

How to wager on the possibility of collapse

Collapse awareness as an opportunity



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[A 1691 portrait](#) of Blaise Pascal by François II Quesnel.

What if you lived as if societal and environmental collapse were a future reality, regardless if you believe in impending collapse in the coming decades or not? How would you change your daily life if there was a significant likelihood that the current ways of highly urban, consumerist, and individualised living will not last for more than 20 years?

Arguments about collapse might be difficult to stomach and acknowledge fully because accepting them is also about facing one's culpability in the root causes. Instead of giving the possibility of collapse a serious thought, it is deceptively easy to feel inconvenienced for a fleeting moment, brush the scenario aside, and go about your day as if the momentary anxiety were just a dream.

I venture to guess that for the vast majority in the Global North, hearing about how we have crossed multiple of the planetary boundaries is a case example of such a moment of fleeting anxiety — and also an example of how powerless one can feel in the face of phenomena that have global proportions.

However, the powerlessness can stem from a mindset that is hardwired to go searching for (quick) solutions, instead of recognising that there are none. And realising the latter is bound to induce anxiety. To cope with the situation myself, I have been searching for approaches with which to cope with the existential anxiety that this acknowledgement, the trigger point of what is known as *collapse awareness*, brings forth.

Several fellow substackers have written about collapse awareness — here are a few contributions that I have found useful:



A Grand Unified Theory of Doom

Collapse: A Framework for Understanding and Navigating the Decline of Industrial Civilisation

This is not a call to despair, but an invitation to understand the forces driving the process of collapse, and to explore how we might navigate the descent with integrity, purpose, and care for the living world...

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A Grand Unified Theory of Doom

Capitalism and Collapse: Why Ending Capitalism Won't Save Us

Editor's note: My earlier essay, *Collapse: A Framework* sets out the structural dynamics of overshoot and collapse. This essay explores the relationship between capitalism, ecological overshoot, and collapse...

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Grasping at Reality

Collapse - Part 1/5: Denial

Twenty years ago, British Royal Astronomer and bestselling author Martin Rees gave me a copy of his book *Our Final Century*. The title says it all...

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The above authors have explored the topic in more detail and sophistication than what I am attempting to do here. My aim here is to contemplate on the informed choice of taking the possibility of collapse seriously, and how acknowledging it can turn into a meaningful opportunity to re-evaluate other choices in life.

If you give in to the possibility, it is something to cope with. What I have found is that coping mechanisms for collapse awareness need to be ethically sound and virtuous yet worldview-shaking; they need to give rise to a shift in one's everyday thinking and behaviour. Instead of powerlessness, becoming aware of the possibility of dark times ahead has the potential to awake us into reimagining our ways of living. In the midst of trying to effect a laborious behaviour change, one should not lose hope — in the words of Jane Goodall — hope is not naive optimism but a moral duty. Therefore, nihilism is not an option. The road ahead is about *finding lights in a dark age*, as [Chris Smaje](#) puts it in the title of his recent, wonderful book.

Let's rewind a little bit, though. What collapse? And where is the evidence?

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What collapse?

The collapse is already here, it's just not evenly distributed. —
[Collapsonomics.info](#)

In previous posts, I have referred to the interpretations (e.g., by William Ophuls) about how civilisations have ended — typically by going

through several periods of growth and abundance before overreaching their limits and falling. Typically, this arc has taken place over approximately 200 years. Luke Kemp's impressive tome Goliath's Curse: The History and Future of Societal Collapse is the latest chapter in backing these observations. Kemp, an academic scholar, presents an abundance of evidence about the curse that takes a stranglehold on a civilisation and brings it down. Kemp shows how a civilisation is a historically specific template "of organising society into dominance hierarchies that control people and energy", and a societal collapse occurs when multiple of those hierarchies fall down permanently. Kemp dislikes the term civilisation because it is not typically associated with dominance, something he identifies as the key characteristic of civilisations (and hence the Goliath of the title). He analyses both historical cases, such as the Chinese dynasties, but also more recent examples, such as the state collapse in Somalia. Concentration of wealth and control of resources are among the patterns Kemp identifies as triggers for collapse, and ones that are easy to recognise in our current predicament. The Goliath we live in is, similar to history, a "collection of dominance hierarchies organised primarily through authority and violence", Kemp writes. However, he also emphasises how outcomes from a collapse can be mixed and not always overwhelmingly negative; different strokes for different folks — not the end of the world, but the end of the world *as we know it*, to use the phrase that [The Dark Mountain Project](#) has made known.

Unfortunately, Kemp also posits that "the future of collapse looks far grimmer than the past". The collapse is already present in the regions of the planet where the impacts of climate change and/or geopolitical tensions have been felt the strongest. Rising temperatures and sea levels, floods, forest fires, famine, and the resulting displacement, food insecurity, ecosystem collapse, and so on, are all cracks in the pillars that keep our Western or Westernised ways of life standing. When news of these disasters are reaching us with increasing frequency, one would think that most people who pay attention would develop at least an

unconscious awareness of the severity of the situation, leading to a nagging anxiety or unease. A more pronounced collapse awareness manifests when this unease rises to the surface and one begins to connect the dots; when one begins to see how the seemingly separate events interrelate on a systemic, planetary scale (hence, the term 'polycrisis').

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Becoming sensitive to the possibility

In their article "Collapse awareness in the face of climate breakdown and urbicide", scholars Christine Hentschel and Susanne Krasmann define the awareness as follows:

(C)ollapse awareness points to a growing sensitivity to large scale destruction. It is an emerging form of dealing with, and anticipating, insecurity on a planetary scale characterised by the collapse of ecosystems, the breakdown of life in bombed or occupied cities, and a weakened international order incapable of protecting people from these major harms. —

<https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2024.2403795>

Hentschel and Krasmann go on to describe how collapse awareness "expresses a sense of a lost future, without offering any way to fix what is or what will be broken." In its fully developed form, the awareness does not allow for false promises about prevention or preparedness, nor resilience. It is a form of grief from a realisation that collapse is not hinging on one thing alone; it is about consciously or unconsciously acknowledging the systemic nature of lives and ecosystems being lost; how the war in Ukraine and the genocide in Gaza have led to not only loss of life but also to food shortages, losses of livelihoods, losses of culture and heritage, and mass scale displacements of peoples. These are catastrophic consequences that directly impact us who live

thousands of miles away. They are with us, period. Acknowledging this, and doing something about it, even in a small way, is another step into acceptance about the permeating nature of the collapse. As Hentschel and Krasmann summarise, collapse awareness “faces the truth of an existential threat that is impossible to escape or to avert because it is all around us.” Luke Kemp notes how, despite tangible individual crises, an ongoing broader collapse can be slow and imperceptible to those who are living through it.

Collapse awareness is about becoming aware of the evidence, where it might lead to, and finding ways to cope with the severity of the situation. One way is to share the evidence, and raising awareness of the possibility, as I am doing here. But similarly to awareness about climate change, the awareness itself is easy to lose sight of in the middle of one’s grind in the teeth of modernity; it is challenging to integrate into one’s everyday life. We might adopt dismissal as a coping mechanism to protect our mental health, which is fair enough, but it does not make the possibility of collapse any less true.

Alternatively, one might take comfort in the less-than-doomer perspectives that maintain belief in human ingenuity and exceptionalism to postpone or even cancel the collapse. Unfortunately, innovating within the machine of modernity and its established political and economic structures is unlikely to be enough, despite the claims in books such as Ezra Klein’s and Derek Thompson’s *Abundance: How we build a better future*, for example.

The wager

So, we come to the point of decision: whether to take the prediction of societal collapse seriously or not. Do you believe the abundance narrative, that someone out there will come and save you with their inventions, and there is no need to change anything in your everyday life? If salvation will be handed to us by the technological geniuses of

our time, what is there to gain, then, by evangelising about the possibility of collapse? Just keep calm, recycle, and carry on.

Well, the picture is not nearly as rosy as that and therefore, I would like to propose a wager. The wager is inspired by Blaise Pascal, the 17th century mathematician and philosopher. In 1654, he submitted an argument concerning how one should approach the question about God's existence. His argument, known as Pascal's wager, threaded the line between faith and reason in probabilistic terms, arriving at a take that faith ultimately is a more reliable source of theological truths than reason. I am tempted to attribute this to a left vs right hemispheric stance to the world — left being the realm of reason and right of faith, to put it bluntly. In *Pensées*, Pascal writes:

Let us then examine this point, and say, 'God is, or He is not.' But to which side shall we incline? Reason can decide nothing here. There is an infinite chaos which separated us. A game is being played at the extremity of this infinite distance where heads or tails will turn up. What will you wager? According to reason, you can do neither the one thing nor the other; according to reason, you can defend neither of the propositions.

Unlike finding conclusive evidence about God, we will eventually know whether the collapse arrives or not. We can put the evidence together and draw predictions and scenarios. But whether to act in the face of the issue is a question reason alone will not help in answering.

For example, peer pressure and the need to appear 'normal' may tilt the scale over to doing nothing. Following Pascal's argument, you have more to lose if you choose not to believe and not to act regarding the situation. In such a wager, to gain is to gain no less than being prepared to cope with crumbling systems and their material and emotional consequences and to cherish something relational and communitarian than individualist and divisive. Pascal writes:

You have two things to lose, the true and the good; and two things to stake, your reason, and your will, your knowledge and your happiness; and your nature has two things to shun, error and misery. Your reason is no more shocked in choosing one rather than the other, since you must of necessity choose. This is one point settled. But your happiness? Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is.

What does one lose by changing your behaviour in the face of the possibility of collapse within a decade or two? Especially in being mindful that it is unevenly distributed already today among fellow human beings and animals? One loses “glory and luxury”, the “poisonous pleasures”, as Pascal puts it, but — provided one is willing to lose them and embrace ‘the great simplification’ — one can choose to “be faithful, humble, grateful, generous, a sincere friend, truthful” and gain joy from such virtues. For Pascal, what you risk equals nothing in the face of the possible gains:

at each step you take on this road, you will see so great certainty of gain, so much nothingness in what you risk, that you will at last recognise that you have wagered for something certain and infinite, for which you have given nothing.

Sure, in material terms you will lose things, but they will always have been the rotten fruits of modernity; the things that have divorced us from nature. The uncomfortable fact is that those living in the most benevolent and inclusive states of today have the most to lose, as Luke Kemp points out when comparing Denmark and Somalia: sometimes living under a warlord might be more durable than being left to one’s own devices by a failed state.

For me, seeking gradual detachment from energy-hungry and globally produced attention grabs and idolisation of material wealth have

represented baby steps in hospicing my own past attachments. I aspire to face the impending material changes in the quality of life (by today's standards) for myself and my loved ones with dignity. At its best, collapse awareness can trigger a renewed sense of urgency and purpose, e.g., to cultivate capabilities in producing food and in other regenerative activities — with humility and gratitude, even in the face of impending dark times.

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“If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing.”

By citing Pascal's words, it is not my intention to imply that there aren't huge issues to be addressed — the material losses from the collapse will be devastating, far from nothing. Personally, for me, there is a risk of unthinkable loss, thanks to the fact that the medication for my son's autoimmune disease is manufactured somewhere hundreds of miles away and dependent on the fragile, collapse-prone supply chains. If communities began taking the possibility of collapse seriously, it would propel investment into local food and medicine production and the skills and resources necessary to bring them about.

Awakening to the locality and its capacity for meaning, then, is another purposeful gain from embracing collapse awareness. I leave you with Chris Smaje's questions from *Finding Lights in the Dark Age: Sharing Land, Work, and Craft* — questions that follow the wager and the redeeming choice we have left:

(I)t's likely that all of this — our visions of the future, our sense of community, our sense of love, our sense of the transcendent — will be rigorously stress tested in the meta-crisis that's upon us. People will be obliged to ask

*themselves afresh — who are my people? Who is my community? What do I
worship? Where is home?*

Thank you for reading.

With love and kindness,

Aki

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