*[This is very much a work in progress and I invite you to help me to think through the ideas under development here. Some of the Polanyi material will be familiar to those of you who attended my presentation last May, “A Defense of Reading at the End of the World,” but it has been revised and I hope it will be productive to return to it in this different context and to have it in writing.]*

***Denying Reality: A Polanyian Theory of the Contemporary Crisis***

Abstract: The present global environmental situation seems to be one of crisis, a failure to secure a human future. Is this fundamentally a failure of knowledge or of affect (care, love)? I use Michael Polanyi’s conceptions of (tacit) knowledge, reality, and discovery to argue that understanding our present situation involves appeal to conditions that are not only empirical but normative and, in some sense, religious—as indicated by the growing discourse of “climate apocalypse”—and that it makes sense to think of this normative dimension as part of the reality of our situation (and that a failure of affect might profitably be conceived as a failure to recognize some reality). I also want to propose, using Polanyi's ideas of inquiry and research, that that an adequate comprehension of that situation demands a disciplined practice of attention and integration—not only of its practical components (environmental, psychological, political etc.) but also art, literature and other cultural productions which both refer to and constitute “our humanity,” and especially of those works that reflect the deep and threatening tensions within the human, from *Moby-Dick*to the art of Lee Bontecou. Finally, I suggest that the failure to attend to our humanity as a historical and normatively conditioned reality is itself an integral aspect of the crisis.

Understanding, as distinct from having correct information and scientific knowledge, is a complicated process which never produces unequivocal results. It is an unending activity by which, in constant change and variation, we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality, that is, try to be at home in the world.

Hannah Arendt, “Understanding and Politics,” in *Essays in Understanding*, 307-8

In September, the *New Yorker* published an article by Jonathan Franzen with the tagline “The climate apocalypse is coming. To prepare for it we need to admit that we can’t prevent it.”[[1]](#footnote-2)

Franzen’s article reflects a growing tendency to refer to the current situation of global warming and environmental degradation as “apocalyptic.” Most who use this term likely intend it in the secular colloquial sense of a large-scale future catastrophe or “the end of the world,” the extinction of human life. “Climate Apocalypse” now has a Wikipedia page which defines the phrase as “permanent global catastrophe, ecological collapse and the los[s] of most species, general misery in a new environment which is hostile to human life, and all the indirect chaos and problems which result [from] these changes.”[[2]](#footnote-3) It may also reflect a sense of inevitability, perhaps in contrast to “climate emergency” (though many also speak of “averting,” “preventing,” or “avoiding” the climate apocalypse[[3]](#footnote-4)).

But the word *apocalypse* also, of course, has its origins in religious discourse and a deep and lengthy history within the religious imagination, and much of the current discourse suggests that the implications go deeper than identifying the potentially catastrophic character of our situation. Apocalypse would seem not only to describe a literal (possible) state of affairs but to serve as a characterization of an already-present “spiritual” reality. In this paper, I want to lay the philosophical foundations for considering what it means to consider our present situation as “apocalyptic,” and to suggest that this characterization and the reflection upon it refers us to certain conditions of human life which are not only empirical but normative.

In *The Environmental Imagination,* Lawrence Buell notes that we grasp “the order of nature” through what he calls “master metaphors”—including among others “an economy..., a chain or scale of being, a balance, a web, an organism, a mind, a flux, a machine”—and that “[w]e cannot begin to talk or even think of the nature of nature without resorting to [such metaphors], whether or not we believe they are true; and our choice of metaphors can have major consequences” (280-1). “Apocalypse” appears as another such metaphor or trope in our more recent attempts to grasp what is going on with nature, and with humanity in relation to it.

Buell’s formulation implies, whether he intends so or not, a Kantian picture in which there is some unknowable “thing in itself” that is the real “nature of nature” and that all of these “metaphors” are mediations and projections—projections which are to some degree voluntary, a “choice,” which we can discard in favor of metaphors with more desirable consequences. Another ecocritic, Greg Garrard, makes this explicit when he characterizes ecocriticism as reading environmentally-concerned literature “as rhetoric”[[4]](#footnote-5); the tropes of “wilderness” or “apocalypse” are “transformations,” that is, transformations of some underlying “real” (literal or metaphorical) reality.

It is true that our metaphors can prove to be misleading, destructive, and wrong (although only in a qualified sense, as I will discuss), and that new metaphors supersede and prove superior to old ones. But I will argue, with reference to the epistemological theory of Michael Polanyi, that such metaphors are not just our only way of thinking about “the nature of nature”—as if this were due to some limitation which could be conceivably, if not empirically, overcome—but that they constitute our contact with and construction of the *reality* of “nature” (insofar as nature is humanly meaningful), which is ultimately—also—the reality of (the conditions of) our humanity.

Polanyi’s theory of tacit knowledge indicates that the popular (and in certain circles unpopular) discourse of “climate apocalypse” reflects a tacit intimation of the reality of our situation—a kind of “preliminary understanding,” in Hannah Arendt’s phrase.[[5]](#footnote-6) I would suggest that the word “apocalypse” indicates that the tenuousness of the current situation is not only a matter of the undermining of material conditions, nor is it only a matter of our practical failure to secure those conditions, but that to make sense of such a situation we must construe it as *apocalyptic*—which is to say, perhaps and among other interpretations, to see the current state of the world as unsustainable, incoherent, and evil, and reform as possible only with some radical disruption that would allow a new order to emerge. (That this way of construing things could have not only “major” but dire consequences is clear, and history shows how apocalyptic thinking can become reified into a disastrous political fantasy—but that does not mean that there is not truth in the apprehension.) The use of the word “apocalypse,” with its roots in religious visions, implies that at stake in the current crisis is the human destiny—however that is now to be understood.

This implies, further, that the meaning and implications of this intimation, and the extent and sense of its truth, can only be found in relation to the cultural and literary tradition—not only the religious tradition of apocalypse but modern apocalyptic literature and art.

I want also to suggest that our failure to respond to the situation in a way that seems commensurate with it (which is not necessarily to say a way that would secure a human future) is itself a failure to grasp or inhabit the reality of our situation—not just a failure of affect but a failure of a kind of knowledge. (And I will suggest that a failure of affect might profitably be conceived as a failure of knowledge.)

I believe these claims can be defended, and are implied, by Polanyi’s conceptions of knowledge, discovery, and reality, to which I now turn. I will give a general outline of the relevant elements in Polanyi’s ontology and epistemology before sketching their implications, as I see it, for understanding the present situation.

*The act and art of knowing*

The title of Polanyi’s major work is *Personal Knowledge: Toward a Post-Critical Philosophy* and the basic aim of this book was to articulate and defend a theory of knowledge that would “restore to us once more the power for the deliberate holding of unproven beliefs,”[[6]](#footnote-7) not for therapeutic or evangelical reasons but because, as he argues, all knowledge rests on and can only grow through the reliance on such beliefs. Polanyi began his career as a physical chemist, making significant contributions in his field, and his philosophical career originated in his sense that the then-dominant positivistic theories of science did not describe his own experience of scientific discovery, the supposed paradigm for the ideal of purely objective knowledge. Science, he argues, in fact rests on procedures that cannot not be fully formalized, that depend on the trained individual’s intuition—an ability to sense the direction in which the answer lies, to intuit the direction of fruitful inquiry, without being able to explicitly state all the reasons for that intuition. Taking scientific discovery as his paradigm, Polanyi argues for the relevance of this paradigm to all fields of knowledge, including art, politics, and morality, contending thereby that knowledge in these humanistic realms is just as much *knowledge* as scientific knowledge, although the methods and standards of verification (or, in the former case, what he calls “validation”) are different.

The foundation of Polanyi’s characterization of knowledge, reality, and discovery is the idea of “personal knowledge”—that all knowledge, including knowledge that we think of as “objective” (our apprehension of the sensible world, scientific discovery), depends on the knower’s active—if not conscious—integration of the particulars of experience into wholes which make sense of those particulars. Polanyi recurrently speaks of the “act” and the “art” of knowing, emphasizing that knowledge is the product of a practiced skill which is learned not only by following explicit rules but by apprenticeship and groping experience through which the apprentice comes to acquire the capacities for (in science) recognizing a fruitful problem and identifying and interpreting the relevant data—capacities which, for reasons to be explained, will always remain to some degree tacit.

Knowledge must be “personal” because of this irreducibly *tacit* dimension: “we know more than we can say.” Taking as exemplary the way in which we recognize a face without being able to specify those features by which we know it, Polanyi writes:

Gestalt psychology has demonstrated that we may know a physiognomy by integrating our awareness of its particulars without being able to identify these particulars…[It] has assumed that perception of a physiognomy takes place through the spontaneous equilibration of its particulars impressed on the retina or on the brain. However, *I am looking at Gestalt, on the contrary, as the outcome of an active shaping of experience performed in the pursuit of knowledge. This shaping or integrating I hold to be the great and indispensable tacit power by which all knowledge is discovered and, once discovered, is held to be true*. (TD 6, emphasis mine)[[7]](#footnote-8)

Polanyi contends that tacit knowing is involved in *all* knowing, even that which we take to be most “objective” and independent of the knower, and an essential characteristic of this tacit knowledge as he conceives it is that it is not a passive knowledge of a given reality but something acquired through activity, through our attempts to understand or to accomplish something.

What is involved in this “integration of particulars,” and what are its implications?

Tacit knowledge, Polanyi shows, involves a relation between two terms—the object of our focal attention (the face we recognize, the thing we think of as “knowing”), and the particulars that collectively compose the object of our attention or knowledge, of which we are only subsidiarily aware. Polanyi speaks of the “from-to” structure of this relationship: we attend *from* the particulars *to* the whole. We are not consciously awareof the particulars—the shape of the nose, the thickness of the eyebrows—but only tacitly aware of them as they bear upon our identification of the whole. And this “bearing upon the whole” is what makes them meaningful—the nose or the brow have no meaning in themselves, just as individual letters have no meaning in themselves; it is because they jointly constitute a whole—a whole that is an object of interest—that they become significant, and that they can be (part of) an object of knowledge.

Thus knowledge is a matter of meaningfulness, and meaning is a matter of unity or integration—of making sense of particulars in terms of a comprehensive whole. Moreover, they are meaningful only *in* their tacit integration: because their meaning is a product of this integration, the particulars lose their meaning (at least, *this* meaning) when we make them the object of explicit focus. (Polanyi uses the example of how a word loses its meaning when we repeat it over and over again, focusing on its sound—or the appearance of the letters—rather than attending *from* the word’s physical attributes to its sense in context [TD 18]). Thus it is not just contingent that we know more than we can say, but necessary; in Polanyi’s phrase, the particulars of the performance of a skill are “logically unspecifiable” because the particulars are what they are only in their integration (PK 56). We may, for instance, learn much by attending to the formal features of a poem, analyzing its meter and rhythm and how these create its effects (another of Polanyi’s examples) and interpreting individual lines, but our statements about these particulars cannot replace what we know in attending *through* them to the poem as a whole, because it is only in their function *as* subsidiaries that the these particular features have their full meaning. The analysis will, however, deepen our understanding and experience of the poem when we return our attention to the whole; the whole that we grasp will in fact be different because now comprised of new associations, increased appreciation of complexity, additional layers of meaning, and so on—and not just different but better, more comprehensive.

Unspecifiability is also a result of the empirical fact that we learn a skill or make a judgment in part by repeated fumbling attempts in which we make numerous and often imperceptible adjustments, attending not to the individual movement itself but to the impact on what we are trying to achieve. Whatever portion of our knowledge we can make explicit (and there is much that we can), the explicit knowledge does not exhaust what we know tacitly.

This essentially tacit dimension is why knowledge—of any kind—cannot be completely formalized or detached from human (or other sentient) knowers as a wholly objective and transmissible body of knowledge. It must be learned by apprenticeship—by submitting oneself to an authority who demonstrates that knowledge in practice and in doing so passes it on, but cannot herself make explicit all that goes into her actions and judgments. This submission to authority is not blind, nor it is wholly uncritical, but there is, Polanyi insists, an indispensable element of trust—of faith—involved. We can learn very little without following, imitating, working under a master of an art—including the practice of science—who, no matter how much she does explain, cannot give an explicit account of or reason for every single thing involved in doing what we are learning to do.

An essential correlate of this conception of tacit knowledge is that the whole which is to be known is not given, but is rather a product of interest or need. It is not written into nature that these features just *are* constitutive of a face, that this face is their joint meaning; rather, it is our interest in recognizing the face or reading the expression that constitutes them as such.[[8]](#footnote-9) Thus knowledge is a product of *intention* and *attention*, and its criterion is, first of all, success at resolving the problem—intellectual or practical—that stimulated the effort to know. Polanyi’s theory is thus a kind of pragmatism.

Another essential correlate is that our attempts to know constitute the world we inhabit. Polanyi argues that the integration of particulars into a meaningful whole in effect means making the particulars a part of ourselves, of *dwelling in* or *interiorizing* them. This is fairly evident with respect to how we know the physical world through our body, especially in skilled activity—when we ride a bike, the balance of the bike and the feel of the tires on the pavement becomes part of the bodily, tacit knowledge from which we attend to our purpose of navigating the path and getting where we’re going—but Polanyi argues that *all* knowledge has this structure. The historian dwells in the evidence in attending to her question, in working on her theory. The evidence becomes an extension of herself—and conversely, when considering a new piece of evidence, a new phenomenon, the theory takes the proximal, tacit position.[[9]](#footnote-10)

Polanyi’s epistemology thus implies, crucially, that the world as we inhabit it is a product of our learned capacities, both our skills and our knowledge of the way things are. As Polanyi articulates it,

Because our body [meaning not only our physical being but everything we’ve already learned and internalized] is involved in the perception of objects, it participates thereby in our knowing of all other things outside. Moreover, we keep expanding our body into the work, by assimilating to it sets of particulars which we integrate into reasonable entities. Thus do we form, intellectually and practically, an interpreted universe populated by entities, the particulars of which we have interiorized for the sake of comprehending their meaning in the shape of coherent entities. (TD 29)

Or, more briefly, “we interiorize bits of the universe, and thus populate it with comprehensive entities” (TD 35)—we “take in” pieces of our experience and knowledge and integrate them by “looking out” and seeing them as parts of integrated wholes.

Polanyi’s account is consistent with the now commonplace view that we read the world through a set of inherited beliefs, values, and so on into which we are socialized. The latter is often taken to imply that the world we inhabit is merely a subjective construction, to be opposed either to an objective “way things are” obscured by that construction, or to a meaningless chaos. But Polanyi’s point is the opposite: that what it *means* to know something is to integrate it in this way, to find it as a constituent of a more comprehensive order. He argues that even scientific knowledge, knowledge of the material or biological world, is the product of our reading of the world, our ability to dwell in the particulars of that world and integrate them into “comprehensive entities”—molecules, forces (e.g. of gravity or momentum), ecological systems—that allow us to make sense of them and to further inquire into the world they compose. These entities, which I would characterize as *structures of sense*, are not given in nature, though of course they must somehow correspond to it; they are the product and condition of scientific inquiry.

With respect to the human world: as the example of understanding history brings into view, knowledge of the human world is a knowledge of the whole that comprehends the uncountable particulars of human life and human experience, individual and collective—or, proximally, “particular wholes” that comprehend overlapping subsets of these particulars. This is not finally a matter of acquiring a set of abstract laws or generalizations about the way people are or the way they ought to be, although if we attempt to make explicit what we have learned, we would express some of it in such propositions.[[10]](#footnote-11) But the knowledge we have acquired is also a matter of greater coherence, the way in which formerly disparate, unintegrated or even repressed particulars have acquired a new and more comprehensive meaning.

If knowledge consists of the (largely tacit) integration of particulars into a comprehensive whole that constitutes the meaning of the particulars, then learning or discovery—an increase in knowledge (or skill)—entails a new, more comprehensive integration; the creation of a more comprehensive structure of sense. This new integration might entail a deconstruction or abandonment of the old structure of comprehension—what we call a paradigm shift.

Such an increase in knowledge begins with the perception of a *problem*, the recognition of some failure to be able to make sense of or control some aspect of one’s situation. Problem solving is the “search[] for a hidden aspect of the situation, the existence of which [one] surmises, and for the finding or achieving of which the manifest features of the situation serve…as tentative clues or instruments” (PK 120). Problem solving, or discovery, is only possible—and conceivable—because of tacit knowledge, which suggests directions of effort or inquiry. (Polanyi points out that tacit knowledge resolves Meno’s paradox—the question of how one can look for something if one doesn’t know what it is, since if one knew one wouldn’t know how to look and if one had no idea one wouldn’t recognize the solution when it was found.)

*A Polanyian Theory of the Crisis*

Polanyi intends his work to allow us, on the other side of skepticism and relativism, to “belie[ve] in the reality of those coherences that we do, in fact, see” (M 67), including ideals such as justice or standards by which we judge a work of art to be good or great. His theory of tacit knowledge provides a basis for thinking of norms or values as being, in their own way, *real*, not just symptoms of underlying psychological or ideological mechanisms.

…to deny the feasibility of something that is alleged to have been done or the possibility of an event that is supposed to have been observed, merely because we cannot understand in terms of our hitherto accepted framework how it could have been done or have happened, may often result in explaining away quite genuine practice or experiences. (PK 51)

This is not license to believe whatever we want—Polanyi acknowledges that “[d]estructive analysis remains also an indispensable weapon against superstition and specious practices” (PK 51). But he means to insist that until and unless *dis*proven, there is reason to think that our tacit intimations or beliefs may well reflect some reality, that is, “any meaningful entity that we expect to manifest itself in unexpected ways in the future,” “something that has a ‘life’ of its own” (M 66). With respect to norms or ideals, I would say that their “unexpected manifestations” come in the form of the conditions of sense, which may come to our awareness most strikingly in their violation. Justice—or any other ideal—is real insofar as we cannot make sense of our experience without appealing to it, to our perceptions of *in*justice which is not merely the violation of positive law.

To return to the issues with which I began, I would propose that the sense of this crisis as “apocalyptic” points to another such condition of sense, to which our attempts to comprehend the present crisis refers us. It first of all suggests that we must make sense of all the particulars of our situation with reference to a trajectory toward catastrophic civilizational collapse or, at best, transformation. But I think that it ultimately refers us to what we might call the reality of (our) humanity, and suggests that this reality is not just something empirical, given—the totality of members of *homo sapiens* upon the planet—but historical and normative: that there is something like a human destiny which we can achieve or fail to achieve, a destiny which is not just a matter of securing an indefinite material existence for the human species but of “realizing our humanity.” Conversely, as we will see when we turn from current popular discourse to the broader cultural tradition of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the image of apocalypse suggests that there is some self-destructive logic within human history.

Whether or not the current situation is a “crisis,” an “emergency,” or “apocalyptic,” it seems safe to say that it presents us with a *problem*, or problems, in the general and the Polanyian senses; we are faced with phenomena that deny our efforts to control and even fully to comprehend them. Broadly speaking, the global economy is sustained by burning fossil fuels and depends upon perennial growth, and the “successful” functioning of this economy degrades the environment and raises the global temperature to a degree likely to undermine or at least severely affect the long-term prospects of human civilization. Moreover: we perceive the present situation as such a threat, possibly an existential threat to the human species, directly or indirectly; on the other hand we cannot seem to do anything about it. The “we,” of course, is largely different in the two clauses—those who perceive the problem as real and massive versus those who would have the power to enact policies to alter the trajectory. (For this reason Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz criticize the term “Anthropocene” for its implication that it is “humanity” generally that is altering our planet; they propose as possible alternatives “Capitalocene” or “Oligoanthropocene.”[[11]](#footnote-12)) But in some aspects the “we” is the same—we who, for instance, keep driving and flying even though we know that in doing so we contribute to spewing tons more carbon into the atmosphere.

The apparent contradiction or contradictions are not inexplicable; various accounts appeal persuasively—to psychological mechanisms, economic conflicts, and political divides. One study of why companies fail to collaborate to address global warming points to a version of the “tragedy of commons, where individuals acting with self-interest independently behave contrary to the common good of all members, thus depleting common resources,”[[12]](#footnote-13) and such conflicts of self-interest and collective interest, as well other barriers to collective action and the weighing of immediate versus long-term goods, are widely invoked to account for the general failure to address the problem. On the other hand, the invocation of “apocalypse” is not precisely an answer to the problem of why we don’t respond to a crisis we allegedly perceive. I would argue, however, that it does or is meant to point to a “hidden aspect” of the situation in which we find ourselves, and in this way expresses a sense that the more common-sense and literal ways of conceiving the crisis are inadequate to its full reality.

I cannot here develop the full implications of thinking of our present reality as apocalyptic—of seeing all the particulars of our situation integrated in a whole that is apocalyptic—but I can suggest how such an inquiry would begin and offer some of my own intimations of those implications.

As Wittgenstein wrote, “a whole mythology is contained within our language.”[[13]](#footnote-14) “Apocalypse” is now used colloquially, secularly and freely to mean a catastrophe with civilization- or world- or species-ending potential, but both the etymology and the history of the word imply another dimension. The best known work declaring itself an apocalypse—“unveiling,” “uncovering”—is the New Testament Book of Revelation, ἀποκάλυψις (*apokalypsis*), which exemplifies the original apocalyptic genre, which relates a vision vouchsafed to the author by a divine figure, a vision of “eschatological salvation.”[[14]](#footnote-15) The Book of Revelation is also the source of the modern usage of “apocalypse” to mean cataclysm, as the vision it recounts is that of the end of the world. Although the direct referent of the word is the vision *per se*, the end itself—the event envisioned—is a revelation as well, both in Revelation and in apocalyptic works generally—a revelation of the fragility and limitations of the old order and of the forces or powers that would sweep it away, a revelation of God’s judgment against that order. There is both a destructive and a creative aspect to the Jewish and Christian apocalyptic vision—it is “God and heaven’s in-breaking on earth”[[15]](#footnote-16) which destroys the former order of things. Contemporary secular visions of the end share this quality of revelation; as Eva Horn puts it, “What is revealed by the apocalypse is the true value and the true power of everything and everyone. The end of the world is the *unmasking of all things*, the manifestation of their true essence.”[[16]](#footnote-17)

Apocalyptic visions are historically associated with crisis, a crisis which is beyond the power of the individual or the collective to rectify, at least *de facto*.[[17]](#footnote-18) The apocalyptic vision emerges when it does not seem or no longer seems that reform is possible, that only some utter disruption of the current state of things could create the conditions for the restoration or establishment of right order. The imagining then of the end of the current world and the ushering in of a new one could be simply a matter of consoling fantasy, but it is also a matter of apprehending the current state of the world as unsustainable, incoherent, and evil.

The apocalyptic vision therefore also implies a wholly different ground of judgment and sense than that of the present world, a different standard of “good” and “bad” than that of the reigning powers on earth. And the recognition and inhabiting of this different ground may be the most important aspect of the apocalyptic vision. As Frank Kermode notes, from early on, with the first disappointment of the prediction of the coming of God’s kingdom, believers had to adjust their understanding of the meaning of the revelations and expectation of the End. In his well-known formulation, Kermode writes that even Christians as early as John and Paul begin to conceive the End as “immanent” rather than “imminent.”[[18]](#footnote-19)

In Kermode’s account, this immanentization of the apocalypse seems to have two aspects. First, the categories of the apocalyptic vision become something like archetypes—recurrent types embodied in different historical figures and events, categories according to which we make sense of history—as opposed to singular instances which are to occur only once at some point of the future. Kermode cites Josef Pieper’s comment that “many have been called Antichrist because many have indeed been Antichrist, or types of him, so that Nazism is a ‘milder preliminary form of the state of Antichrist,’ and so is any other tyranny.”[[19]](#footnote-20) This is to see these regimes not just as bad human institutions responsible for earthly ills, but as instantiations of the battle between God and Satan, ultimate good and ultimate evil.

The other and corresponding implication of seeing the End as “immanent” is that the individual’s life becomes a synecdoche for the eschatological arc of human history. Kermode quotes Rudolf Bultmann:

*...the meaning of history lies always in the present,* and when the present is conceived as the eschatological present by Christian faith the meaning in history is realized....Always in your present lies the meaning in history, and you cannot see it as a spectator, but only in your responsible decisions. In every moment slumbers the possibility of being an eschatological moment. You must awaken it.[[20]](#footnote-21)

In Bultmann’s demythologized, existentialist view, one conceives every moment in history in light of salvation and the ultimate victory of God over evil, but this is not understood as some future event for which one passively waits; each individual is called upon to be instrument of the realization of this end which is a present moment of decision; and, just as any and many particular earthly evils may be understood as Antichrist, the possibility of victory over those evils, in the world and in oneself, is ever-present.

The most obvious difference between the Judeo-Christian apocalyptic visions and the modern vision of climate apocalypse is that in the former it is *God—*an intelligent and benevolent power*—*that “breaks in and breaks up the established order”[[21]](#footnote-22) and establishes a new order. The end is not just an end but a beginning; there *is* a new order on the other side of cataclysm, and it is divine, ultimately good. Some modern, secular apocalyptic visions have had a positive moment—Marx’s communist revolution; images of humanity living in harmony with nature after the breakdown of an industrial civilization radically at odds with ecological conditions. But visions of climate apocalypse raises the specter of an end that is really and only an end. They suggest in different ways that even if the species is not extinguished, whatever survives will be diminished and crippled, no longer capable of a fully human form of life or consciousness, of a fully flourishing human life.

References to “climate apocalypse” with regard to the climate crisis most obviously simply refer to some catastrophic ending—in Franzen’s piece, the “impending collapse” of the planet, analogous to other possible “religious or thermonuclear or asteroidal” ends of the world.[[22]](#footnote-23) I would propose, however, that, intentionally or not, the use of the term reflects the original sense of revelation—and the religious origins of the apocalyptic—suggesting that making sense of human experience and human history depends upon recognizing that the modern situation is radically untenable, governed by a logic and by forces whose direction is toward destruction, and that this is not only a material problem but in some sense a spiritual one, pertaining to the meaning and realization of the human destiny.

To return to the “imminent” and the “immanent,” the word conveys a sense both of an unveiling that will come in time—that this world will pass away—but also of another reality that is present even now—not literally another world, a supernatural sphere that is elsewhere in space, but a truer order of meaning that is radically other than the one we typically inhabit.

In popular allusions to the “climate apocalypse,” this alternate order of meaning could first simply be conceived as the fact of the material unsustainability of our situation. A (very) recent New York Times opinion piece by Farhad Manjoo bears the apocalyptic headline “It’s the End of California as We Know It”; the subheading is “The fires and the blackouts are connected to a larger problem in this state: a failure to live sustainably.” This is, of course, an explicit statement, but the article suggests that it is based on a tacit integration: looking at the fires not as isolated disasters or sheerly “natural” ones but looking *from* them or through them to some radical human failure, internalizing them as clues to some more serious condition of our humanity. Manjoo describes the “apocalypse” as it is currently manifesting itself in California’s wildfires and power outages (a distinctive but synechdochic manifestation of the larger crisis):

The fires and the blackouts...are...like California’s other problems, like housing affordability and homelessness and traffic — human-made catastrophes we’ve all chosen to ignore, connected to the larger dysfunction at the heart of our state’s rot: a failure to live sustainably.

....The founding idea of this place is infinitude — mile after endless mile of cute houses connected by freeways and [uninsulated](https://www.utilitydive.com/news/federal-judge-links-pges-uninsulated-power-lines-to-california-wildfires/546332/) power lines stretching out far into the forested hills. Our whole way of life is built on a series of myths — the myth of endless space, endless fuel, endless water, endless optimism, endless outward reach and endless free parking.

One by one, those myths are bursting into flame.[[23]](#footnote-24)

Manjoo’s use of “myth” suggests the failure of an old coherence, disrupted by the disasters of the fires, and the need for a new one. In Polanyian terms, to see the need for a dramatically new and different life would be to reconfigure all the particulars of one’s situation in light of a new coherence. Part of the solution to the problem—both practical and conceptual—of climate change would be to see that our old framework is one of “endlessness” which failed to encompass the fact of “finiteness.” It is obvious and banal to say that we need to recognize the unsustainability of our way of life. But I think it is productive to see this from Polanyi’s perspective not as a matter of failing to recognize certain facts but rather failing to inhabit a certain *reality*—failing to integrate all of the facts into a comprehensive whole in which those facts have their joint meaning. To focus independently on each particular is to fail to grasp its true meaning—and the whole to which one must look in order to make sense of these particulars is nothing less than “our whole way of life.”

But what would such an integration look like, and how might it be achieved? Franzen asks, “what if instead of denying reality, we told ourselves the truth?” “Telling the truth” for him seems to mean ceasing to believe that we will be able to prevent any (further) major disruptions to our ways of life (his audience is, of course, the wealthy West)—concretely, to meet the two degree Centigrade warming limit theorized by the I.P.C.C. as necessary to prevent the worst climate cataclysms. We will fail in this, he believes, not because no policies could accomplish it but because certain psychological and political realities would work decisively against implementing the necessary international agreements and collective sacrifices of convenience and comfort.

Franzen sees this recognition not as demotivating but in fact as a condition for real and effective mitigating action by those who *are* committed to “doing something.” Telling the truth would mean recognizing the inevitability of “climate apocalypse,” meaning the inevitability of things not just getting much worse but of moving into a qualitatively different world—a world of scarcity, displacement, radical uncertainty.

Without closely evaluating the particulars of Franzen’s or Manjoo’s arguments and their proposed solutions, which may or may not hold[[24]](#footnote-25), I think that these articles and Polanyi’s view of reality are mutually illuminating, jointly suggesting that the problem is one of grasping the *reality* of the situation, and sketching one picture of what that might mean. Explicitly, the reality Franzen urges us to recognize is simply the fact, as he sees it, that we won’t be “saved” from two degrees of warming and the miseries that accompany it. But he also sees ethical implications of recognizing these “facts” (as he sees them), and by the Polanyian model we can see those implications as part of the reality itself—that is, conditions for making adequate sense of the situation in which one finds oneself:

Once you accept that we’ve lost [the all-out war on climate change], other kinds of action take on greater meaning. Preparing for fires and floods and refugees is a directly pertinent example. But the impending catastrophe heightens the urgency of almost any world-improving action. In times of increasing chaos, people seek protection in tribalism and armed force, rather than in the rule of law, and our best defense against this kind of dystopia is to maintain functioning democracies, functioning legal systems, functioning communities.

As described above, knowledge for Polanyi is a matter of meaningfulness and the idea that actions would take on “new meaning” suggests that those actions correlate to the apprehension of a new, more adequate and comprehensive, reality. This is not to say that we are bound to see that reality just by looking—it can only be apprehended as a matter of a practice of attention and ongoing attempts at integration.

The weakness in Franzen’s article, as I see it, is that he seems to want to have it both ways—on the one hand to say that “human nature” will prevent us from adequately responding to the crisis; on the other to exhort us to engage in collective actions that will still “improve the world.” This isn’t a strict contradiction—Franzen is exhorting actions that are in the power of each of his readers, actions which are significant, even if not globally efficacious, because they reflect the real conditions of our lives. But he seems at the end to retreat from a vision of “apocalypse” to one of a “future [which], while undoubtedly worse than the present, might also, in some ways, be better” because the plight of our neighbors will provoke us to draw on new resources of kindness and humaneness.

This may be true; surely we all hope that it is and have reason to try to bring it about. But there is also reason to believe that the “whole” toward which we must look—the reality that “solves” the problems we face, at least the problems of comprehension if not the practical problems, is one which we cannot fully grasp through science and journalism nor even through reflecting on and engaging in political and ethical action aimed at mitigation, essential as these all may be. The idea of “apocalypse” represents a tacit intimation that points, I think, not only to religious tradition but also to non-religious (or at least not explicitly doctrinal) works of art and literature that take up apocalyptic imagery and themes in the context of a more general crisis of modernity.

To take just one example—just as references to apocalypse have increased in the popular consideration of climate change, *Moby-Dick* has also made appearances as an evocative allegory of our situation. In 2017, the leftist magazine *Jacobin* published an essay interpreting *Moby-Dick* as an illustration of the social forces responsible for the current climate crisis.[[25]](#footnote-26) The essay, by Justin Slaughter, takes its departure from socialist C.L.R. James’s 1953 *Mariners, Renegades & Castaways,* which finds in Captain Ahab’s mad quest a symbol for the destructive tendencies of modern capitalism. Slaughter characterizes Ahab as “the chief executive who wields centuries of accumulated knowledge and labor for his own gain, but who — not unlike Donald Trump and his circle — would blindly throw all of it into the abyss.”

I want to say that seeing a connection between *Moby-Dick* and the current crisis comes out of a tacit apprehension of a dimension of the crisis that goes beyond what Slaughter explicitly articulates—hence the value and even the need to appeal to literature, to story and image. This is a subject that would need much greater development, but to briefly expand: in *Moby-Dick* the end of the Pequod and the little cosmos it represents is brought about by Ahab’s mad chase after the White Whale. Slaughter simplifies the story into a morality tale. But the vision of the book itself is more complicated. Ahab’s chase after *Moby-Dick* is not merely self-insistent revenge; it comes out of a perception that whatever ordered the universe it was no loving and caring God. In Moby Dick, Captain Ahab finds a concrete symbol—or manifested reality—not of a benevolent deity or divine Platonic Good but of some malicious power. In response to his first mate Starbuck, who objects to his revenge quest by protesting that the whale is just a “dumb brute,” Ahab famously rejoins:

All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! (Ch. 36)

Ahab takes his own disfigurement as symbol and instance of all human suffering that defies human sense, and the whale as symbol and embodiment of those forces in the universe that bring such suffering.

All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick. He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down…. (Ch. 41)

He admits even that “[s]ometimes I think there’s naught beyond” the mask of the visible. But it is only by construing the world as it impinges upon human beings as the manifestation of some intelligence—some “inscrutable malice” as it would seem, judging from the world’s thwarting of human need and desire—that human beings can assert agency, can maintain spiritual integrity when the body is dismembered.

Ishmael also finds the whale as symbolic of something inimical to human happiness—not only as a bringer of death and destruction, but as an image of the universe’s utter indifference—or worse, the absence of any “reasoning thing” at work in the workings of the universe at all. Ishmael’s fear is the one that Ahab dismisses, that “there’s naught beyond” the “pasteboard mask” of the visible world. This is most powerfully expressed in Ishmael’s discourse in Chapter 42 on “The Whiteness of the Whale” which reflects on the terror of whiteness, which “by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation.”

In a sense this indifference of the universe is a vision yet more disturbing than that of Ahab, for whom every natural phenomenon is freighted with intentionality and human significance, albeit usually (though not always) signifying something bad. For Ahab, the universe is hostile to man; in the vision sometimes articulated by the narrator (be he Ishmael or Melville) it is totally indifferent. Such a perception is shared too by the cabin boy Pip, who is abandoned on the ocean and in his terror has a vision continuous with that of “Whiteness,” a vision of “the unwarped primal world” beneath the surface, “the multitudinous, God omnipresent, coral insects that out of the firmament of the waters heaped the colossal orbs,” “God’s foot upon the treadle of the loom” in the alien deeps. God’s laws are conflated with the laws of nature. This was a pleasing thought to the earlier Enlightenment scientists and philosophers—the laws of nature were a delightful order, and modern science thus now allowed man to grasp the mind of God—as Newton put it in the Principiae: “This most beautiful system of the sun, planets, and comets, could only proceed from the counsel and dominion of an intelligent and powerful Being....This Being governs all things, not as the soul of the world, but as Lord over all…”[[26]](#footnote-27) But in Melville’s vision, Nature in its deepest, darkest, and vastest being—of which the unfathomable depths of the ocean are both symbol and reality—is terrifying in its strangeness and beyond the grasp of human reason.

This, *Moby-Dick* suggests, poses a deep problem for human beings, if they would but recognize it, and a problem integrally bound to the Pequod’s self-destructive trajectory. The dual structure of the narrative—the “telling plot” of Ishmael’s narration grafted onto the “action plot” of Ahab’s quest—suggests a deep skepticism about the possibility of integrating the knowledge of the conditions of our lives into a human way of life. Ishmael would seem at first to embody such an integration, but he is passive, riding along atop the vast mechanism of civilization and observing the world as he finds it without being able to exert any influence over its doomed trajectory; his very sensitivity to the ambiguities of meaning renders him so. Ahab, on the other hand, perceives an unambiguous meaning in the world that provokes action—action that is heroic, if one grants his premises, but crazed and monomaniac; Ahab can *only* see and respond to the hostility of the universe. I would suggest—as a matter for future inquiry—that the novel implies a connection between our present self-destructive historical trajectory and a deeper and older crisis of meaning. Our current unsustainable use of resources is not a conscious quest, heroic or insane, aimed at battling evil; but it is arguably a passive variant, connected to the loss and lack of a shared framework of meaning that would make some alternative real and compelling—a failure to be in touch with normative conditions, to inhabit the reality of our humanity as something live, collective, futural, and worth sacrificing for. If one “attends from” *Moby-Dick* to our present situation, I believe that the problem of securing a human future appears the problem of finding reality—a reality that is normatively structured, a reality not just of material conditions but of imperatives and constraints that are meaningful and binding.

Contrary to Slaughter and others’ readings, however, the novel also shows that conceiving and finding those conditions is indeed a *problem*, not to be simply resolved*.* *Moby-Dick—*and other cultural works of the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries[[27]](#footnote-28)—suggests at least that there are deep and dark destructive threads that have determining roles within human history, and that an adequate grasp of our situation has to encompass not only the material threats to civilization and the species and the political and ethical realities and demands that reveal themselves distinctively in this new historical situation.

If, as Polanyi suggests, reality is something that we come to know and inhabit not just by looking but by efforts of knowing, then grasping the reality of our situation—both the threat to humanity and what exactly that threatened “humanity” *is* (that humanity which is both victim and perpetrator)—then it would seem that coming to a full comprehension of our present situation would involve an ongoing practice of reading and attending not only to the practical problems that face us but the human problems that are dramatized by works of art and literature. Such an attempt to know the whole of our humanity would in fact be the condition for constituting it, for making it real—which isn’t yet to say what kind of human reality such an attempt would unveil.

Rev. 11/4/2019

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1. Franzen, “What If We Stopped Pretending the Climate Apocalypse Can Be Stopped?” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. “Climate Apocalypse.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. E.g. “Can We Still Prevent an Apocalypse?” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Garrard, *Ecocriticism*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. “Understanding and Politics,” in Arendt, *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954*, 310. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. “Understanding and Politics,” in Arendt, 308. “Understanding and Politics,” in Arendt, 308. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. I will refer to Polanyi’s books by abbreviation: *The Tacit Dimension (TD), Meaning (M),* and *Personal Knowledge (PK).* [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Even in the case of the poem—we are so accustomed to recognizing a poem as a “whole” that it seems “natural,” but it is something that we have constructed as such, at however basic a level. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Thus “proximal” and “focal” are fluid; the proximal and distal terms can switch places when it comes to beliefs or theories. Empirical particulars—e.g. historical events or natural phenomena—might be proximal terms from which one attends to a theory, or the theory might be the tacit background from which one attends to the particulars. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Such as Gary Saul Morson’s “One Hundred Sixty-Three Tolstoyan Conclusions” e.g. “True life takes place when we are doing nothing especially dramatic. The more the drama, the worse the life” (*Anna Karenina in Our Time: Seeing More Wisely*, 223). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Bonneuil and Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Finke, Gilchrist, and Mouzas, “Why Companies Fail to Respond to Climate Change.” [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Franzen, “What If We Stopped Pretending the Climate Apocalypse Can Be Stopped?” {Citation} [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Duff, “Christian Apocalyptic.” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. 11/4/19 10:20:00 AM [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. As L. Michael White writes, the Judeo-Christian genre of apocalypse emerges from prophecy, which was originally not a prediction of the future but an indictment of present sin and a summons to God’s people to do God’s will. But after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, oracles began “calling for people to hold fast, saying that there would be a restoration of the nation and that the enemies would eventually be punished by God. A future-looking sense of history was born...” White, “Apocalyptic Literature in Judaism and Early Christianity.” [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. “No longer imminent, the End is immanent. So that it is not merely the remnant of time that has eschatological import; the whole of history, and the progress of the individual life, have it also, as a benefaction from the End, now immanent. History and eschatology...are the same thing.” Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 25. “No longer imminent, the End is immanent. So that it is not merely the remnant of time that has eschatological import; the whole of history, and the progress of the individual life, have it also, as a benefaction from the End, now immanent. History and eschatology...are the same thing.” Kermode, 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 26. Kermode, 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Bultmann, *History and Eschatology*, 155; Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 25. Bultmann, *History and Eschatology*, 155; Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Attributed to Paul Lehmann, in Nancy J. Duff, "Christian Apocalyptic," in *Theology Today*, April 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Franzen, “What If We Stopped Pretending the Climate Apocalypse Can Be Stopped?” [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. Manjoo, “Opinion | It’s the End of California as We Know It.” [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. cf “Can We Still Prevent an Apocalypse?”, which offers a detailed critique of Franzen’s argument. . [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. “C. L. R. James in the Age of Climate Change.” [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. General Scholium. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. For instance, Robert Lowell’s meditation on Melville in relation to the second World War, “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket”; poems by Robinson Jeffers; the novels of Cormac McCarthy—to name just a few authors whose works refer us to a humanity to be divided against itself in potentially catastrophic ways. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)