

Making Catastrophe ‘Possible’: Dupuy’s Theory of Enlightened Doomsaying

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English Abstract:

Jean-Pierre Dupuy takes on the challenge of making doomsaying possible again. He begins with examinations of current approaches to understanding catastrophe. Building on the works of Henri Bergson and Ivan Illich (among other figures), Dupuy offers a thought-provoking reconceptualization of catastrophe through a reconsideration of its temporal qualities and a correction of counterproductive tendencies in current systems of economic, social, and political arrangement. Concise and astute, Dupuy’s book has much to contribute to ongoing discussions of catastrophe.

Die Katastrophe ‚möglich‘ machen. Dupuys Theorie der aufgeklärten Weltuntergangsszenarien

Abstract:

Jean-Pierre Dupuy widmet sich der Herausforderung, Weltuntergangsszenarien wieder denkbar zu machen. Basierend auf den Werken von Henri Bergson und Ivan Illich (unter anderen) bietet Dupuy eine Rekonzeptualisierung der Katastrophe an, die zum Nachdenken anregt. Dazu analysiert er die zeitlichen Aspekte von Katastrophen und bietet eine Korrektur der kontraproduktiven Tendenzen der aktuellen wirtschaftlichen und gesellschaftlichen Ordnungssysteme. Dupuys Buch ist prägnant und scharfsinnig und kann viel zu den laufenden Diskussionen über Katastrophen beitragen.

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Dupuy, Jean-Pierre: *How to Think About Catastrophe: Toward a Theory of Enlightened Doomsaying*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2023. 165 pages, 45.24 EUR. ISBN: 978-1-6118-6436-6.

In his recently translated volume, Jean-Pierre Dupuy, professor emeritus of social and political philosophy at the École Polytechnique, offers a thrilling exploration of innovative ways of thinking about catastrophe. Over twelve chapters, he outlines and analyzes the counterproductive logics according to which modern industrialized societies operate in relation to their perceived destruction. Writing in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks (Dupuy’s book was published in the original French in 2002), the author seeks to buttress human beings’ chances of survival by developing a concept of catastrophe that takes into account the shortcomings of previous catastrophe models and the flawed systems of prevention they informed.

The book is divided into three parts: “Risk and Fatality,” “The Limits of Economic Rationality,” and “The Limits of Moral Philosophy and the Necessity of Metaphysics.” The first part contains five chapters whose titles range from “A Singular Point of View” to “Doomsaying on Trial;” the second part from “Precaution, Between Risk and Uncertainty” and “The Veil of Ignorance and Moral Luck” to “Knowing Is Not Believing.” The aim of these first two sections is to bring to the reader’s attention the defective nature of contemporary discourse about catastrophe and related subjects (e.g., prevention, risk management), and how this discourse serves only itself and its proponents rather than the public at large. He takes care to critique the centrality of economics and to isolate the temporal constraints economic rationalism exerts on thinking about catastrophe in the first place. The final section of the book lays out his solution to the problem, with chapters on “Memory of the Future,” “Predicting the Future in Order to Change It (Jonah vs. Jonas),” “Projected Time and Occurring Time,” and “The Rationality of

Doomsaying.” It is here that he unpacks the eminent temporality of catastrophe that he had originally produced in the introduction. As he puts it, “[a] catastrophe, as an event surging forth, suddenly arising out of nothingness, becomes possible in the course of ‘possibilizing’ itself” (p. xii). Hence his proposal for a metaphysics capable of grasping the elusive nature of catastrophe. Borrowing from Bergson, Dupuy asserts that catastrophes must be understood as “ineluctable” (p. 107) events, the prediction of which must be made “so that they will not come true” (p. 109). In so doing, one can utilize the metaphysics of “projected time,” with which one makes the past and future “twins” (p. 132), allowing human beings to anticipate distant (future) temporal events in the present. In other words, by adopting the proposed metaphysics, one can concretize the threat of catastrophe so as to motivate human action to prevent it.

Perhaps the most impactful section of Dupuy’s text comes in the fourth chapter, in which he explicates the replicating logic of technology. The chapter begins with a summary of his work with Henri Atlan and Moshe Koppel. As the author explains, they endeavored to describe the relationship between a totality and the individual elements that compose it. They were building on the approach posited by the Austrian-American scientist Heinz von Foerster, who sought to explain the phenomenon of counterproductivity, which Dupuy covers when talking about the ideas of Ivan Illich, an Austrian theologian and philosopher. Essentially, von Foerster states that “the more rigid the relations between individuals are, the more the behavior of the totality will appear to its members to be endowed with a dynamic of its own that eludes all efforts on their part to master it” (p. 37). The implications of this idea are enormous, not only for critiquing the dominating systems of economic, social, and political arrangement, but also for better understanding the enduring issue of human-caused catastrophe and the matter of culpability. Citing Hans Jonas and Martin Heidegger’s work on technology, and referring to economists like Adam Smith, John Maynard Keynes, and Friedrich von Hayek, Dupuy articulates the “self-fulfilling” (p. 40) nature of technology. Through a chain of mimetic mechanisms, technology comes to create systems of relations, indeed, whole worlds that are “wholly disconnected from reality” (p. 42). Immediately, one sees the practical application of Dupuy’s argument in contemporary discourses on catastrophe, notably as it pertains to climate change, in which technocrats rely heavily on the hypothetical technological

developments for responding to environmental degradation while continuing to pursue the growth objectives set out by the market system that have led to the destruction of the world climate in the first place. Dupuy's model offers a means to break the paralysis currently holding back human action against climate change.

I find little to critique in Dupuy's book. Though explanations become sometimes a touch less clarifying than I imagine the author would prefer, he typically recovers any loss in meaning through the regular recasting of the subject matter. If there is one thing that I would have liked to see better articulated, it would be the relationship between natural, human-caused, and hybrid catastrophes. Dupuy touches on these – though not the latter – distinctions at times, but they are usually in service to another point he is attempting to make. I believe his analysis would benefit from a thorough examination of these different kinds of catastrophes, whether to integrate them into his understanding or to reject them as artificial categories without any practical difference.

Jean-Pierre Dupuy's *How to Think About Catastrophe* offers an insightful and constructive means of thinking about catastrophe for the present age. His insights about the unique temporal quality of catastrophic events and the circular logic that manifests from it offer much to one's thinking about catastrophe, even decades after its original publication. For example, an enduring issue of catastrophe studies is when and how one can determine an event to be a catastrophe. At which point, in other words, can one utter: 'here is a catastrophe.' Based on current understandings, especially those which dominate in public policy discourses, such diagnoses operate more as a kind of biopsy, in that they too often arrive after the fact. Dupuy's insight that catastrophes generate their own unique temporal signature that breaks with common understanding of linear causality may offer some practical steps for engineering a new and actionable approach to temporally complex catastrophes such as those experienced as part of climate change.

Dupuy's volume covers a surprising amount of material in only 165 pages, which also makes it ideal for both newcomers and those have been long involved in the catastrophe discourse. Its application of counterintuitive ideas to practical examples helps to make the abstract

concrete. Erudite and accessible, Dupuy's book represents a welcome addition to the field of catastrophe studies.