



**UEA  
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PROJECT**

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'We do not err because truth is difficult to see. It is visible at a glance. We err because it is more comfortable.'

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

# Foreword

‘What did you do to help stop climate change?’

As a parent, this is a question you are likely to be called on to answer by your children and grandchildren in the coming decades.

How will you respond?

As a parent myself, of a cheeky six-year-old boy, I often wonder about this question — as I know many other parents do. So far, we’ve collectively failed when it comes to even slowing down, let alone reversing, catastrophic climate change.

Confronting this reality feels overwhelming. However, as Rupert Read points out, it’s part of our human conditioning — to intellectually understand a future crisis, but not to feel the urgency to act now.

As Mark Lynas says in the film *The Age of Stupid*, humans did not evolve to be worried about issues years in the future.

The only place where Rupert observes an exception — and as a parent I can attest to this — is with our children. I am willing to sacrifice, take bold action and move mountains to give my son the best future possible. I love him so much. I want him to avoid all the pain I experienced growing up.

I’m sure as a parent (or guardian or fosterer, or aunt or uncle) you know exactly what I’m talking about.

When we think about protecting our children, changes that would normally seem too drastic for us (such as not eating meat, not flying and getting an electric car) seem possible. Taking the next step to persuade friends and family to do the same feels worthwhile.

Rupert directly addresses our inner sceptic that pipes up when we consider changing our diets and purchasing habits... ‘Surely if the situation were really as alarming as Extinction Rebellion and Greta Thunberg make out, then surely governments would act? I’m sure they’ll sort this out.’

I write this in the second UK lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite governments knowing for decades that pandemics are a big risk in our ever

globalised world, it is devastatingly apparent that we in the UK were unprepared.

Many of us are looking over to Germany, where they have twenty million more people but (at the time of writing) only a sixth of the number of deaths. While they were preparing a Covid-19 test in January 2020, the UK Government was arguing about whether 'Big Ben should Bong for Brexit'.

This is a perfect example of both how distracted and short term our thinking is. And, how our children's and grandchildren's future could be decided on how many populist governments are elected around the world.

It's easy to be overwhelmed, fearful and unsure of what to do next. But as parents we are used to handling these emotions — especially when our children are very young. We stepped up for them then, and they need us to rise up and take action now.

I suspect you picked up this book because you are looking for actions. One that I say to anyone wanting to do something right away is to go to [Ecologi.com](https://www.ecologi.com) — for the same price as a Netflix subscription you and your family can become climate positive through tree planting and carbon credits.

But while this is a great place to start, the journey Rupert is about to take you on requires courage and ambition to think bigger and bolder.

You will likely find some points in this book challenging. However, my hope is that many of these ideas actually inspire you, and help you consider different ways we could find solutions to this crisis.

Most of all, I hope that you find your own path to answer that future question: what did you do to stop climate change?

For me, as the co-founder of a successful and growing business, I've committed us to planting over one million trees by 2025 to draw down CO2 way beyond my business' collective carbon footprint. I've made this commitment to personally plant a million trees as well. These will cover hundreds of people who can't afford to do this themselves. My goal is to persuade over one thousand individuals and businesses to take the one million tree pledge as well.

I'm committed to doing this for all of us, but, most importantly, I'm compelled to do

this for my six-year-old son, Zac.

**Marcus Hemsley**

Co-founder of Fountain Partnership

#RiseUpDrawDown

# 1 S.O.S.: Save Our Species



‘What has to be overcome are not difficulties of the intellect but of the will.’

Ludwig Wittgenstein<sup>1</sup>

## **On trying**

Reader, I want to invite you into an essay proposing a new way to address the great issue of our time: how — even now, at the twelfth hour — we might turn ourselves away from our current path of self-destruction.

Even as I mount this attempt, I am daunted by the scale of the task. Perhaps it daunts you too. And I am unnerved by the seeming inadequacy of the means at our disposal.

How can one even begin to write an essay on something as big, as incomprehensible, as the end of our world — let alone propose a way of preventing it? For one thing, isn’t the essay, as a literary form, too assumptive of something like the status quo, too redolent of a parlour game? Too ‘clever’, too self-indulgent and brief? Too, well... slight?

And how can a mere essay possibly succeed where far greater forces have failed? Haven’t we — and by ‘we’ I mean everyone: scientists, ecologists, politicians, intellectuals, not to mention many active citizens — already attempted to present the

evidence, marshal the arguments and press for the policies? Haven't we — and by 'we' I mean now our society itself — already shown ourselves terminally incapable of the radical action needed? After all, despite everything we know, despite everything science has told us, despite even the opportunity that was afforded us by the coronavirus crisis for a radical reset, we remain firmly on course for burn-up, for an ecologically induced societal collapse.<sup>2</sup>

A strange phenomenon: facts, no matter how unequivocal, don't seem motivate us.

If facts haven't been able to shift the needle, change our ways of thinking and galvanise us into meaningful action, what about fiction? Here too, where one might have hoped for a deeper engagement, we tend to find a dearth of it. Take TV. Television remains the most influential mass medium of our time. It is incredible — yet true — that there has been no significant fictional television series addressing front and centre the climate and ecological emergency.<sup>3</sup> (The recent David Attenborough documentaries, *Climate Change: The Facts* (2019) and *A Life On Our Planet* (2020), have made some real impact. They put fiction/art to shame.) Nothing by way of story, on the main media in the world, focussed on the biggest issue of all. More generally, the arts — a space where, we might think, the imagination can be harnessed to make the impossible seem possible — have so far largely failed to face this issue adequately, failed to give us tools with which to think through our predicament. Possible exceptions to that judgement might include *The Road* (2009), *Melancholia* (2011) and *Avatar* (2009), with an honourable mention too for *Wall-E* (2008).<sup>4</sup> These three fine works of film (with *The Road* having started life as a magnificent novel) do provide ways of starting to approach this matter that matters most of all. But, for all their inspirational qualities, they are unlikely to strike anyone as laying out a realistic path for how we are to save ourselves. (*The Road* and *Melancholia* find a fragment of redemption in the face of utter destruction, while *Avatar* ends in marvellously unrealistic fashion by positing a Gaia-like 'god' awakening to become the saving power.)

Amitav Ghosh, in *The Great Derangement* (2016),<sup>5</sup> has shown beautifully how and why



the novel as we know it is too ‘realistic’ a medium to tackle this topic. In the nineteenth-century heyday of the realist novel, someone like Charles Dickens could use fiction as a vehicle for tackling the pressing issues of the day. In our time, as Ghosh suggests, the inconceivably vast, sublimely mind-blowing challenge of human-induced climate breakdown exceeds the bounds of realist description. It departs from what we thought we knew our world to be like and strikes off into a terrifying unknown. It exceeds reality as we know it.

As our Anthropocenic weather<sup>6</sup> gradually goes psychotic, the very categories of ‘*natural*’ disaster or ‘act of god’ — categories that we’ve relied upon for so long — become unavailable to us; because it is humanity’s effects that now pattern the whole. There is nothing supernatural about the utterly unnatural climate we are entering.

Ghosh’s book shows how the uncanniness of global weirding is incompatible with the norms of the novel.<sup>7</sup> (It might just be parsable within those of an epic.) Ghosh’s founding example is his own experience of the first ever tornado to hit Delhi: a tornado so strange and novel that he has never found a way to integrate the experience of it into his novels.

The truth — the reality — is that the phenomena of man-made deadly climate change really are stranger than fiction. If we continue on our current path, the terrible future that awaits us will go on striking most readers as ‘unrealistic’, ‘unbelievable’ — fodder (it would seem) for ‘escapist’ blockbusters, but not literary realism, let alone actual reality. My point: unless we can find a way of envisaging that which is coming our way, unless we find a way of believing in the reality of climate breakdown, then we will not succeed in averting it.

It’s an awful paradox: our inability to believe in this overwhelmingly likely future assures we remain on course for it. As things stand, we simply can’t bring ourselves to credit that which science tells us is true or likely. It’s too vast, too deeply strange, or just too awful to look in the eye. And yet, there will be no escape from it, *unless* we look it in the eye — face it and change everything to swerve our future from it.

Of course, we have recently had a shot across the bow, one which even yet might just occasion the massive realignment we need. The terrible, broadly foreseeable

outbreak<sup>8</sup> of Covid-19 is itself a product of the ecological crisis: of habitat destruction for the sake of economic growth,<sup>9</sup> of the maltreatment of animals,<sup>10</sup> of economic globalisation.<sup>11</sup> It has made the unimaginable much more imaginable than it was, because, in one key respect, we don't even have to imagine it: it's here. We are, in this long moment, undergoing an experience of planetary emergency, of lived vulnerability, of potential mortality: our own, our parents', our grandparents'; just conceivably, our society's. For many of us, especially in the Global North, it's the first time this has happened in our lifetimes.

Furthermore, we have seen many governments act with incredible speed and boldness, spending money like water. (Never again will the lack of public money be a tenable reason for states not taking major protective action in the face of an emergency.) We experienced a re-attunement to the value of nature, as we heard more birdsong under lockdown. Many of us have realised that it isn't necessary to commute after all. And here where I am writing, in the UK, we have come to re-appreciate the value of care, the marvel of the NHS, the starkness of the economic divisions fracturing our society, the centrality to us of love. With great vulnerability comes great responsibility — and great power.

Within the horror of coronavirus, then, comes a concealed gift. If we can transfer this sense of vulnerability to the larger emergency<sup>12</sup> — the ecological crisis that is parent to the pandemic — then we will have taken a huge step forward. After the December 2019 general election in the UK, I felt very discouraged. With the big victory of a melting block ice as Prime Minister, we had likely missed our last shot at the political system hitting the targets for transformational change that might have headed off eco-driven societal collapse. Covid-19, and the years of reset it will require, may have given us one last chance to do what this book asks of us. These opportunities don't come often; the last was the financial crisis of 2008 and we allowed it to pass by. We cannot allow that to happen again. And yet it is happening: we have returned to an alarming extent to business as usual, bailing out the polluters, resuming car travel and even air travel. We've lost much of the opportunity afforded by the Covid crisis. If we let it go by, then we will have lost our very last chance at transforming rather than destroying our civilisation.<sup>13</sup>

So we can and must but try... And in this way I've started to make my case. Despite the litany of failure, of insufficiency of one kind or another, individual or collective, this book sets out to make the argument finally stick, the proposal hold, the solution a thing you can believe in.

In the verb I was drawn to above — *try* — we might find a justification for my choice of form. After all, an essay is an attempt, a try — a having a go at something. And we have to try, even when — in fact, precisely *because* — all those other methods have failed. For the only thing we know for sure is that if we stop trying to imagine an answer<sup>14</sup> — if we give up essaying something truly bold, something ingenious and ingenuous enough to truly tackle the long emergency — then we are certain to face a catastrophic civilisational decline. If those of us seeking a way to stop the coming climate cataclysm give up trying, then it is certain that that cataclysm will come. For it is heading our way, as surely as Hurricane Katrina headed for New Orleans. And so we have this thing I'm sharing with you: *my try*; my essay.

Of course, even trying as hard as we can may not be enough. The transformations our civilisation requires will be astonishingly hard to achieve and the obstacles we face are formidable: from chronic short-termism to entrenched fossil interests, from a deadly time-lag to waning attention spans. The corona crisis doesn't only help us, it also gets in the way: look at the difficulties public transport is now in; look at the way the digital behemoths and the surveillance state have been strengthened; look at the way in which climate-bandwidth is now being taken up by corona-preoccupation.<sup>15</sup>

We are on course to fail, and this supertanker will take the almightiest turning. Life is so very precious, and we see that all the more clearly when we know it may be short.

So, enjoy it while it lasts. And that means: do the right thing, regardless of outcomes. Don't 'attach' to the outcomes you hope for. In fact, give up ordinary hope. It's too late for ordinary optimism, for waiting for something or someone to come along, just as it's too late for pessimism to be anything other than an evasion. All that's left now is a deeper realism — and action.

If (and only if) we start really trying, then hope will sprout everywhere. I essay here a way that we might finally put ourselves in a position to see adequately what is to be

done, and why it must be done.

The idea that we must safeguard the environment for future generations is a commonplace. But as yet it has almost completely lacked any felt binding power upon almost any of us. I essay here the bringing of what we already sense into a place of deeper knowing. So that we might finally put ourselves in a position where we can see what is to be done and why it must be done, and so that our actions — in all our life roles, and despite all of life's complexity — can flow from this place of knowing.

## **Parenting the future**

What is the nub of my case for how we can tackle this, the great issue of our time? We need to become parents of the future. How do we do that? By taking the metaphor literally. By understanding that only if we take completely seriously what it *really* means to be good parents to our children, will it *really* be enough to take care of the whole future.

What I'm trying to do, by marshalling this particular metaphor, is find a way of helping us face something that we don't want to face: the destruction we are wreaking on ourselves and, with greater finality, on our children. We don't want to face it, because to do so will mean we have to grieve deeply — and to change our lives profoundly. We need to mourn all the nature that is lost, mourn our lost innocence, perhaps mourn the loss of the life and material 'progress' we had hoped for; and even mourn pre-emptively for the horrible losses to come. This mourning-work clears the ground upon which we can and must then stand, unwilling to allow our common future to be smashed. Present, with determination, to undertake the great transformation.<sup>16</sup>

By focussing our minds on the young vulnerable generation that we lavish our love upon, I'm trying to find a way into the problem that will appeal not only to anyone who's ever had children, but to anyone who understands the duty of care that parenthood entails. Our sense of this duty, I argue, is so strong and sweet that it can, as it were, move the Earth. It is a way of feeling, of waking up, that can move us and, in moving us, will move our children and their children out of the firing line, out of

harm's way.

If we allow ourselves so to be moved, then finally we have a place to stand, a place to make our stand. Within the Earth, not 'outside' it. Within reality, not evading it any longer.

This calls us to face climate reality. To face the truth. As people have woken up to what Trump and the Brexit referendum have done to our politics and our civic life over recent years, there is a growing pushback against the inanities and insanities of 'post-truth',<sup>17</sup> a pushback accelerated by the realisation, with the coronavirus, that we haven't had enough (of) experts. Countries whose governments refused to admit the reality of the coronavirus outbreak — the USA, Brazil, Sweden, and yes, the UK — have seen their populations and economies needlessly ravaged. There is a growing awareness of the need to defend facts and science if we want to remain in the gene pool. This is a hopeful sign. If we can learn again to track the truth and to tell it, then we'll have passed first base.

But once again, facts (as opposed to the alt-variety) are not going to be enough. The task I am engaging in here requires something much more than responsiveness to evidence. The evidence has been with us for decades; it hasn't made much of a difference. Climate-denial was the original post-truthism.<sup>18</sup>

The existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, in the context of Nazi invasion of France — another historical moment when summoning the will to act required exorbitant resourcefulness (and sacrifice) — wrote of the people's desire for reprieve. An excuse for not acting, at least not yet. Faced with what is actually a far greater (but more deniable) threat, we too are dying for a reprieve.<sup>19</sup> We want an escape from the realities we don't want to face and the obligations we lack the gumption to acknowledge. Climate-denial has been so attractive because it offers a reprieve, an excuse for resisting the urgent call to join the resistance.

The truth is obvious to anyone willing to look, and yet it has taken us decades to arrive — finally — at the point where climate-denial is publicly unrespectable. For a public still hoping for a reprieve, the strident voices of shills and 'contrarians' have till very recently been far more seductive than the sober intonations of scientists. This is, I argue, a problem of the will. If you want to achieve something, you have to

be willing to accept — and enact — the means to that end. We have been reluctant to will the end (a sane future, living within safe ecological limits) because we have been reluctant to will the means (especially, a drastic reduction in our energy consumption<sup>20</sup>). And so, absurdly, we have failed to take on — to root out — the deniers.<sup>21</sup> We haven't really wanted to believe that anthropogenic climate change is happening. We are only now — with the climate chaos of the last few years, with the advent of school climate strikes, with the uprising of Extinction Rebellion (XR) — beginning to wake up from the 'soft' denial which assumes that anthropogenic climate change could be manageable without serious changes to our economy or lifestyles. Over the last few years, with such events as the Californian and Australian bush fires — and now with Covid-19 — we have begun to have a tiny taste of the cataclysm to come, if we don't start to really move, fast. The kind of eco-driven cataclysm that, we are now starting to realise, will come to rich countries too, and not just to those who have borne the brunt of the impacts of so far.

If we don't will the means to ending the rising tide of destruction, then — in effect — we will the end of our world.

The real issue, as Wittgenstein saw clearly, is not whether we are capable of intellectually grasping the problem. The real issue is whether we are willing to face the reality of the future we are headed towards; whether we are willing to really *feel* the horror of our situation; whether we are willing to accept — more, to seek to bring about! — the measures that will be needed if we are to avert disaster. Whether, in sum, we are willing to truly try.

It is for this reason that my main focus in this little book will not be on facts. The facts largely speak for themselves, to anyone willing to listen, and have done for decades. The problem is that we are not sufficiently receptive to the facts because we do not want to be. The facts can't get in to do their work if your capacity for wisdom and care isn't open. The way I seek to wake us up is by means of an emotionally resonant metaphor and of a little fairly simple philosophical thinking: a simple logic. Logic that a ten year old could master (and, in my experience, they do).

For it turns out that great intellectual acuity isn't required in order for us to change in the way we need to. What is most required is your heart — and your

willingness. The question is whether you are prepared to accept the simple logic that I describe in Chapters 2 & 3, chapters that require some philosophical effort of you but no specialist or prior knowledge whatsoever. Then Chapters 4 & 5 outline the kind of needful changes that follow, which make exacting demands of us — but, I argue, they are prerequisites for our continued survival, let alone flourishing.

The first half of this book will explain how our existing values around parenthood and custodianship demand that we care for this living world and work decisively to restrain humanity's destruction of it. The later chapters set out bold recommendations for working collaboratively and deliberately towards a habitable future for our children, their children and all our many descendants.

### **We don't want to know**

I said I would not make our dire predicament the main focus of this book. But for those who are less familiar with climate science (and if you are feel free to skip this section), I'll briefly rehearse the things you don't want to hear — but in many cases probably already sense, at least deep down — that provide the backdrop for our story. I must lay out the abject direness of our predicament, which is very likely far worse than you've been told.

I will focus primarily on the climate crisis and the interlinked crisis often euphemistically termed that of 'biodiversity loss'. For the climate crisis, that hogs most of the attention, is not all that really matters: far from it. We are at the same time bringing about an extinction crisis, and the primary driver of that so far is not climate damage but ecosystem destruction: the extirpation of wildlife habitats. We are not only recklessly mining the Earth, we are also 'mining' the soil, the fish and the whales. We treat natural 'resources' as though we can deplete or even exhaust them without consequence. Insects are facing potential Armageddon<sup>22</sup> (this is profoundly worrying especially because of their role in pollination, without which our food systems will collapse). And this broad ecological crisis cannot be separated out from the climate crisis. Consider for instance the Amazon rainforest: if it does not retain its biological and ecological integrity and turns to savannah (or even

desert), then this cataclysm for biodiversity is simultaneously a cataclysm for our climate system.

The climate-and-ecological emergency is the mega-crisis of our times:

- it increasingly threatens us *now or at least soon*; it threatens to take away the futures — the lives — of those who are living (especially the young);

and, furthermore,

- unless the transformation we effect is rapid and deep, the threat to our civilisation may well be *terminal*.

Climate itself then is only the canary in the coalmine. Unless we stop mining and digging, then dangerously many other birds too in time will go silent, one sad springtime to come.

For *none* of the ecological crises we're causing can be adequately addressed from within our current paradigm of politics and economics. They can be seriously tackled only if we are willing to make big changes to our system. That is, to the way that, as a society, we live (especially we in 'the Global North', in the so-called 'developed' world). We must be willing to seriously reduce our impact on our home, so as to protect us all. What is called for is a collectively self-protective contraction of the economy; a reduction in the rampant economic growth that our economies have been taught to be addicted to. The recent serious slowdown of economic activity to prevent the spread of coronavirus offers a fragile hope that we may yet be willing and able to take the drastic measures required when a global catastrophe threatens us all. But the way we are so far building back aggressively from the virus is, tragically, tending to fuel the underlying eco-emergency from which it sprang.

And so, there is a spectre haunting our society, our common future: the spectre of climatic cataclysm. Why 'spectre'? Because, in the way I described at the opening of this introductory chapter, it *seems* unreal to us. An air of unreality hangs pervasively over our situation. If human-induced climate change were really as bad as all that, then we'd be doing something truly serious about it already... right? If the situation



were really as alarming as Extinction Rebellion and Greta Thunberg make out, then surely governments would act? So, because governments are not acting as if this is an emergency, it seems to follow that the situation cannot be that alarming. Can it *really* be that we are on the verge of committing human civilisation to oblivion? Surely it would take a true 'black swan' event, something utterly unexpected, to accomplish that? Surely if we can see catastrophe coming, then, as rational animals, we'd already be acting to stop it... right?

At this point you might well be thinking, 'But surely we *are* doing something serious; surely governments are in any case acting; that is what the world's leaders agreed at the Paris climate conference in 2015.' It was indeed extraordinary that world leaders managed to agree on anything climate-related at all at the Paris summit, after the debacle of Copenhagen in 2009. It was, perhaps, as good an outcome as could be expected: because every country in the world had to agree, in order for the talks to work. And they did.

Paris was an extraordinary diplomatic achievement, and, realistically, it is hard to hope for much more. This makes the truth about the accord harder to bear: the much-lauded Paris Agreement on climate is a paper tiger. It's dead on arrival. Even if the Paris commitments that countries have made were achieved *in full*, it would not be enough to stop dangerous climate change.<sup>23</sup> It would, in fact, probably result in around three to four degrees of global overheating, triple what we have so far. That would be enough to demolish our civilisation.<sup>24</sup> Enough, over time, to raise sea levels by twenty-five metres and, much sooner than that, to complete the job that Bolsonaro has begun, of burning the Amazon rainforest (which seeds much of the world's rainfall, and some of its oxygen), turning it into savannah and possibly in time desert. A three to four degree rise would accelerate the catastrophic 'feedbacks' already in process, causing even greater ice-melt as the poles turn less white (and so reflect less sunlight away), and quite possibly triggering the massive release of the highly potent greenhouse gas methane (much of which is stored near the poles). Terrifyingly, we may already be quite close to unleashing this 'methane dragon'; in fact, this process might even be said to have already begun.<sup>25</sup> If more than a *fraction* of the methane stored under ice gets released, there will be a runaway heating effect

which will probably wipe out most of humanity.

If we limit ourselves to achieving what Paris commits us to, then we are almost certainly committing ourselves to the collapse of civilisation as we know it. To say the matter plain: even if the commitments obtained under the Paris process are achieved, climate devastation will still almost certainly bring down civilisation as we know it. Paris achieved what was politically possible, not what is needed.

But it's worse than that. We can say with near-certainty that, barring an unprecedented change in consciousness, the parameters set out in the Paris Agreement will *not* be achieved. The treaty is non-binding, and virtually every country in the world has plans (for road-building, for air-travel expansion, for ramping up intensive animal agriculture, and so forth) that contradict their Paris commitments. Some of these infrastructure projects continued even during the Covid-19 lockdown, notably Britain's carbon-heavy, ancient-woodland-demolishing, high-speed rail system, HS2. Lockdown had its environmental silver linings, of course: we saw fast falls in pollution, including in climate-deadly carbon emissions, during the height of the pandemic. The challenge now is to harness the public's acceptance of the need for economy-limiting measures in times of existential threat to argue for levels and forms of economic activity that are long-term ecologically survivable.

I put it to you that, deep down, you *know* that the path we are on, or even a 'reformed', 'improved' version of it, is a high road to cataclysm. We will not even meet the toothless demands of the Paris Agreement. You know full well that endlessly building more high-tech transport infrastructure (starting with airports) points in the opposite direction to reducing our burning of fossil fuels. You know that the endless 'growth' of the economy is at the cost of the ecology.<sup>26</sup> ('It's the ecology, stupid...') But it is hard to face this. The real difficulty is in allowing what you know in your bones to come to full consciousness.

Because, once it does, it cannot be un-known.

And here is something you may well *not* know, the nail in the coffin of Paris's credibility as a plan for saving humanity. The hopeful scenarios of the Paris Agreement depend upon the availability of magical-sounding 'Negative Emissions Technologies' (NETs) to suck carbon out of the atmosphere (so that in the future we

would allegedly be able to have less-than-zero net carbon emissions).<sup>27</sup> These are technologies that *do not exist* and that, even if they did exist, would be reckless in the extreme to deploy (as I shall explain in Chapter 4). This is the dirty secret of Paris, and the dirty secret of the UK Government's 2050 net zero target: the word 'net' scoops up a multitude of sins. Sins that are being indulged now, as we gamble our children's very future on non-existent NETs that are most unlikely to save them.

There will likely be no net to catch our kids if and when ecosystems (and, as a consequence, entire economies) start to cave in on themselves. No one wants to think about this, but the harsh reality is that we are already not far from making it virtually impossible for human civilisation to outlive the century. We are smoothly marching over a cliff, pushing our most vulnerable in front of us as we do. We are gambling the entire human future, without a backstop. A climate-devastated future is not a 'black swan' possibility; it is not some surprising, unexpected event: it is a *white swan*.<sup>28</sup> It will come and overwhelm us — unless we change course far more radically than is dreamt of in Paris's philosophy.

That future is already here, for Bangladeshis, for Pacific Islanders — even, in the record-breaking summer of 2018 (since when we have had many more such records broken), for many residents of Houston and Florida and parts of Greece. That future arrived, in early 2020, for many Australians (including a billion Australian animals). Their fate prefigures that of our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, the multiple holocausts to come. The summer of 2020 was horrifically, unprecedentedly bad, in terms of wildfires (including in the Amazon, again, and California), crazy temperatures in the Arctic, the collapse of ice-shelves.<sup>29</sup> But much of this wasn't even noticed, as the world was gripped with pandemic-fever.

It has been shown beyond reasonable doubt that anything remotely like a reformed business-as-usual path puts us on course for climate-nemesis. This dire outcome is, quite simply, what anyone with a basic understanding of the situation should now expect.

It is true that there are still some grey areas which could — *could* — turn out to work in our favour. We don't know the exact 'climate-sensitivity' of the Earth system: we don't know exactly how sensitive it is to the carbon-pollution we are flooding it

with. We don't know all the feedbacks that are likely to kick in, nor just how bad most of them will be. There might even, if we are very lucky, be as-yet-unknown feedbacks that will actually buy us time. So, we don't know how long we've got. But none of this means that we can relax. Far from it.

For crucially, these uncertainties, as I shall detail in Chapter 4, underscore the case for radical precautionary action on climate: for uncertainty cuts both ways. This is what 'climate sceptics' deliberately forget: that for every uncertainty that might mean things will be less bad than we fear, we are also exposed to things being potentially even worse than we fear. The grey feathers in the white swan's plumage change the situation not one bit — except to underscore how we not only have a (broadly) predictable catastrophe facing us, but, furthermore, one that may exceed most of our models and even our imaginations.<sup>30</sup> It is beyond reasonable doubt that we are driving ourselves and our loved ones towards the edge of a precipice; maybe one with a fatally larger drop below it even than our best current science suggests.

Catastrophic climate change is a white swan; and even the odd grey or black feather only underscores the precarity and unpredictability of our current situation. The gravity of our exposure to incalculable harm.

### **A way to not turn away?**

The situation outlined above raises deep ethical, philosophical and political questions. Firstly: how can we look our children in the eye while continuing to allow this cataclysm in the making? (Maybe this is why we typically *don't* quite look our children square in the eye, on this determinative issue: why virtually all of us, and not just those on the nastier and stupider fringes, are — in practice, most of the time — in some form or another of climate-denial.)

Secondly: how can we be woken up? You may have heard of frogs who will doze till they die in water that is gradually heated up. But here's something that you probably didn't know, a piece of potential good news: actually, most frogs *jump out* and save themselves before the temperature gets too high.<sup>31</sup> Is it not reasonable to hope that we can be at least as rational as frogs? How do we learn to act as 'wise frogs'? How do

we jump out of the saucepan before we boil ourselves alive? It seems to me that we do not jump because we do not want to acknowledge the problem (and to acknowledge our responsibilities: to acknowledge those for whose fate we are responsible), which is startling given the way it stares us in the face. To deny the obvious takes much more effort than to deny the unclear (and this of course is why for years now climate-deniers have been trying to argue that the evidence is *not* clear). And yet, I say again: virtually all of us are complicit with such denial, most of the time...

How can we call ourselves *rational* animals, as the philosopher Aristotle claimed we are, given all this? The truth is that we can't, as long as we continue to value our desire for reprieve over a humble acknowledgement of the facts. That is why I assert that, uncomfortable as it may be to acknowledge it, it seems that the majority of us have much more in common with climate denialists than we like to think.

I'm going to try to change that.

The book you are holding in your hands aims to provide a cogent way of thinking about all this. A way to not look away. The enormity of the facts and the urgency of the situation can be overwhelming, I get that. I'm as daunted as you are.

The temptation to turn away is profound: it's not your problem; these disasters are happening to other people, elsewhere in space and time; maybe it might not be as bad as 'they' say. But these are stratagems for avoidance, and little more. I want to share with you how, starting from uncontroversial propositions about the love and care you feel for your own children, we arrive at a compelling case for taking action to prevent the destruction of ecosystems and build a liveable future for billions of as-yet-unborn strangers. I mean: a case that you will actually feel compelled by. Even if you *think* that you don't care about the planet, or even not about other people beyond your own family.

Clear thinking, combined simply with your genuine care for your own kids, really can do the trick of awakening you — and, in the same way, everyone else.

If at this point you feel desperate, or frustrated, wanting already to *do* something, then do it. Stop, put the book down for a minute; and (say) switch to a 100 per cent

renewable electricity supplier such as Good Energy or Ecotricity. It doesn't take long. Or if you have already done that, then get government help to get your home better insulated or fitted out with solar hot water.<sup>32</sup> That takes rather longer but can be even more significant. Or at least maybe switch your browser to the wonderful tree-planting site, Ecosia, which plants trees as you internet-search.

But do not be under any illusion that taking such conscience-salving steps amounts to more than the first tiny gesture in the direction we need to be going in. There is no individualistic solution to the ecological emergency. This book seeks to point you in the direction of travel that we will take together, if we choose not to fail our children. The journey through the following chapters requires a much more substantial level of courage and ambition than any green consumerism. It needs you as a citizen. And, in fact, as a whole human being. Beginning with the meaning of your role as a carer.

Let me close this introductory chapter by sketching how the remainder of my book, through four chapters of simple, accessible philosophy — combined with a few imaginative exercises and the occasional example from films, books and art — can enlighten and encourage. How, from premises that virtually everyone agrees to, we reach an extraordinarily salvational conclusion. How we might yet snatch a kind of triumph from the jaws of defeat, if we are brave and realistic enough to see, and *to try*.

*Chapter 2* explains why caring for your kids means you'll care for the whole human future. It begins from the observation that facts (taken by themselves) have failed us. Scientists thought that sharing the facts about the climate and ecological emergency with us would be enough. They were wrong. Instead, I begin by focussing on what we — on what *you* — most *value*. And what do humans value more than their own children? So, let's make the conservative assumption that your children are what you most value.

Next, I argue that concern for your own children isn't real if it doesn't include the same level of concern for *their* children too. This is because they love their children more than anything, and you don't love them if you destroy what they love. This logic

iterates: if you love your children, you are committed to loving all your/their descendants. The only non-reckless attitude to have toward the future of the human race is thus to care for it all because over time your descendants will, so far as you know, be spread anywhere or everywhere in the world, marrying away like rabbits. Real care just for your own children, therefore, entails the same care for the distant future of the whole human race. (And similar considerations apply *vis-à-vis* the young who you care about even if you are yourself childless.) This argument implies that it is useless to try to take care of your kids by (for example) building them a bunker, or making them incredibly wealthy. Although this might well work for a few decades or even generations, it won't work for your distant descendants if our collective life-support systems are breaking down. (This chapter also explains why the logic I have set out works for the parenting of the future undertaken by all of us, including those of us who don't have kids of our own.)

*Chapter 3* describes why caring for the human future means you care for the planetary future. Many people, even when convinced by the logical argument contained in Chapter 2, say that they only care about humans, and so still don't see any strong case for taking care of our ecosystems. But, I argue, anthropocentrism (the placing of humans first) *equates* to ecocentrism (the placing of the planetary ecosystem first). This is because, in the long term, the only non-reckless attitude to have toward the human race is to safeguard its (our) continued existence by protecting the ecosystems on which we depend. We depend on them utterly: for everything from regulation of the atmosphere (of pollution, of weather patterns), through new medical cures and foods, to places to seek refuge and solace and rest. It makes absolutely no sense to think of replacing those — or putting them at existential risk (risk of no longer existing). We are *nothing* without a living planet. We are nothing but part of it.

This inescapable fact turns concern for humans (a concern that, as Chapter 2 shows, extends into the distant future) into concern for the planetary ecosystem reaching into the distant future. Even if you (think you) don't give a fig about fluffy animals and trees, it nevertheless turns out that you *do*, because the only rational

*Parents For A Future*

How Loving Our Children Can Prevent Climate Collapse

By Rupert Read

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