Global Climate Change, the Unifying Crisis, and the Poetics of Despair

Carol Braun
Global Climate Change and Society
August 9, 2002
After eight weeks of studying global climate change and society, I feel pulled in what feel like two very different directions. On one side is the policy analyst’s pragmatic call for attention to ends. Let’s keep in mind what our goals are, after all, lest we pour money into a solid gridlock over how the climate is changing and how to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, while millions die in severe whether events whose effects could have been mitigated. For at least some of our policy decisions, the original source of the problem need not be identified before solutions are put into action. On the other side is the environmental ethicist’s dissatisfaction with the landscape he knows to be artificially produced—his conviction that origins and history contribute significantly to the value of an object or a landscape. Although the pulls from these two sides feel very different, I’m not convinced that they’re incompatible. But I’m left wondering which side should have a stronger influence over my decisions if I value highly both the pragmatics of a focus on ends and an intuitive grasp of the value of origins?

Sometimes pragmatic attention to ends seems to miss chunks of deeper value that elude most practical considerations. I am thinking of Brad Allenby’s dream of Earth Systems Engineering and Management. This is where attention to ends gets us, no? When we lose sight of the value of origins, we take the world into our hands and engineer it to fit our goals, and though we may reduce human suffering due to natural disasters, who’s to say we don’t impoverish the human condition by taking away from ourselves any sense of something transcendent, greater than us all. Where is humanity left if we have lost our sense of the transcendent, if our sole understanding of the good is as the good we engineer for ourselves. We are left in the woeful modern condition bemoaned famously by Nietzsche’s madman in *The Gay Science*. God is dead and we have killed
him; his blood is on our hands. We are left with a need to atone for what we have done, to salvage meaning through the invention of sacred games in attempt to fill the void left in God’s absence. And yet “is not the greatness of this deed too great for us?” Can we ever fill that void through our own self-conscious devices? Emotionally, can we handle taking our fate entirely into our own engineering hands? Surely this woeful, abandoned condition is someplace we’d rather not be.

Or is it? Amid fears of uncovering emotional perversion, I can’t help admitting to myself that there’s something inspiring about the predicament described by Nietzsche’s lucid madman. Isn’t it poetic, isn’t breathtakingly, tragically beautiful the way he talks of us sailing off into the cold darkness of outer space. “Are we not straying through an infinite nothing?” he asks, and, hearing him, I can only reel with pleasure and think “Oh what a splendidly hopeless predicament! Spinning into infinity, abandoned and alone on our pale blue dot in the middle of meaningless nothingness!” It is the same dark thrill I feel when reading Russell’s agnostic manifesto,

That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they are achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspirations, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the
temple of Man’s achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of the universe in ruins.

How is it that the news of our impending doom and our utter insignificance can be inspiring? Russell suggests an answer himself: “Only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair can the soul’s habitation henceforth be safely built.” Despair brings with it a peace, a lack of restlessness, a grounding upon which new things can be built. But what of value can we find to build on that grounding? A collective sense of despair and isolation is in itself a source of hope and unity within the isolated group. In the absence of God, our first instinct—my first instinct, at least—is to cling to each other.

Enter despair as pick-up line. “Dover Beach,” Matthew Arnold’s great poetic statement of the modern condition, knows exactly how channel collective despair into the instinct toward interpersonal union. I’ll include the whole thing, in case you haven’t read it recently. If nothing else, read the last two stanzas.

The sea is calm to-night.
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits;--on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.
Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!
Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanch’d land,
Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Ægean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Do I cheapen this impulse, calling it “despair as pick-up line”? Maybe it’s despair as a motive for genuinely better human interaction. It feels noble, but I worry that it’s somehow a cop-out, somehow artificial; that it weaves the gold of real existential crisis into the straw of basic lust, like an inverted Rumplestiltskin. It’s an impulse that feels somewhat like the kiss in the wagon on the way to the guillotine at the end of A Tale of Two Cities. “Ah, love, let us be true to one another! for the world around us is going all to hell and there is no God.” And so on. It’s an impulse that feels maybe just a notch above the soldier’s “Kiss me tonight, for I sail at break of day, and who knows whether I’ll ever come back home alive;” or, more simply, “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.”

But I digress. Or then again maybe I don’t. My strong emotional reaction to feelings of shared isolation raises issues about how emotional insights relate to rational knowledge. Should I trust my strong emotional reactions as noetic insights, or should I
treat them as misleading enemies to my perception of the truth? Maybe beauty illuminates truth, but maybe it could just as easily illuminate falsity to look like truth. Beauty be a great deceiver, and intense emotion can carry us away into unjustified belief. Isn’t that what propaganda’s all about? Maybe beauty is the wine we drink when we feel like forgetting our sober-minded values.

Intense emotions, whether they reveal truth or obscure it, dominate the way we think about global climate change. Over the past eight weeks, when we’ve talk about human interactions with the global climate, our discussions have been strongly influenced by our feelings of responsibility and our conviction that we’re messing things up and need to stop. In a world where the climate was changing not because of human influences but because the sun was getting brighter, we’d feel very different about global climate change. Our emotional approach to the problem would therefore be very different. When we worry over the problem of global climate change, when we chastise ourselves for our wastefulness and coddle ourselves in the pride of finally taking responsibility for our actions, we long for a poetic solution to the problem—a solution that meets not just our practical needs but also our emotional ones.