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Reasoning the Disaster

“The future is inevitable and precise, but it may not occur.”

– Jorge-Luis Borges, *Other Inquisitions*

“The future can only be anticipated in the form of an absolute danger.”

– Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*

“The catastrophe, even though it does not occur, retains the status of a possibility, not in the sense that it would still be possible for it to take place, but in the sense that it will forever remain true that it could have taken place.”

– Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *The Mark of the Sacred*

Future anteriority

Will you, in the future, after reading this paper, understand the nature of the disaster? Will you have understood the disaster by the time I finish my seminar? *In what lies ahead* there is a claim that the disaster operates according to a tense structure quite different from the one we normally assume for it. This tense structure is the future perfect in English, a tense more accurately referred to as the *future anterior* in the Romance languages, “the tense that refers to something that lies ahead and yet which is already complete, not *will happen* but what *will have happened*.”¹ There is a trace of the impossible in the future

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¹ Mark Currie, *The Unexpected: Narrative Temporality and the Philosophy of Surprise*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2013, p.1; Also relevant here is Lacan’s discussion of the temporal order of the “*futur antérieur*” which he identifies as the necessary precondition for the realization of subjective truth (Lacan 2006a: p. 37 and Lacan 2006b: p. 247). The structure of future anteriority is the very model of temporal becoming as Lacan understood it, of “what I will have been, given what I am in the process of becoming” (Lacan 2006b: p. 247).

perfect, of a future that has already taken place, a future projection rooted in a memory of the past, a pro-tention founded in retention. The future perfect is almost never used in academic papers such as mine, yet it tells us something about how we craft our narratives with what we experience, the foreseeable with the unexpected. The future cannot be known, but its contentlessness (do you, *can* you know what I will write next?) is given form by the strange expectation that you are going *to have known it*, by the strange temporality of what *will have* happened. To think about an academic presentation as the future perfect is not to use it in the way we may normally use a tense: that is, as a description of the basic relation between the time of an utterance and the time to which it refers. It is to acknowledge that the reading of an academic paper is a transaction in which the past is re-experienced, but also its prospect decoded in the process of delivery as a quasi-present. The mere staging of my paper, its unfolding, produces the expectation that something unexpected will have taken place by the time it is over. You are going to *have known* the disaster (of my paper) by the strange temporality of what *will have* happened.

In what lies ahead it is the relationship between the future perfect and the unexpected that converges. The future perfect suggests a kind of doubling of temporal perspective, of what will happen with what has already taken place. In Jacques Derrida's work there is an early fascination with future anteriority that transmutes progressively into a preoccupation with messianic time, his term for a certain kind of unforeseen, and yet expected, arrival from the future. This context may seem quite distant from the immediate concerns of my topic of "reason and disaster," yet Derrida's concerns with the temporality of action and responsibility are often those explored in the contradictions that surround the future anterior and the unforeseeability of events. As Mark Currie concludes: "Nobody has written in a more sustained way about futural meaning than Derrida, nor engaged with the eschatological tendencies of modern thought more critically."² We might even say that the *a-venir*, Derrida's "to-come," and an interest in the future anterior as it bears upon expectation and responsibility, is one if not *the* main strand of his thought. "An event," Derrida declares, "does not come

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² Ibid., p. 6. See also Geoff Bennington: "Derrida has in fact been constantly writing (about) the future, without making any predictions," "Towards a Criticism of the Future" (p. 230). Derrida made the distinction between the predictable future and the future that actually comes about, referring to the first with the traditional French designation of the future as *l'avenir*, and the second, the surprising arrival, as *l'arrivant*.

about unless its irruption interrupts the course of the possible, and as the impossible itself, surprises any foreseeability.”³ Thus the thinking about unpredictability, spontaneous eruption, interruption, reversal of fortunes, emergence and change in contemporary philosophy is part of the effort to think about the relation between unexpected events, futurity and social change. The face of contemporary thought that is the unexpected, for which we need to reinstate the future that cannot be foreseen within our conceptualization of the present, is a kind of doubling of temporal perspective, of what will happen with what has already taken place. Perhaps – and it is only a “perhaps,” a projection – the future perfect *will have been* the tense of our times.

The question of the unexpected, as must be clear by now, is not simple and it will prove difficult to talk about the prevalent concept of the future in our culture. Who would dare predict the history of prediction? And who could promise to tell it as a (true) story? And who could tell that story without giving in to a conventionally dialectical schema, whereby the history of prediction, as error, as work of the negative would be made to contribute to the process of the verification of truth. Even supposing that prediction has a history, one would still have to tell it without predicting. If there is a history of prediction it cannot let itself be reappropriated by a history of error *or* of the truth. It will prove difficult to discuss prediction of the future since that brings me to one of my propositions. One will never be able to declare agreement with or prove anything against the person who says, “I predict a disaster and I do this in good faith.” Here is the theoretical subtlety, it is as if the theoretical discourse on prediction was yet one more predictive strategy, an unavowable technique of disculpation by which theoretical reason deceives practical reason. Here is an issue that will persist for the rest of my paper: can there be a conventional dialectical schema whereby the history of the unexpected, as history and work of the negative, could be made to contribute to the process of truth, to the verification of truth as absolute knowledge? In its prevailing and recognized form prediction is not a fact or a state; it is an *intentional* act, a predicting. There is not *the* prediction, but rather this pronouncing or meaning-to-say that is called predicting: to predict would be to address another (for one only predicts to the other; one cannot predict to oneself, unless it is to oneself as another) a statement or a series of statements

³ Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, edited and translated and with an introduction by Peggy Kamuf, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2002, p. 73.

that the predictor knows form assertions that may or may not be false. The prediction pertains to saying, and the meaning-to-say, not to the said. This appears at once obvious and complex and, *in what lies ahead*, each of its elements will become part of our analysis.

But in the above proclamation there remains, above all, the question of whether the prediction of a disaster always consists in a *declarative* (constative) utterance, or whether the prediction is a manifestation of the *performative* type, since it implies a promise of truth where it may even be betrayed, and since it also aims to produce an effect of belief where there is nothing to state, or where at least nothing is exhausted in a statement. This “speech act” aspect of the prediction is not a matter of truth or falsehood. It is a way, as J.L. Austin phrased it, of doing something with words. Its functioning depends on faith or the lack of faith in the one who receives it, not on referential veracity. Whether or not prediction has a delimitable space within language one sees the enormous issue of the problem of finding decidable frontiers for it. Where does its event stop, take place, or even carry on? Here, then, are a first and then a second obstacle: if what is apparently the most common concept of the prediction of the disaster, if good sense concerning prediction has a history, then it is caught up in a becoming that risks always relativizing its truth and value. But – second obstacle – we also have to distinguish between the history of the notion of prediction and the history of prediction itself, a history, as we shall see, that affects the practice of prediction, its means and effects. So before even beginning to begin I must make an assertion. You would have every right to distrust it, as you might with any assertion. I will not predict, not be able to predict, what you might think about the history of prediction. Does this mean that I have failed to predict for you, *will have failed* to predict for you? And am I accountable for this? I leave this question adjourned, I turn it over to you, at least until the end of reading my paper, and in doing so I am, of course, predicting that there *will be* questions.

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To help me in this fabulation about the prediction of the disaster as fabrication I will introduce some figures who will remain more or less present, like ghosts who appear and then wait off-to-the-side during my paper: first, as you have already seen, there is the not-too-ghostly presence of Jacques Derrida, then in introductory mode Slavoj Žižek and Martin Heidegger, Henri Bergson, Günter Anders, followed by the biblical figure of the prophet Jonah and Hans Jonas, the philosopher who rethought ethics in the light of the transformations of modern

technology, but most important for the discourse of *what lies ahead* will be the figure of engineer and social philosopher, Jean-Pierre Dupuy.

The unexpected

I will now try and commence – and without predicting, believe me – by presenting these illustrations. I will propose some specific examples on the basis of which we will try to advance in a reflective fashion from the particular to the general. Although I am wary of the term “reflective” which implies the canonical distinction, made by Kant between a determinant judgment (where particulars are subsumed under known universals) and a reflective judgment (where we find unknown universals for given particulars).⁴ Nevertheless, it would appear that the essence of catastrophe has become normal for what Žižek, following Adorno and Horkheimer, calls “our Western administered world”⁵ – we now govern according to scenarios of war, terror, ecological disasters and financial crises; the normal run of our societies is continually threatened by these things.⁶ The

⁴ “It is then one thing to say, ‘the production of certain things of nature or that of collective nature is only possible through a cause which determines itself to action according to design’; and quite another to say, ‘I can according to the peculiar constitution of my cognitive faculties judge concerning the possibility of these things and their production, in no other fashion than by conceiving for this a cause working according to design, i.e. a Being which is productive in a way analogous to the causality of an intelligence.’ In the former case I wish to establish something concerning the Object, and am bound to establish the objective reality of an assumed concept; in the latter, Reason only determines the use of my cognitive faculties, conformably to their peculiarities and to the essential conditions of their range and their limits. Thus the former principle is an objective proposition for the determinant Judgment, the latter merely a subjective proposition for the reflective Judgment, i.e. a maxim which Reason prescribes to it.” Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* Section 75.

⁵ The phrase “*verwaltete Welt*” (“administered society”) is derived from Adorno and Horkheimer.

⁶ Jean-Luc Nancy proposes an “equivalence of catastrophes” where “the spread or proliferation of repercussions from every kind of disaster hereafter will bear the mark of that paradigm represented by nuclear risk” and “the complexity here is singularly characterized by the fact that natural catastrophes are no longer separable from their technological, economic, and political implications or repercussions” ... “There are no more natural catastrophes: There is only a civilizational catastrophe that expands every time.” Jean-Luc Nancy, *After Fukushima: The Equivalence of Catastrophes*, translated by Charlotte Mandell, Fordham University Press, New York 2015, p. 3, p. 4, p. 34). For Massimo Cacciari, the development of the theory of catastrophes belongs to “the general emphasis placed in our culture on phenomena of discontinuity as fundamental characters of the very form

future as a shared horizon of modernist universal emancipation has succumbed to the future imagined as global catastrophe, disaster or apocalypse. It no longer seems necessary to spell out the ways in which the culture of disaster continues to characterize the contemporary moment. We can also view the entirety of late twentieth-century European philosophy as unfolding in the aftermath of a pervasive sense of catastrophe that is itself withdrawn from thought. In this vein, Žižek also reminds us that for Heidegger, the most violent catastrophes in nature and social life are nothing in comparison with the catastrophe which is “man” itself. In his meditation on Hölderlin’s Hymn “The Ister,” Heidegger reflects:

The most powerful “catastrophes” we can think of in nature and in the cosmos are nothing in terms of their uncanniness compared to that uncanniness that the human essence in itself is, insofar as human beings, placed amongst beings as such and set in place for beings, forget being. In this way, the homely becomes an empty and errant wandering for them, one that they fill out with their activities. The uncanniness of the unhomely here consists in the fact that human beings themselves in their essence are a *katastrophe* – a reversal that turns them away from their own essence. Among beings, the human being is the sole catastrophe.⁷

With Heidegger, we must conclude, says Žižek, that “the essence of catastrophe has nothing to do with ontic catastrophes, since the essence of catastrophe is the catastrophe of the essence itself, its withdrawal, its forgetting by man.”⁸ Furthermore, in Heidegger it is not clear that we need the threat (or fact) of an actual ontic catastrophe in order to experience in a negative way the true catastrophe that pertains to human essence as such.

We live with and within the idea that the world is somehow more unpredictable than it used to be. The idea, the global cultural understanding, that we inhabit

of the system ... catastrophe is change of order, structural transition.” Massimo Cacciari, Massimo, “Catastrophes” in *The Unpolitical: On the Radical Critique of Political Unreason*, pp. 146-58, translated by Massimo Verdicchio, Fordham University Press, New York 2009, p. 148.

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin’s Hymn “The Ister,”* translated by William McNeill and Julia Davis, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1998, p. 77.

⁸ Slavoj Žižek, “The (Mis)uses of Catastrophes” in Laurence Simmons, Heather Worth and Maureen Molloy (eds), *From Z to A: Žižek at the Antipodes*, pp. 35-42, Dunmore Publishing, Wellington 2005, pp. 137-8.

an epoch that is characterized by the unexpected from war to terror to ecological and pandemic outbreaks, may seem ubiquitous, but the paradox is that this cannot be a temporal condition because it gives prominence to unforeseeability. Further invocations of the future perfect as the “postmodern tense,” and temporal structure of our epoch, are to be found in Jean-François Lyotard’s *What is Postmodernism?*⁹ And earlier by Derrida in his “Exergue” to *Of Grammatology*. For Derrida, writing remember in 1967, the new epoch, which cannot be foreseen, is the monstrosity that guides our future anterior, so that the future anterior is the relation with the unforeseeable itself, and never the characteristic of the epoch to come. He insists:

The future can only be anticipated in the form of an absolute danger. It is that which breaks absolutely with constituted normality and can only be proclaimed, *presented*, as a sort of monstrosity. For that future world and for that within it which will have put into question the values of sign, word, and writing, for that which guides our future anterior, there is as yet no exergue.¹⁰

It is also important to attend to the possibility that the credibility of this idea derives from the notions of uncertainty that have gathered momentum in the physical and theoretical sciences, in quantum mechanics and mathematics, in theoretical physics and evolutionary theory as well as the applications of game and chaos theory to the unpredictability of economic systems. Some of these areas have had to reconcile themselves to the opacity of the future, for example Heisenberg’s “Principle of Uncertainty.” Others have constructed the category of the unforeseeable as the state of exception among the predictive laws they have established, for example the distinction that John Maynard Keynes proposed in 1921 between risk and uncertainty, or later the introduction within statistics of the concept of subjective probability by Leonard Savage.¹¹ The future perfect

⁹ “The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*... *Post modern* would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*).” Lyotard 1984, p. 62. It is a tenet of postmodern cultural theory that we should think about the contemporary as a condition of blocked futurity, in which novelty is reduced to the simulation, repetition and recycling of past forms.

¹⁰ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1997, p. 6.

¹¹ Leonard J. Savage, *The Foundations of Statistics* and John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*, Wiley, New York 1954.

and prediction may seem one and the same thing, they are both anticipations of a future which have to wait for their verification, but there is an important difference of location of the future position: where prediction imagines an event in the future (x will happen), the future perfect imagines a time further into the future in relation to which that future event is past (x will have happened).

Projected time

In what lies ahead the disaster may all of a sudden become real *and* possible, and the paradox resides in this retroactive appearance of probability. Henri Bergson discussing the modality of the outbreak of World War I, which surprised him as emerging so formidably and with so little objection, wrote:

That one can put reality into the past and thus work backwards in time is something I have never claimed. But that one can put the possible there, or rather that the possible may put itself there at any moment, is not to be doubted. As reality is created as something unforeseeable and new, its image is reflected behind it into the indefinite past; thus it finds that it has from all time been possible, but it is at this precise moment that it begins to have always been possible, and that is why I said its possibility, which does not precede its reality, will have preceded it once the reality has appeared. The possible is therefore the mirage of the present in the past...¹²

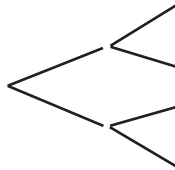
The encounter of the real as impossible is thus always missed: either it is experienced as impossible but not real (the prospect of a forthcoming catastrophe which, however probable we know it is, we do not believe it will effectively occur and thus dismiss it as impossible), or as real but no longer impossible (once the catastrophe occurs, it is “renormalized,” perceived as part of the normal run of things, as always-already having been possible). For Bergson the future is at stake in the memory of the present in two ways, not only in the idea that the memory is of the future, located in an envisaged future which looks back upon the present, but also in the sense that we already know what we do not yet know. He continues elsewhere:

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¹² Henri Bergson, “The Possible and the Real” in *Key Writings*, edited by Keith Ansell Pearson and John Mullarkey, Continuum, London and New York 2002, p. 230.

As I cannot predict what is going to happen, I quite realize that I do not know it; but I foresee that I am going to have known it, in the sense that I shall recognize it when I shall perceive it; and this recognition to come, which I feel inevitable on account of the rush of my faculty of recognizing, exercises in advance a retroactive effect on my present, placing me in the strange position of a person who feels he knows what he knows he does not know.¹³

I do not know what is going to happen but I *will have known*, or I will know what *will have happened*, and this future perfect disposition tilts me towards what is on the point of happening. There is a feeling that the unforeseeable has already been seen, which comes from the expectation that we will know it when we see it. And, as Jean-Pierre Dupuy who himself starts with Bergson, makes it clear, the gap which makes these paradoxes possible is the one between knowledge and belief: we *know* the catastrophe is possible, probable even, yet we do not *believe* it will really happen.¹⁴



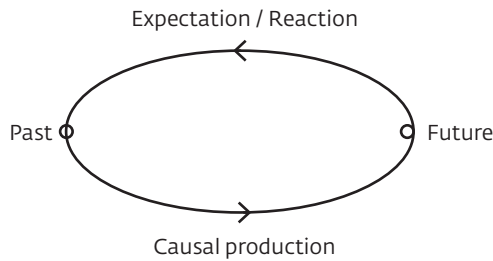
In ordinary metaphysics time bifurcates from a more or less fixed past into a possible set of branching futures, each accorded a probability of realization on the basis of particular actions in the present and the actual world constitutes one path among these alternatives. Dupuy calls this “occurring time” (*temps de l’histoire*).

But, he argues, if we are to confront properly the threat of a (cosmic or environmental) catastrophe, we need to break out of this “historical” notion of temporality: we have to introduce a new notion of time. Dupuy calls this time the “projected time” (*temps du projet*) of a closed circuit between the past and the future: the future is causally produced by our acts in the past, while the way

¹³ Henri Bergson, “Memory of the Present and False Recognition,” in *Key Writings*, edited by Keith Ansell Pearson and John Mullarkey, Continuum, London and New York 2002, pp. 148-9.

¹⁴ Dupuy, 2002, pp. 142-143; For a fuller discussion of Bergson on time and the unforeseeable see Currie, 2013, pp. 31-3; pp. 62-8.

we act is determined by our anticipation of the future and our reaction to this anticipation.¹⁵ The anticipation of the fixed future then functions as if it is sending signals back into the past, which then prompt action in the present. Here is proposed an alternative metaphysics of temporality based on the obstacle of the non-credible character of catastrophes.



Dupuy calls this “projected time” because it takes the form of a loop in which past and future reciprocally determine each other. He insists: “To foretell the future in projected time, it is necessary to seek the loop’s fixed point, where an expectation (on the part of the past with regard to the future) and a causal production (of the future by the past) coincide.”¹⁶ This is how Dupuy proposes to confront the catastrophe: we should first perceive it as our fate, as unavoidable, and then, projecting ourselves into it, adopting its standpoint, we should retroactively insert into its past (the past of the future) counterfactual possibilities (“If we were to do that and that, the catastrophe we are in now would not have occurred!”) upon which we then act today. Thus the fixed point of the future is a superposition of two states, one of which is the occurrence of the catastrophe that is both accidental and fatal, the other is its non-occurrence. According to Dupuy, in the case of a future inscribed as catastrophe, projected time thus involves the creation of an image of the future that is sufficiently convincing as catastrophe to set in motion actions in the present that will prevent its occurrence, barring an accident. The more logical and effective strategy, Dupuy maintains, is to live in a future time, as if the catastrophe were already a certain thing; to believe that the catastrophe will not be just a possibility but will occur necessarily. In “projected time,” the enlightened common sense that understands that

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¹⁵ Dupuy’s “temps du project” can also be translated literally as “time of the project” where “pro-ject” involves a throwing forward, an accompanying sense of futural potential and promise.

¹⁶ Dupuy, “Rational Choice before the Apocalypse,” *Anthropometrics* 13 (3/2007), n. p. Accessed Feb 12, 2015. <<http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap1303/index.htm>>.

we make our own future must be overturned. There is the future we can predict, and then there is the unexpected. In an obvious way the unexpected is the failure of prediction, and in a less obvious way, it comes into view as a result of the success of prediction.

For Dupuy, the German philosopher Günter Anders (1902-1992) was the most radical of our thinkers on the disaster in the twentieth century. In thinking *after* the disaster of the holocaust – the past is the time when some possibilities were realized and others were not: a time of blame and responsibility, the counting of those who died and those who survived – Anders’ retells the biblical parable of someone who predicts catastrophe. Noah was tired of playing the prophet of doom and forever foretelling a catastrophe that would not occur and that no one would take seriously. So Anders’ fable tells us:

he clothed himself in sackcloth and covered his head with ashes. Only a man who was mourning [the death of] a beloved child or his wife was allowed to do this. Clothed in the garb of truth, bearer of sorrow, he went back to the city, resolved to turn the curiosity, spitefulness, and superstition of its inhabitants to his advantage. Soon a small crowd of curious people had gathered around him. They asked him questions. They asked if someone had died, and who the dead person was. Noah replied to them that many had died, and then, to the great amusement of his listeners, said that they themselves were the dead of whom he spoke. When he was asked when this catastrophe had taken place, he replied to them: “Tomorrow.” Profiting from their attention and confusion, Noah drew himself up to his full height and said these words: “The day after tomorrow, the flood will be something that will have been. And when the flood will have been, *everything that is will never have existed*. When the flood will have carried off everything that is, everything that will have been, it will be too late to remember, for there will no longer be anyone alive. And so there will no longer be any difference between the dead and those who mourn them. *If I have come before you, it is in order to reverse time*, to mourn tomorrow’s dead today. The day after tomorrow it will be too late.” With this he went back whence he had come, took off the sackcloth [that he wore], cleaned his face of the ashes that covered it, and went to his workshop. That evening a carpenter knocked on his door and said to him: “Let me help you

build the ark, *so that it may become false.*” Later a roofer joined them, saying: “It is raining over the mountains, let me help you, so that it may become false.”¹⁷

In this fable, the paradox of the prophecy of doom is as follows. Making the perspective of catastrophe credible requires one to increase the ontological force of its inscription in the future. The foretold suffering and deaths will inevitably occur, like an inexorable destiny. The present conserves its memory and the mind can project itself beyond the catastrophe, speaking of the event in the future perfect tense: there exists a moment from the standpoint of which one will be able to say the catastrophe will have taken place. In the parable Noah declares: “The day after tomorrow, the flood will be something that will have been.” But if this task is too well carried out, one will have lost sight of its purpose, which is precisely to raise people’s awareness and spur them to action so that the catastrophe *may not occur* – “let me help you build the ark, *so that it may become false*” say the carpenter and the roofer. The paradox comes from a temporal looping that should, but that *does not*, occur between the earlier prediction and the future event. The catastrophe, although unrealized, will conserve its status as a possibility, not in the sense that it might still possibly be realized, but in the sense that it will always remain true that it could have been realized. When one predicts, in order to avoid it, that a catastrophe is on the way, this prediction does not have the status of a prediction, in the strict sense of the term: it does not claim to say what the future will be, to “say before,” but simply what it *would have been* if people had not paid attention. Such is the meaning of Noah’s conduct in Anders’ parable: through the staging of the mourning for deaths that have not yet occurred, Noah reverses time, or rather he renders it circular, therefore negating it by transforming it into an eternal present. But the misfortunes of the prophet of misfortune are not over. Either his predictions will turn out to be correct and no one will thank him, indeed, he may even be accused of being the cause of the foretold disaster; or, if the disaster is not realized, the catastrophe does not occur, he will be made fun of for carrying on as he did. The paradox comes from a temporal looping that should but does not occur between the earlier prediction and the future event. For, as Dupuy notes,

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¹⁷ Quoted from Dupuy, *The Mark of the Sacred*, translated by M.B. Debevoise, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2013, p. 203; Anders’ German text is found in the first chapter of *Endzeit und Zeitenend*. Anders told the story elsewhere and in other forms, particularly in *Hiroshima ist überall*.

the very idea of this looping in no way makes sense according to our ordinary metaphysics, as shown by the metaphysical structure of prevention, which consists of having an unwanted possibility sent into the ontological realm of unrealized possibilities. The catastrophe, although unrealized, will conserve its status as a possibility, not in the sense that it might still possibly be realized, but in the sense that it will always remain true that it could have been realized. When one predicts, *in order to avoid it*, that a catastrophe is on the way, this prediction does not have the status of a prediction, in the strict sense of the term: it does not claim to say what the future will be, but simply what it would have been if people had not paid attention. Looping is not a condition in this instance: the predicted future has no need of coinciding with the actual future, the anticipation has no need of being realized, for the predicted or anticipated “future” is in fact not at all the future, but a possible world which is and will remain unrealized.¹⁸

If the metaphysics of Anders’ parable is not “our ordinary metaphysics” then of what does it consist? Here time appears as a loop in which past and future determine each other. The future is taken to be no less fixed than the past – “Asked when this catastrophe had taken place, he answered: tomorrow” – the future is no less necessary than the past – “The day after tomorrow, the flood will be something that will have been” – the future is of the order of fate or destiny, which means that every event that does not take place in neither the future nor the present is an impossible event.

The Two “Jonas”

It might seem that the words of the prophet Noah have a performative power: the saying of things brings them into existence, but that is to forget the fatalistic aspect of prophesy, it describes events to come as if they were immutable, ineluctable, written already in the book of history. Prophesy is a paradoxical mix of fatalism and voluntarism. This double possibility must remain open, as both a chance and a threat, for otherwise we would no longer be dealing with anything but the irresponsible operation of a programmatic machine. Furthermore, as Dupuy reflects, “The prophesy includes itself in its own discourse; it sees itself

¹⁸ Dupuy, 2007, n.p.

realizing what it announces as destiny.”¹⁹ Prophecy is both where we are going and where we have been.

And for Dupuy, no example is more striking than the prophets of the Bible, even the minor prophets. His example is Jonah, son of Amittai, the biblical prophet of the eighth century before Christ mentioned in the second Book of Kings (14, 25). Ordered by God to go to the city of Nineveh to prophesy against it “for their great wickedness is come up before me” (Jonah 1.2) he chooses instead to avoid his mission and to flee to Tarshish. God asks Jonah to prophesy the fall of Nineveh but instead of carrying out the task of prophesy Jonah flees. Why? We are not told. Nevertheless, everyone knows how the story develops: while on board a huge storm arises and the sailors learn that Jonah is to blame and he is thrown overboard to calm the seas. Jonah is miraculously saved by being swallowed by a large fish and then after three days and three nights vomited onto dry land. We also forget, of course, the ending of the story, which tells us why Jonah disobeyed God. It was the fact that Jonah foresaw – inasmuch as he was an efficacious prophet – what would have happened if he *had* delivered his prophesy. Now God for a second time orders him to prophesy the fall of Nineveh and this time, having understood the cost of his disobedience, he obeys. But now the inhabitants of Nineveh repent, they convert and God forgives them. Their city will be saved. But to Jonah, however, the Bible tells us: “this was very displeasing..., and he became angry” (Jonah 4.1). Jonah would appear to be one of the lesser prophets but all the religions of the book nevertheless place great importance on the story of Jonah for Jewish, Christian and Muslim tradition. Why? First there is Jonah’s disrespect. The initial conflict between God and Jonah lies in the fact that Jonah does not want the inhabitants of Nineveh to be saved. Nineveh is the capital of the Assyrians and would remain so until 612BC. The Assyrians were Israel’s most ferocious and resolute enemies. Jonah’s dilemma is thus both moral and metaphysical. But what he understands, and we come to understand, is that in this case God prophesizes the future expressly so it is *not* produced. And the future here means the fall of Nineveh. The problem with foreseeing the future in order to change it is, for our metaphysical tradition at least, a logical impossibility. And this is the basis for our understanding of Jonah’s metaphysical dilemma and his contrariness. He knows that his prophesy, in its realization in the world, will become false. He knew that the first time when he fled, and

¹⁹ Ibid.

he knows it when God for the second time commands him to prophesy the fall of Nineveh. The inhabitants of Nineveh will repent, convert and be pardoned. Their city will be saved. How can he not be angry at God who has prepared a trap for him, the trap of time?²⁰

For Dupuy, who plays upon the fact that in French their names are homonyms, the philosopher Hans Jonas is like the God found in the Book of Jonah. He prophesizes the future expressly with the end that it does not take place. Both “Jonases” are faced with the same dilemma: they “must foretell an impending catastrophe as though it belonged to an ineluctable future, but with the purpose of ensuring that, as a result of [their] doing just this, the catastrophe will not occur.”²¹ In his fundamental work, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, Jonas explains why we need a new ethics in the technological age and an ethics for the future [*Ethik für die Zukunft*], for the sake of the future not of the future. Hans Jonas is not interested in a hypothetical future which is not a future at all. The problem is that to prevent the future happening by changing it is for our metaphysical tradition an impossible logic. If I had done this, while I did something else, the future would (perhaps) be different... What for Jonah seemed a “blind alley” for Jonas is cause for celebration. He declares:

The purpose of all predictions is ... that they be translated into practical politics, namely, in the sense that the actions induced by them will promote or prevent their coming true. Prevention ranks foremost of the two, as the prediction in the sense of warning is naturally and rightly a stronger motive for the exertions of statecraft, surely a more compelling command to responsibility, than the call of promise. ... The prophecy of doom is made to avert its coming, and it would be the height of injustice later to deride the “alarmists” because “it did not turn out so bad after all.” To have been wrong may have been their merit.²²

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²⁰ As Terry Eagleton points out, “It is a mistake to believe that the biblical prophets sought to predict the future. Rather, the prophet denounces the greed, corruption and power-mongering of the present, warning us that unless we change our ways we might well not have a future at all.” *Why Marx Was Right*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2011, p. 67.

²¹ Dupuy, 2013, p. 191.

²² Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, translated by Hans Jonas with the collaboration of David Herr, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1984, p. 120.

The excess of our power on our capacity to foresee the consequences of our acts at the same time provides us with the moral obligation to foresee the future but renders us incapable of doing so. As Dupuy concludes, if the metaphysics of Jonah allows us to think of prevention, the metaphysics of Hans Jonas allows us to flee it. “And it is this metaphysics that will allow us, perhaps, to think the coherence and rationality of catastrophism.”²³

In the path of *what lies ahead* we would appear to have reached an aporia. In our present age, the age of the technological “administered world,” we have an ardent obligation that we cannot fulfill. As Dupuy insists, “if one is to prevent a catastrophe, one needs to believe in its possibility *before* it occurs. If, on the other hand, one succeeds in preventing it, its non-realisation maintains it in the realm of the impossible, and as a result, the prevention efforts will appear useless in retrospect”²⁴. This is the Jonah/Jonas paradox: “We must neither believe too much in fate nor refuse too much to believe in it.”²⁵ An aporia is, etymologically, a blind alley, an impasse, a no thoroughfare, in a sequence of logical thinking. You follow through a perfectly rational line of argument, one depending on clear and self-evident distinctions. Suddenly you hit the wall and there seems no way out. Given the magnitude of the possible outcome of our technological choices we have an absolute obligation to try and anticipate them. However, the very same reasons that oblige us to anticipate the future make it impossible for us to do so. This is a perilous activity that both demands foreknowledge and prohibits it. When a logician encounters an aporia in his or her train of thinking, he or she has been taught to assume that there must be something wrong with the primary definitions or presuppositions, the theorems that make the whole

²³ Dupuy, 2013, p. 191; “Catastrophism” here does not contain the same meaning it does in evolutionary biology as the effect of a historical series of sudden, violent, “catastrophic” events that are then used to explain the current shape and size of natural phenomena. Dupuy’s “catastrophism” is more akin to “catastrophe theory” developed during the 1960s and 1970s by René Thom and Christopher Zeeman which analyses degenerate critical points of a function. “Catastrophe theory” in mathematics and climatology argues that a tiny change in one part of a dynamical system, in the famous example, the flapping of a butterfly’s wings in Guatemala, can, through a series of rapid relays, produce a sudden wholesale rupture, a gigantic and “catastrophic change” in the whole system, for example, a hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico.

²⁴ Dupuy, 2007, n.p.

²⁵ Dupuy, 2013, p. 193.

train of logical thinking possible. But what if there were another way around this ethical aporia? According to Dupuy,

The major stumbling block of our current implicit metaphysics of temporality turns out to be our conception of the *future as unreal*. ... If the future is not real, it is not something that we can have cognizance of. If the future is not real, it is not something that projects its shadow on to the present. Even when we know a catastrophe is about to happen, we do not believe it: we do not believe what we know. If the future is not real, there is nothing in it that we should fear or hope for.²⁶

And, he continues, this is the source of our problem “[f]or if one is to prevent a catastrophe, one needs to believe in its possibility *before* it occurs. If, on the other hand, one succeeds in preventing it, its non-realisation maintains it in the realm of the impossible, and as a result, the prevention efforts will appear useless in retrospect.”²⁷

Anacoluthon

Will we ever get to *what lies ahead*? I can hear the objection that this paper hardly seems to know where it is headed, that it seems to be avoiding the issue it explicitly set as its object, namely to ask whether we can make a rational choice in the face of the catastrophe. It is true that this paper hardly knows where it is headed to the extent that every message is divided in its address and its destination. Which doesn't mean of course that by seeking to not know it may arrive at knowing. The rhetorical figure of this paper's agrammaticality of following is *anacoluthon*. Anacoluthon: literally a want of grammatical sequence, a passing from one construction to another before the former is completed, an interruption within the sequence. *In what lies ahead* the anacoluthon determines the (im)possibility of the promise: whatever other form it might take, the promise is always, in essence – and therein lies its gravity – a vow to defy the temporal change, rupture and discontinuity the anacoluthon represents; yet at the same time the anacoluthic discontinuity itself provides the grounds for the disavowal of any promise, since one can only claim one's non-identity with the promiser one once was. So anacoluthon is what fails to follow; it is what is non-sequential

²⁶ Dupuy, 2007, n.p.

²⁷ Ibid.

or literally “without following” (*an*, privative, *akolouthos*, “following”). But, as Derrida has noted, there exists a strange and inseparable bond between anacoluthon and the acolyte. The acolyte (from *akolouthos*) is the “follower” and the apparent opposite of anacoluthon. As Derrida argues, “Logically they are opposed; but in fact, what appears as a necessity is that, in order to follow in a consistent way, to be true to what you follow, you have to interrupt the following” (life.after.theory 7). In his essay “‘Le Parjure,’ *Perhaps*” Derrida quotes grammarian Pierre Fontanier’s definition of anacoluthon from his *Les Figures du discours* (1968):

It consists in implying and always in conformity with usage or without contravening it, the *companion* of an expressed word; it consists, I say, in letting stand alone a words that calls out for another as companion. *The missing companion is no longer a companion; it is what in Greek is called Anacoluthon, and this name is also that of the figure.*²⁸

In Fontanier’s rhetorical definition, there is a break in presence, there is a correlation between a word that is present and one that is not. There is a missing companion that is no longer a companion. Fontanier’s definition emphasizes the interruptive element of the anacoluthon, the element that provokes feelings of disappointment, even loss, at the lack of the expected completion of the inaugural construction. Interrupting the continuity of writing or speech, the anacoluthon leaves the reader or listener with a sense of confusion and frustrated expectation. Fontanier even goes so far as to call it a “non-trope.” For J. Hillis Miller, in his essay on Paul de Man entitled “The Anacoluthonic Lie,” anacoluthon causes a perturbation and a sense of betrayal, of infidelity, of a breach of promise.²⁹ It becomes a question of what “after” means. According to Jean-Luc Nancy, “the “after” we are speaking of here stems... not from succession but from rupture, and less from anticipation than from suspense, even stupor. It is an “after” that means: Is there an after? Is there anything that follows? Are we still headed somewhere?”³⁰

²⁸ Derrida, 2002, p. 182.

²⁹ J. Hillis Miller, “The Anacoluthonic Lie” in *Reading Narrative*, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman 1998, pp. 149-57.

³⁰ Nancy, 2015, p. 15.

Here we are again with questions of continuity and discontinuity, sequence and consequence – or, more specifically, what (even who) does or does not *follow*. Broken and unstoppable, anacoluthia fails or refuses to complete one construction and continues instead with another. Can there be a definitive breaking off or crossing over without the possibility of some anacoluthonic attachment, even if that attachment only operates relationally in terms of negation? Anacoluthic narrative cannot be grasped as the record of past presence, without forcibly repeating the division of presence. If syntax guarantees a logic of narrative sequencing, anacoluthia doubles that logic and divides it from within. *In what lies ahead* anacoluthia describes the discontinuity not of some formed thought but of the push, skip, contraction or condensation that moves thinking.

This is what Dupuy describes – in a phrase that returns throughout his work – as the “*logique du détour*”: detour as turn, deviation, circuitous path, even a turn of phrase, the association of theoretical and disciplinary perspectives that may seem ideologically and theoretically different: rationality and faith, the anthropological and the technological. Dupuy’s theoretical use of this term would call for its own analytical exposition – a *detour* on the “*détour*” one could say. In order to indicate the cognitive movement that Dupuy has in mind with reference to the articulation between past and future, prevision and prophesy, between regression and anticipation, the *logique du détour* is a logic of the turn, an indirect logic, even a “folding back” of an element or part such as the lapel of a jacket or the cover of a book (both meanings of the French term). The theoretical point being that a movement forward or back in time, an articulation between past and future, prevision and prophesy, regression and anticipation, can no longer to be simply thought of as inserted in a temporal line understood as a succession of instants (a historical linearity) nor that of a circular restoration (an eternal return). So the centre of an anacoluthon is both a rupture and an interruption, but it is also a fold, a folding back that enables the continuation of thinking, of saying something new, of triggering a new ethical perspective. This folding over or overlap – and the creation of a final text that is agrammatically related to the initial text (that follows and does not follow it) – is the very condition of what Derrida describes as “invention.” He notes:

this word “invention” ... *hesitates perhaps* between *creative* invention, the production of what is not – or was not earlier – and *revelatory* invention, the discov-

ery and unveiling of what *already* is or finds itself to be there. Such an invention thus hesitates *perhaps*, it is suspended undecidably between fiction and truth...³¹

The agrammatical continuance of the anacoluthon opens the way for new thought – an after-life, one might say.

In what lies ahead

Let us assume the end is near. The end that subverts the intelligibility of the sequence through which we have been progressing. How exactly will it happen? What can we do to prevent it? What can we do to hasten it you may well be asking at this point? The question of the future is not, then, a question about fictions that are about the future. Situating the disaster within a linear-historical temporal order – locating the occurrence of a catastrophic event sometime in the future, and choosing preventative measures from a range of current possibilities – is inadequate. Instead of approaching the disaster as a future possibility, which will only be realized if we fail to act appropriately, we ought to confront it in a more radical way, as an undisputed inevitability. Let us hasten towards *our* end, pro-ject ourselves into it. The surprise ending. Let us now revise the premises of our first question in the light of *what lies ahead*. Will we be able to think, what is called thinking, at one and the same time, both what is happening (the event) and the calculable programming of that event? For that, it would be necessary in the future (but there will be no future except on this condition) to think *both* the event *and* its incompleteness. Thinking ahead, prophesy seems to tell us, is indistinguishable from looking back; we think ahead by imagining looking back; we try to impute to the future the certainty of retrospect. The unexpected event, however, reasserts the asymmetry of time and the condition of unforeseeability. It is not that the unexpected is difficult to grasp, but that, in being difficult to grasp, it reveals the ungraspability of nothingness, of presence in general. Such is, perhaps, the reason for the dissatisfaction of any thinking of the disaster – that sense that something remains beyond our grasp, incomplete, perhaps never to be completed. This is the doubling of time of “enlightened catastrophism”; the future anterior that makes the unexpected intelligible and the temporal loop between future and past that Dupuy calls “the metaphysics of

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³¹ Derrida, 2002, p. 168.

projected time.”³² More precisely, before the disaster occurs, it can only not occur; it is in occurring that it begins to have always been necessary, and therefore, that the non-catastrophe, which was possible, begins to have always been impossible. For how does one know whether the end is an end if one does not know *what lies ahead*?

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³² “Enlightened catastrophism consists in thinking the continuation of human experience as the result of a negative self-destruction — a self-destruction that is inscribed in the future fixed under the form of destiny” (Dupuy, 2007).

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