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We know today that prideful humanism which gives the modern world its incredible dynamism imperils the very continuation of the human adventure. We are living henceforth in the shadow of future catastrophes that, taken as a system, will perhaps provoke the disappearance of the species. Our responsibility is enormous, since we are the sole cause of what is happening to us. But our sense of responsibility has every chance of increasing inordinately the pride that got us here. Persuading ourselves that the salvation of the world is in our hands and that humanity is obligated to be its own savior, we run the risk of throwing ourselves further into this headlong rush, this panic movement, which world history resembles more each day.

German philosopher Günther Anders (1902-1992) was the most profound and radical thinker to have reflected on the major catastrophes of the twentieth century. Rather than weighty systematic treatises, Anders preferred shorter pieces on current issues, sometimes written in the form of a parable. More than once, he will have told in his own way the story of the flood.

Noah was tired of playing the prophet of doom and of always foretelling a catastrophe that would not occur and that no one would take seriously. One day,

he clothed himself in sackcloth and put ashes on his head. This act was only permitted to someone lamenting the loss of his dear child or his wife. Clothed in the habit of truth, acting sorrowful, he went back to the city, intent on using to his advantage the curiosity, malignity and superstition of its people. Within a short time, he had gathered around him a small crowd, and the questions began to surface. He was asked if someone was dead and who the dead person was.

Noah answered them that many were dead and, much to the amusement of those who were listening, that they themselves were dead. Asked when this catastrophe had taken place, he answered: tomorrow. Seizing this moment of attention and disarray, Noah stood up to his full height and began to speak: the day after tomorrow, the flood will be something that will have been. And when the flood will have been, *all that is will never have existed*. When the flood will have carried away all that is, all that will have been, it will be too late to remember, for there will be no one left. So there will no longer be any difference between the dead and those who weep for them. *If I have come before you, it is to reverse time*, it is to weep today for tomorrow's dead. The day after tomorrow, it will be too late. Upon this, he went back home, took his clothes off, removed the ashes covering his face, and went to his workshop. In the evening, a carpenter knocked on his door and said to him: let me help you build an ark, *so that this may become false*. Later, a roofer joined with them and said: it is raining over the mountains, let me help you, *so that this may become false*.ⁱ

The whole quandary of someone who predicts catastrophe, as well as the ingenious way of getting out of one's predicament, is inscribed in this magnificent parable. The prophet of doom is not heard because his word, even if it brings knowledge and information, does not fit with the beliefs of those to whom it is addressed. It is often said that if we fail to act in the face of catastrophe it is because our knowledge is uncertain. Yet, even when we know something for sure, we are unable to believe what we know. As to the existence and consequences of global warming, scientists have known where things stand for over twenty-five years and have told us so. They are preaching in the desert. Their predictions are doubtless tainted with considerable uncertainty, but that is not the reason why we do not budge.

Attempting to explain the fact that many European Jews refused until the very end, even on the platform of the Auschwitz-Birkenau station, to believe in the reality of industrial extermination, Primo Levi would quote the old German adage: "Things whose existence seems morally impossible cannot exist." Our capacity to blind ourselves in the face of obvious suffering and atrocity is the main obstacle the prophet of doom needs to circumvent.

Our main problem is to avoid a major catastrophe that might bring to an end the history of humankind. Is this to say we have to replace the philosophy of progress with a philosophy of regression and decline? A complex approach is needed. Progress or decline? The debate is of no interest at all. One can say completely opposite things about the time we are living in, and they are equally true. It is the most exalting time and the most frightening. We have to conceive at once of the eventuality of catastrophe and the perhaps cosmic responsibility that befalls humanity to avoid it. We are presently witnessing humanity's emergence as a quasi-subject: the inchoate understanding that our destiny is self-destruction; the birth of an absolute requirement to avoid this self-destruction.

Our responsibility is not towards "future generations," those anonymous beings with purely virtual existence whose well-being no one will ever convince us we should have any reason whatsoever to be interested in. Conceiving of our responsibility as a requirement to insure distributive justice between generations leads to a philosophical dead end.ⁱⁱ

It is with the destiny of humanity that we need to reckon, thus with ourselves, here and now. If we were to be the cause of the door of the future's closing, it is the very meaning of the entire human

adventure that would be forever, and retrospectively, destroyed: "The day after tomorrow, the flood will be something that will have been. And when the flood will have been, *all that is will never have existed.*"

Can we find conceptual resources outside the Western tradition? Amerindian wisdom handed down to us the admirable saying: "We are borrowing the earth from our children." Our "children"—understood as our children's children, indefinitely—have no physical or juridical existence, and yet the saying invites us to think, owing to a temporal inversion, that it is they who bring us the earth which we depend on. We are not the "owners of nature," just temporary users. Who did we get it from? From the future! Answering, "But this has no reality!" only reveals the stumbling block of any philosophy of future catastrophe: we do not succeed in giving sufficient weight to the reality of the future.

This saying does not stop at reversing time since it is in fact we who make our children, biologically and above all morally. Time appears here as a loop. The saying invites us then to project ourselves into the future and to look upon our present with an exacting eye that we ourselves will have spawned. It is possible that the future has no need of us. But we, in contrast, need the future, for it is what gives meaning to everything we do.

Such is the meaning of Noah's conduct in Günther Anders' parable. *Through the staging of mourning for deaths that have not yet occurred*, time is reversed, or rather arranged as a loop. But the misfortunes of the prophet of misfortune are not yet over. Either his predictions turn out to be right and no one is thankful to him—when he is not accused of being the cause of the foretold misfortune—or

else they are not realized, the catastrophe does not occur, and he is made fun of after the fact for carrying on like Cassandra. But Cassandra was condemned by the god to having her words not be heard. Never then does anyone envisage that if the catastrophe did not occur it is precisely because its prediction was made and heard. As Hans Jonas (120) writes, “the prophecy of doom is made to avert its coming, and it would be the height of injustice later to deride the ‘alarmists’ because ‘it did not turn out so bad after all’—to have been wrong may be their merit.ⁱⁱⁱ”

The paradox of the prophecy of doom is as follows. Making the perspective of catastrophe credible requires one to increase the ontological force of its inscription in the future. The foretold suffering and deaths will inevitably occur, like an inexorable destiny. The present conserves its memory and the mind can project itself beyond the catastrophe, speaking of the event in the *future perfect* tense: there exists a moment from the standpoint of which one will be able to say the catastrophe *will have taken* place: “The day after tomorrow, the flood will be something that will have been.” But if this task is too well carried out, one will have lost sight of its purpose, which is precisely to raise people’s awareness and spur them to action so that the catastrophe *may not occur*—“let me help you build an ark, so that *this may become false*.” This paradox is central to a classic figure in literature and philosophy, that of the murderous judge, who “neutralizes” (assassinates) criminals of whom it is written that they are going to commit a crime. But this neutralization results precisely in the crime’s not being committed.^{iv} Intuition tells us that the paradox comes from a temporal looping that should but that does not occur between the earlier prediction and the future event. But the very idea of this looping in no way makes sense according to our ordinary metaphysics, as shown by the metaphysical structure of

prevention, which consists of having an unwanted possibility sent into the ontological realm of unrealized possibilities. The catastrophe, although unrealized, will conserve its status as a possibility, not in the sense that it might still possibly be realized, but in the sense that it will always remain true that it could have been realized. When one predicts, *in order to avoid it*, that a catastrophe is on the way, this prediction does not have the status of a *pre-diction*, in the strict sense of the term: it does not claim to say what the future will be, but simply what it would have been if people had not paid attention. Looping is not a condition in this instance: the predicted future has no need of coinciding with the actual future, the anticipation has no need of being realized, for the predicted or anticipated “future” is in fact not at all the future, but a possible world which is and will remain unrealized. This figure is familiar to us as it corresponds to our “ordinary” metaphysics in which time branches off and is ramified into a tree form, the actual world being only one path within this arborescence. Time is “a garden of forking paths,” to quote Jorge Luis Borges.

The implicit metaphysics of Günther Anders’ parable is obviously of a different sort. Here time appears as a loop in which past and future determine each other. The future is taken to be no less fixed than the past—“Asked when this catastrophe had taken place, he answered: tomorrow”—the future is no less necessary than the past—“The day after tomorrow, the flood will be something that will have been”—the future is of the order of fate or destiny.

The metaphysical status of catastrophe in the prophecy of doom is highly paradoxical, and yet it resonates with figures familiar to Western consciousness. The catastrophic event is doubtless inscribed in the future as a destiny, but also as a contingent accident: it could

have not taken place, even if, in the future perfect, it appears as a necessity. This metaphysics is that of the humble, the naïve—which consists of believing that, if a significant event occurs, for instance a catastrophe, it couldn't not have taken place, even while thinking that, as long as it hasn't happened, it is not inevitable. It is thus the actualization of the event—the fact that it occurs—which retrospectively creates necessity. The metaphysics that must serve as a foundation for prudence adapted to the time of catastrophes consists in *projecting oneself* into a time that follows the catastrophe,

and in seeing it retrospectively as an event *at once necessary and improbable*. Is this a new figure? When Oedipus kills his father at the fatal crossroads, when Meursault, Camus' *Stranger*, kills the Arab under the Algiers sun, these events appear to Mediterranean consciousness and philosophy both as accidents and as necessities where *chance is fused with destiny*. The metaphysics of such prophecy is the very metaphysics underlying the face of the tragic.



A graduate of the École Polytechnique and the École des mines, Jean-Pierre Dupuy, is a professor at Stanford University. For many years he taught social and political philosophy and ethics of science and technology at the École Polytechnique, where he created the Centre de Recherche en Épistémologie Appliquée (Center for research in applied epistemology) and manages the Groupe de Recherche et d'Intervention sur la Science et l'Éthique (Research and intervention group on science and ethics). He was recently elected to the Académie Française des Technologies (French academy of technologies). > *La Marque du sacré (the sign of holiness)* (*Carnets Nord*, 2009)

CATASTROPHE PRACTICE

The political, social, individual, and literary imagination of catastrophe -- Thursday, Feb 2nd 2011, The New School

ⁱ Günther Anders, *Endzeit und Zeitenende: Gedanken über die atomare Situation*. München: Beck, 1972.

ⁱⁱ "A hackneyed anecdote among astronomers describes a worried questioner asking: 'how long did you say it would be before the sun burnt the Earth to a crisp?' On receiving the answer, 'six billion years,' the questioner responds with relief: 'thank God for that, I thought you said six million'.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jonas, Hans. *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*. Translated by Hans Jonas with the collaboration of David Herr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

^{iv} One may think of a famous episode from Voltaire's *Zadig*. A subtle variation of this theme is found in American science-fiction writer Philip K. Dick's short story *Minority Report*. The film by Spielberg based on this story is unfortunately not on the same level.