

# BEGINNING AGAIN AT THE END: A DIALECTICS OF EXTINCTION

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*Ben Ware*

**Abstract:** This essay makes three connected moves. First, it examines various modalities of ‘the end’ in philosophy and contemporary neoliberal culture, asking what new political lessons might be drawn from each. Second, it looks at different dialectical ideas of catastrophe: Günther Anders’ and Jean-Pierre Dupuy’s notion of ‘enlightened doomsaying’; and Maurice Blanchot’s and Theodor Adorno’s contention that only in the face of extinction does humanity become visible in the first place. Third, the essay concludes by proposing a move beyond Blanchot and Adorno. We don’t just need to look the negative (extinction) in the face, but to move into the zone of politics proper: to recognise that only the negation of *this world* – a world of converging and multiplying catastrophes – ends the prospect of the end of *the world* – understood not as a sudden death, but rather as an incremental decay, the slow unravelling of intimately entangled forms of life.

**Keywords:** extinction, dialectics, ecology, Marxism, psychoanalysis, Kant, Adorno

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## THE END

### I.

In his late essay, ‘The End of all Things’, Immanuel Kant walks us towards the edge of a mental abyss. He invites us to imagine a scenario in which ‘the whole of nature will be rigid and as it were petrified: the last thought, the last feeling in the thinking subject will then stop and remain forever the same without any change’.<sup>1</sup> This idea of an *absolute end* is both ‘horrifying’ and ‘attractive’: ‘frighteningly sublime’, as Kant puts it. While such an end, strictly speaking, cannot be thought (it implies ‘an end of all time’, which we are unable to cognise), it is certainly not a meaningless idea. For Kant, the moral perfection that humans aspire towards cannot be realised within time, marked as it is by a constant alteration of their moral and physical state. This leads to the idea of a *final end*, which (at the same time) is the beginning of a duration in which beings as *supersensible* no longer stand under conditions of time and in which their ultimate moral end can thus be attained. The idea of an end of all things is therefore what gives worth to the world of rational beings; without it, as Kant writes, ‘creation itself appears purposeless ... like

1. Immanuel Kant, ‘The End of all Things’, in *Religion and Rational Theology*, Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni (trans.), Cambridge University Press, 1996, p227. (Hereafter *The End of all Things*.)

a play having no resolution and affording no cognition of any rational aim’.

The end of the world is, for Kant, an idea of ‘reason’; but thinking about it, as he suggests, inevitably becomes a kind of *repetition compulsion*: we ‘cannot cease’ turning our ‘terrified gaze back to [it] again and again’. This latter point is true with respect to both modern philosophy and the culture of contemporary capitalism. In the case of philosophy, thought is, we might say, forever haunted and fascinated by the possibility of extinction, wipe-out and ultimately its own negation. Nietzsche’s *oeuvre*, to take just one example, begins with (the fantasy of) an end. At the start of his posthumously published fragment, ‘On Truth and Lie in a Nonmoral Sense’, we encounter the following fable:

Once upon a time, in some out of the way corner of that universe which is dispersed into numberless twinkling solar systems, there was a star upon which clever beasts invented knowing. That was the most arrogant and mendacious minute of ‘world history’, but nevertheless, it was only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths, the star cooled and congealed, and the clever beasts had to die. One might invent such a fable, and yet he still would not have adequately illustrated how miserable, how shadowy and transient, how aimless and arbitrary the human intellect looks within nature. There were eternities during which it did not exist. And when it is all over with the human intellect, nothing will have happened.<sup>2</sup>

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘On Truth and Lie in a Nonmoral Sense’, in *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche’s Notebooks of the Early 1870s*, Daniel Breazale (trans.), Humanity Books, 1979, p79.

3. See Domenico Losurdo, *Nietzsche, the Aristocratic Rebel: Intellectual Biography and Critical Balance-Sheet*, Gregor Benton (trans.), Haymarket Books, 2021, p27.

4. The physicist Rudolph Clausius coined the term ‘heat-death’ in 1865. Clausius observes that when the universe attains the condition at which its entropy reaches a maximum, no further change can take place and the universe will ‘be in a state of unchanging death’. See P. M. Harman, *Energy, Force, and Matter: The Conceptual Developments of Nineteenth-Century Physics*, Cambridge University Press, 1982, p65.

Writing in the shadow of the Paris Commune, which he took to be an apocalyptic event,<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche here imagines the extinction of all human life in a *heat-death* scenario.<sup>4</sup> While the author’s tone is both provocative and playful, it is nevertheless possible to read the fable as enacting a double philosophical-ideological move. First, *a refutation of the revolutionary project as such*: occupying a minute position within the universe, the human species is a ‘miserable’, ‘aimless’ and ultimately insignificant thing, and from this cosmological perspective all political change becomes meaningless. And second, *a critique of the anthropocentric world view*: consumed by ‘arrogance’, human beings see themselves as separate from other natural beings, as occupying a privileged place, believing, in Nietzsche’s words, that ‘the eyes of the universe are telescopically focused’ upon them.

This sets up an interesting confrontation with Kant. In ‘The End of all Things’, the idea of a *final end* is implicitly tied to the belief that the world exists for the sake of its rational inhabitants. And indeed, when Kant goes on to speak about the expectation of a *terrible end* to come – a cosmic catastrophe delivered as divine punishment for the ‘corruption’ of the species – this further expresses a conviction that humans are in some sense *exceptional* in the order of world-beings. While Nietzsche’s critique of anthropocentrism might, by contrast, appear progressive, striking a chord with a certain strand of contemporary ecological thought, we should nevertheless bear in mind

that this critique emerges directly from the philosopher's anti-collectivist, anti-revolutionary position. As Domenico Losurdo points out, it is a profound aversion to the radical human rights proclaimed by the French Revolution – and later by the Communards – that stimulates Nietzsche's rejection of anthropocentrism. What is more, while this critique stresses the continuity between human beings and the rest of nature, it also emphasises what it takes to be the vast differences among human beings themselves – the 'slave' versus the 'master', the 'lumpen' versus the '*Übermensch*', the 'Semite' versus the 'Aryan'; and in this respect, it can be seen as a direct precursor of modern forms of eco-fascism.

To the extent that it grounds fantasies of conquest and divine entitlement, a certain idea of human exceptionalism should of course be resolutely rejected. At the same time, however, we need to be mindful of the ways in which liberal-philosophical arguments against anthropocentrism often obscure and exacerbate the very problems which they purport to solve. Such arguments have become increasingly common in our own period of *terrible ends* (to use Kant's phrase): an era of accelerating climate heating, environmental depredation, and the spectre of mass extinction. In an article for *Time* magazine, Judith Butler, for example, makes the following claim:

[A]n inhabitable world for humans depends on a flourishing earth that does not have humans at its centre. We oppose environmental toxins not only so that we humans can live and breathe without fear of being poisoned, but also because the water and the air must have lives that are not centred on our own. As we dismantle the rigid forms of individuality in these interconnected times, we can imagine the smaller part that human worlds must play on this earth whose regeneration we depend upon – and which, in turn, depends upon our smaller and more mindful role.<sup>5</sup>

Here human exceptionalism is paradoxically affirmed at the very point at which it is rejected. Humans, we are told, must radically de-centre themselves with respect to the earth; dismantle all hitherto existing ontological hierarchies; fold themselves modestly into the great interconnected network of animate and inanimate things. But these moral injunctions serve only (in different ways) to *foreground* the human. First, and mostly obviously, the idea of a new relation to the earth is one which makes sense only from the human standpoint: it is (to paraphrase Nietzsche) a human-all-too-human fantasy, towards which the earth and nature remain utterly indifferent. In this respect, we might say that the *eco* is, in typically anthropocentric fashion, wholly consumed by the philosophical *ego*. Second, the notion of an 'inhabitable world' as it is here presented, might be read as a point of convergence between liberal environmentalism and a strange kind of eco-political disavowal. At precisely the moment when collective and large-scale human interventions are called for, we hear instead that the future depends upon humans adopting

5. Judith Butler, 'Creating an Inhabitable World for Humans Means Dismantling Rigid Forms of Individuality', *Time*, 21 April 2021, <https://time.com/5953396/judith-butler-safe-world-individuality/>.

6. See Slavoj Žižek, 'Last Exit to Socialism', *Jacobin*, 21 July 2021.

7. Adrian Johnston, *Prolegomena to any Future Materialism, Volume Two: A Weak Nature Alone*, Northwestern University Press, 2019, p26.

8. Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*, Duke University Press, 1993, p30.

9. G.W.F. Hegel *Phenomenology of Spirit*, A.V. Miller (trans.), Oxford University Press, 1977, p21.

10. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Alain Sheridan (trans.) W.W. Norton and Co., 1981, pp263. (Hereafter *Four Fundamental Concepts*.)

11. Louis Althusser, *The Spectre of Hegel: Early Writings*, G.M. Goshgarian (trans.), Verso, 1997, p170.

12. Russell Sbriglia and Slavoj Žižek, 'Subject Matters', in *Subject Lessons: Hegel, Lacan and the Future of Materialism*, Russell Sbriglia and Slavoj Žižek (eds), Northwestern University Press, 2020, p13.

a 'smaller and more mindful role',<sup>6</sup> in order to create an environment free of 'toxins' in which air and water acquire their own distinctive and dynamic agency. But this, once again, is a uniquely *human vision*: one falling somewhere between Deep Ecology, new materialism, and New Age animism.

One of the main problems with liberal anti-anthropocentrism is not so much that the human (unwittingly) re-emerges centre stage, but that it does so in exactly the wrong kind of way. Rather than the fiction of a chastened humanity treading lightly on the earth and achieving some kind of harmonious 'balance' with nature, we need to begin instead by acknowledging that human beings are in fact *freaks of nature*: constitutively divided speaking beings; subjects of the unconscious and the death drive; and beings who are *dialectical contradictions* – on the one hand, *part of nature* (emerging immanently out of it) and, on the other hand, standing *apart* from this very nature (acquiring a degree of independence and autonomy from it). This latter point is crucial and can be further developed along lines suggested by Hegel and a number of his contemporary interlocutors.

The subject that emerges from nature, and which separates itself off from nature in order to achieve a kind of self-relating independence, is, we might say, an effect of the *non-identity at the heart of nature*, the failure of nature to be fully natural. As Adrian Johnston remarks, nature is not some 'placid organic evenness ... undisturbed by any destabilising imbalances'; rather it is '*perturbed from within itself*'.<sup>7</sup> The subject is thus the name of the fissure by way of which nature becomes 'alien' to itself;<sup>8</sup> it is the push of natural substance to produce its own otherness; and this, at least in one respect, is what Hegel means when he says that 'substance shows itself to be essentially subject'.<sup>9</sup> Putting the point slightly differently and adapting a phrase from Jacques Lacan's Seminar XI, we can say that there is something in nature *more than nature itself*;<sup>10</sup> and this extra something, this *exteriority* which is also *interior*, is the human subject which nature generates out of itself.

But to think of the subject as dialectically entwined with nature, is also to think of nature as *ontologically incomplete*: as having a void or hole inscribed at its very centre. 'At the level of nature,' as Althusser writes, the human subject 'is an absurdity, a gap in being, an "empty nothing," a "night"' – the final references here being to Hegel's 1805-6 *Jenaer Realphilosophie* manuscript and to his famous description of human beings as 'the night of the world' (*die Nacht der Welt*).<sup>11</sup> This empty nothing, this void of pure negativity which is the subject, operates however in a powerfully double sense: it is both *the wound of nature*, the rupturing of any unified identity that substance might have enjoyed with itself; and simultaneously the attempt to *heal the wound* by constructing a universe of meaning out of negativity itself.<sup>12</sup> If we are to think the relation between subject and nature, then it is from this point that we need to begin: first, the subject as nature's inner's disturbance, its excess of negativity, that which prevents it from achieving any kind of harmonious internal 'balance'; and second, the experience of negativity itself (including

an awareness of our *non-rapport* with nature)<sup>13</sup> as the very precondition for the appearance of a new kind of human universality which (potentially at least) can make possible a transformed relationship with all living things.

## II.

How then might we locate the historical origin of the kind of subject we have here been describing? Out of what sort of world does this subject emerge? Whilst Hegel has one kind of answer to these questions, here we can close the circle and turn instead to a footnote in ‘The End of all Things’ where the Sage of Königsberg provides us with another kind of answer – a speculative theological farce, which we might nevertheless treat *as if* it were fully serious. Drawing on the work of a certain ‘Persian wit’, Kant says that ‘our earthly world’, the dwelling place of the human subject, originated as a ‘*cloaca*’ – a shit house – ‘where all the excrement from the other worlds [was] deposited’. According to this account, in paradise, the dwelling place of the first human couple,

there was a garden with ample trees richly provided with splendid fruits, whose digested residue after the couple’s enjoyment of them, vanished through an unnoticed evaporation; the exception was a single tree in the middle of the garden, which bore a fruit which was delicious but did not dry up in this way. As it now happened, our first parents now lusted after it, despite the prohibition against tasting it, and so there was no other way to keep heaven from being polluted except to take the advice of one of the angels who pointed out to them the distant earth, with the words: ‘There is the toilet of the whole universe,’ and then carried them there in order to relieve themselves, but then flew back to heaven leaving them behind. This is how the human race [arose] on earth (*The End of All Things*, p224-5).

This scatological re-telling of the myth of the Fall proves to be extremely useful. First, as Kant elsewhere suggests, the eating of the fruit is not a moral crime, but rather an originary *liberation from nature*.<sup>14</sup> The Fall, in this respect, is nothing other than a fall *into subjectivity* – an act of radical self-positing at which point the aforementioned ontological crack in nature appears. Second, from the contemporary perspective, we can take Kant’s footnote as a reminder that there can be no return to a paradisaical world completely free of ‘toxins’, ‘emissions’ and ‘pollution’. Our world is a world of waste: a mountain of shit, piling ever skywards, which now includes not just human effluence (almost 700 million people worldwide still defecate in the open, 2 billion don’t have access to toilets), but also carbon dioxide, methane, plastics, asbestos, heavy metals, deadly chemicals, radioactive material and trashed electronics; not to mention endless digital spam, masses of obsolete data stored in the cloud and the daily churn of social media trash. ‘*Civilisation is the sewer*’, as Lacan

13. The idea of a non-rapport or non-relation with nature draws on Lacan’s expression: ‘there’s no such thing as a sexual relation’ (*il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel*). On the human non-relation with nature, see Lorraine Daston, ‘The World in Order’, in *Without Nature? A New Condition for Theology*, David Albertston and Cabell King (eds), Fordham University Press, 2010, p16. Paradoxically, however, folded into this non-relation is a relation at the level of the bio-material body. Thus, the human never succeeds in fully denaturalising itself.

14. Immanuel Kant, ‘Conjectural Beginning of Human History’ (1786), in *Anthropology, History and Education*, Mary Gregor et al. (trans.), Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp164-5.

15. Jacques Lacan, 'Lituraterre', Dany Nobus (trans.), *Continental Philosophy Review*, 2013, 46:1, pp327-334. (Emphasis added.)

16. See Bertolt Brecht, 'Saint Joan of the Stockyards', in *Collected Plays: Three*, Ralph Manheim (trans.), Methuen, 1998, p285. See also, Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, E.B. Ashton (trans.), Routledge, 2004, p366.

17. Alenka Zupančič, 'The End of Ideology, the Ideology of the End', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, October 2020, 119:4, pp833-844, p833. (Hereafter *The End of Ideology*.)

writes in a late essay;<sup>15</sup> a remark which we might read here not just as saying that civilisation emerges with the invention of sewage systems, but, rather, that our own civilisation has now become *nothing but a sewer* – a mansion built out of dogshit, as Brecht memorably describes it.<sup>16</sup>

## VARIETIES OF THE END

### I.

If modern philosophy can't stop returning to the idea of the end, then the same is also true of contemporary culture. Within culture, however, the fantasy of the end takes a number of distinct forms which we will need to be theoretically attentive to.

In the 2021 film *How it Ends*, the central character Liza (Zoe Lister-Jones) decides how to navigate her last day on earth. Sporting an inconspicuous Chanel leather backpack, and with her younger self (her 'metaphysical YS') in tow, Liza walks the streets of suburban Los Angeles attempting to settle accounts with her parents, friends and various ex-lovers, before a life-destroying meteorite finally strikes the earth. The impending prospect of mass extinction is here a breezy affair, involving breakfast pancakes, psychedelic drugs, and a sentimental singalong with the indie-folk performer Sharon Von Etten. In this version of apocalypse, there is no social breakdown, no struggles over access to resources, and no tooled-up military personnel patrolling the streets. Indeed, the film's key ideological manoeuvre is to displace all evil from *inside* (capitalist economic and social relations) to *outside* (the chaotic universe itself), while at the same time presenting annihilation as part of the mildly eccentric everyday run of things. The end is, consequently, not only something over which the characters have no control, but also something which they can *enjoy* as pure unadulterated spectacle.

We might refer to this particular fantasy of the end as the *end as sublime event*: that is, the end as spectacular catastrophe, as an abrupt and violent intrusion arriving from elsewhere. According to Alenka Zupančič, the idea of the end as involving a 'total destruction of the earth' is, at least in our own period, bound up with a broader ideological shift that occurs at the end of the Cold War: one emblematised in Francis Fukuyama's infamous thesis that world history has reached its categorical conclusion since there is no longer any viable alternative to Western liberal capitalism.<sup>17</sup> Rather than signalling a *final end*, however, what this argument announces is precisely the opposite: the impossibility of an end, and specifically the impossibility of ending capitalism or of capitalism as we know it ever coming to an end. This, as Zupančič points out, plays a crucial role in restructuring the limits of political thought and imagination: 'the end, or any kind of serious transformation', can now only be conceived of as coming catastrophically 'from the great *Outside*' (*The End of Ideology*, p834).

We can, however, add a double dialectical twist to this argument. The fantasy of a world-destroying end, which clearly both predates and lives on beyond Fukuyama's utopian vision of *posthistoire*, might be seen to operate in a curiously two-fold sense. First, this fantasy functions as a kind of psychic defence: the idea of a sublime ending provides a protective shield against the real horror that history no longer has any aim or purpose, meaning that we might now have arrived at something like a new *chronic mode*, which may well be a state infinitely worse than death.<sup>18</sup> Second, rather than signalling capitalism's (Fukuyamist) triumph, the fantasy of a final end is, we might say, an effect of an internal disturbance within capitalism itself. As George Caffentzis writes, 'whenever the ongoing model of exploitation becomes untenable, capital has intimations of mortality *qua* the world's end'.<sup>19</sup> But because there is never anything secure about the capitalist model, this apocalyptic fear becomes part of capitalism's own chronic condition: *the fantasy of capital is inseparable from the anxiety about the apocalypse of capital*.

Taking the two points together, we thus arrive at an intriguing paradox: the idea of a final end is a defence against the idea that the present state of things will never end; but this is itself a fantasy which conceals the (repressed) truth that the spectre of the end is precisely what haunts capitalism. Ultimately, then, we might conclude that *the recurrent fantasy of a sublime end has its material basis in capitalism's anxiety about its own ability to reproduce itself over time*. It is as if the system secretly knows that it is moving inexorably in the direction of its own extinction.<sup>20</sup>

## II.

The fantasy of the end as sublime event can be contrasted with another idea of ending: the end as repetition, as stuckness within a circuit, an end, that is, which plays out *endlessly*. In Darren Aronfsky's 2019 film *mother!*, a husband and wife live alone in a grand isolated house. The husband (Javier Bardem), named 'Him', is a poet struggling to find creative inspiration; his wife (Jennifer Lawrence), the film's unnamed 'mother', is at work carefully restoring the house after it (at some previous, unspecified time) was destroyed in a fire. The uneasy peace between the couple is interrupted only minutes into the film by the arrival of an uninvited guest ('the doctor'), and then, shortly afterwards, by the appearance of his wife. While Him happily accepts the new couple into the house, and indeed invites them to 'stay' as long as they wish, mother is perplexed: she isn't consulted on the matter and the bizarre guests clearly have no respect for her home – they smoke indoors, fuck wherever they please, and fill the place with their vomit, trash, and dirty laundry. As the film progresses and, by various shocking twists and turns, more and more strangers arrive at the house, proceeding to completely destroy the environment which mother has created and, finally, to violate the body of mother herself.

18. On the temporality of the 'new chronic' condition, see Eric Cazzdyn, *The Already Dead: The New Time of Politics, Culture and Illness*, Duke University Press, 2012, pp13-98.

19. George Caffentzis, *In Letters of Blood and Fire: Work, Machines, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, PM Press, 2013, p12.

20. See Nicolai Bukharin, *Philosophical Arabesques*, Monthly Review Press, 2005, p111.

An obvious ecological reading presents itself here: mother is Mother Nature, Gaia, the 'goddess' of Earth; while Him and the host of other characters are exploitative, ecophobic humanity, the destructive *anthropos*. Mother, in her own words, has created a 'paradise', but she and her home (the two are in fact *one*) are seen only as a resource: they provide the 'care' and 'nurture' which allows Him to 'create' and the 'setting' for the violent and hedonistic enjoyment of the intruders. When mother's child is taken from her and brutally murdered and eaten by the untamed hordes, this, the film (unsubtly) suggests, is what our relation to nature has now become.

But this ecological reading is, we should be clear, precisely the film's ideological trap. To go along with such an account is to find oneself caught up in the various distortions and misrecognitions which frame the film as a whole: humanity is the disease; the earth is over-populated (mother nature's house is now full); given the degraded state into which civilisation has now fallen, the only way of protecting mother nature would be by installing some kind of Climate Leviathan. It is here, then, that we should attempt to turn the film inside out, politically speaking, by means of a number of specific questions. Aren't the intruders themselves *part of* nature, its perverse inner disturbance, what is in nature more than nature itself (to go back to a previously cited remark)? Doesn't the disorder in mother nature's house therefore reveal the catastrophe at the heart of nature, what Lacan calls nature's 'rotteness' (*pourriture*) 'out of which oozes culture as *antiphysis*' (anti-nature).<sup>21</sup> While the film traffics in the nostalgic idea of a return to 'primitive conditions', doesn't this fantasy of a return to a state of pre-castrated earthly innocence also turn out to be a masculine fantasy in its purest form: one in which nature figures as both mother and virgin? But there is an additional issue. The film's suggestion that 'we' – the human species – are all equally responsible for the destruction of the earth is aligned with the thesis of the anthropocene, a thesis which moves simultaneously in two directions: on the one hand, the planet has now entered a new geological era in which the human is the dominant force; on the other hand, precisely because the anthropocene *is* a new geological epoch, any *real* historical agency on the part of the human species is rendered obsolete.<sup>22</sup> Mastery and impotence thus coincide; and politically and temporally speaking, we arrive at a new endless end, an inescapable enclosure, an era of irreversible species alienation in which the past is extinguished and the future occluded. Isn't it *this* empty, looped temporality, rather than simply the depredations of nature, which the film dramatises and seemingly cannot get outside?

At the close of the film, after mother's house has been reduced to ruins, Him reaches into mother's charred body and pulls out a crystal – an *objet a* (an object *cause* of desire) (*Four Fundamental Concepts*, p198) – that will allow him to go on with his 'work'. The film then cuts to a scene in which a young woman wakes up in bed in the same house – a repetition of one of the film's opening scenes. Is the young woman mother? Yes and no. It is in fact her

21. See Jacques Lacan, *L'insu que Sait...*, Seminar XXIV 1976-77, 17 May 1977, Cormac Gallagher (trans.).

22. According to the discourse of the anthropocene, the only kind of intervention that human beings can now make is to act as 'planetary managers' overseeing 'large-scale geo-engineering projects' in order to "'optimise" climate'. See Paul J. Crutzen, 'The Anthropocene: Geology of Mankind', *Nature*, 415, 2000.



double (played by a different actor): the whole drama of the end is thus set up to repeat on a potentially endless loop. We are, as the lyrics of the Skeeter Davis outro song suggest, stuck at ‘the end of the world’ because we have now lost the love of mother nature. And yet, is it not precisely at the moment of closing, that a space also opens up in which the end – and specifically the apparently endless end of our ‘anthropocenic’ present – can be dialectically re-thought?

### III.

The first thing to say here is that the end, at least in certain instances, provides the subject with a way of *going on*. It is not only a cause of anxiety and dread, but also a source of enjoyment *beyond mere pleasure*. The wild excitement of Him in the face of world destruction is an instance of what we might call *apocalyptic jouissance*.

We can follow this idea into the domain of contemporary eco-activism, where it connects up with what Gilles Deleuze has called ‘the problem of masochism’. For Deleuze, masochism involves a double attitude towards the law: on the one hand, the law is transferred onto the mother and identified with the image of the mother; on the other hand, the masochist carries out a humorous subversion of the law by zealously following it to the letter.<sup>23</sup> In the case of the activist group Extinction Rebellion (XR), however, Deleuze’s definition is turned upside down. XR’s masochistic acts of self-inflicted pain – locking their bodies on to inanimate objects, sewing their lips together, playing dead and deliberately attempting to get arrested by the police – have a clear two-fold aim. First, they attempt to provoke the anxiety of the Other (in this case ‘the government’); and second, rather than subverting the law, they attempt to call it forth, to bring it *fully* into being:<sup>24</sup> what is desired is a new Master figure who will acknowledge the activist’s ‘demands’ and integrate them into the law’s own functioning through the creation of a ‘Citizens Assembly’.<sup>25</sup> What is appealed to here, then, is the law of the father, rather than the (Deleuzean) law of the mother; and this return to paternal authority is underscored by Lacan when he rewrites perversion as *père-version*.<sup>26</sup> Paradoxically, however, it is the law’s own failure, its refusal to accede to what the activist demands, that opens up the space for the latter’s *apocalyptic jouissance*: ‘climate change: we’re fucked’, as the infinitely repeated and endlessly enjoyed XR slogan has it – a phrase that in connecting the threat of annihilation with sexual gratification perfectly sums up the political impotence of the contemporary eco-masochist. In striving to bring an end to the threat of the end (the devastation of the planet), eco-masochism merely adds to the prevailing culture of the endless end: Spectacle (of protest), Arrest (by the authorities), Demand (that the capitalist state ‘act’ and ‘tell the truth’) – a SAD politics repeated ad infinitum.

And yet, by observing this ideological impasse it is also possible to glimpse

23. Gilles Deleuze, ‘Coldness and Cruelty’, in *Masochism*, Zone Books, 1991, pp81-94.

24. This alternative (counter-Deleuzean) view of masochism – which, with some modifications, would seem to perfectly capture the subject-position of the XR activist – is theoretically derived from Lacan. See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X: Anxiety*, A.R. Price (trans.), Polity Press, 2014, pp105-107.

25. Here we can paraphrase Lacan: *What you aspire to as extinction rebels is a master: You will get one!* See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Russell Grigg (trans.), W.W. Norton and Son, 2007, p207.

26. As Jacques-Alain Miller points out: *père-version* ‘is untranslatable, made up of *père*, father, and *version*. It implies a *turning to the father*, a *call to the father*, which is also perhaps a very profound reminder that perversion is, in no sense, a subversion’. Jacques-Alain Miller, ‘Perversion’, in *Reading Seminars I and II: Lacan’s Return to Freud*, Richard Feldstein et al. (eds), State University of New York Press, 1996, p308. (Emphasis in original.)

a new way forward, to apprehend collective politics under a changed aspect. Simply put, to break out of the endless end – the anthropocenic end as spirit-devouring empty repetition – we will need to begin by refraining from making the wrong appeals, to the wrong people, at the wrong time. Here Franz Kafka can act as our political guide. His remarkable micro story ‘Give it Up!’ (*Gibs auf!*), written between 1917 and 1923, and unpublished during the author’s lifetime, reads as follows:

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 realised 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.<sup>27</sup>

27. Franz Kafka, ‘Give it Up’, in *Franz Kafka: The Complete Stories*, Schocken Books, 1971, p456.

In Kafka’s tale, the figure of authority being appealed to for help is one whose function it is to preserve existing social and economic relations; and one who is therefore incapable of providing any kind of direction. Indeed, requesting them do so is enough to raise laughter: ‘You want help from me?’ ‘Me?’ ‘Really?’ ‘Well, if that’s what it has come to, I suggest you give it up!’ We should let this stand as Kafka’s lesson on the pitfalls of asking those in power (or those whose role it is to serve power) to show us the way out of our current planetary emergency. If the future is to be salvaged and the dead time of the present to be redeemed, it will only be through the transformative agency of those who have learned how to take political sides.

## ‘DOOMSAYING’ AND ITS LIMITS

### I.

The German-Jewish thinker Günther Anders was given the epithet ‘*Atomphilosoph*’ (the ‘nuclear philosopher’). A contemporary of Herbert Marcuse, Bertolt Brecht and Hannah Arendt (to whom he was married from 1929-1937), Anders devoted much of his work in the 1950s and early 1960s to exploring the relation between technology and catastrophe, especially the threat of nuclear extermination. According to Anders, we have become ‘inverted Utopians’: ‘while ordinary Utopians are unable to actually produce what they are able to visualise, we are unable to visualise what we are actually producing.’<sup>28</sup> This *Promethean gap* – ‘our capacity to produce as opposed to our power to imagine’ – ‘defines the moral situation [facing us] today’ (*Theses for the Atomic Age*, p496). Our society is, Anders argues, a society of machines

28. Günther Anders, ‘Theses for the Atomic Age’, *The Massachusetts Review*, 3:2, 1962, pp493-505, p496. (Hereafter *Theses for the Atomic Age*.)

and technological devices; and it through these that the great 'dream of omnipotence has at long last come true'.<sup>29</sup> 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' (*Reflections*, emphasis added). With these new 'apocalyptic powers', we enter what Anders calls 'The Last Age':

On August 6, 1945, the day of Hiroshima, a New Age began: the age in which at any given moment we have the power to transform any given place on our planet, and even our planet itself, into a Hiroshima. On that day we became, at least 'modo negativo', omnipotent; but since, on the other hand, we can be wiped out at any given moment, we also became totally impotent. However long this age may last, even if it should last forever, it is 'The Last Age' ...

Thus the basic moral question of former times must be radically reformulated: instead of asking 'How should we live?', we now must ask 'Will we live?' (*Theses for the Atomic Age*, p493).

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*. As Anders puts it: 'Our imperative: "Expand the capacity of your imagination", means, in concreto: "Increase your capacity of fear". Therefore: don't fear fear, have the courage to be frightened, and to frighten others, too. Frighten thy neighbour as yourself.' (*Theses for the Atomic Age*, p498.) We need then to become *enlightened doomsayers*.<sup>30</sup> Anders distills this doomsaying metaphysics into a short parable which creatively retells the Old Testament 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, 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,

29. Günther Anders, 'Reflections on the H Bomb', *Dissent*, 3:2, 1956, pp146-155, p146. (Hereafter, *Reflections*.)

30. The phrase is from Jean-Pierre Dupuy, one of Anders' most sophisticated readers. See, for example, Jean-Pierre Dupuy, 'The Precautionary Principle and Enlightened Domsaying: Rational Choice before the Apocalypse', *Occasion: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities*, 1:1, 2009, pp1-13.

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.'<sup>31</sup>

31. Cited in Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *The Mark of the Sacred*, M. B. DeBevoise (trans.), Stanford University Press, 2013, p203. (Hereafter *Mark of the Sacred*.)

According to the philosopher Jean-Pierre Dupuy, what we discover in Anders' Noah is an apocalypticism which signposts a way out of our current impasse when it comes to thinking the planetary catastrophe. For Dupuy, in Anders' 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 (a version of the famous 'future anterior' that we find in Lacan). By acting *as if* the catastrophe has already taken place – or will *necessarily* take place – we are able to project ourselves into the post-apocalyptic situation and ask what we could and should have done otherwise. 'Let me help you build an ark, so that it may become false' (*Mark of the Sacred*, p204).

Both philosophically and politically, however, Dupuy's metaphysical 'ruse', which he extracts from Anders, turns out to be a dead end.<sup>32</sup> First, it is not clear why thinking of the catastrophe as inscribed in our future as fate would necessarily mobilise us to act against it; especially if averting the worst turns out to be (as Dupuy suggests) an activity of 'indefinite postponement', an infinite extension of the present. The politics of Dupuy's temporal metaphysics is liberal and survivalist, rather than emancipatory: by asking us to act 'as if' the future is already a ruin, he gives no suggestion of a transformed society to come, merely the hope that we might succeed in preserving *what already is*. Second, to advocate acting 'as if' the catastrophe is our implacable destiny is still to posit catastrophe as an existential dark cloud looming on the horizon. But this is like the case of the obsessional neurotic patient who fears 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 in fact *already occurred*.<sup>33</sup>

We don't need to act 'as if' the catastrophe has happened or will one day happen because – as the coronavirus pandemic already made clear – the future of recurring disasters linked to climate change and ecological destruction has *already arrived*. Our task is thus not to try to avert the worst by prophesying it, but rather to find ourselves *within* the current moment of

32. For Dupuy's reference to enlightened doomsaying as a 'ruse' see, for example, Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *A Short Treatise on the Metaphysics of Tsunamis*, M.B. DeBevoise (trans.), Michigan State University Press, 2015.

33. See D.W. Winnicott, 'Fear of Breakdown', *International Review of Psychoanalysis*, 1, 1974, pp103-7.

crisis and catastrophe: to take the threat 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 attempts by passengers on capitalism's runaway train 'to activate the emergency break'.<sup>34</sup> The aim, as Benjamin powerfully puts it, is 'to interrupt the course of the world' (*Paralipomena*, p170).

## LOOKING EXTINCTION IN THE FACE

### I.

Capitalism as the time of catastrophe; catastrophe as capitalism's chronic condition: this is the point from which radical thought needs to begin.

In the penultimate section of his magnum opus *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno, not for the first time, turns Hegel's thought politically on its head: 'The world spirit ... would have to be defined as permanent catastrophe.'<sup>35</sup> For Hegel, world spirit (*Weltgeist*) is the *substance of history*, the spirit of the world as it reveals itself in human consciousness; its aim is to make itself its own object, to discover its true nature and to become conscious of itself.<sup>36</sup> At each stage of its development, world spirit realises itself in the forms of life of particular human societies: their political institutions, moral frameworks, cultural models and systems of knowledge. As Adorno makes clear, however, it is capitalism, ironically and perversely, that has now realised Hegel's *Weltgeist*. To the extent that world history is an expression of the process of this new spirit, it is a history 'leading not from savagery to humanitarianism ... but from the slingshot to the megaton bomb' (*Negative Dialectics*, p320). Contra the optimistic philosophies of Hegel and Kant, there is no progressivist 'universal history', just an emergency situation in which 'the forms of humanity's own global societal constitution threaten its life'.<sup>37</sup> 'The One and All that keeps rolling to this day – with occasional breathing spells – [is] the absolute of suffering', Adorno writes (*Negative Dialectics*, p320). We should add here, however, that in our own time – a period of suffocating pandemics, murderous police chokeholds and megacities on the verge of asphyxiation – even this freedom to draw breath can now no longer be taken for granted.<sup>38</sup>

But Adorno also makes another dialectical move. While the chronic nature of catastrophe means that we cannot assume any progress that would suggest that humanity already exists and is therefore capable of making progress, progress can, nevertheless, still be thought. It 'would be the very establishment of humanity in the first place, *whose prospect opens up in the face of its own extinction*' (*Progress*, p145, emphasis added). It is the threat of extinction then – *an end without remainder*, 'the most extreme, total calamity' – which makes possible the realisation of humanity, the coming into being of what Adorno calls a 'self-conscious global subject' (*Progress*, p144).<sup>39</sup> Paraphrasing lines from Hölderlin's poem 'Patmos', famously cited by Heidegger in his lecture 'The

34. Walter Benjamin, 'Paralipomena to "On the Concept of History"', in *Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940*, Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings (eds), The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003, p402. (Hereafter *Paralipomena*.)

35. Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, E.B. Ashton (trans.), Routledge, 1990, p320. (Hereafter *Negative Dialectics*.)

36. G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, H.B. Nisbett (trans.), Cambridge University Press, 1984, pp29, 52, 65.

37. Theodor Adorno, 'Progress', in *Critical Models*, Henry Pickford (ed.), Columbia University Press, 2005, pp144. (Hereafter *Progress*.)

38. See also, Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *Breathing: Chaos and Poetry*, Semiotext(e), 2018.

39. See also, Theodor Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965*, Rodney Livingstone (trans.), Polity Press, 2006, pp116, 118, 123, 143.

40. Martin Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology', in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, William Lovitt (trans.), Harper & Row, 1977, pp28, 34.

41. Sigmund Freud, 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death', in *Civilisation, Society and Religion*, James Strachey (trans.), Penguin, 1991, pp79-80.

42. Maurice Blanchot, 'The Apocalypse is Disappointing', in *Friendship*, Elizabeth Rottenberg (trans.), Stanford University Press, 1997, pp101-108. (Hereafter *The Apocalypse is Disappointing*.)

Question Concerning Technology', we might say that for Adorno 'out of the danger of human extinction, the saving power also grows'.<sup>40</sup> Another point of connection is to Freud's 1915 essay, 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death'. Writing in the midst of the great human extinction crisis of World War One, Freud observes:

War is bound to sweep away our conventional treatment of death. Death will no longer be denied; we are forced to believe in it. People really die; and no longer one by one, but many, often tens of thousands in a single day. [And yet, precisely because of death's proximity,] [l]ife has, indeed, become interesting again; it has recovered its full potential.<sup>41</sup>

The difference between Adorno and Freud is, however, clear. For Adorno the threat of extinction compels us to think about how *society as a whole* might be rationally re-organised; whereas Freud's much more modernist point is that through the encounter with the reality of mass death, life is once again *enlivened*, brought *back to life*.

## II.

The connection between the threat of extinction and the opening up of new subjective and political horizons is given one of its most suggestive explorations in Maurice Blanchot's short essay 'The Apocalypse is Disappointing'.<sup>42</sup> In the first part of his essay, Blanchot turns to Karl Jaspers' 1958 book *The Atomic Bomb and The Future of Man*. Blanchot reconstructs Jaspers' argument along the following lines. Today humankind has the power to annihilate not only cities and specific populations, but also humanity as a whole. This is a point (as Günther Anders agrees) from which there is no going back; and therefore either humanity will disappear, or it will transform itself. Such a transformation will require nothing less than a 'profound conversion' (*The Apocalypse is Disappointing*, p101), a fidelity to something like the Rilkean maxim 'You must change your life'. But Blanchot also detects something decidedly odd about the style and substance of Jaspers' articulation. Despite the latter's rhetoric of 'change', not to mention the urgency of the issue with which he deals, in his book *nothing has changed* (*The Apocalypse is Disappointing*, p102): there is nothing new at the level of language, politics, or indeed philosophical thought. How, then, to account for this repetition in the face of a new catastrophic horizon? Blanchot provides a clear answer: while Jaspers is preoccupied with the end of humanity, his *real* concern is less the atomic threat and more the extinction of the so-called 'free world' threatened by communism (*The Apocalypse is Disappointing*, p103). There is, therefore, no new thinking in Jaspers because reflections on the bomb serve merely as a pretext for returning to old formulas and oppositions: western 'liberal freedom' as the

foundation of all values; death as preferential to 'oppression'. While Jaspers argues that the atomic bomb and what he calls 'explosive totalitarianism' are inextricable ('the two final forms of annihilation'), it is clear that if one *must* choose, then one's 'reason' should be guided by a familiar Cold War logic: better dead than red; better the end of all things than the end of NATO.<sup>43</sup>

What, then, of Blanchot's own reading of the extinction threat? His dialectics of annihilation attempts to open up the new. By putting into question the human species as a whole, the threat of extinction makes visible, for the first time, the *idea of totality*: a global human community (*The Apocalypse is Disappointing*, p105). But this totality exists only as a 'negative power'. The humanity that is threatened with disappearance does not yet exist in any meaningful sense, but simply as an abstract idea. Indeed, because humanity has not yet been fully established, it is, *strictly speaking*, incapable of being destroyed, which is why Blanchot says (somewhat ironically) that extinction (or what he terms 'apocalypse') is 'disappointing' (*The Apocalypse is Disappointing*, p106). However, now that there is at least the idea of humanity as a whole, we should work to construct a real 'human community', a true 'totality', one that can, paradoxically, be fully destroyed because it fully exists. Blanchot says, without further elaboration, that this this new totality should be called 'communist' (*The Apocalypse is Disappointing*, p107).

43. If anything, Blanchot is too politically reticent in his treatment of Jaspers. The latter was a vehement anti-Marxist, who participated in the founding conference of the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF): a CIA-backed anti-communist group that operated in Europe, North America, Asia, Africa, Latin America and Australia between 1950 and 1979.

### III.

Blanchot's point, much like Adorno's, is avowedly Hegelian: it is *only* by looking extinction in the face that humanity comes to glimpse the possibility of its own realisation. The prospect of the end places the idea of a new unity on the agenda; it opens up the potential of an awakening to the idea of totality. Or at least that's the theory. But here we might ask if this dialectic still holds true – if indeed it ever did. Does danger signal the possible emergence of a saving power in the way that Adorno and Blanchot both seem to believe? From our present perspective, the answer to this question must be twofold. First, contra Blanchot, the catastrophe is no longer a future possibility, but (as I argue in the previous section) that which, in one respect, has *already* arrived. This is not (or *not yet*) the nuclear calamity which Blanchot speaks of, but rather the coming together of the planetary ecological crisis, the global epidemiological crisis, and a new period of war(s) and economic devastation. This catastrophic convergence, far from placing the possibility of a global humanity on the immediate horizon, has instead intensified a series of sad passions, alienating symptoms and damaging political attachments: surplus rage, surplus anxiety, cynical resignation, fetishistic splitting or disavowal, the addiction to numbing forms of enjoyment, the inability to enjoy, identitarian narcissism, collective paranoia, melancholic withdrawal, moral hypochondria, historical forgetting, false (or confected) remembering, delegating one's pleasure, delegating one's anti-capitalism, the desperate attempt to preserve

the 'human' as it already exists under capitalism. What we are talking about here then is a new kind of traumatised psychic reality, a new wounded subjectivity, one which won't be overcome by a dialectics of mortal fear (being scared 'so much that we start fighting for our lives'),<sup>44</sup> but which will instead require a political shift away from the time of endless suffering – a time that Althusser defines, simply, as 'barbarism':

44. Alenka Zupančič, 'The Apocalypse is (still) Disappointing', *S: Journal of the Circle for Lacanian Ideology Critique*, 11, 2018, pp16-30, p28.

45. Louis Althusser, *History and Imperialism: Writings, 1963-1986*, G.M. Goshgarian (trans.), Polity Press, 2020, p50.

What is barbarism? Regression while remaining in place, stagnation while remaining in place, of a kind which human history offers examples by the hundreds. Yes, our civilisation can perish in place, not only without rising to a higher stage or sinking to a lower stage that has already existed, but in accumulating all the suffering of a childbirth that will not end, of a stillbirth that is not a delivery.<sup>45</sup>

How, then, in such conditions might the idea of the whole be placed back on the agenda? Importantly, as Adorno and Blanchot remind us, 'humanity' does not (yet) exist; its existence in the future would require its political construction. We are therefore still living in prehistory (as Marx famously points out), at a stage prior to the *actual* creation of human society. But it is here precisely – and this is the second point – that we should radically re-politicise the Adorno/Blanchot dialectic. The possibility of a real human community won't simply emerge *in the face of* pure negativity (through an encounter with the possibility of our own extinction); instead, it will require the realisation that *this world* (the world of unfolding catastrophe, illusory humanity, and 'normalised' barbarism) can itself be ended – ended through a conscious intervention into existing conditions.

The shift is therefore from the affective encounter to the zone of politics proper; and it hinges upon the recognition that only the collective negation of *this world* ends the prospect of the end of *the world* – understood here not as a sudden death, but rather as an incremental decay, the slow unravelling of intimately entangled forms of life. As Ernst Bloch points out: '*The true genesis is not at the beginning, but at the end*, and it starts to begin only when society and existence become radical'.<sup>46</sup> To terminate the threat of the end (as the biological end of all things) will therefore mean beginning again at the end (of prehistory): abolishing a mode of political and economic life which seeks to tether us all – the *yet to be born* – to a sick but undying present.

46. Ernst Bloch, *On Karl Marx*, Verso, 2018, p44.

**Ben Ware** is Co-Director of the Centre of Philosophy and Art at King's College 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, Psychoanalysis* (Thames & Hudson, 2019). His latest book, *On Extinction: Beginning Again at the End*, is forthcoming with Verso.