Can a Crisis be Singular?

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The "Age of Separation" is the moniker Charles Eisenstein (2007) assigns to our current era. This isn't just the separation between humans and nature, consciousness from body, subject from object, or any other simple, if severe, break that structures our life. The polycrisis we find ourselves in is instead fractal, where separation has no beginning or end, as instrumentalization is reciprocal. The polycrisis, or metacrisis, is concerned with the feedback loops of hate and dehumanization, as much as it does with carelessness, and the conceit that we can touch without being touched.

By whichever terms we wish to call this great reckoning, our zeitgeist is the moment in which many believe the house of cards which has become our constructed world will come crashing down. This simultaneously creates hope and fear, depending on the delusions of grandeur one fosters – that the sinners will be exposed, that all disease will be made manifest, that we will finally get to the bottom of all lies. Relief. In this sense of exposure and reckoning, our crises are welcomed by accelerationists, whether atheist or religiously devout, as they wish to bring this Apocalypse on all our heads, because they believe it is (1) inevitable, and (2) that they will somehow be whisked away as part of the elect, either to an earthly heaven on an island while the world burns, or into the firmament after death, welcomed into the graces of a loving god. These devaluations of life on earth permanently displace the real into a realm of the imaginary, temporal or immaterial. As such, this displacement constitutes a reckless willingness to sacrifice all materiality, all life, on the bet that another existence, better, awaits (and based on the shaky premise that one is a member of the elect few).

The position of privilege, whether real or imagined, which justifies the sacrifice of the earth and its creatures as collateral, represents the height of selfishness, of disconnection, and the belief in individual salvation apart from one's symbionts. The fact that our civilization has yet to take drastic action in diagnosing and treating this nihilistic disease, suggests that we have learned nothing from history.

A Genealogy of Metacrisis

The Holocaust, the Pogroms, Mao's great leap forward – all sought to gain momentarily at another's expense. Whether human or more-than-human, the other was despised, seen as enemy, and an unpassable gulf of moral distance was erected. With the slogan *Ren Ding Shen Tian* (Man Must Conquer Nature), Mao Zedong declared in 1958 to "make the high mountain bow its head; make the river yield the way." Today, we might call this logic 'ecotoxic masculinity.' But for Mao, this was a sincere effort to flush out weakness, whether perceived in man or nature. And because the more-than-human world was glossed as fragile, malleable, or responsive, that is, cognitively but also physically open and vulnerable, it was despised; regarded as something to supersede, overcome. As a historian describes it:

> "One of the most extreme measures was an effort to stop birds eating grain. As part of the Four Pests campaign – a hygiene campaign against flies, mosquitoes, rats and sparrows – people were called upon to shoot sparrows, destroy their nests and bang pots and pans until the birds died of exhaustion. Millions of sparrows, perhaps even hundreds of millions, were killed. The measure though left crops vulnerable. Pests such as locusts became the real winners, as they had lost a major predator. Mao called off the sparrow campaign, but it was too late. A perfect storm had gathered. A toxic combination of widespread deforestation, misuse of poisons and pesticides and misinformed

agricultural policy combined with poor weather to create a devastating famine. Up to 45 million
people died. By the early 1960s, the Great Leap Forward was repealed." (Steinfield 2018).

The metacrisis we face is not just a crisis of our ecological world, but as Val Plumwood (2002) diagnosed, it is also a crisis of reason. Where we get fixated on the crutches and scaffolding of our maps of the world, the heuristics of the finger pointing to the territory, rather than the territory itself.

Under the fallacy of misplaced concreteness or 'fixation of belief' (in the words of Whitehead (1929) and Peirce (1878)) we remain oblivious to the trophic cascades in the more-than-human-world. Trophic cascade interactions, such as the interaction between the 'Four Pests', only retrospectively show themselves to us if all we are set out to do is conquer nature. While cleverness devises an optimal way of killing the most sparrows, wisdom discerns between the models that the reasoning aspects of ourselves construct. Similarly, to imagine that the polycrisis could be contained through piecemeal changes to our preexisting model naively buys into the logic of reformism: that things are not that bad, and that by picking low-hanging fruit, we will placate the angry gods, or mob, whichever happens to be momentarily more pressing. Electric cars are not a solution for keeping the planet alive, although they will surely keep the vehicle industry alive while claiming to perform the former work.

But whether it is denial or doomerism, we find ourselves surrounded by mimetic desire derailed, a civilization in decline. If it were optional, if we could revive civilization by becoming an ecocivilization, wouldn't this be preferable to simple collapse, giving up on the totality of things, ideas, places, people, traditions, creatures we care about? Without passing on the baton to the next generation, the very things valued as having supreme worth in the current generation and civilization will be lost. By being willing to give up everything *except* for domination and control – that is, the anxiety of separation – we lose everything to a single constriction, a single fear of a single group of very afraid people. Art, music, learning, culture, national treasures, all become worthless when the fundament of life is at stake. People will burn Mona Lisas and Rembrandts to stay warm if they must.

Facing Uncertainty not Risk

The existential anxiety of facing the indeterminacy of the world, an indeterminacy running all the way down to the quantum level (as Heisenberg and Bohr taught us), must be faced and become part of our construction of models; seeing models *as* models. Attempts to shortcut this uncertainty and quantify it into risk equate to delusions of hermetic sandboxing, permitting some of us to get away with widening the gap between the real and the rational, while foisting the inevitable remainders on others, out of (our) sight, out of mind. As Michel Serres has written,

> *"If our rational could wed the real, the real our rational, our reasoned undertakings would leave no*
> *residue; so if garbage proliferates in the gap between them, it's because that gap produces pollution,*
> *which fills in the distance between the rational and the real. Since the filth is growing, the breach*
> *between the two worlds must be getting worse."* (1990, p. 24-25)

Rationality-as-model proliferates this gap as it incessantly constructs maps of the world, often forgetting that "disorder is simply the order we are not looking for" (Bergson 1934, p. 104). Rationality is never enacted alone. It is always navigating in *ratio* to, in relation to a *topos*, where a foregrounding of certain aspects of reality is always at the expense of backgrounding others.

A crisis of reason is a fixation on self-deceptive aspects at the expense of backgrounded aspects that accumulate, and as remainder, dispossess. Where instead of leaders ushering in a peaceful transition of power, the maieutic of birthing a new generation in continuation with the old, from the same bloodline, so

to speak, we have become inundated with technological distractions – electric cars, new fuels, geoengineering, AI, and so on – as the stop gaps which aim to embalm the old, dying body. We're performing heart transplants as fast as we can, but still smoking. These *deus ex machina* nonsolutions approach life imitating art, according to the central trope of the hit movie *Don't Look Up* betting the farm on last-minute intervention. The worst type of procrastination, it drags along our anxieties until our anxieties prove true – keeping us in paralysis the entire time until our untimely death. Thus coalesce the dark arts of planetary gaslighting.

Against deceptive modeling, Consilience Project director Daniel Schmachtenberger discusses our polycrisis as a series of meta-crises: all the prevalent crises – social, ecological, technological, psychological, political, economic, and so on – are mutually reinforcing and bound up with each other. If true, this has grave implications for how we organize knowledge in education and action in politics. Already, we see the separation of disciplines has created an impotent academic system where the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences largely talk past each other, like blind men feeling different parts of an elephant (one, it's ears; another, it's tusk; a third, it's leg; another it's tail) all believing that the part they have grasped constitutes quintessential elephantness. In the realm of action, we have governments that devote large quantities of money to supposed sustainability, while another ministry's entire logic is to engage in activities that deliberately cut away any consideration of sustainability in their accounting, ensuring climate chaos and biodiversity collapse. Lack of coordination is key. When we measure success or failure in piecemeal terms, we end up with improper emotions – certainty that we have achieved something or grasped something, only to at a later point have the vanity of our ambitions crumble back that assertion that we are the good guys (Hendlin 2019; Princen 2005).

These mereological problems of confusing parts for wholes, models for reality, subjective reason for Reason, could be called metonymic fallacies. While instrumentalizing fast enough to reach escape velocity, our precarious relationship with uncertainty remains unaddressed, where the constraints of our models enable a proliferation of discoordination that continue to cause untold suffering. For example, in the early 90s, as pharmaceutical companies ramped up distribution of selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) for treating depression. American journalist Ethan Watters (2010) observed these companies first employing marketing strategies to convince citizens in Japan that their anxieties towards life were 'depression,' to medicalize malaise into a pathology that could be prescribed their pharmaceuticals. After the globalization of the Western model of medicine, medicalizing and pharmaceuticalizing life into treatment-ordained pathologies, updated research now realizes that SSRIs are ineffective against depression (Katakam et al 2019, Olfson et al. 2006; Sharma et al. 2016; Gøtzsche 2017), and that the entire theory and evidence linking depression and brain chemistry (especially serotonin) is faulty (Moncrieff et al. 2022). Garbage proliferates in the agnotological gap between the real and the rational.

Despite shrill attestations to the contrary by the greatest marketeers, health is not solely a matter of overcoming risks of illness; rather it may be characterized "by the capacity to maintain balance in spite of being knocked around by changes to one's internal condition, the environment and the balance between them," which requires a bona fide stance towards uncertainty (Dolphijn et al. 2020, 24). In times of 'Human Resource Management' and 'risk management' we are bludgeoned into accepting that uncertainty needs to be 'managed' by experts, rather than becoming experts of the self. Quantified into an appropriate dose of SSRIs, the profit model of long-term illness maintenance industries exemplifies the tendency of quantifying uncertainty into risk, and then via this weakly constructed scaffolding claim to master the feared unknown. With the same logic as Mao's catastrophic model, we tie maximization functions of industries, such as those of pharma, oil, and cars, geared towards optimizing for extractive power. Companies with no regard of our health in their metrics of success provide our food, while the hospitals that care for our health fail to account

for our nutrition. How on earth does it become plausible, to anyone, that this form of willful discoordination is a good idea?

Finding ourselves in a continuous crisis prevents reflection – preventing the human need to "think what we are doing," as Hannah Arendt (1959, 5) urged us. To 'think what we are doing' requires time, space, quiet, no distractions. Constant crisis precisely truncates our sense of space, the luxury of thinking, reflecting, being able to modulate between modes of being, unstuck ourselves from a degenerative steady state; stable but dysfunctional. How do we instead reconcile those dehumanized and marginalized in our society? How do we rebuild our naturecultures, when we have to do this this time by design, rather than through the unrushed evolutionary process of generational attunement? It seems that knowing what to do is not the problem. For hundreds of years, we have seen a direct correlation between inequality and environmental pollution, between monopolies and poverty, between the privatization of the public sphere and the commons and the decline of citizenries. So how do we exist between going with the toxic flow of sewage we're all swimming in, and the exhaustion of constant struggle? How do we learn to better understand ourselves and our world, without the shame, heat, and retaliation that hate – self and other – conjures?

Facing Complexity beyond *Technē*

Here, Daniel Schmachtenberger (2023) has quipped: "the answer to all the problems is all the solutions." To hunker down on a single approach, or to say that a single approach is better than others, is to miss the forests for the trees. We don't need one thing or another. We need everything, everywhere, all at once (preferably, with coordination).

It's easy, though, for such pronouncements to sound empty. To say that we need all the solutions might appear tantamount to the empty gesture – thoughts and prayers. But in fact, the acknowledgement of complexity brings us to our knees, humbling us to admit that "Nature is not only more complex than we think, but more complex than we *can* think" (Egler 1977, 2, italics added). We face a world that we are getting wrong, with the remainders of pollution, where "the messenger [must] always brings strange news; if not, he's nothing but a parrot" (Serres & Latour, 2008, 66). To realize our destiny not just as disembodied minds, but aspects of ecosystems, as co-created members of a world inhabited and teeming with beings integral to our existence. Not just physically, but ideationally, where this radical thought would entail ethics and aesthetics to be isomorphic – understanding that beauty is the currency in which existence exchanges. Thich Nhat Hahn's book *How to Fight* (2017) links personal liberation with social and ecological liberation. There's no escape or get-out-of-jail free card that allows personal salvation at the expense the health of one's environment.

Of course, this is operationalized through the quotidian, the almost boring issues of harm reduction: ending our addiction to fossil fuels, transitioning out of an accelerationist society through re-regionalization, and prioritizing the basic necessities of life for all. In short: sufficiency (Princen 2005). Certainly, in an egalitarian framework, rationing will be crucial. If we have limited resources, due to the destruction of our ecosystems and living beyond our carrying capacity, to get through the lean years – which, we'll first have to accept, there will be lean years – then in order to avert violence and competition for the necessities of life, we will have to ration. Rationing is highly democratic, as it acknowledges that suffering (or at least its perception) is nonoptional, and that we choose to equitably distribute that suffering, rather than to pretend that some people deserve to bear the brunt of it while others can opt-out.

Ration has its root in the Latin *ratio*, meaning both reason and an 'approportionate accounting for'. The difference between two kinds of resource rationing (that, is nonprice and price) are that while the "rationing function of price refers to the adjustment of demand through changes in price of a scarce product to bring it line with supply", 'nonprice' rationing is "when the price is *not* allowed to move to a point at which demand

and supply align" (Cox 2013, 21-22). Rationing, like rationality, is always navigating in *ratio* to, in relation to a *topos*, where a foregrounding of certain aspects of reality is always at the expense of backgrounding others. While Price rationing is only in terms of the *map* of the territory, the economy (with the goal to align the measured demand and supply), nonprice rationing is in terms of the *territory* and its actual resources. This 'real' rationing would be a natural and "necessary response to externally imposed limits on production" so that "everyone has enough in times of scarcity" (14). When rationing is in terms of the real and not the rational, the breach (that proliferated garbage) between the real and the rational closes. Both rationality and rationing are only functions of allocation, not as the ultimate judge on *how* to allocate, which requires more than the *technē* of engineers. Life, meaning, significance, trade-offs are not engineering problems that can be solved by number-pushers offering rational calculus of costs and benefits. Utility cannot solve the emotions which ultimately are guiding our every actions. Only acknowledging and then learning to orchestrate our own emotional arrangements, hormonal states, biochemistries of desire (Hendlin 2021), can we actually come to a place where *technē* can do us any good to properly ration. While few will want to hear about rationing, as we've been hypnotized to equate it with scarcity and lack rather than sufficiency, it is only a symptom of a precarious relationship to uncertainty, where any threat to our attachments is identified as an existential threat. Our cars, our fossil fuels, technological-emotional crutches, our daily routines and addictions, have through a process of cathexis become the concentration of our identity – that we cannot imagine that our self persists without them.

Re-membering (of) the Self

Rationality on its own cannot coordinate a response to the polycrisis we face. *Logos* cannot act alone as it merely means to gather, to give an account of, but without any form of *mythos* to know what to be accountable for, our vain attempts of 'management' and trust in 'market competition' will fail. Recovering and building back a shared *mythos* affords us to share a model of the world, a worldview in which collective stories allow one another to face that uncertainty we would otherwise deny with useless band-aids that EVs and SSRIs provide via instrumental rationality. 'Degrowth' and rationing are about ensuring this story of us stays alive, as whatever happens, the only uncertainty will be if we will still be here to see experience the earth. Degrowth will be about re-*membering* ourselves to each other and the world for the sake of common sense. As we, *Homo sapiens*, with the Latin root of *sapere*, to taste, can ask from the reasoning aspects of ourselves to lend a hand to allow us to come back to our senses and remember we are in a continuous co-creation. Our ecologies, which orient us, lend us memories through smell, inspiration through the sweet air, ground and orient us through our sensual memory, ward off promises of luxurious housing developments and lucrative mining operations. Belonging in both our human and ecological community, is the surest way to build strong allegiances that can perpetuate these naturecultural systems in the face of this polycrisis. A community that loves us unconditionally, that has a place for us no matter, that gives us bearing and compass, is itself an immune system against charlatans and chicanery which otherwise find the threads of our insecurity and pull until there's nothing left.

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