

thought dates to the court case of *Stoeck v. Public Trustee* in 1921. Max Stoeck was a businessman who had left Prussia in 1896 to manage a German business in London that manufactured electric lamps. In ways we might recognise today, Stoeck saw himself as an entrepreneur, unburdened by the restrictions of nationality that sought to impede the free flow of capital across borders. After war broke out in 1914, Stoeck suddenly found himself transformed from cosmopolitan businessman to enemy alien, and eventually, to a stateless person. As Siegelberg explains, *Stoeck v. Public Trustee* reaffirmed Stoeck's claim that, since he had lost his legal connection to the German empire years before and had never been naturalised in Britain, he was now a person of 'no nationality'.

This decision transformed questions of legal personhood, statehood, and rights in international law. As Siegelberg shows, by shining a light on the evolving role of statelessness as a category in legal thought, it is possible to trace the bigger theme of the evolution of international law, hinged by politics, policy, and activism. By 1954 and then the 1961 UN Conventions on the Reduction of Statelessness, the position of individuals as bearers of universal 'human rights', including the right to possess a nationality, was entrenched, though, as Siegelberg's analysis demonstrates, those rights were vested primarily in the sovereign power of the state. This also included the power of states to strip people of their rights to citizenship or to deny them naturalisation. This was a disappointment to those who had hoped to create a stronger international order in which rights would be guaranteed to all individuals, regardless of one's membership of a state. It also meant that millions of post-imperial subjects of the crumbling British and French empires were left stranded in the postwar period of decolonisation, as newly independent states refused to recognise minorities displaced within their borders.

The stateless are not refugees under international law, though they can often become so. In the past fifty years, refugees have become the primary objects of both humanitarian concern and public anxiety, largely obscuring the issue of statelessness from world attention. But at least twelve million people spend their lives never leaving the places where they were born, and yet do not possess any of the rights of legal residency their fellow citizens do, including birth certificates or passports. The Rohingya of Myanmar, the Roma of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the Karana in Madagascar, the Pemba and Makonde of Kenya – these are just some of the minorities that experience the full burden of living without papers, severely hampering access to education, legal employment, health care, the right to vote, the right to own a home, and freedom of movement. These are the modern-day equivalent of Joseph Roth's 'wandering Jews', 'condemned to rootlessness and unable to budge'. Meanwhile, the international organisations that once promised solidarity and the protection of the vulnerable beyond the boundaries of the state are increasingly powerless. In the past half century, the earlier hopes that international legal norms could be developed and strengthened to protect individuals *against* the power of the state are no longer realistic. Instead, in recent years we have witnessed an unprecedented hardening of borders and state powers for the poor and the disenfranchised, while the fantasy of a globalised borderless world remains the prerogative of the wealthy and the few.

This is not a book about the experience of statelessness – that

would be another book. *Statelessness* concerns the ways in which international lawyers and political scientists have responded to the modern phenomenon of exclusion and displacement that characterised much of the twentieth century and that forced new ways of thinking about the role of borders and boundaries of membership. Now we face a new challenge, as the climate crisis deepens and a global pandemic tests the resilience of national governments and the capacity of the international community to contain or respond to them. Perhaps optimistically, Siegelberg ends her book on a note of hope. If we wish to remain a 'world of states', we need a new vocabulary and framework of ideas to comprehend and manage these challenges, rather than relying on the doctrines and institutions that were created by intellectuals of a different era for a different time. ■

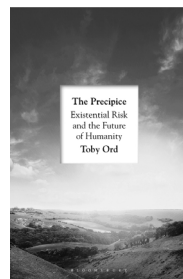
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## PHILOSOPHY

# Defending the far future

A consideration of existential risk

Robert Sparrow



The Precipice: Existential risk and the future of humanity

by Toby Ord

Bloomsbury

\$29.99 pb, 468 pp

This is a strange time to be reading a book about risk, especially one in which the risk of a pandemic is a central concern. Many of us have been worrying about, and attempting to manage, risks every time we have left the house. One of the lessons of this experience has been just how bad we are at thinking about risk. In particular, we struggle to reckon with small risks that may have disastrous outcomes.

This well-known human failing is one of the motivations for Australian philosopher Toby Ord's book *The Precipice*, which argues that we are not doing enough to address the risk of extinction of the human species. The 'precipice' of the book's title refers to the idea that we are standing on the edge of great things but also on the edge of disaster. Our new-found power over the natural world, provided by science and technology, holds out the prospect of a near infinite 'future of value' in which humanity flourishes and reaches for the stars. At the same time, science has made us conscious of species-level threats such as asteroid strikes that might cut short this future, while technology has produced new threats, including climate change and the risk of rogue artificial intelligences.

'Existential risk' has become something of a cause célèbre

in the last decade. Research centres dedicated to ‘The Future of Humanity’, several of which are funded by eccentric billionaires, have sprung up around the globe: at Oxford (where Ord works), at Cambridge, in Boston, and at Berkeley. *The Precipice* is a manifesto – one might even say, a bible – for the mathematicians, physicists, computer scientists, and philosophers that populate the boards of these institutes. Ord argues for the moral importance of defending humanity’s long-term future and makes an impressive start on identifying and categorising various existential risks. Ord considers both natural risks – in the form of globe-shattering asteroids and comets, ‘super volcanoes’, nearby stars exploding, and other more esoteric cosmological events – and man-made risks, such as nuclear war, global heating, ‘super-intelligences’, and pandemics.

In each case, Ord tries to estimate the magnitude of the risk and to identify actions we might take to prevent, or at least manage, it. In most cases, in the short term, that turns out to be the traditional academic conclusion ‘more research required’, although, to be fair, getting governments to do even that much to protect the long-term future of humanity would be an achievement. In relation to the risk of nuclear war and engineered pandemics, Ord has some sensible, if modest, suggestions for strengthening international institutions to try to reduce the risks of catastrophe owing to these causes.

However, when it comes to other risks stemming from technology, especially the risk associated with the pursuit of AI, Ord seems to lack the courage of his convictions, arguing only that we should ‘proceed with caution’. Like others who want to alert us to the dangers of new technologies, without threatening the material interests of the companies that champion them and that are often sponsoring the conferences or institutes at which concerns about new technologies are being raised, Ord suggests that we can’t stop new technologies from being developed: it would only take a few rogue actors flouting any ban on a technology to bring it into existence. However, if this is true, it is equally a problem for proposals for regulation of new technologies, whenever regulation would stand in the way of profit or national interest – which is to say precisely when it is important. Consequently, the choices we face in response to the risks posed by new technologies are more difficult than Ord admits.

One of the pleasures of reading *The Precipice* is watching Ord reveal himself as a prodigious polymath. The book ranges across the natural sciences – including geology, physics, and cosmology – as well as economics, history, and philosophy. The writing is clear, the tone ringing, and Ord buttresses his claims with extensive notes, sources, and several appendices, which together take up nearly half of the manuscript.

Inevitably, the reader is required to take many of Ord’s claims on trust. The book also illustrates one of the difficulties of doing applied philosophy, which is getting the balance right between offering something to address a real-world concern and following ideas where they lead. For many people, I suspect, the immediate risks they face – starvation, disease, civil war, rape – mean that they have no time to consider the long-term survival of humanity. Yet Ord argues that addressing existential risks is one of most pressing challenges of our time. This conclusion follows swiftly from that fact that Ord believes that we should only discount the interests of future people to the extent that we are uncertain whether they will exist or not. According to Ord, this means: ‘Almost all of humanity’s life lies in the future, almost everything of value lies in the future as well: almost all the flourishing; almost all the beauty; our greatest achievements; our most just societies; our most profound discoveries.’

Indeed, the scale and scope of the future *The Precipice* is concerned with is so large that Ord cannot prevent himself from launching into occasional flights of philosophical fantasy, such as when he suggests that disputes between different schools of philosophy could be resolved by allowing each to colonise different galaxies! Moreover, although Ord denies this, his argument risks the conclusion that we should abandon all our current worldly concerns for the sake of the well-being of those who will live in this distant future.

Even more problematically, Ord’s focus on existential risk itself risks distracting our attention from disasters short of extinction, which are arguably more pressing. This is especially true of the book’s treatment of the climate crisis. Ord suggests that, although it would be an ‘unparalleled human and environmental tragedy,’ even an extreme of 20° C of warming is unlikely to cause our extinction. Given the pace at which global heating is occurring, and the scale of the disasters that have resulted from just the 1° C warming that we have already experienced, this strikes me as small comfort.

That being said, both the looming catastrophe of global heating and the risk of a pandemic of the sort we are currently experiencing were predicted decades ago. Governments, and the global community more generally, didn’t take these risks sufficiently seriously at the time and failed to do what was required to avert them. *The Precipice* is a clarion call that we should not make the same mistake again when it comes to the other risks that threaten life on planet Earth. I only hope we heed it. ■

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Toby Ord (David Fisher)