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THE STONE

Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene

By **Roy Scranton** November 10, 2013 3:00 pm

The Stone is a forum for contemporary philosophers and other thinkers on issues both timely and timeless.

I.

Driving into Iraq just after the 2003 invasion felt like driving into the future. We convoyed all day, all night, past Army checkpoints and burned-out tanks, till in the blue dawn Baghdad rose from the desert like a vision of hell: Flames licked the bruised sky from the tops of refinery towers, cyclopean monuments bulged and leaned against the horizon, broken overpasses swooped and fell over ruined suburbs, bombed factories, and narrow ancient streets.

With “shock and awe,” our military had unleashed the end of the world on a city of six million — a city about the same size as Houston or Washington. The infrastructure was totaled: water, power, traffic, markets and security fell to anarchy and local rule. The city’s secular middle class was disappearing, squeezed out between gangsters, profiteers, fundamentalists and soldiers. The government was going down, walls were going up, tribal lines were being drawn, and brutal hierarchies savagely established.

I was a private in the United States Army. This strange, precarious world was my new home. If I survived.

Two and a half years later, safe and lazy back in Fort Sill, Okla., I thought I had

made it out. Then I watched on television as Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans. This time it was the weather that brought shock and awe, but I saw the same chaos and urban collapse I'd seen in Baghdad, the same failure of planning and the same tide of anarchy. The 82nd Airborne hit the ground, took over strategic points and patrolled streets now under de facto martial law. My unit was put on alert to prepare for riot control operations. The grim future I'd seen in Baghdad was coming home: not terrorism, not even W.M.D.'s, but a civilization in collapse, with a crippled infrastructure, unable to recuperate from shocks to its system.

And today, with recovery still going on more than a year after Sandy and many critics arguing that the Eastern seaboard is no more prepared for a huge weather event than we were last November, it's clear that future's not going away.

This March, Admiral Samuel J. Locklear III, the commander of the United States Pacific Command, told security and foreign policy specialists in Cambridge, Mass., that global climate change was the greatest threat the United States faced — more dangerous than terrorism, Chinese hackers and North Korean nuclear missiles. Upheaval from increased temperatures, rising seas and radical destabilization “is probably the most likely thing that is going to happen...” he said, “that will cripple the security environment, probably more likely than the other scenarios we all often talk about.”

Locklear's not alone. Tom Donilon, the national security adviser, said much the same thing in April, speaking to an audience at Columbia's new Center on Global Energy Policy. James Clapper, director of national intelligence, told the Senate in March that “Extreme weather events (floods, droughts, heat waves) will increasingly disrupt food and energy markets, exacerbating state weakness, forcing human migrations, and triggering riots, civil disobedience, and vandalism.”

On the civilian side, the World Bank's recent report, “Turn Down the Heat: Climate Extremes, Regional Impacts, and the Case for Resilience,” offers a dire prognosis for the effects of global warming, which climatologists now predict will raise global temperatures by 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit within a generation and 7.2 degrees Fahrenheit within 90 years. Projections from researchers at the University

of Hawaii find us dealing with “historically unprecedented” climates as soon as 2047. The climate scientist James Hansen, formerly with NASA, has argued that we face an “apocalyptic” future. This grim view is seconded by researchers worldwide, including Anders Levermann, Paul and Anne Ehrlich, Lonnie Thompson and many, many, many others.

This chorus of Jeremiahs predicts a radically transformed global climate forcing widespread upheaval — not possibly, not potentially, but *inevitably*. We have passed the point of no return. From the point of view of policy experts, climate scientists and national security officials, the question is no longer whether global warming exists or how we might stop it, but how we are going to deal with it.

II.

There’s a word for this new era we live in: the Anthropocene. This term, taken up by geologists, pondered by intellectuals and discussed in the pages of publications such as *The Economist* and the *The New York Times*, represents the idea that we have entered a new epoch in Earth’s geological history, one characterized by the arrival of the human species as a geological force. The biologist Eugene F. Stoermer and the Nobel-Prize-winning chemist Paul Crutzen advanced the term in 2000, and it has steadily gained acceptance as evidence has increasingly mounted that the changes wrought by global warming will affect not just the world’s climate and biological diversity, but its very geology — and not just for a few centuries, but for millennia. The geophysicist David Archer’s 2009 book, “*The Long Thaw: How Humans are Changing the Next 100,000 Years of Earth’s Climate*,” lays out a clear and concise argument for how huge concentrations of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and melting ice will radically transform the planet, beyond freak storms and warmer summers, beyond any foreseeable future.

The Stratigraphy Commission of the Geological Society of London — the scientists responsible for pinning the “golden spikes” that demarcate geological epochs such as the Pliocene, Pleistocene, and Holocene — have adopted the Anthropocene as a term deserving further consideration, “significant on the scale

of Earth history.” Working groups are discussing what level of geological time-scale it might be (an “epoch” like the Holocene, or merely an “age” like the Calabrian), and at what date we might say it began. The beginning of the Great Acceleration, in the middle of the 20th century? The beginning of the Industrial Revolution, around 1800? The advent of agriculture?

The challenge the Anthropocene poses is a challenge not just to national security, to food and energy markets, or to our “way of life” — though these challenges are all real, profound, and inescapable. The greatest challenge the Anthropocene poses may be to our sense of what it means to be human. Within 100 years — within three to five generations — we will face average temperatures 7 degrees Fahrenheit higher than today, rising seas at least three to 10 feet higher, and worldwide shifts in crop belts, growing seasons and population centers. Within a thousand years, unless we stop emitting greenhouse gases wholesale right now, humans will be living in a climate the Earth hasn’t seen since the Pliocene, three million years ago, when oceans were *75 feet* higher than they are today. We face the imminent collapse of the agricultural, shipping and energy networks upon which the global economy depends, a large-scale die-off in the biosphere that’s already well on its way, and our own possible extinction. If homo sapiens (or some genetically modified variant) survives the next millenniums, it will be survival in a world unrecognizably different from the one we have inhabited.

Geological time scales, civilizational collapse and species extinction give rise to profound problems that humanities scholars and academic philosophers, with their taste for fine-grained analysis, esoteric debates and archival marginalia, might seem remarkably ill suited to address. After all, how will thinking about Kant help us trap carbon dioxide? Can arguments between object-oriented ontology and historical materialism protect honeybees from colony collapse disorder? Are ancient Greek philosophers, medieval theologians, and contemporary metaphysicians going to keep Bangladesh from being inundated by rising oceans?

Of course not. But the biggest problems the Anthropocene poses are precisely those that have always been at the root of humanistic and philosophical questioning: “What does it mean to be human?” and “What does it mean to live?”

In the epoch of the Anthropocene, the question of individual mortality — “What does *my life* mean in the face of death?” — is universalized and framed in scales that boggle the imagination. What does human existence mean against 100,000 years of climate change? What does one life mean in the face of species death or the collapse of global civilization? How do we make meaningful choices in the shadow of our inevitable end?

These questions have no logical or empirical answers. They are philosophical problems *par excellence*. Many thinkers, including Cicero, Montaigne, Karl Jaspers, and The Stone’s own Simon Critchley, have argued that studying philosophy is learning how to die. If that’s true, then we have entered humanity’s most philosophical age — for this is precisely the problem of the Anthropocene. The rub is that now we have to learn how to die not as individuals, but as a civilization.

III.

Learning how to die isn’t easy. In Iraq, at the beginning, I was terrified by the idea. Baghdad seemed incredibly dangerous, even though statistically I was pretty safe. We got shot at and mortared, and I.E.D.’s laced every highway, but I had good armor, we had a great medic, and we were part of the most powerful military the world had ever seen. The odds were good I would come home. Maybe wounded, but probably alive. Every day I went out on mission, though, I looked down the barrel of the future and saw a dark, empty hole.

“For the soldier death is the future, the future his profession assigns him,” wrote Simone Weil in her remarkable meditation on war, “The Iliad or the Poem of Force.” “Yet the idea of man’s having death for a future is abhorrent to nature. Once the experience of war makes visible the possibility of death that lies locked up in each moment, our thoughts cannot travel from one day to the next without meeting death’s face.” That was the face I saw in the mirror, and its gaze nearly paralyzed me.

I found my way forward through an 18th-century Samurai manual, Yamamoto

Tsunetomo's "Hagakure," which commanded: "Meditation on inevitable death should be performed daily." Instead of fearing my end, I owned it. Every morning, after doing maintenance on my Humvee, I'd imagine getting blown up by an I.E.D., shot by a sniper, burned to death, run over by a tank, torn apart by dogs, captured and beheaded, and succumbing to dysentery. Then, before we rolled out through the gate, I'd tell myself that I didn't need to worry, because I was already dead. The only thing that mattered was that I did my best to make sure everyone else came back alive. "If by setting one's heart right every morning and evening, one is able to live as though his body were already dead," wrote Tsunetomo, "he gains freedom in the Way."

I got through my tour in Iraq one day at a time, meditating each morning on my inevitable end. When I left Iraq and came back stateside, I thought I'd left that future behind. Then I saw it come home in the chaos that was unleashed after Katrina hit New Orleans. And then I saw it again when Sandy battered New York and New Jersey: Government agencies failed to move quickly enough, and volunteer groups like Team Rubicon had to step in to manage disaster relief.

Now, when I look into our future — into the Anthropocene — I see water rising up to wash out lower Manhattan. I see food riots, hurricanes, and climate refugees. I see 82nd Airborne soldiers shooting looters. I see grid failure, wrecked harbors, Fukushima waste, and plagues. I see Baghdad. I see the Rockaways. I see a strange, precarious world.

Our new home.

The human psyche naturally rebels against the idea of its end. Likewise, civilizations have throughout history marched blindly toward disaster, because humans are wired to believe that tomorrow will be much like today — it is unnatural for us to think that this way of life, this present moment, this order of things is not stable and permanent. Across the world today, our actions testify to our belief that we can go on like this forever, burning oil, poisoning the seas, killing off other species, pumping carbon into the air, ignoring the ominous silence of our coal mine canaries in favor of the unending robotic tweets of our new digital

imaginarium. Yet the reality of global climate change is going to keep intruding on our fantasies of perpetual growth, permanent innovation and endless energy, just as the reality of mortality shocks our casual faith in permanence.

The biggest problem climate change poses isn't how the Department of Defense should plan for resource wars, or how we should put up sea walls to protect Alphabet City, or when we should evacuate Hoboken. It won't be addressed by buying a Prius, signing a treaty, or turning off the air-conditioning. The biggest problem we face is a philosophical one: understanding that this civilization is *already dead*. The sooner we confront this problem, and the sooner we realize there's nothing we can do to save ourselves, the sooner we can get down to the hard work of adapting, with mortal humility, to our new reality.

The choice is a clear one. We can continue acting as if tomorrow will be just like yesterday, growing less and less prepared for each new disaster as it comes, and more and more desperately invested in a life we can't sustain. Or we can learn to see each day as the death of what came before, freeing ourselves to deal with whatever problems the present offers without attachment or fear.

If we want to learn to live in the Anthropocene, we must first learn how to die.

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Correction: November 26, 2013

An earlier version of this article incorrectly described the origin of the word "anthropocene." The term was not coined in 2002 by Paul Crutzen; it has been in use since the 1980s, and was introduced into scientific discussion by Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2000.

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