

A PHILOSOPHY FOR CONFRONTING GLOBAL OVERSHOOT

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CONTENTS

PREFACE AND INTRODUCTION	6
Acknowledgements.....	11
CHAPTER 1 TO BE ADDED: CHILDREN OF THE GALAXY	12
CHAPTER 2 STAGES IN THE EVOLUTION OF MODERN HUMANS	12
From placental mammals and primates to the first humans	12
Down on the ground.....	14
Australopithecines and their brains.....	14
Habilines and erectines	16
Cultural and genetic evolution in the Pleistocene.....	21
Memory and learning.....	23
Feelings and emotions.....	25
The further evolution of non-verbal communication.....	30
The transition to spoken language	35
Selecting for language skills	45
Humans of the late glacial to early post-glacial period.....	51
After the Mt Toba eruption.....	51
New behaviours	53
New minds	58
Reflections on hominid evolution.....	65
When is a species vulnerable to extinction?	67
Constraints and trajectories in phylogenesis.....	73
The hominid experience.....	77
CHAPTER 3 EMERGENCE AND EVOLUTION OF COMPLEX SOCIETIES	
91	

The Idea of a Universal Evolutionary Process.....	91
Evolution as History	92
The Biological Eon	92
The Cultural Eon.....	94
The Neolithic and Urban Revolutions	95
12 000 BP-6000 BP The Neolithic Revolution.....	95
6000 BP-3000 BP The Urban Revolution	97
The Cognition-consciousness Revolution.....	99
The Problem of Consciousness	100
3000 BP-2000 BP New Religions, New Thinking, New Societies	113
Coevolution of Food Production, Society, and Ecosphere 12000 BP-2000 BP	138
Holocene Survival Strategies	141
Understanding Change in Human Ecosystems	146
Patterns of Eco-cultural Evolution.....	149
CHAPTER 4 THE ROAD TO HIGH COMPLEXITY	162
The Last Two Thousand Years	163
Trading networks	163
Northern invaders.....	164
Rise of Islam	165
Europe reorganises.....	166
Wind-powered trade.....	166
The Islamic Empire.....	167
The Mongols	168
Islam's 'post-Mongol' empires.....	168
Early Renaissance	169

Printing.....	170
The rise and decline of Spain and Portugal	171
European imperialism and mercantilism	173
Fossil fuels and industrial capitalism.....	175
Changing perceptions of nature, people and society	178
World wars.....	184
A new order.....	188
The Postmodern Era.....	189
Understanding and reflecting on the Common Era.....	210
Globalisation	211
An ongoing accumulation of ideas	215
Continuities and discontinuities.....	229
The deep processes of eco-cultural history.....	233
The uses of history	237
CHAPTER 5 CONFRONTING GLOBAL OVERSHOOT	238
The warm glow of understanding	238
Wonder is not admiration.....	240
Some ineluctable realities	241
Three ways of reacting to an overshoot scenario.....	254
Don't panic.....	256
Two ways of being tender-minded	260
Stop fiddling.....	261
Rise like a phoenix.....	266
Discussion	281
A broader context.....	282

CHAPTER 6 TO BE ADDED: STORIES TO LIVE BY 289

PREFACE AND INTRODUCTION

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

TS Eliot

Myself when young did eagerly frequent
Doctor and Saint, and heard great Argument
About it and about: but evermore
Came out by the same Door as in I went.

Omar the Tentmaker

This book has its origins in a handful of questions and perceptions which have been niggling me since the publication in 2003 of *Deep Futures*, my attempt to equip myself with an evidence-informed set of beliefs---working hypotheses---about humanity's prospects for surviving, and surviving well, through the centuries and millennia ahead.

Writing *Deep Futures* cheered me up no end. While present knowledge condemns our species to eventual extinction in one way or another, I concluded that we could well have a long Indian Summer before us, provided that we kept learning, stayed lucky and didn't turn what was promising to be a particularly difficult century into a full-blown catastrophe.

I was seeing the 21st century as one where the people of the world might, through hard work, ameliorate the overarching problems of war, poverty, injustice, environmental degradation and sociopathy; or, more positively, creep up on the goals of peace, material wellbeing, social justice, environmental protection and sociality (goodwill). The challenge, as I saw it then, could be expressed in terms of how to most effectively improve quality of life for most people. However, the perspective I had come to hold by the time of beginning this book was, not quite that humanity is fighting for survival, but, plausibly, that *we are fighting to avert a large and rapid drop in quality of life (e.g. in life expectancy) across the world; and that humanity's primary task for the foreseeable future will be to defend the status quo, not improve on it.* It was [is?] a perspective indicating that the human species is responding to a perception of crisis and suggesting that what it is doing should have the highest priority.

There is nothing particularly novel about this perspective; perhaps I was just catching up. The world is awash with premonitions that global society is on the brink of being massively disrupted by global-scale processes associated with, for example, global warming and the depletion of fossil fuel deposits. There is probably general agreement on the need for international cooperation to address global-scale problems, and a recognition that achieving such cooperation is always difficult. Working from within this mainstream world view---call it *Interventionism*---there are thousands of policy analysts and scientists, mostly from first world countries, documenting and modelling global change---economic, social and environmental---and developing social and material technologies for responding to the threats and opportunities it presents.

My own response to global-scale problems is somewhat different. As when writing *Deep Futures*, my humanistic starting point is a wish to contribute to the achievement of high quality of life for most people into the indefinite future, the goal I call *quality survival*. But I do not want to write yet another treatise on how to set up a carbon trading scheme or save water or, indeed, any aspect of the mechanics of tackling the world's many problems; I want to produce a philosophy, not a recipe book. I want to build up an historical and pre-historical understanding of how humanity and the human ecosystem came to be as they are (Chapters 1-4) and, from that base, explore how people of different temperaments might respond to the suggestion that an *Overshoot crisis* (sic) has already begun (Chapter 5). My term *Overshoot Crisis* purports to capture the converging effects of momentous human-made trends towards overpopulation, overconnection, overheating and overextraction, a knotty *problematic* that will, unless actively averted, impact pervasively on quality of life via deurbanisation, deindustrialisation, depopulation, currency wipe-outs etc.

In addition to the conventional wisdom of Interventionism in some form or other, Chapter 5 discusses tough-minded *Empiricism* and tender-minded *Reconstructionism* as other legitimate ways of responding to the diagnosis of an Overshoot Crisis. Empiricists have a 'wait-and-see' perspective while Reconstructionists have, metaphorically, a 'Noah's Ark' perspective. More directly, *Reconstructionism* is the belief that it is already too late to stop a massive disorganisation and simplification of the human ecosystem. As of now, we are committed to passing through a dystopic bottleneck and should be concentrating on how we might best help our great-grandchildren (?) regain some quality of life as they emerge on the other side where, if they are lucky, they will toil their days away in agricultural villages. Because Reconstructionism is all too easily labelled as defeatist and sanctimoniously dismissed, I have felt it useful to explore the puzzles it throws up. As for the Empiricists' perspective, it suffers from being too easily hijacked by vested interests wanting to use caution as an excuse for inaction.

Accepting, as a working assumption, that a global-scale Overshoot Crisis is indeed emerging, how realistic is it to believe, as many mainstream Interventionists do, that global society can and will, rationally and comprehensively, intervene to forestall a large and rapid drop in quality of life across the world? The answer is 'quite unrealistic.' All that can be hoped for is a collation of piecemeal interventions by various protagonists---

from international organisations to individuals---each acting within their own sphere of influence to 'fix' some facet of the total problematic as they see it.

There are two elephantine reasons for this naïveté, both so fundamentally at odds with the way problem-solving is conceptualised in 'enlightened' societies that neither can be readily admitted to the public consciousness. Thus, in no sense is there a collective 'We,' united around achieving or defending quality survival as a primary task. And even if there were, the Overshoot Crisis has been generated from within the human ecosystem, this being what scientists call a complex dynamic system. That means, first, that the speed, size and duration of the Overshoot Crisis cannot be predicted and, second, that humanity's knowledge of how such systems work is insufficient to allow them to be confidently steered in some preferred direction, such as defending global quality of life.

Chapter 5 concludes that while humans will survive their self-made Overshoot Crisis, it won't be because of any remarkable capacity to adapt to major challenges in ways that protect quality of life. It will be because the Crisis wasn't as bad as some thought it might have been; that is, the species had not been really tested. Or, it will be that while the Crisis was highly destructive of quality of life for most, it spat out a post-bottleneck population which, scattered and much-reduced, retained sufficient social and material technologies to begin rebuilding stable sedentary societies and improving quality of life once again.

This conclusion will be unwelcome to many people, particularly those with an exaggerated view of humanity's ability to know its goals and to manage itself and the world to achieve them. It has not been done deliberately, but we need to acknowledge that humanity has brought a crisis on itself, one which it is not yet ready to deal with. We are confronted with a knot of problems of a type which we have not yet learned how to avoid, much less solve. This is despite the fact that our material and mental capabilities have increased sharply in the last three thousand years. While every generation has its world view(s), recent generations have acquired a dramatically improved understanding--plausible, coherent, naturalistic--of most (?) of the world's physical, biological, social and psychological processes. Strange as it sounds, it is an enormous achievement of consciousness to recognise that, as a species, we face great problems which are of our own making and which, for the moment, we are unable to solve.

Neither is it judgmental to recognise that, metaphorically, *H. sapiens* is an adolescent species whose emotional development has been slower than its cognitive development, e.g. not yet having learned to empathise and collaborate with others, and being, on occasions, thoughtlessly cruel or abusive; impulsive; still unduly bewitched by material technology; unconcerned about death, or even with planning life a few generations into the future. Indeed, Chapter 6, 'Stories to Live By,' extends the metaphor of humanity the adolescent to an allegory, likening the life story of the human species to the life of a human individual. I suggest that this is a rich and powerful world view, one which allows us to more readily understand not only where we have arrived, but where we might turn in search of enhanced quality of life. It is a device which allows the species to understand that what is happening, namely the Overshoot Crisis, is no more and no less

than a challenge to be survived in one way or another so that we might return to constructing a quality life for our lineage.

It is also a story which offers the individual an insight into his/her own identity, namely, that you are a participant in your species' Overshoot Crisis, e.g. as an Empiricist, an Interventionist or a Reconstructionist; or, more practically, as a pawn or as an opportunist. Just as any individual's life story takes shape within the life story of the species, so is the species' life story embedded in the successively larger life stories of the biosphere, the planet and the cosmos. Being aware of these evolutionary and ecological envelopes, and knowing something of the history and pre-history of the species (Chapters 1-4), all help to build a strong sense of identity, central to which is a 'spiritual' feeling of being at home in the world, the universe.

More than this, we have here the makings of an 'origin story,' a combined ecological-humanistic world view, which, not being exclusive to any national or religious group, and which, because it does include all people at all times, has the emotional pull to bind people everywhere into an empathizing global family or tribe. It is a story which, of itself, can help individuals meet three of their fundamental quality-of-life needs simultaneously---for belonging, for meaning and for identity.

From a whole-of-species perspective, if some such eco-humanistic story were to become the 'dominant discourse'---and that might take centuries or forever---it would have the potential to help with the two elephantine problems which are currently making it so difficult to intervene effectively in the Overshoot Crisis, namely the co-operation problem and the complexity problem. Coordination and agreement between social groups with divergent interests could be expected to improve to the extent that conflicts would now present as being between 'family members and neighbours' rather than between strangers. Also, a widespread recognition of the common heritage, biological and cultural, of all humans might be expected to promote a convergence of the higher-level goals of disparate social groups---towards a quality-survival goal perhaps.

There are good reasons for thinking that complex situations, characterised by networks of causes rather than simple sequential causes can only be steered adaptively, i.e. by some strategy of incremental and continuously monitored trial-and-error. So, the problem of what-to-do in the face of complexity is not going to be solved by subscribing to some abductively plausible origin story. Nevertheless, the choice of what strategies to trial and, equally, to avoid trialling, does depend on the way in which the past is understood---an understanding which recognises the role of luck, the role of natural events, the role of morality, the limits of reason, the arbitrary nature of emotions, what worked, what failed...The list goes on. The point is that how humanity understands its past will guide its future behaviour. The challenge in that reality is to outgrow belief in such shackles as 'the iron laws of history' or 'the fixity of human nature' or, more generally, to be able to question adherence to 'truths' and authoritarian behavioural rules inherited from earlier times, sometimes from earlier origin myths. The old stories do not have to be abandoned, simply recognised as having had a function at a particular moment in cultural history.

More positively, as wisdom increases with maturity, we will see more clearly that, while the past does not dictate the future, it does suggest indicative guidelines and principles for responding to issues of concern. Chapter 6 discusses this idea in more detail, but a random example might be ‘as far as possible, communities should avoid relying on a single staple crop because this makes them vulnerable to seasonal variability.’ *The presumption here is that while any strategic decision can never be more than intuitive in the end, that intuition can only be improved by a conscious elaboration of the principles and insights that one would like to see influencing that decision.* For the moment this is the pragmatic best we can do about complexity.

Freed from the dogmatism and limited evolvability of traditional origin stories and world views, the ecological-humanistic world view being adopted in this book, based as it is on an appreciation of scientific method, is always open to both extension and re-interpretation. The point is made is that each generation has to re-interpret history, or, more generally, the knowledge stock, in terms and concepts that are relevant to its own times; and that as each generation continues to learn in its own way, its new knowledge will become part of the story its descendants will live by.

Have I, as Omar Khayyam put it, come out by the same door as in I went? Or, have I, as TS Eliot put it, returned from my exploring with a clearer view of where I started? I certainly have not found practicable cause and effect mechanisms which will protect or enhance global quality of life. There is every prospect that the people of the world are going to suffer enormously over coming decades. Perhaps that can and will be avoided, or perhaps it just won’t happen. For those of us who are aware of these ‘scenario’ futures, several questions suggest themselves. Do I care? Which scenario will I adopt as my working assumption? Do I want to help protect global quality of life? How can I best help?

I find the prospect of plunging quality of life, world-wide, very plausible and very distressing but do not think there is anything practical I can do; nor am I sure if I want to. What I do know is that writing this book has increased my understanding of and empathy with my own species and sharpened my sense of the joy and pain of living. I very much want this species to seek and find quality survival. We may be about to endure a great setback but, if so, we will surely rise like the phoenix. And I realise that we will rise that much more easily if we can protect the knowledge stock that has been accumulating, with ups and downs, for several hundred thousand years. Nor do we want to have to struggle for centuries or millennia to regain the heights of joy and pain that a great poetic consciousness can express:¹

Once and once only for
each thing-then no more.

For us as well. Once.
Then no more... ever.

¹ RM Rilke....from Ninth Duino Elegy

But to have been as one,
though but the once,
with this world,
never can be undone.

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