

Philosophy for Coming Through: Review of Read's *Why Climate Breakdown Matters*

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Abstract

Philosophy has overwhelmingly approached climate breakdown in terms of the ethical obligations to the future which it is supposed to involve. This review of a recent book by Rupert Read shows him bringing philosophy to bear on why and how it matters in the first place – as an already present disaster which could reconnect us deeply with ourselves.

Rupert Read, climate activist and campaigner, has written his new book *Why Climate Breakdown Matters* (Bloomsbury, 2022) explicitly as a philosopher; it joins a series called *Why Philosophy Matters*. But why should the question of why climate breakdown matters be one for a *philosopher* at all?

Philosophers have of course written a lot, perhaps too much, about what moral obligations to prevent climate breakdown we might have, and to whom or what – but that is a rather different question. Climate breakdown itself matters, surely, because as has been evidenced in an avalanche of scientific reports, if we don't address it seriously, our civilization faces disaster – routine extreme weather events, massive sea-level rise, droughts, famines, huge refugee migrations and a rate of ecologically destructive extinctions not seen since humans emerged. What, to this now fully authoritative picture of what awaits us, could philosophy have to add?

The strength and value of Read's book lies in showing that it has much to add – that, in fact, the kind of practical-philosophical engagement that he demonstrates is vital to addressing

properly the question why breakdown matters, and thus to doing anything hopeful about it. I shall identify three ways in which he enriches, as a philosopher, the scientifically attested truth just sketched.

In the first place: if we don't address climate breakdown, we face disaster – but *not yet*. The year 2050, never mind the 2080s, sounds a long way off for people engaged in the day-to-day scramble for existence, and while many manifestations of breakdown are by now apparent, they are not yet seriously civilization-threatening. It is therefore easy to think that this is a concern, however important, which can legitimately be pushed aside by more immediate demands such as the current cost-of-living crisis. But Read argues powerfully that something like the full force of climate breakdown is impacting us already.

The argument (made even more sharply in his 2021 book *Parents for a Future*) runs as follows. On reflection, what we find we care about most strongly is our children – or, for the childless, those in the rising generation nearest to hand. But actively caring about our children



means also caring strongly about what they will most strongly care about, which by parity of argument will be *their* children – so we are thereby committed to caring strongly about what *they* in turn will most strongly care about, which will be ... and so on. Concern thus iterating itself down the generations commits us to caring now, as intensely as for our children alive in the present, for whomever among our (or their) ramifying descendants will be alive when climate breakdown decisively kicks in. Hence unless we now do everything we can to oppose the further jeopardizing of climate stability, which will ensure for these people intolerable conditions, we are in effect forswearing care for our children.

One can query some of the logical mechanics of this. Do I *have* to care most strongly about my children? – what about my work, instead? If I do as a matter of fact care most strongly about them, does that really imply caring about what they in fact most care about? (My elder son

was once very heavily invested in the fortunes of Arsenal FC, which have never moved me to more than indifference.) Doesn't caring itself naturally attenuate as the oncoming generations whom we can anticipate fade into the imagined future? But the argument could perhaps be reinforced against these objections, and in any case its general structure feels compelling despite them. This is because it shocks us into recognizing how the disaster of climate breakdown is *hitting us now* – not just through early-warning floods and wildfires, but through the intimate wrenching away of this most fundamental of our human relationships. If we cannot bring up our children to trust in the intergenerationality of life – in their own growing up and that of those for whom they will care – we as well as they are vitally impaired as human beings. Such damage can only be palliated and such trust revived by our acting as vigorously as we can towards making our collective prospects less appalling.

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Secondly: while it is true that if we don’t address this our civilization faces multiple disasters, it is also true that even if we do address it we face disasters, such as the global temperature rise already locked into the system. What really remains to us is the chance to prevent disasters from accumulating into catastrophe. But, as I sometimes used to demonstrate to my own children, disappointment can result from mistaking the warning that if you don’t stop misbehaving you won’t get an ice-cream for the promise that if you do you will. And in the climate case, appreciation of this logical point can mean not mere disappointment that we won’t anyway be rewarded by a disaster-free future, but acute grief at what that must involve for humanity and the living world. Such grief could be potentially paralysing for the most energetic activist, as Read acknowledges that he has been himself sometimes paralysed.

He argues nevertheless that we should embrace this emotional trauma. In a brave and moving chapter, he uses his experience of the death of his best friend to display the existential nature of grieving. It can bring you to the sort of state which Moore’s Paradox is supposed to rule out, that of *knowing* something while not *believing* it. Not believing the known death, Read

insists, is not denial, but inability to comprehend a world with a radical rip in its fabric, with the missing person gone but other things just the same. The existential power of grieving for someone deeply important to you is that to come through it to eventual acceptance, your whole life-world has to change, and this demand can be a source of transformative energy – you must reshape a world which their vital presence still informs, but in a new and different way. The application to climate and ecological grief is clear: ‘The only recovery from it that is possible is for us to change the world such that it no longer keeps deteriorating’ (p. 103). We must bring all the life which humanity has extinguished back to bear on the survival of remaining life through our own human life-energies.

And then thirdly: if our civilization faces disaster anyway, does that not mean we should all be preparing hard as individuals to shore our up own security? Won’t successive and prospective disasters precipitate an intensifying struggle for survival advantage – from the billionaires creating defended enclaves in New Zealand and similar places, all the way to a general closing of borders by temperate-zone countries against climate refugees, armed defence of food-growing areas against incursions from collapsing cities, a general unravelling of organized collective provision and ultimately the disappearance of all legal authority?

Behind this frightening scenario lies a philosophical vision traceable back at least to Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (1651), which argues that in a state of nature, with no social controls to apportion goods or restrain violence, people must find themselves engaged in permanent lawless competition for limited resources. Since no individual or *ad hoc* group will be strong enough to guarantee its own security against combinations of others, everyone’s rational approach to this situation will always be to get their retaliation in first, turning competition inevitably into a war of all against all. Escape from that deadly logic seems only to lie with the erection of a central authority entrusted exclusively with the means of coercion, to establish and police laws which none will dare break. This for Hobbes is the origin-myth and

justification of civil government, but it also points to the dangers – inherent, he thinks, in human nature – of letting authority disintegrate, as it did for a time during the English Civil War through which he lived, and as climate breakdown now threatens for our own times.

Read notes that all of this is only persuasive if you subscribe, like Hobbes, to a picture of humans as atomistic units, essentially separate centres of experience and will. On such a model, and given resource limits which climate breakdown must make more stringent, supply and security must always be zero-sum games: I must pursue what I need or want, even though someone else must therefore get less. Against that model, however, he calls on evidence from the new field of Disaster Studies, cataloguing what actually happened in a number of disasters and periods of emergency such as the earthquakes at San Francisco in 1906 and Mexico City in 1985, the London Blitz of 1940 or the New York attacks of September 2001. Testimony from those involved shows that these were very largely occasions, not for outbreaks of defensive individualism, but for the sudden flowering of a spirit of community and spontaneously self-organized mutual aid – capacities generally suppressed in the quietly chronic disaster of liberal-individualist living, but making a strong empirical case against the Hobbesian version of human nature. On this basis, Read even dares to suggest that climate breakdown could lead to an important kind of breakthrough, to recovered common purpose.

Nor is he content just with the empirical. He argues that at the deepest levels of personhood we are not atomized individuals at all – that the primordial first person is *wē* not *I*. An intriguing chapter points to cetaceans as perhaps exemplifying the kind of interanimation he would like to posit for humans. (Attention to cetaceans might seem empirical too, but an indwelling understanding of them is here meant to put us onto an *a priori* intuition about our own nature.) Whales will sometimes deliberately strand themselves *en masse* alongside other whales accidentally stranded, resisting attempts to help them back into the sea. This, he suggests, evinces neither stupidity nor an evolved form of

altruism – self-stranding cannot *save* the already stranded – but instead a pure instinctive solidarity of shared being which we might come to recognize also in ourselves. This discussion leaves some philosophical loose ends; he invokes, for instance, the idea of internal relations without really explaining it. (I am externally related to you if I stay *me* whether I leave you to die or not – this is the atomistic model – but we are internally related if I cannot do so without *giving up on myself* at a deep level, an essential interconnectedness to which cetacean behaviour might answer.) Nor does he consider the absence in whales of the reflexive self-awareness that makes subjective individuality so seemingly inescapable for humans. But again, his conclusion feels more powerful than the possible objections: ‘It would be better for us if we were all profoundly internally related ... Then we might be better placed to think as a civilisation. And to survive’ (p. 119).

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The upshot of all this is that we have to find new understandings of ourselves on the way to action which we can no longer shirk. But isn’t it too late? Can we believe that changes of the order needed to prevent disaster from turning into catastrophe can be made in the time which decades of procrastination have left us? While to a detached observer such changes are by now empirically quite implausible, Read stresses

that we never are such observers: *we are not spectators here*, and this changes all the lights. The realism of what is empirically possible gives way to a deeper realism when we recognize that action – including tragic action, our only remaining option – is always open-ended: we cannot know what taking up our life-responsibilities will lead to, because what it will lead to only opens out when we take them up. We *create*

possibility. In thus liberating the activist intelligence, he does not blow the dust off any of the academic-philosophical literature on free will, but nevertheless brings that issue illuminatingly to bear on our plight.

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