lettre de cachet* obtained by his mother-in-law, Madame de Montreuil. In 1798 – two years after the publication of Cuvier's groundbreaking essay – Sade anonymously published his marathon picaresque novel *L'Histoire de Juliette*. The work is a labyrinthine tale of unadulterated inhumanity: a defense of crime, cruelty, and unrestrained sexual activity in all its forms. This postrevolutionary horror story is, however, also an enlightenment tract (preoccupied with questions of philosophy, theology, and science) at the center of which stands a metaphysics of extinction.

The key section is a philosophical “dissertation,” delivered by Pope Pius VI to the lapsed-Catholic antiheroine Juliette, where the Pontiff expounds his atheistic view of nature.²⁴ The Pope's position can be summarized as follows: (i) Mankind is the result of nature's “unthinking operations”; and so, at one level, man has no real relationship to nature, nor nature to man. (ii) At another level, however, the two are intimately bound together: if mankind reproduces as a species it takes away from nature the privilege of being able to “cast new entities” (767); consequently, “our” multiplication leads “her” to suspend propagation. (iii) Thus, what most humans regards as “virtues” (the preservation of living things and the continuation of the species) are

“crimes” from the point of view of nature (768). (iv) But nature makes clear her displeasure: through wars, famines, and natural disasters she aims to bring about “the wholesale annihilation of cast creatures” to give herself “the chance to recast them anew.” (v) It therefore follows that any figure who participates in this orgy of destruction – anyone who is prepared to help lay waste to the world through “wicked,” “abominable,” and “barbarous” acts – becomes a spokesperson for nature’s desires. (vi) It is the libertine who fully assumes this role: their criminal acts striving towards “*the extinction of all beings*” which in turn makes “room for the new casting nature desires.” In the words of the Pope: “The criminal who could smite down the three kingdoms [of animal, mineral, and vegetable] all at once by annihilating both them and their capacity to reproduce would be [the one] who serves nature best” (771).

Here one glimpses the philosophical underpinnings of Sade’s empire of *jouissance*: virtue is criminal and criminality a virtue; propagation is violence against nature, and violence is an aid to nature’s renewal; the principle of life is none other than death, yet the latter, strictly speaking, does not exist, as there is only the ceaseless motion and recycling of “matter” according to nature’s laws. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer read

08/12

Sade’s perverse utopia as the dark shadow of Kant’s universe of absolute reason, the negative side of his moral law: the “enlightened” libertine Juliette

embodies (in psychological terms) neither un-sublimated nor regressive libido, but intellectual pleasure in regression – *amor intellectualis diaboli*, the pleasure of attacking civilization with its own weapons. She favors system and consequence. She is a proficient manipulator of the organ of rational thought.²⁵

While this is certainly true, up to a point, it is also clear that what one encounters in Sade is not “pleasure” as such, but rather that which runs *beyond the pleasure principle*: the death drive, which in this case involves not only a return to some inorganic state but also “*the total extinction of humankind*” (373) along with the annihilation of the very cycles of the transformations of nature. Sade’s goal, then, is negation in its purest form: a delirious nothingness, an original and timeless chaos.

Here we can make two related points. First, this desire to wipe the slate clean and begin again from zero turns out to be a metaphysical *farce* – destruction is simply the flip side of creation; disorder another form of order; death



The character Veronique (played by Anne Wiazemsky) reads Marquis de Sade on camera in Jean Luc Godard's movie *La Chinoise* (1967).

the foundation of new life. Total annihilation, pure negation, turning the earth into “an extinct frozen globe” (to use Engels’s phrase) thus reveals itself to be an illusion, as Sade’s Pope himself acknowledges: “When I have exterminated all the creatures that cover the earth, still shall I be far from my mark, since I have merely served Thee, O unkind Mother” (782). What we encounter here then is a kind of Sadean *extinction comedy*: the libertine is unable to transform into deeds the appalling desires that nature has roused in him; but even if total destruction were possible this would come as a great disappointment to the libertine, as it would deprive him of the very system of value from which his libertinage takes direction.

And yet – and this is the second point – none of this is a mere relic of eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinking. For nothing could be clearer than the fact that today’s capitalism is still looking for ways to fulfil the Sadean dream. Indeed, it is precisely this dream that Gustav Metzger detects in the projects of atomic power and biotechnology, in which the quest for absolute mastery and total destructive power can only be realized through a forced violation of the most profound taboos, a faithful dedication to the perverse:

The opening up of matter and the penetration to its deepest level to overturn the existent unites both [atomic and biotechnological] research, which are marked by a readiness and ability to enter previously closed domains. These domains were not only unobtainable because of an inability to enter them, there were also walls of ethical and religious interdictions blocking the entrance. This forced violation of the most profound taboos sanctioned in humanity led to a conduit towards the forbidden. Atomic power and biotechnology invented a means of destroying all life and found ways to create all life, and placed humanity on a god-like plane. This is a plane against which all religions have warned: the sense of holiness is entirely breached and, in breaching this plane, the human is being shattered, having conducted the ultimate irredeemable sin. This shattered being turns to a golem, who will march inexorably to its destruction, consuming the entire world.²⁶

If the moral and religious language here sounds somewhat quaint, we should perhaps remind ourselves of the current stakes. It is now accepted that we are moving towards a new phase of world war: war by algorithm; and specifically the development of Lethal

Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS) – systems that are, essentially, outside human control.²⁷ In November 2019, US Defense Department Joint AI Center director Lieutenant General Jack Shanahan (in conversation with Google CEO Eric Schmidt) spoke frankly about a future of algorithmic warfare: “We are going to be shocked by the speed, the chaos, the bloodiness, and the friction of a future fight in which it will be playing out, maybe in microseconds at times. How do we envision that fight happening? It has to be algorithm against algorithm.”²⁸ If the very idea of humanity rests, at least in part, on an ability to imagine the other’s suffering, then what is being signposted here is a movement towards humanity’s final negation. Today’s researchers of destruction (acting in the interests of “security”) would, by comparison, give Sade’s band of libertines an inferiority complex.

5. How Not to Be “Fucked”

From sadism, then, to masochism – for it is the latter which characterizes the psychic landscape of much of today’s ecological discourse. The problems with the universalizing, ecological “we” should now, of course, be fully clear: a faulty metaphysics which claims that all of “us” are equally responsible for the sixth mass extinction; that our destructive “lifestyles” are what are destroying the planet; that it is “civilization” itself – and specifically a civilization in thrall to “consumerism” – which is killing the human race (criticisms that are just as likely to emerge from the eco-alt-right as they are from the eco-soft-left). Following this logic, the only solution to our present problems appears to be a kind of *eco-depressive hyper-moralism*: an accelerated form of pseudo-authentic, “anti-consumerist,” “back to the land” “green living,” which turns out to be a parody of committed action and self-realization. Not only does such a position fail to register the true extent of the economic and political forces driving the climate and ecological emergency, it also seeks to instrumentalize this emergency: using it as the very *means* by which the “good subject” is able to save his or her own soul.

But problems run deeper still. Just beneath the surface of much of this contemporary eco-moralism there appears to be a strange *apocalyptic jouissance*. In 2018, XR activists dropped two banners, both thirty-seven meters long, off Westminster Bridge in London. One of them read “Climate Change,” the other, simply, “We’re Fucked.” The slogan “Climate Chaos: We’re Fucked” now appears on XR stickers, leaflets, and fly posters worldwide; “We’re F**ked” also features as the title of a section in a recent book, *Another End of the World is Possible*, by the environmentalist John Halstead.

The phrase “we’re fucked” should indeed strike us as rather odd, managing as it does, in this particular context, to connect extinction and sexual gratification.

In his book *Coldness and Cruelty*, Deleuze speaks of masochism (in a chapter engaging Freud and Reik) as the desire to be punished, the purpose of which is to resolve guilt and the corresponding anxiety. But this turns out to be merely the preliminary or “moral” stage of pleasure: one that prepares for, and makes possible, the higher stage of *sexual pleasure*; a stage that is in this case “passive,” with the subject assuming the role of the object.²⁹ As Deleuze makes clear, however, such pleasure is only possible through a strict implementation of the law: the use of contracts and rituals which serve to proscribe the limits of the subject’s *jouissance*. Seen in this light, then, it is not just that the slogan “we’re fucked” eroticizes extinction, but rather that this eroticization, as we see in groups such as XR, must be staged through a series of performances and rituals – deliberately attempting to get arrested by the cops; playing dead; chaining, gluing, and locking oneself to inanimate objects – which are distinctly masochistic in nature.

The position of the masochist has always been an ambiguous one. On the one hand, he or she appears to be the ideal capitalist subject: someone who *enjoys* being treated as a *mere means*. On the other hand, by deliberately becoming an object – by, as in the eco-activist case, identifying with one’s *fuckedness*, by assuming it as a kind of negative pleasure – the masochist succeeds in establishing a minimal distance from the master, a small space outside of the realm of cruelty and exploitation. Is this enough to ground a program of liberation and transformation? The answer, I think, must be a decisive *no*; and, in the case of contemporary eco-moralism, for two reasons. First, the name of the master – capitalist accumulation and its “democratic” political anchors – is that which cannot be spoken, for fear of breaking the taboo surrounding politics as such. Instead, the violence is displaced back on to the self: it is “we” who are responsible for the fucking. Second, the libidinal ties between master and slave are *strengthened*, rather than contested, through the specific contract which the eco-masochist seeks to secure: an agreement that the government (one kind of master figure) will “create and be led by the decisions of a Citizens’ Assembly on climate and ecological justice.”³⁰ The demand here is that the master will no longer act like a master, but will instead treat the slave *as if* they were a political equal: a demand which the master may well be happy to consent to, at least temporarily, the better to disguise the

vulgarity of his own power and that of the financial interests which he faithfully serves. Kant already sniffed out such maneuvers over two hundred years ago when, in a remark on British politics, he notes that limited parliamentary concessions often have “the insidious effect of discouraging people from looking for the *true* ... for they imagine that they have discovered it in an instance which is already before them.”³¹

Moving beyond masochistic “rebellion,” then, will involve a revolutionary redirection of libidinal energies: a politically creative desire to begin all over again in the midst of crisis. Part of this process will entail a return to the activity of *critique* – what Marx describes in a letter to Arnold Ruge as “*ruthless criticism* of all that exists, ruthless both in the sense of not being afraid of the results it arrives at and in the sense of being *just as little afraid of the conflict with the powers that be*.”³² The eco-masochist position is sustained, at least in part, by a specific set of signifiers: the “Anthropocene” (that now infamous discourse of doom, irreversibility, and species alienation), “deep adaptation”³³ (a term denoting a new kind of blackpilled eco-survivalism, inviting ethical and “spiritual” reflection on “our way of life” in the face of inevitable social collapse), along with the neoliberal empty rhetoric of “sustainability” and “healing.”

All of these terms, in different ways, feed into a politics of passive annihilation. In this respect, critique will therefore need to be (in Wittgenstein’s phrase) *a critique of language*: an investigation into the attractions, ideological connotations, and unmapped unconscious significances of certain words; an investigation that will, at the same time, also be a reminder that “words are also weapons, explosives or tranquilizers and even poisons”; and indeed that the whole political struggle “may be summed up in the struggle for one word against another.”³⁴ This fight over language is a fight for an *unfucked* future.

x

Thanks to Hans Ulrich Obrist for discussions on a number of the above topics, and to Maria Balaska, Peter Buse, and Dany Nobus for feedback on an earlier draft. Additional thanks to Elvia Wilk for editorial comments.

Ben Ware is the Co-Director of the Centre for Philosophy and the Visual Arts at King's College, London and Philosopher in Residence at the Serpentine Galleries, London. He is the author of *Dialectic of the Ladder: Wittgenstein, the "Tractatus" and Modernism* (Bloomsbury, 2015); *Living Wrong Life Rightly: Modernism, Ethics and the Political Imagination* (Palgrave, 2017); and editor of *Francis Bacon: Painting, Philosophy and Psychoanalysis* (Thames & Hudson, 2019). He is currently completing a book on philosophy and extinction for Verso.

- 1
Gustav Metzger, *Writings 1953–2016* (JRP Editions, 2019), 66.
- 2
Metzger, *Writings*, 66, 76, 107.
- 3
Günther Anders, "Theses for the Atomic Age," *The Massachusetts Review* 3, No. 2 (Spring, 1962): 496.
- 4
Günther Anders, "Reflections on the H Bomb," *Dissent* 3, no. 2 (Spring, 1956): 146.
- 5
Anders, "Theses for the Atomic Age," 493.
- 6
Cited in Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *The Mark of the Sacred*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Stanford University Press, 2013), 203.
- 7
Dupuy, *Mark of the Sacred*, 204.
- 8
For Dupuy's reference to enlightened catastrophism as a "ruse," see, for example, Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *Pour un catastrophisme éclairé: Quand l'impossible est certain* (Seuil, 2004), 100.
- 9
On the fear of the breakdown that has already occurred, see D. W. Winnicott, "Fear of Breakdown," *International Review of Psychoanalysis*, no. 1 (1974): 103–7.
- 10
Walter Benjamin, "Paralipomena to *On the Concept of History*," in *Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938–1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings (Belknap Press, 2003), 402.
- 11
Franz Kafka, "Give it Up," in *Franz Kafka: The Complete Stories* (Schocken Books, 1971), 456.
- 12
See <https://extinctionrebellion.uk/the-truth/demands/>. XR states that they are "a politically non-partisan international movement that uses non-violent direct action to persuade governments to act justly on the Climate and Ecological Emergency." They have three demands in the UK: tell the truth; act now; go beyond politics.
- 13
Walter Benjamin, "Letter to Gershom Scholem on Franz Kafka," in *Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935–1938* (Belknap Press, 2002), 327.
- 14
See Jacques-Alain Miller, "Psychoanalysis, the City and Communities," *Psychoanalytic Notebooks*, no. 24 (March 2012): 15.
- 15
Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960* (Routledge, 2008), 224–26.
- 16
Walter Benjamin, "The Lisbon Earthquake," in *Radio Benjamin*, ed. Lecia Rosenthal (Verso, 2014), 160.
- 17
Immanuel Kant, *Natural Science* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 363.
- 18
Kant, *Natural Science*, 363.
- 19
The classic study on the history of this idea is Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Harvard University Press, 2001).
- 20
Benjamin Stillingfleet, *The Saturday Magazine* 10, No. 290 (January 7, 1837) <https://search.proquest.com/openview/62bbddb216dcf4a7/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=1465>.
- 21
George Lakoff and Mark Turner, *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (University of Chicago Press, 1989), 167.
- 22
Georges Cuvier, "Species of Elephants" ("Espèces des éléphants," 1796) in Martin J. S. Rudwick, *Georges Cuvier, Fossil Bones, and Geological Catastrophes* (University of Chicago Press, 1997), 24.
- 23
Paul Valéry, "The Crisis of the Mind," in *Paul Valéry: An Anthology* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), 94.
- 24
Marquis de Sade, *Juliette*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (Arrow Books, 1991). Page numbers for all quotes from this source given within text.
- 25
Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Verso: 1997), 94–95.
- 26
Metzger, *Writings*, 615.
- 27
See Max Liljefors, Gregor Noll, and Daniel Steuer, *War and Algorithm* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).
- 28
Khari Johnson, "The US Military, Algorithmic Warfare, and Big Tech," *Venture Beat*, November 8, 2019 <https://venturebeat.com/2019/11/08/the-u-s-military-algorithmic-warfare-and-big-tech/>.
- 29
Gilles Deleuze, *Coldness and Cruelty* (Zone Books, 2013),

104–5.

30

See <https://extinctionrebellion.uk/go-beyond-politics/citizen-assembly/>.

31

Immanuel Kant, *Political Writings* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 186.

32

Karl Marx to Arnold Ruge, Kreuznach, September 1843
https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43_09.htm.

33

Jem Bendell, “Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating Climate Tragedy,” 2018
<https://jembendell.com/2019/05/15/deep-adaptation-versions/>.

34

Louis Althusser, “Philosophy as a Revolutionary Weapon,” *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (Aakar Books, 2006), 8.

12/12

e-flux journal #111 — september 2020 Ben Ware
Nothing but the End to Come? Extinction Fragments