

Preface

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

(TS Eliot¹)

Myself when young did eagerly frequent
Doctor and Saint, and heard great Argument
About it and about: but evermore
Came out by the same Door as in I went.

(Omar the Tentmaker²)

This book has its origins in a handful of questions and perceptions which has been niggling me since the publication in 2003 of *Deep Futures*,³ my attempt to equip myself with an evidence-informed set of beliefs—working hypotheses—about humanity’s prospects for surviving, and surviving well, through the centuries and millennia ahead.

Writing *Deep Futures* cheered me up no end. While present knowledge condemns our species to eventual extinction in one way or another, I concluded that we could well have a long Indian summer before us, provided that we keep learning,

¹ From his *Little Gidding* (Number Four of the ‘Four Quartets’.) <http://www.tristan.icom43.net/quartets/gidding.html> (Accessed 19 Jan 2011).

² Edward FitzGerald, *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, 1859, http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/o/omar_khayyam/o54r/ (Accessed 19 Jan 2011).

³ Cocks, D., 2003, *Deep Futures: Our Prospects for Survival*, University of New South Wales Press and McGill University Press, Sydney.

stay lucky and don't turn what is promising to be a particularly difficult century into a full-blown catastrophe.

I was seeing the twenty-first century as one where the people of the world might, through hard work, shrink the overarching problems of war, poverty, injustice, environmental degradation and sociopathy; or, more positively, creep up on the goals of peace, material well-being, social justice, environmental protection and sociality (goodwill). The challenge, as I saw it then, could be expressed in terms of how to most effectively improve quality of life for most people. However, the perspective I have come to hold as I write the present book is, not quite that humanity is fighting for survival, but, plausibly, *we are threatened with a large and rapid drop in quality of life (e.g. fear and hunger) across the world; and that humanity's primary task for the foreseeable future should be cast in terms of defending the status quo, not improving on it.* More colloquially, our challenge is one of sandbagging the levees, not irrigating the desert.

There is nothing particularly novel about my updated perspective; perhaps I am just catching up. The world is awash with premonitions that global society is on the brink of being massively disrupted by global-scale processes associated with, for example, global warming and the depletion of fossil fuel deposits. There is probably general agreement on the need for international cooperation to address such global-scale problems, and recognition that achieving such cooperation is always difficult. Working from within this mainstream world view—call it *Interventionism*—there are thousands of policy analysts and scientists, mostly from first world countries, documenting and modelling global change—economic, social and environmental—and developing social and material technologies for responding to the threats and opportunities it presents.

My own response to global-scale problems is somewhat different. As when writing *Deep Futures*, my humanistic (humanitarian) starting point is a wish to contribute to the *achievement of high quality of life for most people into the indefinite future*, the goal I call *quality survival*. But I do not want to write yet another treatise on how to set up a carbon trading scheme or recycle water or, indeed, any aspect of the mechanics of tackling the world's many problems; I want to produce a philosophy, a way of looking at things, not a recipe book. My plan is to understand what is happening, not to suggest solutions.

My starting point is to build up an historical and prehistorical understanding of how humanity and the human ecosystem came to be as they are (Chaps. 1, 2, 3, and 4) and, from there, in Chap. 5, explore how people of different temperaments might respond to a suggestion, a diagnosis rather than an assertion, that a global-scale *Overshoot Crisis* has already begun. A system is in *crisis* when it is moving quickly towards a highly uncertain future. It is in *overshoot* when one or more processes of cumulative change appear to be approaching limits (sometimes called tipping points) where a major reorganisation could well be triggered. My scenario of an *Overshoot Crisis* rests on the perception that the converging effects of four momentous human-made trends—towards overpopulation, global overheating, overextraction (of resources) and over-connectedness⁴ between nodes of activity, e.g. an increasingly

⁴Connectivity is the ability of one element in a network to influence another.

interdependent world economy—will, unless actively averted, impact pervasively on quality of life via destructuring processes such as deurbanisation (abandoned cities), deindustrialisation (shattered economies), depopulation (megadeaths), and deglobalisation (e.g. currency wipe-outs, declining trade, declining internationalism). That is, an Overshoot Crisis could turn into an *Overshoot Catastrophe*.

In addition to the conventional wisdom of Interventionism in some form or other, Chap. 5 discusses tough-minded *Empiricism* and tender-minded *Reconstructionism* as other legitimate ways of responding to the diagnosis of an Overshoot Crisis. Empiricists have a ‘wait-and-see’ perspective while Reconstructionists have, metaphorically, a ‘Noah’s Ark’ perspective. More directly, *Reconstructionism* is the belief that it is already too late to stop a massive disorganisation and simplification of the human ecosystem. As of now, we are committed to passing through a dystopic bottleneck and the Reconstructionist suggestion is that we should be concentrating on how we might best help our great-grandchildren (or beyond?) regain some quality of life as they emerge on the other side where, if they are lucky, they will toil their days away in agricultural villages. Because Reconstructionism is all too easily labelled as defeatist and sanctimoniously dismissed, I have felt it useful to explore the puzzles it throws up. As for the Empiricists’ perspective, it suffers from being too easily hijacked by vested interests wanting to use caution as an excuse for inaction.

Assuming that a global-scale Overshoot Crisis is indeed coming into view, how realistic is it to believe, as many mainstream Interventionists do, that global society can and will, rationally and comprehensively, intervene to forestall a large and rapid drop, a plunge, in quality of life across the world? My answer is ‘quite unrealistic’. All that can be hoped for is a collation of uncoordinated interventions by various protagonists—from international organisations to individuals—each acting within their own sphere of influence to ‘fix’ some facet of the total problematic as they see it.

There are two elephantine reasons why the Interventionist perspective has to be judged naïve, both so fundamentally at odds with the way problem-solving is conceptualised in ‘enlightened’ societies that neither can be readily admitted to the public consciousness. First, in no sense is there a collective ‘We’, united around achieving or defending quality survival as a primary task. Next, even if there were, the Overshoot Crisis has been generated from within the human ecosystem, this being what scientists call a *complex dynamic system*. That label means, first, that the speed, size and duration of the Overshoot Crisis cannot be predicted and, second, that humanity’s knowledge of how such systems work is insufficient to allow them to be confidently steered in some preferred direction, such as defending global quality of life. I will return to these two difficulties presently.

Chapter 5 concludes that while humans will survive their self-made Overshoot Crisis, it won’t be because of any remarkable capacity to adapt to major challenges in ways that protect quality of life. It will be because the Crisis wasn’t as bad as some thought it might have been; that is, the species had not been really tested. Or, it will be that while the Crisis was highly destructive of quality of life for most, it spat out a post-bottleneck population which, scattered and much-reduced, retained sufficient social and material technologies to begin rebuilding stable sedentary societies and improving quality of life once again.

This conclusion will be unwelcome to many people, particularly those with an exaggerated view of humanity's ability to know its goals and to manage itself and the world to achieve them. It has not been done deliberately, but we need to acknowledge that humanity has brought a crisis on itself, one which it is not yet ready to deal with. We are confronted with a knot of spillover problems of a type which we have not yet learned how to avoid, much less solve. This is despite the fact that our material and mental capabilities have increased sharply in the last 3,000 years. While every generation has its world view(s), recent generations have acquired a dramatically improved understanding—plausible, coherent, and naturalistic—of most (?) of the world's physical, biological, social and psychological processes. Each year we know a little more. Strange as it sounds, it is an enormous achievement of consciousness to recognise that, as a species, we face great problems which are of our own making and which, for the moment, we are unable to solve.

It is not judgmental to recognise that, metaphorically, *H. sapiens* is an adolescent species whose emotional development has been slower than its cognitive development, e.g. not yet having learned to empathise and collaborate with others, and being, on occasions, thoughtlessly cruel or abusive; impulsive; still unduly bewitched by material technology; unconcerned about the species' life expectancy, or even with planning life a few generations into the future. Indeed, likening the life story of the human species to the life of a human individual is a rich enough metaphor (an allegory perhaps) to not only suggest ways of understanding where we have arrived, but also alternative directions we might take in search of enhanced quality of life. For example, taking a whole-of-life perspective might lead the species to conclude that what is now happening, namely an Overshoot Crisis, is no more and no less than the next challenge to be survived, as best we can, so that we might return to constructing quality lives for the lineage.

Conversely, thinking of the species as living out a life story offers the individual an insight into his/her own identity, namely, as someone playing a role in their species' Overshoot Crisis, e.g. as an Empiricist, an Interventionist, a Reconstructionist, a pawn, an opportunist; and so on.

Just as any individual's life story takes shape within the 'life story' of its species, so is the species' life story embedded in the successively larger and longer 'life stories' of the ecosphere (Earth's surface film of plants and animals and their environments), the planet and the cosmos. Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4 attempt to build up a basic awareness—I term it *Eco-awareness*—of how well-recognised evolutionary and ecological processes (physical, biological and cultural) have given rise to a temporal sequence of increasingly complex energy-degrading systems, from the early universe to today's worldwide human ecosystem.

In Chap. 6, 'Ecohumanism and Other Stories', I argue that an Eco-awareness of the processes underlying the *Story of Global Overshoot* provides an initial framework and a succinct language for formulating and debating what-to-do responses to the perception of Overshoot. Building on this conclusion, I proffer the philosophy of *Ecohumanism*—a bundling of Eco-awareness and the Quality Survival goal—as a useful *tool* for thinking about the Global Overshoot Crisis. Definitionally, humanism is a philosophy which puts human progress at its centre, and Ecohumanism is a

humanism which is informed by an extended awareness of ecosphere processes, both ecological and evolutionary. Metaphorically, Ecohumanism views global society as being like an evolving ecosystem in which a plethora of human interest groups are the ‘virtual species’ and the social and material technologies these groups repeatedly create are the ‘mutations’ which selectively change the quality-survival prospects of the adapting groups.

The value of Ecohumanism to those confronting Global Overshoot cannot be ‘proved’, but it can be demonstrated in various ways, and this is what Chap. 6 essays. It shows how Eco-awareness can be helpful, for example, in shaping attitudes towards threatening trends (like population growth); or in the identification of issues which need to be widely debated, e.g. choice of an overarching societal goal.

Further, the chapter’s section on ‘Practical Ecohumanism’, presents a sample of indicative guidelines to bear in mind when addressing, not the proximate causes (overpopulation, overheating, overconnectedness, overextraction) of the Overshoot Crisis, but several of its underlying causes (root causes) as these emerge from the Story. One of these is the aforementioned difficulty which human groups have in cooperating for their common good, what I call the *virtual-species problem*. The other is the *complexity problem*, a recognition that complex situations, those characterised by networks of causes rather than simple sequential causes, can only be steered adaptively, i.e. by some strategy of incremental and continuously monitored trial-and-adjust operations.

The question of what-to-do in the face of complexity is not going to be answered by simply subscribing to some abductively plausible ‘origin’ story leading up to Global Overshoot. Nevertheless, the choice of what strategies to trial and, equally, to avoid trialling, does depend on the way in which the past is understood—an understanding which recognises the role of luck, the role of natural events, the role of morality, the limits of reason, the arbitrary nature of emotions, what worked, what failed....The list goes on. There is a presumption here that while no strategic choice can ever be more than intuitive, that intuition can only be improved by a conscious elaboration of the principles and insights one would like to see influencing that choice. For the moment this is the pragmatic best we can do about complexity.

I close my case for Ecohumanism by recapitulating some of the qualities which I believe are likely, on balance, to make people *emotionally* inclined to accept it as a platform from which to contemplate the possibility of global overshoot. These include: an understanding of cultural differences; naturalism; a nonreligious spirituality; inclusiveness; an opportunity for personal responsibility; a flexible and evolving narrative; an acceptance of the species’ strengths and weaknesses; and an understanding of death. Ecohumanism is proclaiming an origin story, which, not being exclusive to any national or religious group, and which, because it does include all people at all times, has the emotional pull to bind people everywhere into an empathising global family or tribe. It is a story which, of itself, can help individuals meet three of their fundamental quality-of-life needs simultaneously—for belonging, for meaning and for identity.

Ecohumanism is an invitation to outgrow belief in such shackles as ‘the iron laws of history’ or ‘the fixity of human nature’. Or, more generally, it is an invitation to

question adherence to ‘truths’ and authoritarian behavioural rules inherited from earlier times, sometimes from earlier origin myths. The old stories do not have to be abandoned, simply recognised as having had a function at a particular moment in cultural history.

Freed from the dogmatism and fixedness of traditional origin stories and world views, the Ecohumanist doctrine being developed in this book, based as it is on an appreciation of scientific method, is always open to both extension and reinterpretation. Thus, each generation has to reinterpret history, or, more generally, the knowledge stock, in terms and concepts that are relevant to the time; and as each generation continues to learn in its own way, its new knowledge will become part of the story its descendants will live by and learn from.

So, have I, as Omar Khayyam put it, come out by the same door as in I went? Or, have I, as TS Eliot put it, returned from my exploring with a clearer view of where I started? I certainly have not found practicable cause and effect mechanisms which will protect or enhance global quality of life. Some will judge this unfortunate in a milieu where most people feel they are unable to discuss a problem publicly unless they have a solution to offer. There is every prospect that the people of the world are going to struggle and suffer enormously over coming decades. Perhaps that can and will be avoided, or perhaps it just won’t happen. For those of us who are aware of these ‘scenario’ futures, several questions arise. Do I care? Which scenario will I adopt as my working assumption? Do I want to help protect global quality of life? How can I best help?

I find the prospect of plunging quality of life, worldwide, very plausible and very distressing but doubt if there is anything practical I can do. What I do know is that writing this book has increased my understanding of and empathy with my own species and sharpened my sense of the joy and pain of living. I very much want this species to seek and find quality survival. We may be about to endure a great setback but, if so, we will surely rise like the phoenix. And I realise that we will rise that much more easily if we can protect the knowledge stock that has been accumulating, with ups and downs, for several hundred thousand years. Nor do we want to have to struggle for centuries or millennia to regain the heights of joy and pain that a great poetic consciousness can express⁵:

Once and once only for
each thing-then no more.

For us as well. Once.
Then no more... ever.

But to have been as one,
though but the once,
with this world,
never can be undone.

Canberra, Australia

Doug Cocks

⁵ Rainer Maria Rilke (from his Ninth Duino Elegy) http://www.hunterarchive.com/files/Poetry/Elegies/Duino_Elegies.html (Accessed 19 Jan 2011).

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Contemplating the World's Converging Problems

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