Existential Investigations into Our Existential Crisis

*Rupert Read[1] and Joseph Eastoe[2] ***

[1]Department of Philosophy, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK and [2]Institute for Global Prosperity, University College London, London, UK
*Corresponding author. Email: joe.eastoe@hotmail.co.uk

Abstract

Now that the opportunity to build back from COVID in an intelligent and thoughtful way has largely passed us by, how do we cope with the existential threat of ecological collapse? We posit that economic concerns have been granted undeserved weight in conversations around climate policy, while the role of philosophy has thus far been an untapped resource of potentially liberating knowledge that can inspire action and a deliberative, collective reconsideration of what parts of society should be valued.

Build Back Better. It's an adage I'm sure you've heard by now. Perhaps the comfort of alliteration is the reason it's been accepted more often than it's been questioned. But it should be questioned. What are we building? 'Back' means something is returning; what is it? Whose definition of 'better' is being used? What the saying does helpfully recognize is the need for change, otherwise it could have knocked the last word off. So, change must happen, there is an appetite for it, and by the end of it we will be in a preferable situation. It's a phrase that sounds hopeful, but the meaning has been coerced.

The adage was introduced to the national stage by former US President, Bill Clinton, who declared to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) that 'build back better (BBB)' would be the guiding principle of recovery in the wake of the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami that hit Indonesia, India, Thailand and Sri Lanka. In 2015, BBB was discussed at the Third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction at Sendai, and became one of the four priorities of the Sendai Framework, a strategy of disaster recovery and risk mitigation adopted by the UN member states (not that it would necessarily be adhered to by most countries, certainly not the UK).

The phrase has kept its connotation with disaster-recovery in recent years. After the COVID pandemic, *Build Back Better* took on a new lease of life. Several countries adopted the term, and it seemed like the perfect opportunity, albeit a trying and morbid one, to reflect on society and deliberate how we could remould it into a better version of itself. In the midst of so much suffering, many thought that COVID gave us a once-in-a-generation opportunity to contemplate and recover responsibly.

However, the term *Build Back Better* became economically driven, focused more on achieving pre-pandemic levels of economic growth than

tackling the pressing environmental crisis. Biden revealed his Build Back Better Plan, part of which was a $1.9 trillion economic stimulus package to jumpstart the American economy following the pandemic (including $8 billion to American airports, and $15 billion for airlines and their contractors). In the UK, BBB was an inescapable mantra. In March 2021, the UK government published *Build Back Better: Our Plan for Growth*, which earmarked £100 billion in infrastructure investment to get Britain back on the path of economic growth.

Let us return again to the purpose of BBB as used by the UN. At the core is a focus on *resilience* and *mitigation* in the face of future disasters. Why, then, does the BBB adopted by the UK and US in response to COVID not focus on resilience and mitigation against the climate crisis, especially when some evidence suggests COVID was caused and exacerbated by climate chaos? What is the purpose of applying these values of resilience and mitigation against *specific* disasters (hurricanes, tsunamis, floods,

etc.) when the underlying problem of human-triggered dangerous climate change remains unaddressed? Why have we still not woken up to the guaranteed slow-motion car crash that a system built on the insane premise of endless economic growth is stuck in?

Given that the golden opportunity COVID gave us to readjust our collectively suicidal trajectory looks to have been largely squandered, the prospects for the future are now dire indeed.

In face of such a grave situation, we have 3 options:

1. **Carry on as normal**. That's not to say that we give the environmental crisis *no* consideration, but that it does not get taken any more seriously than it is being taken at present. (This amounts to shutting our eyes.)
2. **Fall into tribal otherization.** This manifests itself in two ways: scapegoating a certain group to shirk personal responsibility, or simply only viewing the interests of your 'group' as valid and so damn the rest. (This

amounts to opening our eyes a bit, but shutting out most of the world, and hoping in vain that we can keep the show on the road within higher and higher walls.)

3. **Strategic adaptation.** A position in which the true realities of the climate crisis, with all the associated risks and dangers, are confronted honestly at every political level. The result will be a pivot *away* from business as usual (i.e. from 1) and towards a new direction.

When we explore each option in turn, there is really only one route to survival.

> ‘… we know the outlook is grim, and that the science, to those without a crude optimism bias, indicates a likely trajectory towards a collapse of society.’

The first option is self-evidently not sufficient. The pandemic gave us a once-in-a-generation opportunity to alter our system to put it on a more sustainable route. Moreover, there was appetite for it. Instead, the governments of the world adopted the reassuring slogan of Build Back Better, full of its promise of mitigation and resilience, and used it to recover the status quo: economic growth. The incessant scramble for an infinitely growing economy (2–3% per year as the World Bank recommends) is simply not viable on a finite planet, and is of course an endless driving force of the ecological crisis. There is no doubt that there is more mainstream environmental concern now than there was a decade ago, and there are projects and investment that, with the best of intentions, aim to tackle the environmental crisis (e.g. renewable energy projects).

Nevertheless, the climate crisis will not be solved so long as the global economy continues to prioritize market-first extraction and growth over ecological sustainability.

As for the second option, hopefully you don't need us to tell you why this is a bad route. Not only is it cruel and callous to dehumanize others based on national identity, but it is a poor strategy for coping with the environmental crisis. Climate chaos recognizes no borders; it is a global issue that requires global confrontation, not the squabbling of national interests. There is a thought that has perhaps dispelled western nations from acting with the appropriate gravitas, namely that with our money and our technology we will be impervious to the true horrors of dangerous climate change. The rest of the world may suffer greatly, but our governments with the resources at their disposal won't let that happen here. This comforting lie of exceptionalism does not hold up to scrutiny. Europe is under existential threat from climate change, as is the USA. Indeed, this should now be obvious after the US has been hit with hurricanes and wildfires of increased frequency and intensity over the last few years. Last summer (2022) Europe experienced a record-breaking heatwave which caused an estimated 15,000 deaths according to the World Health Organisation, and this summer (2023) is looking even more dire. Climate chaos is undeniably upon us, and its effects will only get more severe.

This leaves just the third option, but what is strategic adaptation? It is the prioritization of what is most important under the motivation to preserve such things in the face of what is coming. Thus, strategic adaptation can only truly be pursued by confronting the truth of civilization-ending climate change and the growing likelihood of some degree of societal collapse.

But is that possible? Societal collapse? Surely not. But this is the first thing to get absolutely clear about; human-caused climate change is an *existential* threat. The purpose of saying this is not to panic you, dear reader. We are not being dramatic, we are not 'fearmongering', and we are not 'doomists'. The gut-wrenching truth is that the warming of the planet caused by anthropogenic greenhouse emissions threatens

human existence, and ensures that the form of life we are at present used to will not long continue.

So far, we have not strayed from any of the mainstream literature on the subject. Even relatively conservative organizations like the IPCC and UNFCCC (which have been accused of underestimating the severity of climate change in the past) are now in agreement that we face an existential problem. The 1.5 degrees C target for relatively 'safe' levels of overheating is going to be broken. We are moving into a hot new world that will end us unless we recognize and act on the existential threat.

Delve deeper and an even more uncomfortable truth becomes apparent: the threat moves from being possible to being highly likely. Consider, for example, the effect of tipping points. Tipping points are elements of the earth's biosphere (e.g. the Greenland icesheet, Amazon rainforest, boreal forests) whose collapse will cause a cascade effect compromising other areas of the biosphere and causing climate change to accelerate at an uncontrollable pace. To assess just one example, the Greenland icesheet covers a huge amount of methanogenic wetland. The melting of this icesheet will cause the release of a massive amount of methane, which has a warming effect around 80 times that of carbon. We are currently estimated to be at risk of having passed the threshold for five of these tipping points already, and if we reach 1.5C, an additional five tipping points will be threatened. Bear in mind also that 1.5C is what governments publicly aimed for in 2015 at the Paris Agreement, but are now expected to miss this target by a mile. Even with all the deals in place and with all the net-zero targets, warming is expected to hit 2.7C by 2100 according to Climate Action Tracker (and this is if those deals and targets are actually adhered to). Link this also with why Option 1 (carry on as normal) is insufficient. The conclusion is thus; human-driven climate change will cause the fundamental reshaping of our society, and more likely than not, the unplanned, uncontrolled, unmitigated collapse of it. As one of us (Read) wrote in *This Civilisation is Finished*, this future will be one of energy-descent, increased localization and civilizational simplification.

While that may sound shocking if this is your first time hearing it put so bluntly, other people are also noticing this. Earth scientists, those who are tasked with collating and analysing the data on climate change as a career, often suffer a severe emotional toll due to the perceived hopelessness of the situation. Similarly, studies show that prevalence of climate anxiety is only rising, especially among young people who are acutely aware that world governments have failed to take climate decline seriously.

It is not five to midnight, as environmentalists and scientists have been saying it is for over a decade now. It can't constantly be. It was five to midnight, and then recently it became midnight, the twelfth hour. And now it's five *past* midnight. That of course does not, contrary to some lazy depressive thinking that is looking for an excuse for resignation and inaction, mean that it is too late to do anything. But it does mean it's too late to meaningfully attempt certain things. The first step in a reassessment — which will reorient us when our normal modes of sense-making have been undermined — is thought-leadership concerning what we can still hope for and how to find meaning in this profoundly changed and changing context.

How, then, can we cope with existential threats? How do we respond to them philosophically, ethically, *existentially*? How can we know the right 'better' to build back? These are vital questions that explore knowledge, perception and meaning, and the answers can only be discovered by real, deliberate and considered reflection. To perform meaningful reflection requires a confrontation of the truths that we have outlined above; society is likely to collapse.

Here, philosophy has a huge role to play.

According to Kant in *Critique of Pure Reason*, there are three questions which can satisfy human reason; 'what can I know', 'what should I do' and 'what may I hope for'? It is worth exploring briefly how we can respond to these questions.

For the first, we know the outlook is grim, and that the science, to those without a crude optimism bias, indicates a likely trajectory towards a collapse of society. We have already highlighted

some of the evidence for this above with tipping points and cascade effects. For more information on the science, we recommend you explore the annotated bibliography at the end of Read's free ebook *Do You Want to Know the Truth,* which documents and explores major scientific works on carbon-cycle feedbacks, ecosystem cascades and biodiversity collapse, all of which serve to display the severity of our ecological predicament. If you want evidence to show that world leaders are not taking this threat seriously, then we would recommend you watch Carl Sagan's testimony to Congress on climate change from 1985 (thirty-eight years ago) as proof that the science has been available to world leaders for decades, and their lack of action is nothing short of monstrously inexcusable. Here, we will leave the first question of 'what can I know' as answered; we know the future is most likely one of societal collapse, unless we accomplish something extraordinary.

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For the second question, 'what should I do', we should prepare for this collapse of our society by working towards protecting that which we most value. Herein lies the essence of strategic adaptation and the potentially revolutionary quality of honestly confronting the realities of climate change; it focuses the mind to prioritize the protection of that which it values most. Following on from confronting the probability of societal collapse comes the motivation to act to preserve the vulnerable and valuable parts of our lives.

As for the final question of what we can hope for, we must first discard the utterly unrealistic aspirations (which still dominate our culture) for the prolongation of anything closely resembling the way we live now, let alone for a technological 'transcendence' of it. Indeed, hope itself as a free-standing attitude of wishing is a harmful evasion of action, and must be let go of; instead, what is needed is clear perception, enabled by what Arendt calls *thinking* (which she distinguishes from *knowledge*).

Inheriting much from Kant, Arendt shows in the opening of *The Life of the Mind* that it is not knowledge that we are most crucially lacking. It is, in her sense, reason or thinking, which concerns not cognition, but *meaning*. When one starts to face up to climate reality, what one typically encounters is a crisis of meaning. One's life may seem pointless, one's future plans rudderless; one is forced to reassess comfortable assumptions about how change can be made to occur. Upon truly confronting the devastating realities of climate chaos your glasses will be anything but rose-tinted, but finally you will be able to see clearly. Such clear perception, as intimated by the philosopher Iris Murdoch, leads directly into doing what is to be done. Clarity as to what we can hope for thus turns out to be identical to how we then act, for hope then becomes a shared agential propensity, not the kind of detached pining that it is too often taken to be. This is the essence of strategic adaptation: to confront the grim truth and undertake a philosophical inquiry about what elements of society are most worthy of preservation.

But herein lies the paradox of strategic adaption: the assumption (at least for the sake of argument) that societal collapse is heading our way

may be the best route of averting the worst outcomes of dangerous climate change. For it concentrates the mind like nothing else. Focusing on the preservation of what is most important brings with it a descaling of what is least important.

This implies, in our view, a tactical, considered, deliberate 'de-development', expending less activity and fewer resources on the unimportant areas of society, resulting in fewer emissions, which in turn reduces the greenhouse effect. Starting from a place of assumed societal collapse may be the best chance of saving the elements of society we truly value. To illustrate the scale of this change, consider the work of David Graeber on the phenomenon of 'Bullshit Jobs', who argued that over half of the work undertaken in society has no social value, often causes harm (especially environmental harm), and takes a psychological toll on the worker who is aware of their job's pointlessness. Through prioritizing what is important to us under the motivation to protect it in the face of societal collapse, we can 'trim the fat' of all this useless work which produces such an absurd amount of emissions and consumes so much of our resources and time.

It is not the role of this piece to tell you what exactly these elements of society are. We can't tell you what you should value and what you should discard. These are decisions you must make. Indeed, they are decisions that we all, as a collaborative, multidisciplinary, diverse, informed society must make *together*.

To this end, one of us (Read) wrote a book entitled *Wittgenstein's Liberatory Philosophy* which explored Wittgenstein as a prophetic philosopher of culture who warned of the decline of the West if we continue to fixate on 'advancement' and 'progress'. The central claim of this book is that genuine intellectual autonomy from the dogmas that saturate our time is through-and-through itself a social endeavour, not a personal pursuit. Indeed, the idea of thought-leadership as a purely individual enterprise is part of the very pathology of our civilization that has brought us to our current cliff-edge, namely one of rugged individualism and social/global disregard. The philosophy of Wittgenstein urges us to engage in thoroughgoingly

collaborative thinking, on an interdisciplinary or indeed *post-disciplinary* basis, and to achieve a thoroughly relational and collective understanding of what it is to extricate ourselves from hegemonic ideologies and to awaken to our actual condition. This sort of collective, collaborative approach is the only route to dealing with societal collapse, and is paradoxically our best chance at mitigating and managing its descent. The unexamined collapse will not be worth living — it will be terrible beyond conception. Only if we are willing to contemplate what is coming and to prepare for it collectively will we be able to make it liveable.

So, to recap, this piece has covered a lot of ground. We began by exploring the mantra of Build Back Better, showing that it used to be focused on building resilience and mitigation to natural disasters, but has recently been coerced to focus on securing economic growth despite the fact that endless economic growth on a finite planet is ecologically nonsensical. Indeed, far from creating resilience to natural disasters, a dedication to economic growth and ideals of material 'progress' are a driving force of the rising tide of climate decline, making natural disasters *more* likely, and showing just how far the notion of Build Back Better has been hijacked. After this, we explored the three options available to us, namely to carry on as normal, to fall into 'tribalism', or to engage in strategic adaptation, before dispelling the credentials of the first two options, leaving us with just strategic adaptation. We then explored what we mean by strategic adaptation, highlighting the benefits of honestly confronting the realities of our predicament and investigating the role that philosophy can play in helping us confront societal collapse.

Our civilization is under a self-imposed existential threat. It will not continue in its current form, that much is clear. It's scandalous that philosophy in particular and the humanities in general have not been facing up to this reality and addressing the nihilism and the nausea (at ourselves) that are beginning to spiral out from it. Kant famously stated that we need to 'eliminate the obstacles by which reason hinders itself'. Our task here, and the wider task of strategic adaptation, must begin by facilitating just such

elimination, just such reasoning. From this, we can engage in the strategic adaptation, but we cannot do so without the sobering honesty that this society will not continue. After we have undergone this vital, sorrowful, heart-breaking realization, then we can start to engage in strategic adaptation; but that is necessarily a public task.

Rupert Read and Joseph Eastoe

Rupert Read is an associate professor of philosophy at the University of East Anglia. He is a former chair of Green House think tank, and a former Green Party of England and Wales spokesperson, councillor, European parliamentary candidate and national parliamentary candidate. He is co-founder of the Greens Climate Activist Network and the Moderate Flank Incubator. His new book *Why Climate Breakdown Matters* is out now. Joseph Eastoe is a Masters graduate from the University of Edinburgh in Global Environment, Politics, and Society, soon to start his PhD in Global Prosperity at University College London. He is also on the central committee for the Greens Climate Activist Network.