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How Should We Look at the Chances of Climate Catastrophe?

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Is it ironic or predictable that Harvard's President, Drew Faust, would enter into a Faustian bargain over climate change and the University's investments in carbon-intensive companies?

Let's suppose that, by pure chance, it turns out that there is a 90% probability that the climate denier campaign paid for or organized by those companies is correct – that human caused climate disruption is not occurring (or if it is it is inconsequential). History shows that the consensus of several thousand honest scientists working in any area *can* be dead wrong (near universal opposition to Wegener's idea of continental drift was an example in my lifetime).

Suppose there were only a 10% probability that business as usual would bring about global climate disruption sufficient to cause the deaths of billions and misery for survivors. What, if anything, should or would society do about it?

Looking at how other risks are handled can give us a clue. Your odds of having a house fire are way under 1%, and those of having your house burn down entirely are less than one in a hundred thousand. Yet most people choose to have fire insurance. The lifetime odds of dying in an airplane accident are about one in five thousand, yet many people are afraid of flying and/or take out trip life insurance.¹

The chances you will die in a car accident are very much smaller than that one-in-ten risk of civilization ending, and the lifetime risk of just being in an accident is only about twice that of our hypothetical collapse (and in the last case states often *require* insurance for drivers).

It seems fair to say, then, that people are accustomed to taking out insurance against a variety of risks. On the other hand, we also know that subjective views of risk do not match the actual odds very well. People worry about being in airplanes, when cars are roughly fifty times as likely to kill them.

¹ <http://nyti.ms/1qZNddl>

One factor in this is familiarity. Human beings in developed nations see and use cars day in and day out, and traveling in wheeled vehicles goes back some 5000 years to the dawn of history. Rolling over solid ground seems perfectly natural to great apes who have walked on solid ground for millions of years. Air travel is only a century or so old, and doubtless seems natural to birds. But even as an instrument-rated multi-engine pilot I often think about the fact that only a thin layer of aluminum or composite separates me from a several mile drop when I'm flying. I rarely consider the odds of a head-on collision when I'm driving.

Of course, none of us is personally familiar with global climate catastrophes, and relatively few people are familiar with the literature dealing with societal collapses. In addition, with educational systems badly broken and the culture gap (that between the total cultural information possessed by human societies and the knowledge of an average individual) widening, relatively few people even know the basics of where their food comes from, how the human life-support systems of the biosphere work, or why society should be increasingly concerned by global toxification.

Lack of a sense of urgency and deep, pervasive ignorance can partially explain why even universities are failing to take significant action to help avoid disaster (the other explanations are meat for social psychologists, but it is obvious that the enormous human capacity for rationalization rather than acknowledging inconvenient facts and the implications of those facts would be at the top of their list).

This failure to act and resort to rationalization is exemplified by the Faustian bargain with big coal and big oil made by Harvard's President Faust, author of brilliant historical analyses of the antebellum South and the Civil War period.² Rather than spearheading the movement to have her university divest from fossil fuel stocks, stocks that could rapidly lose their value if society awakes to its peril, Faust allowed a meretricious statement to be issued in her name, and like so many others temporized and bowed to political pressure.

Harvard, the "Stanford of the East," is a great university. But in a nation where many politicians are both pig-ignorant and afraid of so called "intellectual elites" – that is, people who engage in rational debate and sober consideration of evidence on matters of public policy – public support for education has fallen far beyond escalating need, and great universities must bow and scrape for funds. Educational leaders feel obliged, by financial need and the necessity they feel to please rich donors, to continue to make investments in unethical companies whose lethal policies and attitudes have been amply documented.³

When they are most needed to be leaders for society, universities are increasingly becoming followers of, and suppliers of narrowly trained cogs for, the corporate-dominated oligarchies that

² Her book, "This Republic of Suffering" (<http://amzn.to/QnuN9A>) was one of the most thought-provoking I have ever read..

³ My own favorite, of course, can be found at <http://bit.ly/1hYOCj1>

now increasingly control rich nations. That is tragic, for those nations that not long ago appeared on the road to truly representative governments, are quite possibly now being doomed to disappear.

It is fortunate that some university administrators, faculty members, students, and alumni are still trying to supply the bottom-up leadership so desperately needed to take out insurance against society sliding over the precipice. The contrast between Jim Hansen, until recently the U.S. government's top climate scientist, going to jail in protest over the fossil fuel industry, and Harvard's Drew Faust kowtowing to it, is stunning indeed.

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