



# laetus in praesens

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## Implication of Personal Despair in Planetary Despair avoiding entrapment in hopeful anticipation

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## Introduction

The following argument is an effort to acknowledge the extent of personal despair, both amongst those whose suffering is widely acknowledged and amongst those who endeavour to respond to it. The relationship of this sense of personal despair to despair about the developing condition of the planet is then explored.

The argument here is that the very heavy investment in "hope", especially in public discourse, is increasingly serving as a narcotic to dull such pain and to distract from acting in a more healthy manner in response to it. This was evident in the period of the recent financial crisis (*Credibility Crunch engendered by Hope-mongering "Credit crunch" focus as symptom of a dangerous mindset*, 2008). The phenomenon could be understood as having been brought to a head with the hope projected onto the [United Nations Climate Change Conference](#) (Copenhagen, 2009) and the despair experienced by those who had expected a legally binding agreement to emerge from that process (*Insights for the Future from the Change of Climate in Copenhagen*, 2010).

This need for "hope" also takes the form of a need for expression in a "positive" mode and a deprecation of any "negative" expression. Its issues are consistent with the 'bright-siding' deprecated by [Barbara Ehrenreich](#) (*Bright-sided: how the relentless promotion of positive thinking has undermined America*, 2009) -- and what might be termed 'globallooning' (*Globallooning -- Strategic Inflation of Expectations and Inconsequential Drift*, 2009). As previously noted, such 'positive thinking' fails consciously to recognize the "unsaid" (*Global Strategic Implications of the 'Unsaid'*, 2003; *Being Positive Avoiding Negativity: management challenge of positive vs negative*, 2005). This is curiously echoed in the recent recognition of the significance of both "dark matter" by astrophysicists and the secrecy systematically cultivated by the Catholic Church regarding sexual abuse of children (*Beyond the Standard Model of Universal Awareness: being not even wrong?* 2010). The latter being a source of immense despair for many.

One response to the hope-mongering by Barack Obama (*The Audacity of Hope: thoughts on reclaiming the American dream*, 2006) has been a criticism of the "apotheosis of co-optation" by Eamon Martin (*Obama and The Audacity of Despair*, *CounterPunch*, 5 August 2008).

The question addressed here is what reframing is possible through acknowledgement of the extent and nature of despair. The argument for a more balanced approach, reconciling positive and negative feedback loops in a cybernetic sense, is consistent with the methodology of the *Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential*. It follows from an earlier exploration of the intimate relationship between individual physical health and the health of the planet (*Cognitive Implications of Lifestyle Diseases of Rich and Poor: transforming personal entanglement with the natural environment*, 2010). However, whereas, as conventionally understood, so-called lifestyle diseases do not typically include the sense of existential despair and associated depression, this possibility is highlighted here -- as possibly indicative of clues to the radical nature of cognitive reframing that is called for at this time.

## Personal despair and depression

Much is increasingly made of the worldwide incidence of [depression](#), otherwise known as clinical depression, major depression, unipolar depression, or unipolar disorder. This is recognized as a common mental disorder characterized by an all-encompassing low mood accompanied by low self-esteem, disturbed sleep or appetite, poor concentration, and loss of interest or pleasure in normally enjoyable activities. These problems can become chronic or recurrent and lead to substantial impairments in an individual's ability to take care of his or her everyday responsibilities. At its worst, depression can lead to suicide, a tragic fatality associated with the loss of about 850,000 lives every year, according to the [description](#) of the World Health Organisation.

This disorder is distinguished from [mood depression](#), namely a state of low mood and aversion to activity, involving experience of feelings of sadness, helplessness and hopelessness. In the USA, for example, in a year between 13-14 million people experience a depressive disorder [see [depression statistics](#)]. Depression is the leading cause of disability and the 4th leading contributor to the global burden of disease (DALYs) in 2000. By the year 2020, depression is projected to reach 2nd place of the ranking of DALYs calculated for all ages, both sexes. Depression is already the 2nd cause of DALYs in the age category 15-44 years for both sexes combined.

Medication is widely available and prescribed for both conditions. Alcohol and other substances may also be used, whether or not they are combined with drugs. Social and other activities may form part of a pattern of alleviating depression.

Arguably "despair" is a characteristic of both the clinical and mood varieties of depression.

## Catalysts of personal despair

It is useful to give focus to the argument here by recognizing some of the contexts which tend to catalyze despair:

- **Poverty:**
- **Inadequate food:**
- **Inadequate shelter:**
- **Unemployment and underemployment:** young -- job -- unfulfilling job -- slavery
- **Dysfunctional relationships:**
  - extra-familial: social exclusion, status
  - familial: and domestic violence: unhappy marriage
  - sexual unfulfilment (including inability to produce children):
  - transsexuality: and the personal challenges of sexual variety
- **Financial and related obligations:**
  - indebtedness
  - victimisation by racketeers
  - bonded labour
  - blackmail
- **"Entrapment" in a care situation:**
  - as carer
  - as dependent
- **Discrimination:**
- **Social status:**
  - "keeping up with the Joneses"
- **Incarceration:** in its various forms, each capable of triggering despair, possibly with comon features (notably including harassment):
  - Prison: Hans Toch, *Mosaic of Despair: Human Breakdowns in Prison*, American Psychological Association, 1992)
  - Military service
  - Educational institutions
  - Hospices
- **Ill-health:**
  - chronic illness
  - lifestyle diseases:
  - terminal illness
- **Old age:**
  - Uncertainties
  - Death with dignity
- **Physical inadequacies:**
  - strength,
  - beauty -- cosmetic surgery -- despair industry
  - hair
  - weight
  - abilities and skills
  - deformities
- **Insecurity:**
  - Community violence
  - Intimidation: bullying, racketeering
  - Lack of self-esteem: existential despair

- **Entrapment in addictive behaviour:**
- **Competence and any sense of the lack of it:**
  - Creativity block
- **Boredom:** notably articulated in French as existential *ennui*
- **Administrative hassle:**
  - Catch 22

These may be variously associated with "cycles" and "patterns" of behaviour. It may well be that it is with respect to entrapment in such "cycles" that the despair is engendered (*Dysfunctional Cycles and Spirals: web resources on "breaking the cycle"*, 2002).

## Personal despair of social change agents

Faced with recognition of such despair in the lives of others, in whatever form, individuals (possibly acting through one or more groups) may dedicate years of their lives, with associated resources and enthusiasm, to responding to such conditions. This may well be framed as an effort to "make a difference", to "save the planet", to "change the Universe", or to "be the change". The effort may be variously framed by others using phrases such as "change agents", "white knights" or "holier than thou" -- possibly adopted as a self-image. It is therefore valuable to recognize the despair that such individuals may eventually come to feel as a consequence of investing their energy in this way, or in the process of doing so. This may be articulated in relation to:

- **Dysfunctional game-playing:** disappointment at exposure to systematic game-playing, especially in group and institutional contexts, where there is effectively little interest in achieving a worthwhile impact on the external social condition and the focus is switched to gaining advantage within those contexts (*Wrecking an International Project: notes from a saboteur's vade mecum*, 1972)
- **Deception at the betrayal of declared collective values:** this has been remarkably articulated by Shirley Hazzard (*Defeat of an Ideal: a study of the self-destruction of the United Nations*. 1973)
- **Futility:** a growing sense of futility, having "tried everything"
- **Lack of appreciation:** an emerging sense that the effort has gone unrecognized, whether by those it was designed to assist, by others with similar concerns, or by various groups and institutions who claim to be concerned with the issue. This may be associated with physical, emotional, intellectual or spiritual efforts -- whether as tangible actions, supportive endeavours, or creative products (art, drama, writing, etc).
- **"Burnout":** in psychology, [burnout](#) describes the experience of long-term exhaustion and diminished interest, notably on the part of those endeavouring to act as agents of change

For others, the experience may be cynically framed as the collective's unwillingness to be persuaded by the truth offered by the change agent -- by their message in a context of many other competing messages. The capacity to handle despair may have been best framed in the famous Poem by [Rudyard Kipling](#) (*If...*, 1895) of which the first verse is:

IF you can keep your head when all about you  
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,  
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,  
But make allowance for their doubting too;  
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,  
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,  
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,  
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise

## Articulation of personal despair by change agents

It is appropriate to note various insightful efforts to articulate despair at reaction to change initiatives. A valuable example is that of management cybernetician [Stafford Beer](#), who argued for an adaptation of [Le Chatelier's Principle](#):

Reformers, critics of institutions, consultants in innovation, people in short who "want to get something done", often fail to see this point. They cannot understand why their strictures, advice or demands do not result in effective change. They expect either to achieve a measure of success in their own terms or to be flung off the premises. But an ultra-stable system (like a social institution)... has no need to react in either of these ways. It specializes in equilibrial readjustment, which is to the observer a secret form of change requiring no actual alteration in the macro-systemic characteristics that he is trying to do something about. (*The cybernetic cytoblast - management itself*. Chairman's Address to the International Cybernetic Congress. September 1969)

Jim Reeds (*Petronius Arbiter, Time Traveller*, 2004) has provided a web page commenting on the spurious nature of the following quote and its variants -- purportedly from *Petronius Arbiter* (210 B.C.) a legionnaire in classical Rome -- and on the number of people who have considered it appropriate in re quoting it so widely:

We trained hard . . . but it seemed that every time we were beginning to form up into teams we would be reorganized. I was to learn later in life that we tend to meet any new situation by reorganizing; and a wonderful method it can be for creating the illusion of progress while producing confusion, inefficiency, and demoralization.

An emphasis may be given to victimization by a shadowy "them", namely those purportedly able to maintain surveillance and block

communications. This may be reframed through sophisticated insights into "paranoia" (*Paranoid Quotes*). With respect to game-playing around change agents, an analysis of associated traps is offered by Gail Golden (*Avoiding The 'Change Agent' Trap*).

The analysis by Mathew Melko of the development of supposedly beneficial conceptual frameworks and models is also indicative (*The Hazards of System Building*, Presented at the Foundation for Integrative Education Conference, Oswego, New York, 1969; reproduced in *Main Currents in Modern Thought*, vol. 269 no. 2):

1. You identify with your system. It cost you blood to build it, and if it is attacked, it is your blood that is being shed.
2. You cannot tolerate tentativeness, suspension of judgment, or anything that does not fit the system.
3. You cannot apprehend anyone else's system unless it supports yours.
4. You believe that other systems are based on selected data.
5. Commitment to systems other than your own is fanaticism.
6. You come to believe that your system entitles you to proprietorship of the entities within it.
7. Since humour involves incongruity and. your system explains all seeming incongruities, you lose your sense of humour.
8. You lose your humility.
9. You accept all these points -- insofar as they apply to builders of other systems.
10. So do I. (P.S. I hope I believe in the cult of fallibility)

This provocative comment might be considered an anticipation of the consequence of the explosion of models, theories, insights and belief systems -- each assuming greater relevance to their context than is widely appreciated within that larger context. With the amplification of this process by internet and web facilities, the emergence of a "blip culture", the degree of information overload, and the erosion of attention span, a "memetic singularity" may be foreseen (*Emerging Memetic Singularity in the Global Knowledge Society*, 2009). This has fundamental implications for any hope dependent on global consensus on social change -- and for the despair associated with the evident fragmentation.

With respect to burnout, advice is distributed by Women In Higher Education (*Advice to Avoid Burnout from a Campus Change Agent*, 1998). *Global Grassroots: conscious social change for women* offers a series of posts tagged "burnout" in relation to their *Five Principles and Supporting Practices of Conscious Social Change*. The phenomenon of emotional burnout is recognized as very important for people working in the sphere of 'helper' professions, notably among the experts who work in the 'person-to-person' sphere. A helpful analysis is provided for the change agents who participated in its trainings by the *Public Fund 'Mental Health'*, including an indication of the stages of burnout (*Syndrome of emotional burnout*, *Bulletin №1* (3) 2008).

The sense of despair experienced by change agents, but especially the attitude required to respond to it, has been reviewed from a valuable perspective by Val Larson and Mike Carnell (*Developing Black Belt Change Agents*, *iSixSigma*, 26 February 2010). Dave Andrews (*The Special "Fools-rush-in-where-angels-fear-to-tread": Change Agent's First aid Kit*) offers much commentary on the stages and conditions of existential pain experienced by change agents. Those offering tips for change agents typically identify traps the change agent may encounter in the process (Don Jacobson, *Tips for Change Agents*, *GovLeaders.org*)

An insightful comment is offered by the *Meta System Consulting Group* with regard to the significance of the blues as a metaphor for change in emerging from a condition readily characterized by despair, as argued by Paul Kweicinski (aka South Bend Slim):

If the blues teaches us anything, it's that despair is not the only alternative to adversity. But the blues isn't about finding a solution to what's wrong; it's about stating what the feeling is. To change a bad situation, you first have to acknowledge it.

The insidious relation between the recognition of "mass man" and the collective nature of despair is presented in a commentary on the articulation by Anti-Climacus (*The Sickness Unto Death*, 1849). Anti-Climacus was one of a number of pseudonyms used by *Søren Kierkegaard*. For Daniel W. Conway and K. E. Gover (*Søren Kierkegaard: Social and political philosophy: Kierkegaard and the "Present Age"*, 2002):

The introduction of the slogan "mass man"...is certainly an instance of the loss of imagination and spiritual identity that Anti-Climacus considers the despair of finitude. But the mass man is a social pathology not inherent in sociality as such. Anti-Climacus is right in considering it a form of despair, but it is precisely a collective despair. It is not merely an individual despair induced by the sociality of human life. The dialectical heart of this text is the insight that despair is a pathology of self in its freedom, a misrelation of the relational self. The self is freedom" and that is why it can despair. A stone or a lump cannot despair, and just as despair in the individual is dialectical testimony to the spiritual freedom of the individual, so the horrific social pathologies of modern times, the collective despair that is epidemic in modern experience, is dialectical testimony to the spiritual freedom inherent in the social nature of human beings. (p. 57)

## Recognition of planetary despair

There is no lack of commentary on the problematic condition of the planet, notably as systematically profiled in the *Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential* from documents of international constituencies. Much is regularly made of challenges of food, water, shelter, health, education, corruption, criminality, violence and the like. More evocative of despair is the sense in which the processes of governance are themselves worthy of despair (*Emergence of a Global Misleadership Council: misleading as vital to governance of the future?* 2007; *Abuse of Faith in Governance*, 2009; *Framing the Global Future by Ignoring Alternatives*, 2009).

Despair at the collective level is frequently expressed as "collective despair", "political despair", "international despair" or possibly "global despair" -- notably in recognition of the absence of the "political will to change":

- Afghanistan: The current tactics are really down to political despair, because they don't know what to do... (as cited by The International Institute For Strategic Studies, Guardian, 16 November 2009)
- Geo-engineering: Tinkering with our entire planetary system is not a silver bullet. It's an expression of political despair (Doug Parr, *Geo-engineering is no solution to climate change*. *The Guardian*, 1 September 2008)
- Politics: David Ohana, *The Politics of Political Despair*, Israel Democracy Institute, 12 November 2008; David Hulme, *Collective Despair Over Gaza*, *Middle East Politics.Net*, 9 February 2009
- Intellectual despair: Postmodernism understood as, in part, a metaphor for despair, and especially intellectual despair (Morton G. Wenger, *Decoding postmodernism: The despair of the intellectuals and the twilight of the future* *The Social Science Journal*, 28, 3, 1991, pp. 391-405)

In the light of other analyses, "collective despair" is proposed in commentary in the [World Problems Project](#) on the *Phases of human development through challenging problems* (1995) as one of a set of group sins or afflictions, characterized by the acknowledgement of current impotence and in recollecting past failures. One relevant articulation is that relating to the experience of many indigenous peoples within a dominant global culture, as articulated by Ernest Hunter (*The Social Context of Aboriginal Mental Health, Australasian Psychiatry*, 1995) citing the report of the [Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples](#) (1995:38):

Collective despair, or collective lack of hope, will lead us to collective suicide. This type of suicide can take many forms, foreshadowed by many possible signs: identity crisis, loss of pride, every kind of dependence, denial of our customs and traditions, degradation of our environment, weakening of our language, abandonment of our struggle for our Aboriginal rights, our autonomy and our culture, uncaring acceptance of violence, passive acknowledgment of lack of work and unemployment, corruption of our morals, tolerance of drugs and idleness, parental surrendering of responsibilities, lack of respect for elders, envy of those who try to keep their heads up and who might succeed, and so on.

On the occasion of the 25th Anniversary of the United Nations (October 1970) and the commencement in 1971 of the United Nations Second Development Decade, the previous period was reviewed under the heading *Discrimination and Fragmentation in the 1970s: an organized response to global crisis* (1971). The sense of extreme existential despair which individuals may experience -- as presented in a classic description by R. D. Laing *The Divided Self; an existential study in sanity and madness*, (1960) -- was put forward as offering an indicative model of the existential condition of collective planetary consciousness (*World in Distress: a model of fragmented "social development"*, 1971):

Even when one felt that what was being said was an expression of someone, the fragment of a self behind the words or actions was not Julie. There might be someone addressing us, but in listening to a schizophrenic, it is very difficult to know "who" is talking, and it is just as difficult to know "whom" one is addressing... One may begin to recognize patches of speech, or fragments of behaviour cropping up at different times, which seem to belong together by reason of similarities of the intonation, the vocabulary, syntax, the preoccupations in the utterance or to cohere as behaviour by reason of certain stereotyped gestures or mannerisms. It seemed therefore that one was in the presence of various fragments, or incomplete elements, of different "personalities" in operation at the one time...

With Julie it was not difficult to carry on a verbal exchange of a kind, but without her seeming to have any overall unity but rather a constellation of quasi-autonomous partial systems, it was difficult to speak to "her". However... even this state of near chaotic nonentity was by no means irreversible and fixed in its disintegration. She would sometimes marvelously come together again and display a most pathetic realization of her plight. But she was terrified of these moments of integration, for various reasons. Among others, because she had to sustain in them intense anxiety; and because the process of disintegration appeared to be remembered and dreaded as an experience so awful that there was refuge for her in her un-integration, un-reality, and deadness. Julie's being as a chronic schizophrenic was thus characterized by lack of unity and by division into what might variously be called partial "assemblies", complexes, partial systems, or "internal objects". Each of these partial systems had recognizable features and distinctive ways of its own. By following through these postulates, many features of her behaviour become explicable.

The fact that her self-being was not assembled in an allover manner, but was split into various partial assemblies or systems, allows us to understand that various functions which presuppose the achievement of personal unity or at least a high degree of personal unity could not be present in her, as indeed they were not.

Personal unity is a prerequisite of reflective awareness, that is, the ability to be aware of one's self acting relatively unselfconsciously, or with a simple primary non-reflective awareness. In Julie, each partial system could be aware of objects, but a might not be aware of the processes going on in another system which was split off from it. For example, if in talking to me, one system was "speaking", there seemed to be no overall unity within her whereby "she" as a unified person could be aware of what this system was saying or doing.

In so far as reflective awareness was absent, "memory", for which reflective awareness would seem to be prerequisite, was very patchy... The absence of a total experience of her being as a whole meant that she lacked the unified experience on which to base a clear idea of the "boundary" of her being. Such an overall "boundary" was not, however, entirely lacking... Rather, each system seemed to have a boundary of its own. That is to say, to the awareness that characterized one system, another system was liable to appear outside itself... It was only "from the outside" that one could see that different conflicting systems of her being were active at the same time. Each partial system seemed to have within it its own focus of centre of awareness: it had its own very limited memory schemata and limited ways of structuring precepts; its own quasi-autonomous drives or component drives; its own tendency to preserve its autonomy, and special dangers which threatened its autonomy. She would refer to these diverse

aspects as "he", or "she", or address them as "you". That is, instead of having a reflective awareness of those aspects of herself, "she" would perceive the operation of a partial system as though it was not "her", but belonged outside. She would be hallucinated". (pp. 214-7)

The situation might be considered well-described by the famous poem, especially the much-quoted last lines, of William Butler Yeats (*The Second Coming*, 1919), which starts:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

To the extent that humanity has transformed the planet into "hell on Earth", the inscription at the entrance to hell -- from [Dante Alighieri's \*Divine Comedy\*](#) -- might be considered appropriate for many on the planet:

Through me you pass into the city of woe:  
Through me you pass into eternal pain:  
...  
All hope abandon ye who enter here.

The final line could well be placed at the entrance of the many slum areas and refugee camps around the world -- whether proudly engendered by the policies and promoted processes of globalization, or otherwise. Cynics might argue that -- in the light of their track record -- the same phrase could be appropriately placed at the entrance to the major institutions of world governance (or their conferences), to the offices of multinational corporations (promising so much in their advertising), to the universities whose research programs purportedly offer insight of relevance to planetary disaster, or even to religious institutions claiming to be exemplars of moral guidance. This would be a perception of many dedicated change agents, as exemplified by [Shirley Hazzard](#) (*Defeat of an Ideal: a study of the self-destruction of the United Nations*, 1973).

## Questionable remedies for collective despair

Various remedies are promoted for collective despair and the encounter with it:

- **Hope-mongering:** this might be considered the most favoured response, notably as implying (even holding out the promise) that some (of the following) responses will be successful (*Sins of Hot Air Emission, Omission, Commission and Promise: the political challenge of responding to global crises*, 2009). It was a major factor in the successful election of Barack Obama (*The Audacity of Hope: thoughts on reclaiming the American dream*, 2006). Making false promise and pledges, scheduled to be broken or to remain unfulfilled, is as characteristic of national politics as it is in global summitry. Such commitments are never legally binding in any sense, nor are they ever sanctioned as "misleading advertising"
- **Being "positive"** (brightsiding): as articulated by [Barbara Ehrenreich](#) (*Bright-sided: how the relentless promotion of positive thinking has undermined America*, 2009). It is a variant on hope-mongering.
- **Prophecy and prediction:** As variously offered through:
  - Anticipation of the fulfilment of religious prophecy: The crises of the time are welcomed by many as harbingers of an imminent archetypal battle in which good will triumph (*Spontaneous Initiation of Armageddon: a heartfelt response to systemic negligence*, 2004).
  - Soothsayers
  - Futurists
  - Modelling assumptions: most notably that the explosive increase in population will stabilize in future decades as a result of economic development and the empowerment of women. Reliance on singular metrics is also a factor, notably in its avoidance of singular problems (*Uncritical Strategic Dependence on Little-known Metrics: the Gaussian Copula, the Kaya Identity, and what else?* 2009; *Lipoproblems: Developing a Strategy Omitting a Key Problem*, 2009)
- **Criminality:** This is clearly a strategy to which many are obliged to resort, most notably in developing countries but increasingly in urban slums worldwide
- **Military action against threat:** Faced with eroding capacity to respond to increasing socio-political complexity, governments make extensive use of framing "others" as a source of destabilizing ("evil") threat, thus justifying "positive" military action (*Promoting a Singular Global Threat -- Terrorism: strategy of choice for world governance*, 2002)
- **Selective focus:** This involves a narrow focus on uncontroversial challenges susceptible to ready solution with available resources -- ignoring contextual challenges which may also be thereby exacerbated (*Framing the Global Future by Ignoring Alternatives*, 2009).
- **Escapism and distraction** (hedonism, narcotics, promiscuity, etc): These are traditional approaches to despair, and perhaps the most commonly and widely used.
  - hopeful expectations associated with gambling and (national) lotteries
  - relocation and migration, most notably on the part of economic refugees
  - quest for distraction, most notably cultivated by the entertainment and media industries

- **Philosophy:** Nihilism, cynicism and fatalism all provide means of (re)framing despair, especially the condition of others.
- **Schadenfreude:** Recourse may be had to a perverse pleasure in the sufferings of others, especially as a means of establishing the relative advantages of one's own situation. Curiously media coverage of the conditions of those in slum areas, in developing countries or suffering from disaster may all serve to this end.
- **Humour:** This has been widely acknowledged as one of the most successful strategies in Eastern Europe during the Soviet period. Only a university mathematics department under [Nicolae Ceaușescu](#) could contrive, under the inspired leadership of [Solomon Marcus](#), to study the mathematics of the theatre, of poetry, of the smile and of humour itself.
- **Suicide / Immolation / Self-harm**

A question is raised by the assumption that undesirable "dis-ease" curiously undermines the desirable condition of "ease", as implied in the case of lifestyle diseases of the more privileged *Cognitive Implications of Lifestyle Diseases of Rich and Poor: transforming personal entanglement with the natural environment*, 2010). This is matched by the correspondence between "des-espoir" (hopelessness in French) and "espoir" (hope). More curious in this light was a major response to the recent financial crisis in the form of "quantitative easing" (aka printing promissory notes). It is appropriate to ask whether this is consistent with a mindset promoting "quantitative hoping" of which the promise of gambling and lotteries might offer appropriate examples. This would in turn be consistent with the hope offered by the speculative nature of casino economics.

## Personal participation in planetary despair

Given the use of "depression" to describe both the experience of a planetary economic condition and of a personal psychological condition, it is interesting to note any traces of links made between the two, as with the comment by Paul Gilding (*The Global Financial Crisis - From Despair to Excitement*, 28 April 2009). Some such link may be sought through the methodology of [appreciative inquiry](#) as provocatively explored previously (*Celebrating the Value of Deadly Problems Worldwide: planetary salvation in an era of inept global governance?* 2008).

Valuable pointers are variously offered by authors such as Gregory Bateson (*Mind and Nature; a necessary unity*, 1979; George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (*Philosophy In The Flesh: the embodied mind and its challenge to western thought*, 1999), Thomas Moore (*The Re-enchantment of Everyday Life*, 1997), Steven M. Rosen (*Topologies of the Flesh: a multidimensional exploration of the lifeworld*, 2006), Henryk Skolimowski (*The Participatory Mind: a new theory of knowledge and of the universe*, 1995), Francisco Varela (*Laying Down a Path in Walking: essays on enactive cognition*, 1997). These have notably been summarized by Jennifer Gidley (*The Evolution of Consciousness as a Planetary Imperative: an integration of integral views*. *Integral Review*, 5, 2007).

The United Nations Climate Change Conference (Copenhagen, 2009) was framed by many as exemplifying hope for a collective global response to an imminent threat of major planetary significance, as notably articulated by George Monbiot (*This is Bigger than Climate Change: it is a battle to redefine humanity*, *The Guardian*, 14 December 2009) -- as was its failure (George Monbiot, *Requiem for a Crowded Planet: this is what the failure of the climate talks means*. *The Guardian*, 21 December 2010). The hopes of many were carried by delegates and activists present. The failure could readily be experienced as personally traumatic. This might be said of participation in many United Nations initiatives and global summits to which individuals and their organizations have allocated vital resources.

Perhaps more tragic is the apparently questionable capacity to learn from the framing of planetary challenges in this way, as previously discussed (*Insights for the Future from the Change of Climate in Copenhagen*, 2010; *Collective Learning from Calls for Global Action*, 1981; *Cooperation and its Failures: metaphors towards understanding the dilemma for the 1990s*, 1988; *An Inconvenient Truth -- about any inconvenient truth*, 2008).

## Planetary embodiment as a cognitive challenge

In the light of such understandings, personal and planetary despair might be considered intimately related, notably with respect to any understanding of imbalance or "dis-ease" (*Cognitive Implications of Lifestyle Diseases of Rich and Poor: transforming personal entanglement with the natural environment*, 2010).

Whether understood as cognitive "embodiment" or cognitive "engagement", new framings may be possible beyond conceptual gameplaying (*Existential Embodiment of Externalities: radical cognitive engagement*, 2009). Gameplaying, given its problematic impact on decision-making, especially in institutional settings, may however also be a factor (*Engaging with Globality through Playful Re-categorizing*, 2009; *Playfully Changing the Prevailing Climate of Opinion: climate change as focal metaphor of effective global governance*, 2005). Integrating that dimension from the perspective of the complexity sciences may prove valuable (*Imagining the Real Challenge and Realizing the Imaginal Pathway of Sustainable Transformation*, 2007). Such framings may well be anticipated, or intuited, in the widespread appeal of songs such as *We Are the World* (written by [Michael Jackson](#) and [Lionel Richie](#)) or the fictional exploration by [Jack Vance](#) (*Dying Earth* series) and its subsequent celebration (*Songs of Dying Earth*, 2009).

The possibility argues for a form of radical recognition of how planetary ills are echoes of poorly recognized cognitive ills and "diseases", perhaps to be understood:

- as pathologies in the processing of meaning and information (*Memetic and Information Diseases in a Knowledge Society: speculations towards the development of cures and preventive measures*, 2008)
- as indicators of systemic neglect (notably in the case of so-called "shortages" and endangered biodiversity) reflected in individual behavioural patterns and a fundamental sense of existential "lack", reinforced by defensive "objectivity". These considerations can be variously argued:
  - *Spontaneous Initiation of Armageddon: a heartfelt response to systemic negligence*, 2004

- *Self-reflective Embodiment of Transdisciplinary Integration (SETI): the universal criterion of species maturity?* 2008
- *My Reflecting Mirror World: making my World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg, 2002) worthwhile*, 2002
- *Psychology of Sustainability Embodying cyclic environmental processes*, 2002

The media occasionally offers the sight of people in extreme poverty and of all ages working through heaps of urban waste in search of anything that would sustain them, most notably food. From the suggested perspective they might well be fruitfully seen as mirroring the condition of many not so materially deprived but obliged to sift through the factoids, spam and information junk in search of anything meaningful to sustain them and ward off the sense of despair and depression.

Beyond recognition of any "resonance dynamic" between a personal sense of despair and any sense of despair with regard to the future condition of the planet, is the question of how such understanding might enable new modes of action as variously considered:

- *Engendering the Future through Self-reflexive Group Initiatives*, 2008
- *Stepping into, or through, the Mirror: embodying alternative scenario patterns*, 2009
- *Self-reflexive Challenges of Integrative Futures*, 2008
- *State of the "World Forum" vs "State of the World" Forum: challenge of reflexivity*, 2009
- *Consciously Self-reflexive Global Initiatives: Renaissance zones, complex adaptive systems, and third order organizations*, 2007

The quality of despair with regard to humanity's capacity to get its act together may typically be associated with fatalistic resignation, as so ably articulated by [James Lovelock](#) (*The Vanishing Face of Gaia: a final warning -- enjoy it while you can*, 2009). However the very phrase "enjoy it while you can" does little to address the desperate sense of personal despair associated with any quest for enjoyment under those circumstances -- most notably marked by a variety of distractive behaviours to "dull the pain", or ultimately by suicide.

## Nourishment through despair -- transcendence through despair?

Far more intriguing is the way in which the two extremes of despair combine to encourage "re-cognition" of the conventional worldview and its sustaining assumptions. This is especially the case when the most radical thinking has been given legitimacy in the explorations of fundamental physics, astrophysics and cosmology -- explorations which continue to nourish many through imaginative science fiction and media portrayals. Given that the quest for enjoyment is intimately related to the quest for cognitive "engrossment", there is an irony to the fact that one such portrayal, *Avatar* (2009), has already (at the time of writing) "grossed" more than any other movie in history.

The media blockbuster *Avatar* offers a powerful exposure of the logic and mindset which drives so much "development" -- at the expense of cultural resources which have yet to be fully appreciated and may well be readily and widely deprecated. However there is a tragic, possibly "schizophrenic", dissociation from the reality of others as previously argued (*From Apartheid to Schizophrenia: ecological ignorance and the logic of depersonalized "separate development"*, 1971). The media offer sanitized exposure to personal existential tragedy on a daily basis -- by which the world is inured to death and disaster to an historically unprecedented degree.

This may take the form of both exposure to the reality of current massacres and of those fading into history. It is characterized by a daily diet of dramatized death and violence, recognized as being the key to "ratings" and for which there are seemingly few appreciated substitutes. The nature of the satisfaction might even be compared to that of "fast food". A degree of personal participation is offered through realistically violent video games, which may be developed and used as part of military recruitment strategies -- possibly even as part of the selection process.

Arguably, whether real or virtual, there is a fundamental "thirst" for participative engagement in "happening" in an otherwise increasingly meaningless contextual reality -- a world effectively already laid to waste as a psychosocial "wasteland". Curiously this is associated with a need for exposure to despair as offering "depth", a vital sense of reality, and a guarantee of genuineness in an increasingly artificial environment -- irrespective of whether or not this is deemed to be "healthy". Contrary to the conventional assumption that reality is a noun, there is a sense in which people "hunger" to experience it as a verb. It has not proven possible to present successfully as "verbs" the idealistic goals of peace, sustainability and development in order to satisfy that hunger. Disasters in particular, and problems in general, are experienced as more real than the values upheld (as nouns) as the key to achievement of sustainability and peace.

It might even be said that the diet of virtual violence and tragedy, and the vicarious participation in the associated despair of others, substitutes for the collective participation down the ages in organized human sacrifice. It remains the case that little legislation is passed that has not been appropriately preceded by human sacrifice and the mediation of the despair of relatives and/or victims.

Authors such as [Arthur Koestler](#) (*Dialogue with Death*, 1942) have provided graphic insights into the existential condition of being under imminent threat of death -- the daily reality of many on "death row". "Culture" is curiously nourished by the challenging terminal despair of its exemplars -- as in the case of Mozart, Beethoven and Van Gogh. That they should die in despair enhances appreciations for their works and the depth of human understanding from which they were engendered.

Many religions offer a curious sense of nourishment to their believers through the prophecies of disastrous "end-times" scenarios in which suffering and tragedy will presumably be maximized -- for reasons upheld as divine justice and retribution. Planetary disaster, and especially "global warming", are therefore welcomed -- possibly even to the point of assisting divinity in engendering them, in order to hasten the desired aftermath as prophesied. The attraction of many religions derives from the manner in which they give a focus to suffering and despair, exemplified, for Christianity, by the words of Jesus on the cross *Eloi Eloi lema sabachthani?* (*Mark 15:34; Matthew 27:46*), translated as *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

Such factors highlight the degree to which there is a poorly expressed desire for some form of existential "focusing of the mind", possibly collectively with respect to planetary consciousness. This might be framed as an implicit understanding of a form of collective "death wish" or "death drive", formulated in classical Freudian psychoanalytic theory as the drive towards death, destruction and

forgetfulness. This is perhaps to be understood as a dimension of the analysis of [Jared Diamond](#) (*Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, 2005).

Frustration with an unenriching conventional worldview, bereft of meaningful happening, might also be seen as deriving from authoritative promulgation and imposition of "cyclopean", exclusive, single-factor explanations of reality (*Cyclopean Vision vs Polysensual Engagement*, 2006). The missing integrative focus might perhaps be usefully seen as lacking the "depth" of perspective potentially offered by the "polyocular" vision articulated by Magoroh Maruyama (*Polyocular Vision or Subunderstanding*, *Organization Studies*, 2004). In this sense individuals might be said to experience themselves as cognitively imprisoned by authority in "subunderstanding" -- a form of unenriching conceptual violence as yet to receive attention analogous to that of movements for penal reform.

## Imagining a new way -- drawing on both science and culture

The question is how such imaginative creativity relates to the human ingenuity which has been upheld as the primary means whereby humanity will navigate the desperate condition of the planet ([Thomas Homer-Dixon](#), *The Ingenuity Gap*, 2000). Where "science" has failed to enable more appropriate approaches to the complexity of global governance, will humanity in some way draw upon the resources of "culture", as has been the practice down the centuries? (*Relevance of Mythopoeic Insights to Global Challenges*, 2009). Significantly culture acknowledges despair in ways that science is unable to do. The interplay between hope and despair is then woven into a dramatic form which transcends both as a vehicle for meaning of another kind. Some indication of this is evident in the transformation of the former USSR (*Participative Democracy vs. Participative Drama: lessons in social transformation for international organizations from Gorbachev*, 1991).

Since the sense of despair is so intimately related to the sense of failure, it is vital to recognize how the experimental methods of research and development point to a need to enable healthy experimentation into "alternatives" in the psychosocial realm. This acceptance of failure, so central to the experimental method of science and technology, is to be contrasted with the systematic marginalization, deprecation, and even criminalization of it in the psychosocial realm. [Kenneth Boulding](#) was wont to make the point that he had no knowledge of any learning that had not been preceded or associated with failure. [Donald N. Michael](#) emphasized the associated importance of the "requirement to embrace error":

More bluntly, future-responsive societal learning makes it necessary for individuals and organizations to embrace error. It is the only way to ensure a shared self-consciousness about limited theory on the nature of social dynamics, about limited data for testing theory, and hence about our limited ability to control our situation well enough to be successful more often than not (*Learning to Plan and Planning to Learn*, 1997)

The value attached to the technology of "tempering" as a metaphor for the cultivation of the strength of the human spirit -- itself then compared to a sword -- raises the question whether despair might be usefully recognized as a means of appropriately cultivating that spirit. This would be consistent with the methods of many radical approaches to training. Does the hope so widely sought need to be tempered by despair as might be readily conceded by those who value "experience"?

In the quest for sufficiently radical new approaches, it is useful to stress the cognitive context appropriate to such exploration, as has been well-framed by [Arthur C. Clarke](#) -- most notably in the third of his **three "laws" of prediction**:

1. When a distinguished but elderly scientist states that something is possible, he is almost certainly right. When he states that something is impossible, he is very probably wrong.
2. The only way of discovering the limits of the possible is to venture a little way past them into the impossible.
3. **Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.**

The question is whether the current radical "re-imagining" of reality -- given even greater legitimacy by "big science" projects -- will offer imaginative guidance to transform the existential despair -- perhaps necessary to motivating the quest for transcendence of the inadequate cognitive forms of the past.

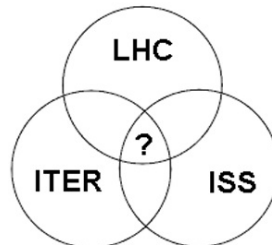
Three "big science" pointers challenge conventional frameworks and constitute powerful metaphors of a poorly articulated cognitive enterprise. Each involves a quite extraordinary investment into matters that are quite intangible and for reasons that are quite questionable at a time of global crisis. They are:

- Astrophysics and cosmology, suggesting (notably in the light of the [International Space Station](#)) possibilities with respect to the universe of knowledge. As a metaphor, the ISS raises the question of the cognitive nature of the quest to achieve and inhabit a stable "orbit" around the mundane:
  - *Beyond the Standard Model of Universal Awareness*, 2010
  - *Towards an Astrophysics of the Knowledge Universe? from astronautics to noonautics*, 2006
  - *Noonautics: four modes of travelling and navigating the knowledge universe?* 2006
  - *Being the Universe: a metaphoric frontier*, 1999
- ITER (aka the [International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor](#)), suggesting the possibility of cognitive fusion. As a metaphor, ITER raises the question of the cognitive significance of the quest for "off the wall" detachment from a container for essentially unimaginable dynamics -- in order to generate unlimited energy (which would destroy the container):
  - *Enactivating a Cognitive Fusion Reactor: Imaginal Transformation of Energy Resourcing (ITER-8)*, 2006
  - *Complementarity and Self-Reflexivity: between nuclear fusion and cognitive fusion*, 2006
  - *Cognitive Fusion through Myth and Symbol Making: archetypal dimensions*, 2006

- CERN [Large Hadron Collider](#), suggesting new insights into [nonduality](#). As a metaphor, the LHC raises questions about the cognitive quest to explore the insights derived from creating situations in which opposites clash under extraordinary condition, recalling the classic Taoist insight of Chuang-Tzu (*The Pivot*)
  - *Dynamic Interrelationship of Symbols of Coherent Experiential Representation of Nonduality*, 2008
  - *Epistemological panic in the face of nonduality: Does nothing matter?* 2010

The three initiatives are characterized by distinct (but related) fundamental geometries suggesting, as metaphors, an interlinked quest for a radical engagement with globality (*Metaphorical Geometry in Quest of Globality*, 2009). This is reinforced when the technical challenges of each, understood as a collective cognitive challenge in the spirit of [Robert Romanynshyn](#) (*Technology as Symptom and Dream*, 1989; *The Wounded Researcher: research with soul in mind*, 2007), are expressed succinctly as a classic [Venn diagram](#):

Use of Venn diagram to challenge adequacy of 3 "big science" initiatives



The possibility of deriving psychosocial benefits from the quality of thinking devoted to such initiatives is liable to be reinforced by ever increasing levels of despair as a consequence of unfulfilled hopes associated with the broken promises increasingly evident as characteristic of political processes -- exemplified by the promise of democracy. The trend is liable to be further reinforced by the evident challenges of information overload and the incapacity to benefit from the insight fragmented across disciplines, belief systems and languages. These are likely to accelerate a form of collapse of any coherence to the body of knowledge (*Emerging Memetic Singularity in the Global Knowledge Society*, 2009). It is evident in the degree to which it takes longer to articulate a response to information already received than to digest new information being currently received -- which may render irrelevant the response being articulated.

The prime characteristic of the emerging experience, necessarily evocative of further despair, is the challenge to both science and to religion as conventionally promoted. But whilst their formal, professional and institutional forms may be challenged, it is to be expected that the associated cognitive disciplines will acquire greater focus and relevance (*Happiness and Unhappiness through Naysign and Nescience: comprehending the essence of sustainability?* 2008). This is evident in the recognized contrast between "religion" and "spirituality" -- and the case made for [apophasis](#) or "unsaying" (*Being What You Want: problematic kataphatic identity vs. potential of apophatic identity?* 2008).

There would appear to be a strange emerging confluence between the sense of personal despair (and the option of suicide) and the sense of humanity being on "death row" (as noted above by Lovelock) -- combined with the concern with how a civilization might consider "dying with dignity" (once immortality is no longer an option).

## In quest of a "gateless way"

It is curious that both despair, as the sense of "pointlessness", as well as its much vaunted context of "globalization", should be framed using metaphors from geometry (*Metaphorical Geometry in Quest of Globality*, 2009). It is perhaps even more curious, from a psychoanalytical perspective, that together they should echo the fundamental reproductive process of the sperm in quest of the egg -- seeking an engagement with globality.

Arguably the radical nature of the "questions" to be asked -- for which "answers" are so desperately sought -- will call into question the nature of both question and answer, so readily assumed to be unquestionable. Their relationship is best called into question in use of the Zen *koan*. This possibility has been variously explored:

- *In Quest of Optimism Beyond the Edge: through avoidance of the answering process*, 2008
- *Clustering Questions of Existential Significance*, 2010
- *Cognitive Feel for Cognitive Catastrophes: Question Conformality*, 2006
- *Conformality of 7 WH-questions to 7 Elementary Catastrophes: an exploration of potential psychosocial implications*, 2006
- *Interrelating Cognitive Catastrophes in a Grail-chalice Proto-model: implications of WH-questions for self-reflexivity and dialogue*, 2006
- *Am I Question or Answer?*, 2006
- *In quest of radical coherence* (Post-crisis opportunities: Global Strategies Project), 1995
- *Development as Discontinuous Societal Learning: cyclic transformation of the global answer economy*, 1982

As with the challenge of other forms of polarity (including science vs culture, agreement vs disagreement, right vs left), the relation between hope and despair would seem to require radical reframing. Metaphorically they might be viewed as the pillars of a problematic cognitive gate. As with the myth of [Scylla and Charybdis](#), they are each fatally strange attractors in their own way -- the challenge being to navigate between them. The problematic challenge for governance is most evident in the polarity between "left" and "right". Each side is a source of hope to its own and despair to the other.

The pathway between them, transcending the polarity, has presumably been well-intuited in such works as *The Gateless Gate* -- a collection of 48 Zen *koans*. It is expressed succinctly in the Vedic adage *Neti Neti* (not this, not that). It would seem to involve a recognition of how:

- any reality "pill" gets "sugared" with hope -- with memetic consequences analogous to diabetes -- where a higher order of hope is called for.
- situations evoking a sense of despair conceal learning and reframing possibilities -- as is characteristic of many courageous initiatives under adverse circumstances

Provided that the argument is not misinterpreted to reinforce the hope-despair trap, the possibility may be well expressed by Paul Rogat Loeb (*The Impossible Will Take a Little While: A Citizen's Guide to Hope in a Time of Fear*):

Those who make us believe that anything's possible and fire our imagination over the long haul, are often the ones who have survived the bleakest of circumstances. The men and women who have every reason to despair, but don't, may have the most to teach us, not only about how to hold true to our beliefs, but about how such a life can bring about seemingly impossible social change.

It may indeed be both inappropriate and impossible to create environments in which the nature of such cognitive skills can be explored. There is an irony to the possibility that the "University of Earth" where these learnings will emerge is best understood as the dynamics of the "interesting times" to come -- whatever the case that might be made for creating such a context (*Towards a University of Earth?* 2010).

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