

A Slow Apocalypse: Non-human Species Revelation Extinction, Specie Responsibility and Strategies for Coexistence

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When speaking of the perception of death and mortality, we unavoidably face the ideas of a total death, a world-wide deadly disaster, or simply the end of the world. The concept of the end of the world has been persistent in most cultures from the beginning of history: floods, walls of fire, and locust invasions, as well as plagues, or even space attacks (meteorites, aliens, the sun ceasing to burn). This has been well depicted not only in religious literature but in fiction, having become especially popular in science fiction and later Hollywood films with the development of special effects, digital technologies, and video editing. Nowadays, followed by *The Book of Revelation*, we use the word *apocalypse*, sometimes rightfully, sometimes not. We are talking about a total death of all life on planet Earth, but due to the strong influence of Christianity on Western thought, the end of the world has become a synonym for the end of human history, and human history only.

Recent days have proven the rise of eschatological discourse in the masses as well as within intellectual circles. Let us look at current events and evaluate whether the Apocalypse has indeed begun. In doing so, our main goal will be to look beyond the human perspective. This article will cover aspects of death and extinction that take into consideration both human and animal worlds, for we are still considered to be one kingdom - fauna. We will seek solutions for a more harmonic coexistence of the two, which may possibly include slowing down the world's economic growth and capitalist acceleration. Whilst previously I have been talking about human-animal relationships and power dynamics on a smaller scale, here I would like to speak globally.

In the light of the COVID-19 crisis and recent fires in the Amazon, Siberia, California, and Australia (to name a few), humanity is forced to face other species existing on the planet other than ourselves and take a radically different attitude to interspecies coexistence. With so many species having died in the wildfires, we can no longer exclude these deaths from the count of any global disaster. With a deadly (to some) virus, spreading beyond our control, we cannot ignore anymore its origins. With mankind spreading further and further into animal areas of habitat, we are influencing their existence brutally and directly - many species are facing extinction, and the numbers of others are decreasing by the day. Another impactful outcome of such an expansion is a higher risk of coming into contact with microbes and viruses that do circulate within the animals themselves, and are tolerated by them, but cause higher risk to the human immune system.

Whilst this realisation and revaluation is crucial especially now, with the world's human population growing steadily, it is **still a human-only perspective that we make use of**, and the logic of looking at possible "end of the world" scenarios hasn't changed much through the course of (human) history.

Still, with a recent new millennium and the current state of ecology and global politics, one cannot stop to wonder whether the Apocalypse is approaching at last.

The Biblical idea of the end of the world, followed by The Last Judgement, has had a great impact the mindset of Europeans and manifested itself on many levels. Burial procedures in Europe (not caring greatly for individual graves) as well as have affected the expectations from life. Mystical symbols and numbers described in The Book of Revelation were linked to real historical dates and events: the year 7000 from the birth of Christ, the year 1666 as containing the number of the beast, linking massive diseases or foreign military interventions to signs of the coming end of the world, etc. In Russia, Pseudo Dimitry I and II were both considered to be the Antichrist, born to Earth.

What is important for us here is that this particular 'end of the world' was only concerning the human race. The only sources I could find about animals going to heaven are rather speculative and cannot be used for this research. There are a few mentions of pet animals being resurrected with their owners, but even if the sources were trustworthy, we are still talking about exclusive relationships between species, rather than acknowledging all life on earth.

Now, since the end of the world narrative was established, the image of the 'doomsday' has been haunting our culture. I've mentioned the eighteenth through twentieth centuries, and the transition from the twentieth to twenty-first was not the exception.

It is very easy to track the increased interest in these themes in cinema, thanks to the list of apocalyptic films - with just 4 films made before 1950 and just over a dozen mid-century, in comparison to over 60 during 2000-2010 and even more during 2010-2019. We will not go through each film, but will state that the majority of scenarios have some interesting similarities - most of the causes of the end of the world are human abuse of the environment, or a scientific mistake (there are alien attacks of course, but they do not dominate overall). Secondly, interspecies communication is rather limited (again, with the exception of aliens). There is hardly any mention of animals in the

post-apocalypse world. Just like the Biblical end of the world, the Hollywood version only regards human species.

A rare exception here is a 1975 film - *A Boy And His Dog*, a black comedy set in 2024 after the fourth World War in America, where a young teenager is travelling through a wasteland with his telepathic dog as a companion. The boy is seduced by a young woman who tricks him into a secret underground settlement, where his semen is to be used to repopulate the village. The boy escapes, followed by the woman, who rebels against her forefathers in the underground village and attempts to pursue him to leave his dog behind. Still the boy chooses to murder her and feed her remains to his dog, whom he found nearly starving to death. This undoubtedly dark example is only important to us for one reason - a man ultimately chooses a non-human companion over a human, treating a canine species as an equal rather than a pet (if not food). Yet still, even here the writers chose to anthropomorphize the dog by giving it fully human reasoning as well as speech. This means that even in the wildest sci-fi fantasies it is hard to imagine relating to a non-human species, admitting their right to be themselves.

Coming back to Hollywood-centred apocalyptic scenarios, it is safe to say that most of them are united by the grandness of the cataclysm leading to “the end of the world” and some kinds of post-apocalyptic existence. We can think of massive floods, explosions, virus attacks, robot attacks, war, etc. These images are boldly imprinted in our brains. Coming back to reality, we can try and remember expectations and fears of the millennium. One scary word that was for some associated with the potential end of the world or at least drastic and sudden changes, which mainly had to do with our software systems, machines, and computers more specifically. In parallel we can think of the end dates of ancient calendars - Mayan, Inca and so on. I am relieved to say that as of today none of these scenarios came true.

In fact, there is a **very different kind of apocalypse** that has slowly but steadily been coming upon many non-human species as well as some parts of the human population living in extreme poverty. This particular apocalypse was dreamed about by many prophets, scientists, and activists, yet still not considered by the mass population, or by many governments. I am talking of course about the ecological crisis, manifesting itself in many ways that we are so used to hearing about that we don't pay attention to them - climate change, water, air and soil pollution, world hunger, and decreases in species diversity.

I will not go into full details here. My dear readers can educate themselves with, amongst other examples, The Reports to the Club of Rome. [2] What I want to suggest instead is to attempt to look beyond the human perspective of

our history, more specifically, the history of the Industrial Revolution, the Green Revolution (including the beginning of pesticide usage in farming), the growth of cities and urbanised areas, the expansion of industrial areas as well as farm land, the appearance of factory farms, and the constant acceleration of economic growth. All these phenomena are linked to the expansion of cultivated land over nature, characteristic of the Anthropocene (the current geological age, viewed as the period during which human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment). From the human point of view, these developments have been predominantly glorious, one might say. Here, I am taking a step back and specifying which part of mankind these changes did benefit, as I cannot speak for mankind as a whole. It is indeed First and partially Second World countries that have felt the positive aspects of economic growth. And here again, a correction, as it is the middle class and people of higher income and status that can feel the benefits of this growth to the fullest. In fact, I am talking about a very small percentage of humans. This percentage is opposed to not only large numbers of poorer human population but an enormous population of non-human living beings. To the latter, urban expansion powered by an anthropocentric mentality is nothing but the apocalypse itself.

Once taking from nature reaches such a scale that the latter cannot reproduce nearly fast enough for a durable business model, we can no longer speak of long term economic benefits either. This situation leads us to a utilitarian dead end: while benefiting a very small number of human species in a short term, we hurt numerous non-human species beyond restoration. This result links back to two particular tendencies that have been dominating profit driven human societies - firstly, once again, anthropocentrism, the complete failure to empathise with the other species and base the economy on co-existence rather than invasion. Secondly, a voluntary ignorance towards the death of the other, the other being animals, and as provocative as it may sound, populations of 'undeveloped countries', ruined by years of war, colonisation, and exhausted natural resources.

Drastic changes in climate expectedly bring more natural disasters - earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, viruses, and diseases. Historically, such events were considered to be a punishment from higher deities upon mankind. Here let's remember a different example from Christian writing, which is The Great Flood narrative, described in chapters VI-IX of the Book of Genesis. This narrative reveals the decision of God to return the Earth to the state of water chaos that preceded its creation, and then to remake it into the reverse course of creation. The plot is very similar to the parts of the Gilgamesh epic as well as many myths of Atlantis or similar sunken lands that preceded the Book of Genesis: all humans living on Earth have lost

themselves in sinful life and must be eliminated. It is then up to Noah, the only man living in dignity, instructed by God to build an ark in which he, his sons, and their wives, together with the male and female of all living creatures, would be saved from the waters.

In this type of a narrative we are looking at a different scenario - selected humans are equal to selected animals and destined to be preserved and repopulate the land. It is incredibly important that animals are taken into consideration, as it becomes obvious that any continuous life would not be possible without them. Yet still, there are several issues with the logic of this type of a myth, as the core of it is just as anthropocentric. Whilst all of mankind naturally had to be executed for their sins, all the animals, apart from the couples chosen by a human (Noah), had to die just the same. It was human and human doings only that had led to the flood, since morality is only attributed to humans, yet all of the living beings had to be swept from the surface of the earth.

In the scenario that nowadays is being acted in reality, the role of Noah is replayed by scientists and animal rights/ecology activists. Yet again we see the reminders of John's predictions, where similarities can seem as striking as they felt to the people of 1666 who were experiencing city fires, wars, and pandemics.

The only difference is that the traditional exclusion of other species can no longer take place, as the effect we have on nature is now visible, with the COVID-19 crisis, which has shaken the world's population, being a topical example. Coronavirus does not have one specific culprit. It, like any other infection, arose as a natural response of nature to the actions of humans cutting down forests, developing wild territories, keeping animals on farms, and trading them in unsanitary conditions at meat markets. New diseases can occur both in the wild and as a result of active interaction with it. And the more aggressive the human invasion into wild nature, the more proximal are similar cases. This pandemic, which could be seen as a sign of Biblical events coming to life, is indeed manmade, and this time has human victims too.

A story similar to The Great Flood narrative is taking place in *Waterworld*, a 1995 American post-apocalyptic action film. As a result of the sea levels rising over 25,000 feet, every continent on Earth is now underwater. The remains of human civilisation live on ramshackle floating communities, using soil as substitute for money, cherishing the last remaining plants, and seeking the mysterious Dryland – the last remaining piece of land, containing both flora and fauna. In a version of events when human actions have indeed caused the

death of all the species, the remaining humans are struggling for survival in a broken ecosystem, yet still do not feel direct responsibility. Once the mythical Dryland is found at last, the happy group of the main characters embrace the resources laying beneath as a happy ending, while the protagonist sails back to the sea in order to continue his way of living, highly dependent on ocean life. The moral lessons remain overshadowed by the richness of nature's involuntary gifts.

We have now looked at some scenarios from religious writing as well as various films and can have a clearer picture of mass death variations. It is easy to split them in three categories, based on species inclusivity of death:

First, the Biblical version - humans and animals dying out. In scenarios like this humans are often promised afterlife;

Secondly, a turn of events as in *Waterworld* and other similar narratives - all or most of animals die, humans remain living;

Finally, one other possible turn of events that we have not looked into is all humans dying, yet animal and floral life continuing to exist. Here, instead of an example from cultural heritage, I would like to briefly mention a working non-profit organisation – the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement. Members of the movement, having ecological concerns at the core of their actions, advocate to stop procreating entirely, and for humans to slowly disappear from the surface of the Earth. This particular turn of events could have made a brilliant Hollywood film, although from a human perspective such a scenario is unthinkable, already for the fact of culture ceasing to exist without recipients. No living creature would wish for their kind to disappear completely. And in reality, even the leaders of VHEMT understand the impossibility of such a quest and stand up for conscious procreation, ecological education, and not for mass suicide, even though it might seem so at first glance.

Still, from an ethical point of view, I find this kind of thinking visionary, merely for the fact that the global ecosystem is taken in consideration and moral responsibility codes are finally applied to our own kind in relation not just to each other but to all species, and not just locally (cruelty to animals legislation, etc.) but on a global scale. Considering the Earth as an ecosystem, the pioneers of VHEMT seek the causes of the imbalance which threatens life in general. And if this cause is us, it is our moral duty to cease to exist, allowing the planet to restore itself. This could be the ultimate example of a solution to a classic 'good deed without personal gain' dilemma. Which brings us to the final film in our list of examples, and the author's personal

favourite, "The Fifth Element" by Luc Besson. Wrapped in another typical Hollywood 'good guys save the world whilst killing a lot of bad guys' narrative, the film has two key points worth noting.

Like many science fiction films, "The Fifth Element" portrays a universe full of interplanetary beings in tight economic and political relationships. Yet one particular species stands out: Mondoshawans, an alien nation dedicated to preserving life in general, even if one's life has to be sacrificed. "Time is not important, only life is important" is a quote by one of the Mondoshawans, as they die whilst trying to preserve a special artefact, due to save life on Earth. Such a sacrifice of one species to protect another is unheard of for us, as human sacrifice to protect other species has always had a limit, and that limit is our own wellbeing.

Another critical part of the film is the story of the Fifth Element herself, an artificial higher being, presumably designed by the Mondoshawans, destined to save life on Earth. Upon arrival for her mission, the Fifth Element takes the form of a humanoid woman and begins to study the history of mankind. Towards the end of the movie, while exhausted, ill, and weak, she questions whether humans are the species that should be saved, as they destroy anything good that's ever existed: "What's the use of saving life when you see what you do with it?". And indeed, whilst the film positions the end of Earth and life on it as the clear end of the world, globally it would mean only a few species, led by the most destructive and exploitative, ceasing to exist. If we scaled this down to just life on Earth, is our human life really worth preserving if it causes pain and ultimately the real apocalypse to so many other species, according to their perspective?

It is now that we humans can rethink and redefine the meaning of the word 'apocalypse' and agree on there being not just one singular end of the world. For each species, the apocalypse is unique and most importantly preventable. The apocalypse has turned out to be of a different kind than has been predicted. **This apocalypse is not sudden and unforgiving, but slow and trackable.** Every day, thanks to social media, we are exposed to the effects of our economies on the planet: wildlife, domesticated animals, and many non-Western countries as well as the poorer social layers in the West. This apocalypse is observable and maybe perhaps it is exactly why it feels so unrealistic - the myths of water level rising, ozone layer holes, mass hunger, numerous species' extinction, and mega-viruses affecting mankind - they all are so evident, so near us, that it is impossible to contain the knowledge of these events actually taking place as we go through our daily life. Fear mixes with denial, and another great tool of human mind - ignorance.

But there is no time for ecological pessimism. While it can be hard for us to reflect on the events taking place, while being inside them, we can at least change a viewing point. The world is more than just us humans. Can the apocalypse happen for us and be a grand disaster? Of course, there is still danger of it. But we cannot speak of just one type of apocalypse, when we've been responsible for numerous species disappearing. From their perspective, the doomsday has already come and I highly doubt that they had a concept of heaven to comfort them in their final moments.

We can no longer hide from the death that surrounds us, when for many, we have been the cause of extinction. Only by embracing the knowledge of death, and letting death on a global scale enter our everyday life, can we begin to hope for the collective living on Earth rather than the fear of its end.

Links and sources

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