

Against Environmental Ethics

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Against Environmental Ethics

The concluding scene of Adam McKay's 2021 comedy *Don't Look Up* contains a surprising lesson on environmental ethics. After having realized that their efforts to prevent the devastating impact of a comet have failed and that life on Earth will be wiped out imminently, the main protagonists – the young astronomer Kate Dibiasky (Jennifer Lawrence) and her supervisor Randall Mindy (Leonardo DiCaprio) – do not crumble in despair of their horrific fate, nor do they act out in desperate escapades of drugs or sex. Instead, they travel back home to Mindy's family and share a calm evening dinner together. He reunites with his wife, whom he has been betraying, and with his sons. With them are also a scientist from NASA and a young shoplifter (who has a crush on Dibiasky), the latter of whom says a perfectly solemn prayer just before they are all obliterated.

What is surprising about this scene, and about the movie as such, is not that it carries a rather heavy sentimental tone, even though it is really a comedy about environmental disaster. (A Hollywood comedy without sentimentality would be a much bigger surprise.) The surprise is that the sentimental final scene is in fact a rather precise comment on environmental ethics – or on the relevant kind of ethical stance in the contemporary situation. If ethics concerns questions about how we should comport ourselves, how we should relate to others, how we should make sense of doing good in the face of meaninglessness, etc., then there can hardly be a more condensed ethical question than this one: How should we live together in our final hours? How do you maintain some level of dignity, when you know that chaos or even devastation will shortly follow?

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When I claim that these questions are particularly relevant for environmental ethics, I do not mean to say that we are all doomed, or that environmental action no longer makes any sense, but only that the kinds of particularly ethical questions that can be meaningfully asked about the environment are rapidly becoming fewer as the climate emergency intensifies. As a teacher of environmental ethics, for example, I have increasingly sensed an uncanny impatience over

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the past couple of years (if not in my students, then certainly in myself): Why should we discuss our relation to nature, the delicate similarities and differences between humans and other beings, the alienating forces of consumption, etc., when we are approaching tipping points that will accelerate the destruction of habitats across the globe? It makes sense to recycle your waste, I would claim, even until the very moment before the comet impacts, but only seen from the point of view of a kind of existentialist perspective, insisting that you want to complete your life as a person who recycles their waste.

Environmental ethics has a particular way of being out of joint. Warnings about the environmental unsustainability of societal structures always seem to be either too early or too late. They are still mostly dismissed as overly dramatic, hysterical, or, indeed, “politicizing”, because they usually imply a demand for certain drastic measures to reform the prevailing situation. The curious thing is that they are dismissed until the moment when they are suddenly no longer enough. (Who needs a poetic appreciation of the beauty of nature when a series of disasters is tangibly approaching?) We seem to fail to understand how we are creating environmental emergencies, until this understanding is no longer enough; until it is too late, almost like the predicament in Zeno’s paradox about Achilles and the tortoise in Jacques Lacan’s interpretation: “It is quite clear that Achilles can only pass the tortoise,” as he said in his Seminar XX, “he cannot catch up with it.”¹

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that philosophy has generally been too late. Allegedly, it is even a defining trait of the trade. Thinking about the environment, however, contains the obvious predicament that the objective conditions themselves undergo change, while great thoughts are contemplated, and so prescriptive philosophy with suggestions for the right conduct or “relation to nature” risks being strangely moot even before it is printed. When philosophy finally paints its green in green, another kind of truth is already required. (The owl of Minerva does still fly at dusk, but some of its cousins have gone extinct and a number of them are endangered, e.g. due to deforestation.) Some, it must be said, were too early rather than too late, but they were marginal figures: Arne Næss, Hans Jonas, Michel Serres. Their philosophies were esoteric and strug-

¹ Jacques Lacan, *Encore – On Feminine Sexuality, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX*, New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 1998, p. 8.

gled with genres and conventions, and generally were not taken seriously by the mainstream. Instead, they were aligned with mystics and poets and hippies. Many others have now appeared, but they are too late: researchers with cross-disciplinary projects that include “new” approaches to sustainability, nature, economy, and what not, mostly written in the jargon of the postmodern (neoliberal) academy. Paradoxically, being too late with respect to the problems that we are facing is no hindrance with respect to funding and institutional acceptance. On the contrary, it almost seems to be a necessary precondition for being on time, catching the wave, if you will. Those who were too early marginalized themselves from the academic mainstream; those who are too late are comfortably placed at its centre.

Science and Politics

More specifically, the reason for the particular impasse in environmental ethics, I think, must be found in the relation between science and politics. Science ideally describes the world, but generally does not “act” on its own knowledge. Others do but depend on science for their orientation. Those who know do not act, while those who act do not know. Although there is an undeniable level of more immediate experience in some aspects of environmental concern (the birds that did not sing in Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*,² for example), environmental activism generally relies, and should rely, on scientific knowledge in some form – about the fall in biodiversity, the rise in temperature, chemical pollution, etc. (indeed, the explanation of *why* the birds did not sing was ultimately a question of a chemical understanding of the effects of pesticides). Activists, whether in the form of environmental groups or individual opinion makers, however, are mostly rejected as being “too early” and for reasons that are very difficult to circumvent: they do not know *themselves* or cannot explain all the scientific details behind their concerns and are therefore easily dismissed as hysterics. The powers that be will typically listen to them “respectfully” and patiently explain their own responsibility for weighing other concerns as well and not getting ahead of themselves, when it comes to the outcries from the so called “interest groups”.

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The response to environmental concerns from the broader public and the political domain as a result tends to be “too late”. There might even be a case to be

² Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, Boston, Mariner Books, 2022.

made for the interpretation that the very enjoyment of dismissing “naïve” environmentalists in and of itself contributes to delaying serious action towards real problems. Perhaps this is even the reason why we have had to go through such a painful process of make-believe environmentalism, which we are still in. The pressure stemming from public concern in many areas, especially with respect to climate change, has become strong enough to demand some kind of action, but instead of addressing the problems directly, businesses, politicians, and academics establish a semblance of environmentalism addressed to the *concern* that people might have – not to that which they are concerned *about*. Instead of actual changes in infrastructure and economic incentives, we get public statements and agreements about “goals”, hopeful anticipation of research on new, technological solutions, programmes for “raising awareness”, pseudo-solutions like CO₂-quotas, and generally networking around “green economies”, while the problems continue to get worse. This is also where we find a very large portion of the academic interest in “sustainability”: career professionals in academia who are themselves not experts on chemistry, glaciology, oceanography, etc., but who react, when political actors and research foundations call for “answers”. They react, undoubtedly, out of genuine concern, or at least partly out of genuine concern (and maybe a little bit out of self-interest), but this concern is nonetheless a reaction to a reaction. Research foundations and ministries have finally reacted to the public concern, and this reaction causes the academic communities to react (and apply) in turn.

Climate science has been especially haunted by this paradox from its beginning. Due to the otherwise healthy conservative tendency in most natural science, reports about future scenarios, possible effects, tipping points, etc., have been described with precaution and caveats, which has led to complications and delays in the interpretation of what it is that science encourages us to do (if anything). Science does not write in imperatives, nor does it run ahead of itself in mixtures of stylistic experiments. It writes, at most, in conditionals: given so-and-so, such-and-such might happen, but we can only predict this within a certain statistical uncertainty. In many cases, this has led scientists themselves to experience an uncanny sensation of being too late, or that society seems to react ineffectively or even irrationally to their insights, because the very (cautious) nature of scientific prognoses opens a loophole for denial. (In *Don't Look Up*, the scientists initially predict the probability of the impact of the detected comet to be 99.78%, which makes the president (Meryl Streep) conclude that there really

is no reason to sound the alarm, since they cannot even say for certain that anything drastic must be done).

Sustainability or Deep Adaptation

In 2018, Jem Bendell wrote a review of recent climate science in which he concludes that we should stop pretending that we can avoid climate disaster and instead start talking about what he calls “deep adaptation”. His starting point is a meta-study of what climate science actually tells us, which is, basically, that the situation is much worse than we like to pretend. Temperatures have risen, the Arctic is melting, storms, floods, and droughts are increasing, agriculture is being impacted, marine ecosystems are deteriorating, and “the reported impacts today are at the very worst end of predictions made in the early 1990s.”³ Bendell finds no reason to doubt that the future consequences will be dramatic and severe, and his message is that we should finally start believing what science is telling us about climate change – if not even that the scientific community *itself* should start believing its own words.

Instead of the continued, sympathetic, and moderate research within the “sustainability field”, within which he has been working for many years himself, he therefore encourages “research that starts from or considers social collapse due to environmental disaster.”⁴ Again, this is not meant as a kind of nihilism or resignation – almost the contrary. The reality is that climate change is already here, and that some of its even very serious consequences can no longer be avoided. Therefore, the continued belief in an escape from disasters by changing one’s lifestyle, improving waste recirculation, etc., is itself a form of resistance to confronting what can in fact be done. Bendell turns the problem on its head: the question is not how we can establish or re-establish some kind of sustainability, but rather how soon we will accept the fact that “despite the attention of international institutions to ‘sustainable development goals’, the era of ‘sustainable development’ as a unifying concept and goal is now ending.”⁵ (Bendell’s own situation in writing his paper underlines the problem with the

³ Jem Bendell, “Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating Climate Tragedy”, *Institute for Leadership and Sustainability (IFLAS) Occasional Papers Volume 2*, Ambleside, University of Cumbria, 2018, p. 8. Available at <http://insight.cumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/4166/>.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

academic incentive structures: in order to even write his paper on deep adaptation, he actually went on an unpaid sabbatical.⁶⁾

When I claim that the field of ethical questions relevant to asking about the environment is becoming narrower, it relates to what Bendell says about “the sustainability field” of research in which a cross-disciplinary optimism is networking to find smart solutions and sustainable forms of life. Bendell identifies several reasons for a rather systematic denialism in this field. There is, for example, no self-interest in “articulating the probability or inevitability of social collapse” and “the internal culture of environmental groups remains strongly in favour of appearing effective, even when decades of investment and campaigning have not produced a net positive outcome on climate, ecosystems or many specific species.”⁷ Psychologically speaking, there may furthermore be strong incentives to avoid traumatic topics and refrain from questioning the status quo, and such incentives certainly reinforce the social and institutional tendencies. Bendell’s suggestion is that these forms of denialism will have to come to an end: “Emotional difficulties with realizing the tragedy that is coming, and in many ways that is upon us already, are understandable. Yet these difficulties need to be overcome so we can explore what the implications may be for our work, lives and communities.”⁸ Like the very idea of “sustainability”, the ethical attitude of “getting it right” and behaving correctly towards others, finding one’s own, appropriate conduct, creating meaningful communities, etc., is increasingly out of joint, as if it has been overtaken by natural forces that do not care about animal welfare, gender studies, balancing the considerations of all involved actors, etc. In a fundamental sense, *we got it wrong*, and this is what we have to deal with. This is also why the Aristotelian concept of phronetic reason is no longer adequate (if it has ever been) to the task: in its core, most ethical thinking is built on a sense of wisdom in tradition, language, or reason, which must be uncovered and might have been forgotten or repressed, but nonetheless contains lessons that will enlighten us about the right thing to do. Again: yes, if we must find out how to spend our final hours, then virtue ethics can certainly help us, but except for that, its advice increasingly resembles the melancholic

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

thinking of a person on their deathbed contemplating what they *should have done* on important occasions in their life.

The Dictatorship of the Proletariat

Already in 2014, Eve Chiapello wrote that, unlike the wave of ecological awareness in the 1960s and 1970s, ecological critique no longer needs to “brandish values”, because it is no longer about values: it is about survival. The question is not so much what kind of lives we want to live (with colours and diversity, healthy food, and strong communities or with monocultural, industrial landscapes, fast food, and social disintegration, etc.). The question is whether we want to live at all. Chiapello herself emphasizes how this scientifically based sense of emergency is politically open-ended and potentially volatile: because it does not require a “foundation” of some kind of value system in order to justify its adherence to certain environmental principles, it does not *a priori* contain any guidelines for the kinds of ethical and political structures that should follow from the measures that have to be taken to stop environmental degradation. This is a dangerous situation in a double sense: partly because we do not really know what kinds of political answers are the most effective for confronting the challenges stemming from (especially) climate change. So far, the response to the crises has been a half-hearted transition to a form of “green capitalism”, which does not really seem to be able to solve the problem. Partly because the environmental devastation that will follow, if we do not respond effectively in time, could lead to new conflicts over natural resources, vastly increased migration, and therefore political unrest and maybe new forms of authoritarian government. In any case, the political openness that Chiapello detects in recent ecological critique could certainly be seen as a danger, but perhaps it nonetheless contains some more positive prospects as well: maybe there is in fact a political opening that can also be usurped by more progressive forces. Are there new ways of thinking solidarity and universality that we have not yet completely thought through? Could we reconceptualize the foundation of the community of the future through a more thorough acknowledgement of “having gotten it wrong”? “Getting it wrong” would here mean something other than being

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⁹ Eve Chiapello, “Capitalism and its Criticisms”, in P. Du Gay and G. Morgan (eds.), *New Spirits of Capitalism? Crisis, Justifications, and Dynamics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 76.

wrong about this or that point (like the size of a planet or the implications of Russell's paradox). It would mean being wrong in a pervasive, systematic sense. To just give an indication of how I think this might make sense, it would mean, for example, acknowledging that the failure of human civilization would have to be thought at a scale that far surpasses the consequences of the Holocaust (and which would therefore require an even deeper reassessment of the "dark side" of the Enlightenment). I mean this literally, although with careful consideration of the implications (and limitations) of such a comparison. In strictly ethical terms, of course, the Holocaust is certainly "worse" than the climate emergency, because it contained countless cases of eye-to-eye brutality and a complete distortion of ethical compasses. But *both are worse*, as they say, since the climate emergency contains a dimension of global pervasiveness that transcends the impact of the Holocaust – a malice that affects even the life cycles of algae on the bottom of world oceans. There is no comparison between algae and humans when it comes to ethics (and when "deep ecology" went down that path, it erred), but there is nonetheless another, and broader, kind of question involved in the ecological emergency, because it relates to the conditions of life on the globe as such. Maybe the implications of this globalized failure contain an occasion to think something new. *Es gibt was zu bedenken*, as Martin Heidegger would probably have formulated it.

One place to start could be a renewal of the conception of a "dictatorship of the proletariat". This concept itself was always essentially flawed. Describing a supposedly necessary stage in the transition from capitalist ownership of the means of production to a form of communist society, it relied on the emergence of a collective agent with the resolve and insight to administer a just transformation of the basic, economic, and political structures of society. Not only did this ambition fail empirically, it also contains a philosophical mistake, I would say: too great a reliance on a particular group within society. Although the working class of course ideally sheds its particularistic identity, when it takes on its role of the proletariat (the universality based on the excluded particular), it is nevertheless due to its virtue of being this particular group that it earns the privilege (or duty) of *taking the step* from particularity to universality and consequently governing through a gigantic change of everything down to the last button on the shirt (like Mayakovsky wrote in the 1920s). What extreme confidence in humanity that this collection of workers, peasants, and bureaucrats would be the one that would be able to finally make everything *right*!

If, however, we started from the notion that humanity essentially got it wrong, then the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat could take on another meaning as well. Etymologically, the “proletariat” is the class of those who have nothing but offspring. In Roman law, if you were a citizen with no significant livestock, but only possessed that which sprang off from your very biological existence, you could be counted as part of the proletariat. This perspective opens a different path for conceptualizing that which the *proletarius* is bound by: not only is he bound by the alien forces of repression and alienation; he is also linked (like protesters at the site of a new coal mine or the expansion of an airport) to the very prolongation of his existence, his *Nachwuchs*.

Instead of (or besides) “being bound by”, the proletariat could thus be seen as “being tied to” in a way that does not allow for any humanistic solution. While the oppression of the dispossessed is certainly an acute (and continued) injustice, it does contain hope of emancipation within the parameters of a certain contemporaneity. If you have “only your chains” to lose, there is a secret promise that the removal of the chains would enable a flourishing of the subject (alienation can be lifted). The perspective of the offspring, however, implies a postponement of emancipation, at the very least. Even if some form of communism would magically emerge overnight, there would still be a price to pay for the offspring. If we follow Bendell and accept that the catastrophe is already taking place, we have already failed our commitment, there is a breach in the solidarity with future generations that cannot be completely recovered. At most, we can hope of getting it wrong in the best way possible.

Two clarifications are of course necessary for this to make any sense: first of all, I do not ascribe to the dispossessed of the Roman Empire any romantic feelings for their offspring. My guess would be that such an ascription would be empirically false, but I do not want to make such a claim at all. Second of all, the point is not to simply exchange one group (the working class) for another (parents). Instead, the point should be to exchange the viewpoint of one particular class of the present with the viewpoint of what Kojin Karatani has called “future others”¹⁰: those, unknown and unidentified, who will suffer the consequences of contemporary injustices. This would simultaneously be an attempt at changing the focus from how we get it right to how we come to terms with the fact that we

¹⁰ Kojin Karatani, *Transcritique – on Kant and Marx*, Cambridge (MA), MIT Press, 2003, p. 125.

got it wrong. The question is not how we can improve or make society perfect, but rather how much we are willing to accept that future generations should suffer from our failure. The “dictatorship of the proletariat” would be the seizure of power by those who care enough about the not-so-distant future of human life to intervene in the accelerated destruction of the environment. It could be a democratic takeover of power, why not, but it would include very drastic measures that would make some groups rather upset.

And one last caveat: defining “those who care enough about the not-so-distant future of human life” is again a conceptualization with some ambiguity. You may certainly care enormously about your own offspring and interpret this care as an obligation to maintain the privileges that you have ensured for yourself and thus strive to make sure that nothing fundamentally changes. (This is why the proletariat in question cannot be conceptualized as a sociological group, parents, but must be understood as a universal concept of those who acknowledge the interests of the future others – from behind a veil of ignorance, if you will). The effects of the threats to the environment are extremely unevenly divided among the human population. One of the reasons why there is still such massive resistance to the transition to a “green economy” that lives up to its name is the incredible ingenuity of the rich to stall and find loopholes. I think that the prospects of geoen지니어ing and carbon capture technology should be seen in this light: before we are affected for real, there will be some techniques to ameliorate the problem (in *Don't Look Up*, this tendency is symbolized by the spaceship that takes off with a small elite just before the comet's impact and travels 22,000 lightyears to find another planet suitable for the human species). I therefore completely acknowledge that one should be very careful not to be too optimistic about said dictatorship, and it should be emphasized that, much as I would like to save the world, I am merely trying to exemplify a rather modest, conceptual point.

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Arne Næss, the founder of the deep ecology movement, wrote in a postscript to a volume entitled *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century* that he was an optimist about the ability of humanity to create the conditions for a sustainable way of life, but only with respect to the twenty-second century. He thought the realistic date for creating a sustainable society would be 2101.¹¹ This was

¹¹ Arne Næss, “Deep Ecology for the Twenty-Second Century”, in G. Sessions (ed.), *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century*, Boulder, Shambala Publications, 1995, p. 465.

not an ironic comment, nor was it a kind of defeatist stoic stance in the sense that one should just accept destiny and wait for better conditions: “Not at all! Every week counts. How terrible and shamefully bad conditions will be in the twenty-first century, or how far down we fall before we start on the way back up, *depends upon what YOU* and others do today and tomorrow.”¹² Næss’s statement about the 22nd century was simply a prognosis: It will probably take time before we take the threats seriously enough to actually change society in ways that really count. Enlightenment is needed, alliances must be made. Maybe it will even take outbreaks of chaos and “enormous ecological devastation,” as he puts it, before there is really a push towards sustainability. Even this realistic and patient approach, however, taking into account how stubborn and self-destructive human communities can be, does not yet abandon the deeply rooted confidence in our ability to get it right. That is why fully acknowledging Jem Bendell’s claim of an “end of the era of sustainability” requires at the very least a shift in the way we think of ethics. From the realistic ethics of a gradual coming-to-awareness – of what is, in some form, essentially already known – to an uncompromising ethics of the real, to the scarcely lit landscape of the law of the unknown.¹³

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¹² *Ibid.*, p. 461.

¹³ Cf. Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*, London and New York, Verso, 2000.