

## **Caring for the future? – a response to Rupert Read**

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The first sentence of Rupert Read's challenging and original paper (Read 2017) acknowledges that the greenhouse gases we've already unleashed commit us to grave new natural disasters, while in the concluding sentence he hopes that we may collectively wake up *before* we have committed our civilisation to breakdown.

Between these positions there need be no contradiction, provided that the inescapable new disasters don't amount, just so far, to breakdown. But then, when he writes of climate *chaos*, and of the prospective deaths of tens or even hundreds of millions, this logically crucial gap seems to narrow; and when he accepts that, in order to re-empower a lost sense of community cohesion, such disasters "need to be big enough to *not* leave an...intact social system", it is in danger of vanishing. So perhaps, and maybe without consciously intending to, Read is presenting us here with an argument which has certainly been made before – as, for instance, also unintentionally, by Clive Hamilton (2010) – to the effect that, if we can only admit anthropogenic climate chaos to be now inevitable, we may still at this eleventh hour spur ourselves into avoiding it. And that *is*, of course, (however temptingly) to contradict oneself.

I will return to this possibility, because it may account for things in the paper which otherwise I find inexplicable. Even if that were his underlying strategy, however, it wouldn't much detract from the power, passion and forthrightness with which Read actually confronts oncoming disaster. Rather than shirk it as unthinkable, the reaction of so many who offer to think about this, he tries to see beyond it to its deeper human meaning and to the anti-Hobbesian (as he hopes) values of altruism, mutual support and renewed social responsibility which it might help us retrieve.

This is admirable and vitally necessary work. I think he accepts too easily that the values which this transformative experience could reawaken in us would be familiar ones which we could readily recognise and welcome, and this goes, in my view, with his not fully admitting

the genuinely tragic nature of our plight. (All the disasters for which he cites analyses from the intriguing field of Disaster Studies were, or were perceived by their sufferers as, inflicted from without, by accident or enemies; climate disaster, on the other hand, we shall have brought wholly on ourselves, through destructive flaws inherent in great human strengths which Enlightenment rationality and technical creativity have deployed.) But I have engaged directly with Read on this matter in my own paper for this Special Issue, so will say no more about it here. Whichever of us is right, this part of his piece remains strong, cogent – and inspiring.

What I do want to address critically in this response is the argument in his Section 3, where, accepting that retrieved community must mean a greatly intensified concentration on survival in our local and particular circumstances, he nevertheless tries to find in this a new kind of impulse towards the universalism of protecting future generations for their own sake. This move turns on the claim that, if we care profoundly for our (actual or imaginary) children, as surely out of mere humanity we most of us do, then we must care profoundly for what they will care profoundly about – that is, in turn, their own children, for whom our transferred profound care will then again commit us to caring profoundly for *their* children – and so the caring relation iterates transitively onwards until we are caring, as profoundly as we care for our own children, for the  $n^{\text{th}}$  generation of our descendants multiplying incalculably across the Earth. Ordinary parental care is thus “enough to unleash a care that encompasses the entire human future time-wise and the entire globe space-wise”.

Now I entirely agree, and have contended in my own work (which Read references in generous terms) that our standardly-alleged liberal-contractual obligations of responsibility towards future generations amount only to a delusive shadow-stewardship; while sounding impressive (from a distance), these pseudo-obligations will never effectively constrain us from present actions grievously harmful to the interests of future people. This alternative argument for stewardship, however, doesn't take us *ad infinitum*, as Read explicitly claims, but – surely – *ad absurdum*. I do care, and profoundly, about my actual, living children. I don't, though, give a hoot whether or not *homo sapiens* as such, never mind my own descendants, will be around on the planet in 21,000 AD, nor, I very strongly suspect, do most of my readers in respect of their descendants. So the conclusion that reason compels us all to give vastly more than a hoot must be a *reductio*.

Read (in conversation) has argued that my not giving a hoot is a case of unjustified pure time preference, which should be overridden by ethical considerations. And for sure, if I bury (say) an unmarked canister of plutonium in my garden, I ought to feel just as worried about its potential effects on someone chancing to dig it up in twenty thousand years, as in twenty – here, my clear responsibility for future harm does seem to render the time-lapse irrelevant. But I could lead an ecologically blameless life, so that no action of mine did anything except increase the chances of humans being still around in 21,000 AD, and still not give a hoot about whether or not they were. My profound concern might be (as indeed it is) to avoid impoverishing biospheric life by my actions in the single lifetime which I have available, and might bear no relation at all to any envisaged distant-future state of the planet. For Read this would make me either unethical (despite my ecological virtues) in not caring properly for my children, or irrational. Since I take myself to be obviously (at least in this regard) neither, again that conclusion must stand as a *reductio*.

As such, it must show something to be amiss with the argument as set out. The problem seems to be with the hypothetical major premise. Where this goes wrong, I take it, is in the supposed transitivity of “profound caring”. If I care thus for my children, I *don't* necessarily care profoundly for people or objects about which they care profoundly, although I will (and perhaps by definition), in caring for my children, care profoundly *that* they care thus about whatever it is – so that I won't, for instance, mock or demean it nor as far as possible interfere with it, and if it is as near-future as a grandchild I will very probably also cherish it, for their and for its own sake. But over just one generation, my caring has already, as it were, taken a step back, and this seems wholly natural. Care, like concern and even interest, just fades as the generations flow on away from us. And well for us that it does – caring profoundly for one's own children, with all the joy, stress and anguish which go to fill the package, is quite exacting enough for one human life. Read's argument would require, by contrast, that we also feel the full intensity of parental concern for our grandchildren and great-grandchildren (to go no further), for whom actually and quite properly we feel only *grandparental* and (if we get there) *great-grand-parental* concern – and  $n^{\text{th}}$ -*great-grandparental* concern, on that trajectory, will have long become wholly indistinguishable from complete indifference. That, luckily, is how we are.

How could so acute a philosopher as Read have come up with so strange an argument? I can only surmise him to have been drawn, perhaps subconsciously, to the strategy on which I

remarked above – that of having the cake of honesty about inevitable climate chaos while nourishing oneself on the unextinguished option of last-minute avoidance. So we confront oncoming disaster by seeing through it to retrievable community, the renewed local focus of which *must* be made to unleash the kind of commitment to protecting the future by which disaster might even yet be forestalled. This is maybe impertinent speculation. But no small part of our inherently tragic human nature is our habitual yearning after such impossibilities.

For all that, Read’s instinct about these issues and their human significance seems to me to point, compellingly, in the right direction. The values we already have, or some painfully-winnowed version of them, are indeed enough if we can come home again to acting on them. We shall not learn what may be learnable from this oncoming disaster unless we come to recognise in practice what we have all along deeply known, that deliberately trashing the ecological bases for continuing human and other life on Earth, however (way beyond our capacity to know or care) the consequences pan out, robs *our lives here in the present* of kinds of meaning which we can’t do without, either for our own flourishing or for that of people for whom we do genuinely care profoundly. If climate tragedy teaches us that lesson, talking of it as a gift – as Read so bravely does – would then seem far from inappropriate.

## **References**

Hamilton, C. 2010. *Requiem for a Species*. London: Earthscan.

Read, R. 2017. “On preparing for the great gift of community that climate disasters can give us” *Global Discourse* 7:1.