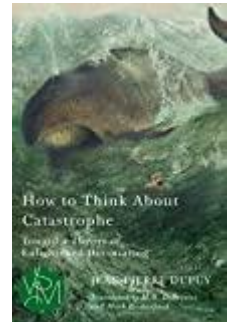


**Jean-Pierre Dupuy.** *How to Think about Catastrophe: Toward a Theory of Enlightened Doomsaying.* Translated by M. B. DeBevoise and Mark R. Anspach. Studies in Violence, Mimesis, and Culture Series. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2022. xiii + 165 pp. \$34.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-61186-436-6.



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## "Enlightened Doomsaying": An Evergreen Ecocritical Philosophy

“Enlightened doomsaying is a philosophical attitude, a metaphysical challenge to our usual ways of thinking about the world and about time that is based on the peculiar temporality of catastrophe.”—Jean-Pierre Dupuy (p. 48)

How should we think about catastrophe when *the way we think* led to our current constant environmental crisis? In M. B. DeBevoise and Mark R. Anspach's translation of *How to Think about Catastrophe: Toward a Theory of Enlightened Doomsaying*, Jean-Pierre Dupuy challenges fatalistic risk discourse surrounding anthropogenic catastrophe. He argues that, contrary to fearmongering *about fear* as antithetical to rationality, enlightened doomsaying forms a necessary heuristic for averting catastrophe in a world rendered increasingly inhospitable by human hubris. While this work at times dates itself in using the events of 9/11 as symbolic nucleus (this text is a translation of the original French edition published in 2002), its overall impetus is relevant and increas-

ingly necessary. That a twenty-year-old text on predicting catastrophe successfully predicted current crisis responses substantiates its own theory.

Based on a series of lectures from the early 2000s, the book's meandering style weaves complex philosophical arguments with engaging thought experiments and real-world case studies along with literary references. Divided into three parts, and twelve chapters, the first two parts set up the problem with current modes of thinking about catastrophe while the third posits an ethics of assumed futurity as solution. Methods employed in this text meld philosophy, economics, theology, and ecocriticism, representatively in that order. In terms of intellectual genealogy, it leans heavily on the works of Ivan Illich (theology and philosophy) and Hans Jonas (philosophy). While the book does not cite many environmental humanists—aside from Ulrich Beck and André Gorz—it reverberates with Anthropocene discourse by arguing for “an image of the future that is suffi-

ciently catastrophic to be repellant and sufficiently credible to give rise to the actions that will keep it from being realized, *barring an accident*" (riffing on Roger Guesnerie, p. 140). To do this, Dupuy proposes a metaphysical time-paradox theory where our assumption of future destruction is so effective that it is averted, therefore nullifying itself.

To build toward this time-paradox theory, Dupuy spends the bulk of part 1, "Risk and Fatality," troubling economic models of risk assessment. Pinpointing how society privileges economic theory as praxis when it comes to thinking about catastrophe, he argues that we cannot depend on the same epistemologies that placed us into the climate crisis to get us out of it. Instead, we must develop an ethics of doomsaying. Chapter 1, "A Singular Point of View," critiques the word "risk" as a means of considering the self-annihilation potential of humans in the industrial era. Risk in this sense connotes gamification, relating our destruction to a gamble when, to properly address catastrophe, we must treat it less as probability than as inevitability.

Nuancing this argument by providing philosophical context, chapter 2, "Sacrifice, Counterproductivity, and Ethics, or the Logic of the Detour," postures Dupuy's intervention against Marxism, Heideggerian critique of technology, postmodern theory, deconstruction, and political ecology, stating that they "take aim at the wrong target" in ascribing blame for our current crises (p. 13). Dupuy channels Illich to instead apply the "logic of the detour" as a cost-benefit calculation (p. 14). The logic of the detour assumes that some sacrifice is necessary to make progress. In a capitalist society, the detour can appear like counterproductivity. Yet, when pushed to its logical extreme through capitalism, the detour becomes the objective, and mankind spends all of their time spinning wheels to chase the appearance of going somewhere rather than the actuality of it. To demonstrate the concepts of "the logic of the detour" and

"counterproductivity," Dupuy provides an example of a Frenchman who takes more time and energy to pay for, use, and maintain his car than it would cost to simply ride a bicycle everywhere, which is also better for the environment (p. 16). This case study highlights the stylistic benefits of the book's lecture origins with its illustrative examples of absurdities brought about by an economically driven mode of thinking. Against such absurdity, Dupuy proposes an ethics rooted in tradition, postured against moral doctrines forwarding the logic of the detour. Chapter 3, "Fate, Risk, and Responsibility," delves more deeply into examples of how our current modes of thinking fail us, using health care and transportation as case studies to examine the phenomenon of social and structural counterproductivity.

Part 2, "The Limits of Economic Rationality," further demonstrates the fallacy of economic thinking. It argues instead for enlightened doomsaying as a "heuristic of fear" à la Jonas and for a metaphysical approach as necessary methodology in averting catastrophe. This resurrection of continental philosophy sets Dupuy's methods apart from current analytic philosophy hegemony. Building off of the failures outlined in chapter 3, chapter 4 once again lambasts economic thinking, arguing that the very concept of market self-regulation is fallacious given how mimesis artificially determines what entails success rather than actual value, utility, or efficiency of a given product. Through what Dupuy calls "imitative logic," the best technology does not necessarily succeed, so there is "no guarantee" that a technological solution to catastrophe "will not lead us to [further] disaster" (p. 43). He forwards doomsaying as a necessary intervention. Anticipating rationalist critique, chapter 5 defines "doomsaying" as rational in its application while defending it from charges of irrationality. This is perhaps the most haunting chapter because it speaks directly to and arguably predicts responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in its fourth year, the 2023 Ohio train derailment unleashing a real life airborne toxic

event, rapidly worsening gun violence, and countless similar disasters since this text's original publication over twenty years ago. "This is the terrifying thing about a catastrophe: not only does no one believe that it will occur, even though there is every reason for knowing that it will occur; but once it has occurred it appears to be part of the normal order of things. Its very reality makes it seem banal, commonplace" (p. 51). To this end, a "heuristics of fear" subverts the normalization of disaster by disrupting the denial-to-normalization loop. Biblical Jonas briefly surfaces in this chapter to justify a return to metaphysics as an intellectual tool for forwarding a theory of enlightened doom-saying.

To differentiate precaution from prevention, and further develop doomsaying as preventative paradox, chapter 6, "Precaution, Between Risk and Uncertainty," dismisses the "doctrine of precaution" as "hostage to the cost-benefit orientation of rational choice theory" (p. 65). Some of the main limitations of the precautionary principle are that it demands a level of data and certainty that is impossible to acquire given the futurity of catastrophe. In service of illustrating the shortfalls of probabilistic thinking, the chapter leverages several examples of formal logic via syllogisms and probabilities. Bringing the argument back to the realm of ethics, chapter 7, "The Veil of Ignorance and Moral Luck," works through John Rawls's conception of justice to center the needs of the most affected by disaster when calculating risk and developing responses to it. This section briefly touches on the disproportionate distribution of risk. Weighing the merits of minimax and catastrophist philosophical stances, this chapter tests the limits of probabilistic judgment. Ultimately, the chapter emphasizes the importance of "the anticipation of the judgment's retroactive character," which provides the need for a future-oriented catastrophism (p. 82). Chapter 8, "Knowing Is Not Believing," offers three arguments for why we need knowledge to prevent risk but also cannot completely access this knowledge, including the

complexity of nonhuman ecosystems, human technological systems' entanglement with nonhuman ecosystems, and the inherency of "non-predictability" (p. 86). Thus we must embrace a level of uncertainty while imagining a certain catastrophic future to avert. This chapter ends by returning to the "heuristics of fear" from chapter 4 to state that such fear, even when combined with knowledge, fails to deter. Even when humans know disaster is imminent and have the ability to act on it, they do not. Dupuy therefore posits a "metaphysics of temporality" as a means of addressing this human psychology error, which prevents reaction to risk unless people perceive that an actionable solution exists (pp. 92-93).

How can we rework our approach to thinking about catastrophe so that we can avert it? Part 3, "The Limits of Moral Philosophy and the Necessity of Metaphysics," argues that the way we process catastrophe—a denial and normalization loop—must shift to a form of temporality paradox in which we assume catastrophe is inevitable in order to prevent it from happening. Chapter 9, "Memory of the Future," contextualizes various moral doctrines regarding responsibility in relation to catastrophe. Dupuy outlines the limits of narrow imaginings of ethical obligations, such as constricting care to family rather than strangers, and encourages us to widen our scope of duty to others through our actions. Our entangled world where we share air and sea means that we should ask ourselves, "What would happen if everyone did what I am doing?" (p. 101). These pithy takeaways ground complex philosophical arguments into maxims that broaden Dupuy's audience beyond academia and toward the public who can actualize meaningful change.

Perhaps the most fertile ground for ecocritics, chapter 10, "Predicting the Future in Order to Change It (Jonah vs. Jonas)," places into conversation two unlikely doomsayer archetypes: the biblical Jonah and the philosopher Jonas. Previous chapters dedicated to outlining the limits of eco-

nomics and philosophy in preventing disaster built the foundation on which this hermeneutical chapter rests. Dupuy presents an ambitious argument: “I will show that to overcome or at least find a way around the obstacle, it will be necessary to engrave the catastrophe in the future much more radically by making it *ineluctable*. We shall then be able to say in all honesty that we act to prevent it *thanks to the memory we have of it*. Metaphysical argumentation will give existence and meaning to those signals of which Jonas speaks that, heedless of the laws of physics, reach us from the future” (p. 107). Similar to Rob Nixon (*Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* [2011]), Amitov Ghosh (*The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* [2016]), and Sonya Posmentier (*Cultivation and Catastrophe: The Lyrical Ecology of Modern Black Literature* [2020]), Dupuy argues that the crux of the issue is that of representation, of grasping the full picture of consequences. Dupuy, like these recent environmental theoreticians, pulls literature into the territory of interdisciplinary methodology to address material crisis. The solution cannot be purely scientific when science has exacerbated the current climate crisis: “The scientist, no less than the poet, has managed to master the passing of time: what the poet achieves through the act of writing, the scientist obtains by substituting for reality an image of reality—a model that both imitates and demands to be imitated” (p. 108). These fictional images (fictional in the sense that they do not exist yet) enable comprehension of future catastrophe in order to take action to avert it.

Developing this forward-projecting metaphysics, chapter 11, “Projected Time and Occurring Time,” develops this concept of a time paradox as a means of imagining future catastrophe so we can avoid self-annihilation as fate—and fatalism. A couple of diagrams illustrate these complex ontologies: “Time as a garden of forking paths, or occurring time” (based on Jorge Luis Borges’s short story of the same name) and “Projected time” (pp. 121, 126). The problem of successfully preventing

catastrophe is “not a matter of logic” but “representation and will” that might be solved through “the fiction of projected time” (pp. 132, 128). This framing provides rich material for environmental humanists to apply Dupuy’s concepts of risk temporality and image figuration to literary studies.

In a swing toward influencing public policy, chapter 12, “The Rationality of Doomsaying,” applies the theory of doomsaying to mutually assured destruction (MAD) discourse. Here Dupuy defends the seeming paradox of deterrence as logical when considered through occurring and projected time. It is a necessary contradiction, one that does not constitute a logical error justifying dismissal. After the doom and gloom of a geopolitical death-drive stalemate, the book ends on a hopeful note of humanity seeking a cause for our current crises, looking into the mirror to recognize ourselves, changing the way we think about the future, and therefore averting self-destruction. While Dupuy does not use these terms explicitly, he frequently riffs on tragedy as a form when it comes to humanity’s relationship with catastrophe. Simultaneously, he retools the tragic form into a mechanism for change by posturing doomsaying as a kind of anagnorisis *before* it is too late.

The book’s main themes have become increasingly central to environmental humanities. Preceding the humanities turn of Anthropocene discourse, it anticipates this framework in implication if not in terminology. Because of the gap between the original publication and its translation, there are several more recent works that resonate, including Timothy Morton’s *Dark Ecology* for its philosophical figurations of time loops and ecological risk; Nixon’s *Slow Violence* in terms of narrativizing catastrophe, temporality of disaster, and risk relativity; “The Biopolitical Unconscious: Toward an Eco-Marxist Literary Theory” by Leerom Medovoi for eco-catastrophe as trope; and *Forces of Reproduction* by Stefania Barca regarding the insufficiency of technological fixes to an-

thropogenic crises and positional relationships to risk.[1]

On the note of inequitable proximity to catastrophic risk, the first-person “we” and “our” frequently deployed in *How to Think about Catastrophe*, combined with its bibliography, signifies a largely Western episteme. It is therefore worth reading Indigenous and Global South scholars concurrently. Many such scholars would argue that the totalizing effect of centering Western as “us” obscures differentiated proximity to, and blame for, risks imposed by anthropogenic climate change. To this end, works like “The Unbearable Heaviness of Climate Coloniality” by Farhana Sultana, “On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene” by Heather Davis and Zoe Todd, “Settler Colonialism, Ecology, and Environmental Injustice” by Kyle Whyte, and *The Nutmeg’s Curse* by Amitov Ghosh provide imperative perspective.[2]

Despite the book’s Western-centrism, environmental humanists will likely find its points on risk, temporality, the doomsayer archetype, the blurring of catastrophe categories (terrorism, natural disaster, anthropogenic climate change), and the role of fictional representation in averting risk useful frameworks. The text’s leveraging of biblical hermeneutics and reliance on metaphysics differentiate it from secular approaches of contemporary ecocriticism (a tendency that the text is self-aware of but has perhaps been amplified since its original publication). Dupuy’s fascinating refiguring of time to avert catastrophe through negation, based on Borges’s fiction, tills rich theoretical ground for ecocritics.

Despite its haunting prescience—or perhaps because of it—*How to Think about Catastrophe*’s rejection of fatalism while embracing doomsaying as an agnoric device provides a path forward. An ontology of ecological doomsaying is, refreshingly, one of hope.

Notes

[1]. Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); Leerom Medovoi, “The Biopolitical Unconscious: Toward an Eco-Marxist Literary Theory,” in *Mediations: Journal of the Marxist Literary Group* 24, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 122-28, [https://mediations-journal.org/files/Mediations24\\_2.pdf](https://mediations-journal.org/files/Mediations24_2.pdf); and Stefania Barca, *Forces of Reproduction: Notes for a Counter-Hegemonic Anthropocene* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[2]. Farhana Sultana, “The Unbearable Heaviness of Climate Coloniality,” *Political Geography* 99 (2022): <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2022.102638>; Heather Davis and Zoe Todd, “On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene,” *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 16, no. 4 (2017): 761–80, <https://acme-journal.org/index.php/acme/article/view/1539>; Kyle Whyte, “Settler Colonialism, Ecology, and Environmental Injustice,” *Environment and Society* 9, no. 1 (2018): 125–44; and Amitov Ghosh, *The Nutmeg’s Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

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