



# laetus in praesens

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## Celebrating the Value of Deadly Problems Worldwide

### Planetary salvation in an era of inept global governance?

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#### Introduction

##### Array of problems to be appreciated

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- Injustice | Urban violence | Crime | Nuclear armaments and biological weapons of mass destruction
- Nuclear proliferation | Terrorism | Disease | Abuse of drugs and alcohol | Smoking | Unemployment
- Delivery failure | Disinformation | Corruption | Degradation of the environment
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## Introduction

This is an effort at [appreciative inquiry](#) into the array of problems with which humanity and the planet is confronted. Rather than bemoan such problems, and seek in vain for remedies to them, there is a possibility that one may learn from thinking "positively" about them -- in the mode of "[positive thinking](#)" widely-advocated by the privileged (*Being Positive Avoiding Negativity: management challenge of positive vs negative*, 2005).

This is therefore an exploration of how to smile at the [Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse](#) as they are expected to emerge in "[end times](#)" apocalyptic scenarios -- and as they are already evident to many, despite vociferous denial by the few. The approach follows from an earlier exploration *Liberating Provocations: use of negative and paradoxical strategies* (2005) following experience in the elaboration of the *Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential* (1976-1994).

This appreciative approach may also be seen as a form of anticipative exploration of the conditions so ably analyzed by [Jared M. Diamond](#) (*Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, 2005) and [Thomas Homer-Dixon](#) (*The Upside of Down: catastrophe, creativity, and the renewal of civilization*, 2006). Especially valuable is the argument of the latter concerning the need of current civilization to develop the skills of "degrading gracefully" through [adaptive management](#) in order to navigate the predictable challenge of the collapse phase of the [adaptive cycle](#) -- understood as essential for civilizational resilience. Failure to acquire such skills might be compared with the faith-based expectations of [Armageddon](#), possibly to be triggered by the unexpected, as analyzed by Nassim [Nicholas Taleb](#) (*The Black Swan: the impact of the highly improbable*, 2007) -- or as explored elsewhere (*Spontaneous Initiation of Armageddon: a heartfelt response to systemic negligence*, 2005).

## Array of problems to be appreciated

**Exploding population:** Why should the exponential increase in the world population cause dismay? People have every right to invest in hope for a miraculous solution to the challenges it poses. The Christian miracle of [feeding the 5,000](#) (Matthew 14:13-21) is but one illustration. With such increasing numbers, there is less and less reason to be concerned with any increasing mortality rates. In biological terms the race will clearly survive -- in some form. Any proportionate increase in the number of deaths, to the extent that any need to be concerned about the matter, can be considered a valuable and necessary lesson in the systemic realities of life. Exploding population numbers help to relieve people of any guilt or shame they might feel when faced with the problematic consequences for some. The increase transmutes the nature of empathy. It will toughen the human spirit, enabling people to resist emotional blackmail by those in need and by those claiming to act in their interest. Furthermore, in an essentially unsustainable economic system, is it not vital to encourage growth in the potential market on which that system is dependent -- as with any viable Ponzi scheme?

**Starvation:** The increasing incidence of starvation as a consequence of food crises (arising from population increases) will encourage people to reflect on the significance of the Christian message: *man cannot live by bread alone* (Deuteronomy 8, 3). If more and more people become victims of starvation, it will enable more and more people to become healthily aware of the nature of the fate that may await them -- and of the maturity of attitude it is possible to cultivate in response to impossible conditions.

**Media violence:** The levels of violence portrayed daily on the media help people to understand how to appreciate the aesthetics and excitement of blood and gore and to derive pleasure vicariously from the suffering of others rather than feel guilty about it -- or ashamed of doing little to remedy a situation that is increasingly out of control. The educational merits of such programmatic content cannot be underestimated. It helps to prepare everyone psychologically for the kinds of suffering to which statistically they will be increasingly exposed in reality -- especially in their elder years. Equally it prepares people for the challenge of dealing with the suffering of relatives and friends that may personally suffer from such violence.

**Suffering and misery:** Given the expectation of challenging levels of suffering, as the incapacity of governance becomes more evident, it is surely appropriate to welcome the lesser sufferings in the present as a means of building awareness and eliciting coping strategies for the future. Given the fundamental learning importance of the Buddha's exposure to misery, and the special Christian relationship to suffering and its prolongation, it is clearly valuable that many should suffer so that some can be encouraged to seek enlightenment for their benefit -- or that of their descendants.

**Arms trade:** Given the appreciation of the merits of arming populations in any democracy, as enshrined in the [Second Amendment to the US Constitution](#), surely the wider distribution of arms should be recognized as appropriate to the viability of a healthy global democracy? (cf [Arming Civil Society Worldwide: getting democracy to work in the emergent American Empire?](#) 2003). Furthermore, given the deaths resulting from use of those arms by individuals, or through state-sponsored military action, is it not important to see the considerable investment in the manufacture and distribution of arms as of far greater significance to curtailment of population growth than ineffectual family planning programmes? Should those engaged in the arms trade not be celebrated for their contribution to stabilizing the population -- rather than condemned for the collateral damage associated with their efforts? Furthermore, by empowering people in this way, will this not enable many to survive the expected social chaos to come? In the absence of other "safety nets", surely this contribution to the survival of the human race is to be welcomed? Furthermore, given the intimate association of the highest human values with the use of arms -- courage, glory, etc. -- is this not a unique means of honing the human spirit which can otherwise only be vicariously and artificially appreciated through video games and sport?

**Inequality:** Given the ever increasing world population, and the well-recognized -- if not insurmountable -- difficulties of ensuring equality in practice, should the ever-increasing degree of inequality not be seen as a process through which the marginalized are most effectively [conscientized](#)? Is it not precisely through such degrees of inequality that the marginalized, especially those in the depths of poverty, are obliged to develop coping skills -- in seizing opportunities that those of more than equal status have seized before them? Should inequality not then be seen as constituting a lifelong educational process *par excellence* -- superior in every respect to the essentially disabling education advocated for them by the privileged? Could poverty traps not be fruitfully reframed as educational environments -- as implied by injunctions to poverty by many faiths? Should promotion of an ideal of "equality" not be seen as an unfruitful inhibition of appreciation of the multiplicity of ways in which people are "unequal" in a richly variegated human ecosystem -- epitomized by the much appreciated differences between men and women?

**Injustice:** In a context of increasing inequality the extent of injustice can only increase and be seen to increase -- together with recognition of widespread [miscarriage of justice](#), notably as associated with the complicity of interested parties in institutions for law and order. Most striking is the characteristic immunity from effective prosecution of those associated with structures of authority -- especially military personnel indicted for unnecessary brutality to civilians. Recognition of such injustice is however effectively the motivating factor through which people are empowered to reap the benefits of social inequality -- often irrespective of the consequent danger to themselves. As such, injustice encourages people to reframe their personal experience in a wider context and to empathize and identify with similar conditions experienced by others.

**Urban violence:** In an increasingly packaged, safe social environment -- with an emphasis on [lifestyle cocooning](#) in gated communities -- is urban violence not to be welcomed as providing an essential "edge" to modern living threatened by obesity? Does this compensate for loss of the vigilance required of healthy living in a wilderness environment -- on which so much romanticized adventure is focused? How else to avoid the dangers of psycho-social complacency and ensure attitudinal preparedness for the rigours of the expected social unrest of the future? For the young, in the absence of what was in the past considered an essential toughening of the human spirit in obligatory "national service", does urban violence not provide a context for vital survival training -- the development of street-wise survival skills? Rather than "outsourcing" violence into confrontation with other cultures, is urban violence not to be usefully recognized as a means of appropriately "insourcing" such violence and the benefits to be derived from it?

**Crime:** That which is framed as unacceptable "crime" by social convention is effectively a prime coping strategy for the marginalized whose interests and challenges are systematically neglected by conventional frameworks. Beyond its value for survival, it provides a valuable training in ingenuity for a context of future social chaos -- whether in providing advantages for exploiting such chaos or through developing the vigilance to counter the criminal activity of others. Crime may be understood as the creative human response to systemic inadequacies. The widespread incidence of crime, and exposure to its consequences, also provides a stimulus to healthy vigilance, as argued with respect to urban violence. Especially challenging to the ingenuity of positive thinking are crimes against humanity -- particularly given the appropriateness of extending the criteria to include those considered relevant by future generations, better able to judge the criminality of actions in the present that are likely to ensure the death of untold millions.

**Nuclear armaments and biological weapons of mass destruction:** Although on a larger scale than urban violence, are not the associated threats commensurate with the psycho-cultural needs of a globalized society that might otherwise suffer from dangerously unhealthy forms of complacency and self-satisfaction? Without such threats by parties that can be successfully demonized as "evil", how

else can populations participate vicariously in the glorious courage of the military -- as expressed in their loyalty and personal sacrifice to the highest values of the fatherland (or motherland)? Without such mortal threats, what else can populations take seriously -- and as being worth dying for?

**Nuclear proliferation:** Although potentially associated with the possibility of nuclear armament, the environmental dangers of nuclear proliferation (and the dissemination of biohazards) constitute a valuable threat calling for forms of long-term vigilance which is surely vital to the health of a sustainable society. The potential dangers offer a powerful education in risk preparedness whose practical significance is valuably enhanced by the occasional accident -- and its only too evident problematic consequences for years to come. Given the probability of social chaos to come, and the associated dangers of radioactivity, nuclear proliferation in the present usefully focuses collective attention. In the desperate search for "change", and the injunction to "be the change", does positive thinking not require that the possibility be envisaged of mutations beneficial to humanity from exposure to nuclear radiation and biohazards? Such possibilities include the speculative *Challenge of Nonviolent Population Decimation* (2007).

**Terrorism:** The horrors of terror are experienced in a wide variety of circumstances, from state-sponsored forms, through those undertaken by insurgents, to action by gangs. This includes the terror elicited by muggings, institutionalized bullying and domestic violence. It extends to terror caused by dangerous driving. For those deliberately engaged in promoting terror, however it may be framed, it is a tactic in support of objectives they may understand as honourable, just and reasonable -- irrespective of the suffering they may cause as collateral damage. For those terrified in this way, if they survive it, the existential trauma may profoundly mark and determine their future understanding of reality and human relationships. This may motivate them to actions of far greater authenticity than they would have otherwise undertaken. (*Varieties of Terrorism -- extended to the experience of the terrorized*, 2004; *Thinking in Terror: refocusing the interreligious challenge from "Thinking after Terror"*, 2005). The value of terror, deliberately instilled, has long been appreciated in *initiation processes* -- whether for students, military conscripts, or novices in secret societies -- as providing individuals with an opportunity to master their fears and acquire a more mature perspective. Terrorism on a larger scale may therefore also be seen as part of a collective initiation process evoking a new perspective from humanity. Is it appropriate to frame terrorism as the ultimate danger to civilization when such as *Nelson Mandela*, Nobel Peace Laureate (1993), was still on the US government's terrorism watch list in 2008, as with the US government's top criminal prosecutor Jim Robinson, together with a million American citizens (*Prosecutor among million on US terror watchlist*, 15 July 2008)?

**Disease:** Whilst ill-health and disease may be painfully experienced at the personal level, is it not the case that their incidence worldwide, and the media coverage given to them, forces healthy re-examination of ill-founded, health-based assumptions -- especially in a society that is liable to be characterized in the future by a far greater incidence of ill-health? How otherwise are people to develop awareness of the coping responses appropriate to disease of epidemic and plague proportions -- whose statistical probability is now a matter of public health concern? Systemically, is fatal disease not one of the primary means through which systemically unhealthy population growth is curtailed? Should the emergence of previously unrecognized diseases not be welcomed -- especially given the mandate it offers for more challenging forms of research? As such, is it not appropriate to see disease, especially social diseases, as being effectively evoked by humanity in response to unhealthy systemic conditions? Is there not then not every reason to welcome and encourage indulgence in unhealthy patterns of consumption -- that incidentally reduce life expectancy?

**Abuse of drugs and alcohol:** Given the increasing importance of recreational drugs and use of alcohol amongst people at every level of an increasingly sterile social environment, is it not appropriate to recognize the access that such substances offers to an alternative sense of reality -- access that is otherwise inhibited, curtailed or prohibited? Do such substances not point the way to psychosocial sustenance beyond that offered by conventional reality? Have they not become the means of "oiling" increasingly mechanized psycho-social relationships -- otherwise in danger of "seizing up"? Whilst those abusing in this way may also endanger others, is this not again a reason for all to increase their level of vigilance in a society in which levels of risk will necessarily increase? As long recognized during some military campaigns, and in deliberate policy for military personnel in Iraq, is there not a case for increasing considerably the widespread access to drugs to enable people to reframe reality in other ways? This would avoiding their need to strive vainly in pursuit of conventional expectations and increase their ingenuity in pursuit of other outcomes.

**Smoking:** As with use of drugs and alcohol, it is surely misplaced to constrain the short-term pleasures of smoking in a context in which people are increasingly challenged to achieve any sense of personal satisfaction. Is it not the case that those corporations promoting the sale of cigarettes and other tobacco products are doing more to curtail population growth than all the family planning programmes combined? Rather than being condemned for their promotion of ill-health, should they not be acclaimed for facilitating an early, voluntary demise -- unconstrained by conventional, systemically questionable, strictures regarding euthanasia?

**Unemployment:** In the education of children, it is widely recognized that extensive boredom is a valuable means of eliciting the creative responses of the individual -- in contrast to the consequences of ensuring a continuing supply of stimulants (and thereby developing external dependencies). The capacity of the human spirit to respond to adversity can surely thus be relied upon to evoke responses to the diminishing opportunities for meaningful employment in an increasingly mechanized society -- whether or not the options chosen are compatible with conventional norms and expectations. Again, the challenge of expected levels of unemployment in future conditions of social chaos requires the early evocation of new attitudes and behaviours. These would already be of benefit to those whose current unemployment is likely to be lifelong. Should the possibility of other modes of employment not be envisaged, whereby individuals and groups sustain themselves otherwise? Crime is but one extreme example.

**Delivery failure:** Modern government is characterized by the multiplicity of remedial actions promised and pledged -- even "vowed" -- and the only too evident characteristic tendency to break those promises. However the increasing recognition of the failure of government to deliver on any promises and election manifestos should surely be welcomed as providing significant encouragement and stimulation to people to develop their own coping strategies. In this sense, should government not in fact be encouraged to make ever more optimistic promises in the full knowledge that it is incapable of delivering on them -- and will never need to do so? This is a low cost strategy to educate people that the role of government is effectively very limited and primarily arbitrary and evasive rather than

systemically enabling.

**Disinformation:** Associated with the challenge of delivery failure are the associated processes of disinformation through which promises and remedial actions are promoted in response to challenges for which there may not in fact be any solid evidence. This has been best exemplified by the solemn assertion of [Colin Powell](#) (US Secretary of State) before the UN Security Council (5 February 2003) regarding the incontrovertible evidence -- known to be false -- justifying intervention in Iraq. Whilst it is easy to regret such "spin", its great value is to enhance recognition of the flimsy basis for the credibility of those who claim authority and assert as true that which they have no interest in substantiating -- with the complicity of supposedly worthy institutions. On the other hand such disinformation may be interpreted as a creative way of applying the [precautionary principle](#) in the absence of substantive evidence to the contrary -- despite failure to act with such prudence in other contexts. It might be considered to exemplify a primary function of governance, namely to frame new realities and to lead populations into them. This understanding is consistent with the much-quoted remark of an aide to President Bush: *"We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality -- judiciously, as you will -- we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too..."* (Ron Suskind, [Without a Doubt](#), *The New York Times*, 17 October 2004).

However, beyond the necessity to become prudent and "street wise" in an urban context, disinformation encourages people to develop critical thinking skills for themselves. Disinformation is vital to the process of conscientization and the recognition that authorities are increasingly incapable of proving the truth of assertions they make -- when they have the power to place a degree of spin upon any information, and may have every motivation for doing so. The complicity of religious authorities in the long-term cover-up of sexual abuse by clergy is a healthy pointer to the existence of other challenges that continue to be more successfully denied.

**Corruption:** The recognition that "power corrupts, but absolute power corrupts absolutely" should not be the subject of regret. Exposure to corruption provides a most valuable education in how complex psycho-social systems operate in reality, rather than how they are presented by the naive to the gullible -- notably through formal processes of education. Experience of corruption, and its extent in practice (notably in relation to major governmental projects), provides valuable insight into what might be termed second order psycho-social control systems -- about which people are otherwise poorly informed, if at all. Such insight may be vital, as a life skill, to survival in the social chaos of the future -- as is only too evident in navigating corrupt societies, "getting on in life", and the current dangers of travel in societies with underpaid forces of law and order. It may also be vital to the design of more appropriate styles of organization capable of surviving in such environments (cf [Consciously Self-reflexive Global Initiatives: Renaissance zones, complex adaptive systems, and third order organizations](#), 2007).

**Degradation of the environment:** The widely recognized pollution of the environment is only too evident and the easy subject of media coverage -- as with the accumulation of non-biodegradable plastic waste in the oceans and elsewhere. But why should this be regretted? Continued representation of "pristine" environments, and the romantic illusions projected onto them, has the marked disadvantage of constituting early promotion of those forms of human invasiveness which ensure that degradation. Furthermore, in the emerging reality of an increasingly urbanized world, with the rapid development of gated communities, exposure to such waste can be readily avoided with appropriate screening -- as historically demonstrated in so-called [Potemkin villages](#), and by the failure of the radioactive cloud from Chernobyl to cross the border into France (according to French state TV). On the other hand, exposure to such degradation provides a valuable education in human proclivities -- focusing a valuable shift to the challenges of recycling and the psychological lessons to be acquired from it.

**Extinction and endangerment of species:** Is it not appropriate to welcome the elimination of species with no known significant function in an increasingly urbanized world? To the extent that they have psycho-cultural value as national symbols, tribal or personal totems, is it not more appropriate to recognize the extent to which the variety of behaviours characteristic of such species are now being embodied in the emergent behavioural patterns and attitudes of various human social groups? Are analogues to their elegance and savagery not readily to be recognized generically -- "tigers", "snakes", "worms" -- if not in the speciated detail that may be a focus of future appreciation? As the romanticized wilderness that is the habitat of such "natural" species is eliminated, is it not appropriate to understand how analogous behaviours are elicited in the social wilderness that is being engendered -- a new and more accessible "jungle", "desert" and "outback" with many ecological niches? Rather than indulging in unfruitful concern and guilt with regard to species that few would ever directly encounter anyway, is it not more appropriate to ensure the appreciation and conservation of the variety of human species engendered by the urbanization and corruption of society?

**Shortage of energy resources:** The reality of such shortage has been the subject of extensive media coverage -- recently brought into focus by "unexpected" rising fuel prices. It is seen as a threat to the dream of a widely promoted way of life. However, as has also been evident in the promotion of efforts to save energy, the shortage is a valuable stimulus to coping strategies in anticipation of a time when, irrespective of shortages and cost, delivery of energy will be problematic and sporadic -- and probably a focus of corruption and criminal activity. Curiously those least affected may be those who were never successfully made dependent on such non-renewable energy resources and who have always been obliged to rely on so-called "natural energy" -- as is so evident in times of disaster ([Reframing Sustainable Sources of Energy for the Future: the vital role of psychosocial variants](#), 2006).

**Information overload:** Many sectors of society, from whom remedial responses to the problems of the world are expected, bemoan the level of information overload to which they are exposed -- and the difficulty of locating useful insights beyond the most simplistic. At the most trivial level this is exemplified by the 80% incidence of spam in e-mail. It is also evident in the proliferation of websites on every imaginable topic. The situation is exacerbated by the cost of access to supposedly "more serious" information that is distributed through commercial media and websites, as well as the extent to which even "more serious" information is classified as secret. However, rather than bemoan this situation it has the considerable merit of encouraging people to develop their own knowledge bases according to their own emergent understanding of what is relevant to its consolidation -- as opposed to being subject to a "harmonised" or "universal" understanding of pertinent "facts" approved (if not imposed) by interested authorities. Whilst it may indeed be the case that people will to some degree make use of [dynamically gated conceptual communities](#), increasingly they will take to the knowledge highway and travel to



other contexts of their choice. It is precisely the development of this capacity that will be most valuable to survival in the expected social chaos of the immediate future -- as it is in the conceptual chaos of the present.

**Undermining of democratic processes:** Whether in the countries and regions considered most democratic, or in countries much challenged to reflect some sort of democratic ideal, recent years have seen every form of abuse of due process. This is epitomized by the refusal of any promised democratic referendum regarding the [EU Reform Treaty](#) and the curious requirement that Ireland votes a second time in order to produce the "right conclusion" in that regard -- a process coincidentally implemented by Zimbabwe (and perhaps usefully to be termed the "Zimbabwe model"). Presumably that sets a precedent at the highest level for every future "unacceptable" election result -- especially in the case of presidential elections. But again, rather than bemoan this violation of a democratic ideal, it is vital to see how it constitutes an unprecedented education in the farcical nature of "democratic processes" vulnerable to such manipulation, as exemplified by the recent scandal of electronic voting in the society held to be a model of democracy. For the young it is an admirable lesson in the need for them to develop alternative decision making processes that acquire their legitimacy in other ways -- whether through charisma, music, prophecy, divination, or otherwise.

**Infringement of human rights:** Beyond the specific challenges of inequality and injustice are the wider set of infringements of human rights -- as enshrined in the [UN Declaration of Human Rights](#) -- and most notably with respect to religious belief and the condition of women. Their infringement has been dramatized by the justifications advanced for state-authorized torture by countries that claim themselves to be the prime defenders of human rights. Rather than see this situation as a focus of despair and suffering, it can be most usefully seen as an empowering revelation of the ethical sham behind which many authorities have operated in their manipulation of the value systems of other cultures -- purportedly from a moral and ethical high ground (*The "Dark Riders" of Social Change: a challenge for any Fellowship of the Ring*, 2002). The sham is all the more evident in their refusal to consider any complementary *UN Declaration of Human Responsibilities* (cf *Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities*, 1997). Such infringement is therefore a direct encouragement to individuals and groups to develop higher and more appropriate ethical standards and behaviours -- rather than acceding complacently to assumptions that these are collectively ensured by international provisions.

**Double standards:** Many have been made aware of the double standards through which world problems are framed and actions proposed -- or required of others. This can again be seen as a highly valuable educational process regarding a widespread modality of collective initiatives -- where such double standards typically go unchallenged under cover of a spirit of carefully cultivated decorum based on a privileged relationship to an ethical high ground. Whether it be academic, religious, corporate, voluntary or government initiatives, such an education empowers people to challenge such double standards, to require that they be recognized in practice, and to engender other modes of social action in which appropriate checks and balances are embedded in practice -- rather than by implication, lipservice or theory.

**Imprudent technical innovation:** As demonstrated by the ease with which military intervention may be successfully undertaken -- and its dubious consequences (Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon) -- there is a ready propensity to advocate technical solutions to complex social and environmental challenges, framed as having only marginal "collateral" deficiencies. This is now evident in the case of climate change ("[geoengineering](#)" and "[planetary engineering](#)") as it has been in past efforts at "[social engineering](#)" (including state-sponsored [euthanasia](#)). The implementation of [genetic engineering](#) of organisms is well advanced in response to the food crisis, with [nanotechnology](#) to follow -- conveniently forgetting the problematic experiences of [species introduction](#) (notably of the rabbit and the cane toad in Australia), [bee die-off](#) in the USA (as a possible consequence of GM crops), and the misrepresentation of the socio-environmental implications of [biofuels](#). But all such intervention can be more appropriately framed as characteristic of the start of the [anthropocene era](#) in which humans "take charge" of their planet and of their own evolution, as strongly articulated by the various forms of [transhumanism](#). Inhibiting precautionary statements, such as the variously attributed: "*For every human problem there is a solution that is quick, simple, inexpensive -- and wrong*", exemplify the unproductive nature of negative thinking. Despite recognition of the ingenuity gap by Thomas Homer-Dixon (*The Ingenuity Gap: how can we solve the problems of the future?*, 2000), such ingenuity in "fixing" problems is to be expected to triumph -- or provide ever more interesting lessons from the failure of misconceived initiatives. A good example of the latter is that many now argue that the recent banking crisis has been aggravated by technical "creativity" within institutions in coming up with increasingly esoteric financial products, including collateralised debt obligations, auction-rate securities and credit default swaps.

**Accidental death:** As but one example, deep concern is expressed at the number of road deaths and associated non-fatal consequences. The focus is placed on the inappropriateness of speeding and risky driving. Given that driving at speed is one of the few opportunities offered for the experience of risk in an increasingly urbanised and controlled environment, should the ability to take such risk not be the focus of appreciation -- rather than stressing the disastrous consequences of occasional failure? More generally, rather than opt for "nanny state" regulations severely restricting exposure to risk, should the focus not be on the essential advantages to the human spirit of extreme sports of whatever nature? Curiously the legal frameworks for much valued corporate endeavours ensure limited responsibility of the owners for risks incurred -- even fatal risks arising from the use or manufacture of their products -- and yet individually people are highly restricted in their ability to engage in personal risk. Exploration of extremes may even be conflated with terrorism (*Norms in the Global Struggle against Extremism: "rooting for" normalization vs. "rooting out" extremism?* 2005).

## Conclusions

**Global misleadership:** The above possibilities of celebrating world problems have been deliberately presented in a context of increasingly evident global misleadership -- where that too might usefully give cause for appreciative interpretation (*Emergence of a Global Misleadership Council misleading as vital to governance of the future?* 2007). New skills are required to assess appreciatively the all too evident incapacity to deliver remedies -- "too little, too late", following procrastination and denial of the challenge. More challenging for any positive appreciation is the associated over-simplification consistent with the above-cited quote: "*For every human problem there is a solution that is quick, simple, inexpensive -- and wrong*".

However, especially from a faith-based perspective, any apparent human inadequacies are more appropriately set within a larger framework -- as might be argued in auto-correcting, systemic terms. In this sense, whether divinity intervenes directly with prophesied remedies that many await expectantly, other framings are also possible. For example, as a (meta-)systemic regulator, Gaia may be fruitfully understood as the governor of "last resort" intervening in the interest of the ecosystem as a whole, irrespective of human priorities (see *Gaia: default global governor of "last resort"?* 2008). Surely it can be argued that by acting ineffectually in response to the above problems, or not at all, the psycho-social system will accumulate the pressures arising from them so as to evoke surprising solutions -- without the need for humanity to agonize unduly over identifying and implementing any complex solutions beyond its capacity. The challenges may simplify themselves such that only the simplest responses appear credible.

The art of governance is perhaps to elicit a constant stream of tertiary challenges, both as a focus for heated debate and as a means of disguising inaction on more complex primary issues -- the resolution of the latter being eventually determined by contextual circumstances rather than by application of collective intelligence respectful of that complexity.

**Radical empowerment:** Any despair regarding these trends in governance can however be fruitfully reframed in the light of the new approach to reality so strikingly pioneered and legitimated by American neoconservatives -- as exemplified by the above quote of an aide to President Bush: *"We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality -- judiciously, as you will -- we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too...."* (Ron Suskind, *Without a Doubt*, *The New York Times*, 17 October 2004). This might be understood as framing psycho-social organization for the coming century -- as was the ambition of the [Project for the New American Century](#). But its implications are highly dependent on how "we" is defined, or defines itself -- and on how "we" decides who "you" is as exemplifying uncreative stasis. It effectively indicates the radical freedom which any "we" has to create its own reality -- a freedom which has been an appeal of American articulations of democracy. It frames a dynamic situation in which reality can be recreated continuously -- rather than the very static framing it has been given in the past. In this respect it also highlights the disempowering disengagement characteristic of conventional approaches to reality -- notably the manner in which it is "judiciously" studied and accredited by academic, administrative and religious authorities. Of course the challenge is that this radical possibility has been fully grasped by unconventional groups like Al Qaida -- seemingly unrecognized by those who have so judiciously studied them in their war against terrorism.

**Negative capability:** One response to the above checklist is that it omits the fatal problem of which it is itself evidence, namely cynicism and negativity -- and the satirical framework within which it is presented. Many points evoked by this challenge have been explored elsewhere (*Being Positive Avoiding Negativity: management challenge of positive vs negative*, 2005). Perhaps the key argument is that elaborated by the poet [John Keats](#) in 1817 regarding the value of [negative capability](#):

I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke, on various subjects; several things dovetailed in my mind, and at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in literature and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously - I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.

Is it the paradoxical capacity to frame positively what is conventionally framed negatively that is the challenge of these times? Is it such capability that would shift understanding beyond superficial formulaic responses to manifestations of such problems (horrific crimes and acts of terrorism, for example) as inherently "incomprehensible", "inexplicable" or "unfathomable"? Such judgments characterize the unfruitful conventionality of the framework more than the challenge of the problem.

**Apophysis vs Kataphasis:** In theological traditions a distinction is made between two approaches to the essentially incomprehensible, even terrifying, nature of divinity. Understood as the most complex and intimate subtlety into which humanity claims some form of insight, the challenge of understanding divinity might be considered analogous to that of comprehending appropriately the significance to humanity of the complexity of the problematique represented by the above array. The most popular approach to deeper understanding of divinity -- through appreciative imagery, symbols, words and other symbolic forms of experience -- is known as the [kataphatic way](#), usefully to be compared with positive thinking. It is exemplified by the mystical assertions of various faith traditions regarding the "perfection of what is" -- including the array of problems above. In systemic terms, kataphasis might also be compared to the process of [anabolism](#), the set of [metabolic pathways](#) within living organisms whereby molecules are built up from smaller units using energy.

A second way -- the [apophatic way](#) -- emphasizes the truth behind, beyond, or hidden within all sensory or intellectual representations -- an acknowledgement that indeed: *God Moves in Mysterious Ways, His wonders to perform* ([William Cowper](#), 1731-1800). Is there a case for recognizing that more appropriate understanding of what the problematique implies for humanity can only be understood in some apophatic manner -- an analogue to [negative theology](#)? Is this the implication of negative capability, unfortunately conflated, from a positive perspective with an inherently inappropriate response to the challenge -- and condemned for that reason? Is this a call for [Structuring around unknowing in a learning society](#)? From a systemic perspective again, apophasis might be compared to [catabolism](#) -- the set of processes whereby large molecules are broken down into smaller parts, releasing energy -- and thereby enabling anabolism. The two processes are necessarily complementary -- whether in theology, in the human body or in collective engagement with reality.

**Lifelong learning:** Why should such an approach be rejected given the primary stimulus of misery and suffering to the lifelong dedication of the Buddha -- and many others? Or, as pointed out by [Kenneth Boulding](#) (*Ecodynamics; a new theory of societal evolution*, 1978): *"Disappointment forces a learning process of some kind upon us; success does not."* Are there not, for example, valuable learnings -- of lifelong significance -- from thinking positively about the experience of being successfully conned, as many of the above problems imply?

Humanity's confrontation with the above array might be fruitfully compared with a global exercise in collective cybernetic self-education (or, better still, "home learning") within a self-organizing system. This is most appropriate to the emergent knowledge society at the start

of the anthropocene era, especially to the extent that it is an education in second and third order cybernetics in which social pathologies and memetic disorders are key factors (*Memetic and Information Diseases in a Knowledge Society: speculations towards the development of cures and preventive measures*, 2008).

**Human sacrifice:** It should not be forgotten that modern civilization effectively requires human sacrifice, however inadvertently, prior to adopting any new health and safety legislation, for example -- no deaths, no legislation. It is just a question of how many bodies (or how much suffering) are required to justify passage of the remedial legislation -- just as cultures of the past have deliberately engaged in [human sacrifices](#) of appropriate scope in response to greater need (as exemplified in the [Aztec culture](#)). The deadly implications of many of the world problems named above are presumably to be celebrated as an appropriate sacrifice of humans and animals in anticipation of remedial responses -- should it ever be possible to give form to them in practice.

**Distractive celebration of exemplars:** There is a curious process that is the opposite of human sacrifice whereby one or more individuals are honoured to the highest degree through allocation of disproportionate resources -- or made the focus of attention eliciting such resources. Examples range from Nobel Prizes, through Right Livelihood Awards, to the devotion of an elite surgical team to an impoverished individual suffering from severe deformity. Whilst there is no reason to deny the worthiness that is thereby celebrated, the process -- which has no name -- has the effect of diminishing the need for recognition of others in a similar condition. Any guilt regarding unnamed others is to a large extent discharged by this process that is the antithesis of sacrifice. It is a celebration of "being positive" such as to distract attention from the "negativity" that is thereby obscured. Worthiness, deliberately associated with individuals and those according such recognition, is celebrated with enthusiasm as a form of catharsis. Such celebration becomes a cloak to disguise failure of appropriate response.

**Greater challenge:** Perhaps even more challenging is to frame positively the unctuous collective self-appreciation of those associated with global leadership, as most recently evident in the case of the G8 summit -- despite its widely-noted failure to fulfil pledges previously made to countries in desperate need. An interesting exploration of such a challenge is the annual question formulated to the eminent by the [World Question Center](#). In 2007 the question was: *What are you optimistic about? Why? Surprise us!* -- as described and discussed elsewhere (*In Quest of Optimism Beyond the Edge -- through avoidance of the answering process*, 2008).

**Failure of positive thinking:** Is the failure of conventional positive thinking to appreciate the true worth of such challenges to be considered a manifestation of "tunnel vision" or "[silo thinking](#)" -- the selective, premature, cognitive closure of [groupthink](#), whereby the value of everything that fails to conform to a conventionally approved pattern is simply denied? Is this failure of negative capability a reason global civilization is so challenged by "the other" in any form -- especially any recognition of its own shadow? (cf "[Human Intercourse](#)": "[Intercourse with Nature](#)" and "[Intercourse with the Other](#)", 2007). Is such positive thinking consistent with the much-cited tale of the person who searched at night for some lost keys -- under a lamp light, because it enabled them to be seen -- even though the person knew that the keys had been lost beyond the lighted area?

**Unconscious civilization:** In broadening the scope of positive thinking, it is perhaps in this sense that the above problems need to be framed as "good news" rather than the implicit focus of unconscious denial and shunning (*Global Strategic Implications of the "Unsaid": From myth-making towards a "wisdom society"*, 2003; *Institutionalized Shunning of Overpopulation Challenge incommunicability of fundamentally inconvenient truth*, 2008). An appreciative approach to world problems would do much to remedy the regrettable condition identified by [John Ralston Saul](#) (*The Unconscious Civilization*, 1995). The challenge of such appreciation would do much to elicit the essential genius of the human spirit -- expected to fulfil creatively the many expectations of it required by such an array of problems.

**Collective self-recognition:** Such considerations of human cognitive entanglement in the problems engendered in society are consistent with any analogue to the "[mirror test](#)" of self-recognition that might be understood as an indication of the maturity of the human species (*Self-reflective Embodiment of Transdisciplinary Integration (SETI): the universal criterion of species maturity?* 2008). They point to the creative possibilities of internalizing and embodying such an array of problems -- in ways as yet to be fully explored, although consistent with the approach of psychoanalysis to the developmental benefits of integration of the "[shadow](#)" -- of lovingly "embracing the shadow" (*My Reflecting Mirror World: making my World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg, 2002) worthwhile*). In this respect, the "[shadow of humanity](#)" is discussed in the context of the *Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential*.

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