

Chapter 9

Infinite Responsibility

If what I have been suggesting is true, our present failure to do what is necessary to ward off severe climate change constitutes a grave threat not only to Earth's living systems but also to fundamental aspects of our ordinary lives. As I have argued, it endangers the future that shapes the narratives by which we live, undermining the significance of everything we do. The reality of that threat calls upon us to value the lives we know and to see them as destructive at the same time, as a result splitting our response to ordinary experience.

The ethical implications of our inaction are equally divided. Our failure will ultimately steal the future from those who follow us, depriving them of a full opportunity to address the problems that will afflict them. But our ineptitude, in turn, arises in part from the decisions of our ancestors; over several recent generations, they expanded the world economy exponentially and produced us in staggering profusion, greatly limiting the options available to us.

Heirs of a discredited past, haunted by a disappearing future, we meet our present moment in dismay. Yet we cannot simply surrender to despair, for the demands of ordinary life perpetually call us to orient ourselves to a future, even if it is disappearing. We are thus caught beyond reprieve between the demand to act and a great difficulty in doing so, shackled and stumbling at the crossroads of history.

If we truly experienced in full the haunted, broken qualities of the present, we would yearn for an emotional and spiritual resource through which we could gain consolation. Yet our situation already undermines nearly every version of comfort and hope familiar to us. As long as we work hard to provide for a better future, as long as we depend upon hope that the world we know will endure, and as long as we grieve in a mode

that still promises eventual recovery, we are caught within an emotional dynamic whose foundations are disappearing.

We thus find ourselves in a situation where we cannot help but seek some other basis for ethical action, another resource for endurance. Once we recognize that the future is in ruins and our present is shattered, the task of encountering the human significance of climate change is not yet complete, for we must still discover *some* foundation on which we can build, a foundation that can stand no matter what may come. Finding that foundation is the task of this chapter.

The first step in doing so is simply for us to accept the present horror in full. Doing so is surprisingly rare. One would think that our highly contradictory, almost impossible position would inspire consternation or outrage. Instead, we have in general responded in a very different tone. Nearly everyone endures this crisis in distraction, mild dismay, ambivalent passivity, indifference—or in a sort of baffled indignation. This very absence of a passionate response from the great majority of us is striking. What could possibly explain our reluctance to acknowledge the nightmare qualities of our ethical dilemma—or what is worse, our tendency to accept it in a mode of quiet desperation?

The answer may well lie within the history I outlined in the previous chapter. We've been living with disaster so long that we're used to it. For generations now we have accepted the shattering of tradition, the decimation of native peoples, enslavement, economic displacement and exploitation, genocide, and the threat of nuclear annihilation as inevitable aspects of our world. Such violence is so interwoven into the very fabric of modern culture that we cannot imagine a world after it has ceased. In consequence, we do not truly attempt to move beyond what we know. We seem to have surrendered ourselves to the prospect not only of our mortality, but of the potential destruction of our societies, our ecosystems, and the biosphere itself. Although we protest against these prospects, in the end we consider any concerted attempt to overcome them as delusional.

We might at times suggest that we disapprove of this violence, but at every turn we take it for granted, accept its results, and flourish on the wealth it produces. We often treat those who protest as moralizing annoyances, as partisans of a simplistic and ultimately failed viewpoint.

We incorporate their denunciations of contemporary society into our own thinking without giving up our love of what we possess, ending up in a partly ambivalent, partly celebratory mood, uneasily aware of what our history has cost but not finally regretful. When we do acknowledge some dimension of that cost, we usually turn it into the pretext for partial, narrowly construed resentment, a demand that our particular group be invited more openly to the party and given a greater share of wealth and respect—as if that broader world, despite the systemic violence on which it is based, remains legitimate. In short, although we know that the world in which we participate emerges from a history of devastation, we ultimately accept its violence because of its benefit to ourselves.

Our response to genocide, however, suggests that on occasion certain events do give us pause. Shocked and appalled by the Holocaust, we vowed never to let murder on that scale happen again. But we have not yet made good on this vow. Although we created the United Nations to help adjudicate conflict, that body places too great a trust on the powers of the modern state to intervene into its affairs and accordingly to this day often allows nations to commit grievous violence against their own citizens. Neither the destruction of a third of the world's Jews nor the long series of genocides in the last four decades has inspired us to act with sufficient resolve. Although we decry the consequences of state violence, we have not dared to shift our loyalty to any alternative that would be powerful enough to curb it.¹¹⁴

Our inability to realize the goals stated in that vow may arise from an even greater inability to understand violence on that scale. Yet such incalculable violence should not disable our resolve but make it incalculably strong in its turn, elevating mourning into an even more powerful emotion that demands resolution. Our failure in this regard in the six decades since the Holocaust suggests either that we did not mourn those deaths or, more likely, that we have learned to dissociate mourning and action, emotion and institution.

The response to genocide thus exposes a fundamental impasse in our culture: a vast gap between our vows and our actions, our confidence we can build new institutions and our ability to do so. We have so far not passed from intention to fulfillment, from horror to resolution. The failure to act in one regard exposes a much broader, long-standing failure

to recognize and address the destructive consequences of modernization for the world's people. Our response to the Holocaust foregrounds what is true virtually across the board: however great our private grief, we live within a public sphere that on ultimate matters remains largely disabled and bankrupt, that operates from within a legacy of uneasy, haunted denial.

This legacy is intensified even further in the era of climate change. If we cannot grieve for those destroyed by genocide, we are even less likely to grieve for those we have not yet lost. Yet the potential violence to come, as I have suggested, dwarfs the destruction of any genocide, indeed of many more genocides than we have yet seen. Our present moment is thus characterized with a dissociation more striking than ever before—a strange compound of horror and complacency, resolution and indifference. It is as if in our halting way we wish to explore the ultimate reaches of disorientation and self-estrangement.

As I suggested a moment ago, our inability may stem from a continued fidelity to the very thing genocide already discredited: the unchallenged rule of the modern state. The United Nations has not yet found a way to supersede the claims of its member nations to govern their internal affairs without interference. This collective failure to curb the powers of the state is especially harmful today as negotiations over an international treaty to address the causes of climate change frequently run aground on competitive assertions of state interest. Such assertions arise from developed and developing nations alike, even from the world's wealthiest nation that can best afford to be generous. Recently many commentators have blamed international inaction on the resistance of nations such as China or India. But we should not forget that in response to the Kyoto accords, in July 1997, the United States Senate voted 95-0 not to agree to any protocol that did not apply as well to developing nations or that would harm the American economy.¹¹⁵ States clearly assume that their priorities are more important than any potential threat to the biosphere, just as their interests are more crucial than protecting human beings from mass slaughter. The rule of the state, it seems, can brook no interference, except from limits the state freely accepts on its own terms.

Our tolerance for the power of the state finds its equal, in the American political sphere, in our respect for the abstract liberty of the individual.

As I suggested in an earlier chapter, the harsh resistance to a carbon tax or untax expresses the wish to protect individual liberty even from the overriding demand to transmit a living biosphere to posterity. The fierce defense of liberty defined in this way—a liberty free of obligations to others or responsibility to the future—ultimately protects *irresponsibility* and a refusal of obligation, much as the tolerance of state power in the abstract authorizes a potential abuse of power. The international inability to respond to genocide is echoed in our general endorsement of the right to drive SUVs, build excessively large homes, apply nitrogen-based fertilizers to crops, or engage in mountaintop removal coal-mining. Taken seriously, the perpetual complaint about environmental regulation voices a demand that one have *the right to use or abuse the Earth's resources as one pleases*, or more directly, *the right to destroy*. Such an insistence, I would suggest, applies in one domain what the murderous abuse of state power enacts in another.

This insistence on the rights of states or individuals makes clear what is at stake in the habits of indifference and self-estrangement. We refuse to mourn the violence of modern history primarily because we are its beneficiaries—because it exemplifies, on a much broader scale, the right to destroy that we claim for ourselves. We ultimately do not wish to take responsibility for the violence that sustains us because our belief in a certain liberty requires us to value that liberty more than responsibility itself. Although we may deplore the exploitation that pervades the world economy, we do not finally lament it, for we do not allow it to crack open the notion of individual liberty or the reality of our relative economic privilege.

The most direct way to overcome this flawed legacy is to renounce the notion of an abstract, purely formal liberty—a right in the end to destroy—and affirm instead our place in a web of relationships with family, friends, neighbors, and partners at the workplace, with fellow citizens in our locality, state, region, and nation, with the living beings who share our habitats, with those who make the goods we use or who consume what we produce, with those who share our humanity, with the dead and the unborn, and with the Earth's dynamic, living systems. An abstract liberty is as nothing compared to our power to respond and be responded

to in turn—that is, our power to be responsible for others, to others, to all others, and indeed to the very domain in which all others can flourish.

The interpretation of the world as a scene of countless relationships, familiar in archaic cultures but gradually marginalized in recent centuries, provides the ground for a much more coherent approach to the challenges of our time. Our ambivalent acceptance of the legacy of violence, for example, stems in part from our inability to conceive of strangers as related to ourselves. Marooned in the past or future, in another country, in a reality we consider too far removed from our own, they do not have enough substance in our minds to merit serious attention. They exist within that vast abstraction, our world, which in its incalculable complexity cannot move us. When a great evil such as the Holocaust takes place, we may experience astonishment, horror, and pain, responding with enough interest, perhaps, to learn something of its history. But without recognizing its implication for our ordinary lives, its power to arise from within institutions familiar to us, we enact only an empty grief, a formal attentiveness without consequence. We could instead allow our relationship to strangers to have a practical effect on our lives or on the practices of which we are a part; if we did so, we would actually complete the process of grief by identifying the cause of the horror and dealing with it directly. The point, in short, would be to consider ourselves responsible for the event and its possible reappearance and to act accordingly.

The same applies to our situation in the era of climate change: we must not simply mourn the victims of the future, nor merely comprehend the problem and its potential solutions, but above all consider ourselves responsible for whatever damage will take place—responsible, in short, to coming generations—and thus by definition *to respond*. Only if we regard ourselves as participants in a web of mutual obligation will we have the motivation necessary to overcome indifference and shatter our unthinking, psychotic belief in our right to destroy. Others have given to us and made our lives possible; let us give to others in return.

To live our moment fully, to feel the horror without reserve, is to be given fierce motive for ethical action. If we were truly to accept our place within a web of relationships and thus attempt to respond, what would follow? Let's imagine that we were to face what Al Gore calls *our choice*, decide wisely, and thus reduce greenhouse gas emissions, use more

energy-efficient techniques, minimize the environmental harm from our management of forests and farmland, create market-driven incentives for everyone to take these steps, fund a wide array of new technology projects and implement them as soon as possible, and reach international agreements that would enable nations around the world to undertake similar efforts of their own.¹¹⁶ As I have suggested, to do so would require that we act in a truly revolutionary manner—that we would defy the assumptions and habits of generations for the sake of a common end.

By acting in that decisive way, however, we would also do much more. We would demonstrate that we are free in a sense scarcely ever mentioned by the pretended partisans of liberty—that we are not merely puppets of our cultural traditions but are still capable of making the right choice despite all odds. For much of this book, I have outlined a series of tough obstacles in our path, including the short timeline for action, the difficult technical challenges, the limits of our political institutions, our addiction to economic growth, the self-interested calculus of state interest, and the belief in a false version of freedom. But it does not follow that these factors ultimately determine what we will do; we are still capable of surpassing what we have so far achieved.

But acting in this way would ultimately go much further than showing our power to alter our common history. If we truly enacted the necessary ecological revolution, we would finally bring about what our forebears barely envisioned and scarcely ever attempted. In doing so we would also address the systemic violence and excess of modern culture, that vast legacy of exploitation and devastation that still defines our time. Choosing justice would not only enable us to transform our historical circumstance; it would also take responsibility for that history. It would say that in our freedom, we are capable of making that history our own, *placing it to our charge*, and judging it in the clear light of its consequences. Most crucially of all, it would show that we can make reparation, do justice to those we have harmed and would otherwise still harm, and fight against the motivating force of this history. By taking up this task, we need not admit to an inherited guilt; we are not automatically accountable for the actions of our forebears, any more than those who follow us will be accountable for ours. Our act would thus be free in yet another sense, for it would be freely chosen rather than demanded; it would suggest that we are capable

of shouldering a burden that should never have fallen to us, but that in taking up that burden we can at last pass beyond enduring the weight of our history and move to a new phase, into a world we have not merely inherited, but made.

But that is not all. Because this ecological revolution would salvage something of the future of the biosphere, as well as of all human societies, it would demonstrate our capacity to assume responsibility for the encompassing ecological context of humanity's future as well. Insofar as *not* acting would deprive people in the future of a full opportunity to respond to climate change, as I argued earlier, an ecological revolution would do precisely the opposite: it would protect the very possibility that in the future we or others could act on humanity's behalf.

Acting in this way would, in short, go far toward restoring some dimension of the stolen future and thus mending in some degree our own broken present. It would salvage something from the ruins, piecing together a remnant of the human despite the shattering effects of climate change I have been describing over the last four chapters.

In doing so, however, we would take on a task breathtaking in its scope and significance, for we would necessarily assume the ethical burden of generations not our own—the weight of a violent history, on the one hand, and of the potentially devastated generations to come. But even this is not all. Between these two domains, of course, lies our present, which in its almost insurmountable momentum, its ambivalent indifference to the violence it still causes, and its refusal to accept genuine transformation imposes still another burden on us—one that we can instantly recognize as our own. In our free choice to save the biosphere from further destruction, in our attempt to salvage something from the ruins of our shared history, *we must ultimately assume responsibility for addressing the violence enacted throughout the entire sweep of modern history*, from the past through the present and into the future, and thus for many centuries of human endeavor.¹¹⁷ Strangely enough, to act justly we would *in our single generation* bear the weight of that *entire* development, discharging an immense debt on behalf of the dead, the living, and the unborn. Although we did not choose this moment, we might still freely choose to accept its challenge, to make at last a full reckoning with modernity itself.

Yet even this description does not capture the full dimensions of our moment. We would hardly grasp the implications of this choice if we did not extend our view further into the past. With Jared Diamond, for example, we should trace the chronicle of civilizations that pushed their environments beyond the breaking point and eventually collapsed—or those that through foresight avoided that fate.¹¹⁸ A decisive moment has occurred on many previous occasions to civilizations around the world; our version of that moment is unique only because it encompasses the fate of the biosphere itself.

We could extend this view even further back. Contemplating the whole sweep of human evolutionary history, we could attribute its disastrous effects to an inherent fault in the species. After all, the story might go, over the millennia we have wiped out most of the large mammals, destroyed many ecosystems, learned how to exploit nearly every living thing for our benefit, multiplied our numbers seemingly without limit, and now are about to torch the climate itself. If we continue with our ways, consuming the biosphere to our heart's content, we will make survival for a good portion of living things difficult if not impossible.

Such stories could justify utter despair; if we have depleted the planet's resources so systematically for millennia and have pushed the logic of civilization beyond natural limits time and time again, there can surely be no hope we will depart from this pattern today. But such a despair would hardly take into account how often we have acted wisely, or—as Diamond's examples of the New Guinea highlands, Tikopia Island, and Tokugawa-era Japan indicate—how often we have lived within our means.¹¹⁹ Nor would it recognize that we are neither simply a biological species nor directly determined by our long history; we are also capable of recognizing our status as animals whose actions threaten the other forms of life on this planet and therefore are capable as well of surpassing our selfishness for the sake of all life. Evolutionary and historical knowledge should *count* for something; the *awareness* of that long legacy, unique to our era, necessarily alters what it means to be human, transforming our relationship to the conditions of our existence. It is surpassingly strange that we as a species, arising from within the complex web of living forms, would ultimately prove capable of damaging that web itself. But if that is so, we have exceeded purely evolutionary determinations and become

unnatural in a precise sense. Facing that legacy, our challenge is to step outside biological determinations in a further and opposite sense, *to accept responsibility for addressing the ecological violence endemic throughout our history as a species*, to make reparation as greatly as we can to the web of life from which we evolved and in which we live.

Taking responsibility for that history may not be the first course of action that many observers would consider. Contemplating this long history of ecological destruction, some might simply wish that human beings would cease to exist: only that prospect, they might argue, could protect the further flourishing of life. But this profoundly misanthropic wish, which could never come true in any case, denies that we, too, are part of the life whose future we wish to protect; eradicating ourselves, if only in thought, is to partake in a version of ecological destruction and genocide multiplied many times over. It is to imagine the kind of devastation that our ethical action is aiming to prevent.

The point is not to destroy humanity, but to undo what Stephen Jay Gould called our “cosmic arrogance,” the anthropocentric attitude that imagined we were the pinnacle of evolution, its ultimate goal.¹²⁰ The best strategy in defeating that arrogance is not to negate human history but paradoxically *to affirm it and transform it as a result*—to make our presence on the Earth into a presence *for* the Earth, as an agent charged with protecting all its forms of life. Choosing to do justice to the life of which we are a part, we would freely accept a task that no other species has attempted to perform: to deny our impulse to thrive and reproduce without limit. By taking this unnatural step, we would finally become the stewards of that realm to which we owe our existence and which, thanks to us, can no longer flourish of itself. Paradoxically, by fully assuming our unnatural status as stewards, we would at last do justice to the biosphere, making the thriving of all life an *ethical*, not merely biological, good. If we set out to do so, we might set as our goal the challenge of becoming genuinely indigenous again, of truly *inhabiting* the ecosystems where we live with intelligence, modesty, and foresight, and thus prove ourselves capable at last of joining that long counter-tradition, also evident throughout our history as a species, of human generosity to the ecosystems of which we are a part.

Considering the full dimensions of this decision, then, teaches us that enacting an ecological revolution is a world-historical act, immense in its implications, for through it we would accept responsibility for the ecological costs of human evolutionary and cultural history across the past, present, and future, and as a result would ultimately accept our role as stewards of the biosphere itself. But such a massive act is not a further example of cosmic arrogance. On the contrary, that act has these dimensions only because *any* act we commit today will ramify backwards and forwards across our whole history; in its physical consequences for the biosphere our decision will reveal the overall significance of that history for better or for worse, showing that human beings are in the end agents of reparation or disaster. The enormous, overbearing import of our current moment arises not from our ambition but from our position at the crucial moment of the Earth's climate history. We are at the crossroads, and we simply must choose.

But this act may seem far too immense in another sense. How can we turn against the longstanding historical patterns that have produced our current ease and convenience? Why would we relinquish the unprecedented abundance that meshes so well with our wishes? No doubt doing so will be very difficult. But we need not act out of purely altruistic motives. We now know that business as usual will condemn us to a miserable fate, dissolving the future that anchors the narratives of our lives. To retain the value of our *own* present actions, to maintain the possibility that *we* can live intentionally, we must intervene. Acting wisely, in short, is in our own self-interest. This fact should give us some comfort. It is not so difficult, after all, to set aside immediate whim in the name of long-term self-interest; we learn to do so as soon as we go to school in childhood and in various ways continue to do so throughout adulthood. Delaying some portion of gratification is a necessary part of modern life. A smart decision would simply take such prudence one more crucial step, extending it to the fate of the biosphere itself. Acting responsibly does not require us to become exemplars of stunning virtue, moral heroes of some kind; it only demands that we step up our prudential thinking, applying it to a part of our experience that once seemed exempt from such concerns.

Because acting in this way serves our interests, the fact that it would also conserve a future for others seems less of a burden than a bonus. In

this case, the usual contrast between selfishness and altruism disappears. As it turns out, if we take our own interest seriously, we will fight to preserve a future for a whole range of others as well. Protecting ourselves, we would also save the prospects for Earth's living systems. Our single decision, then, would operate on several levels, saving the future for ourselves, humanity, and the biosphere, all at once.

One way to imagine the full dimensions of the present choice is to incorporate into our present activity the possible experience of those to come, ultimately making them into the guardians of our own future as well. We would see the present through their eyes, judging it as we imagine they will judge it. We might even fancifully imagine ourselves to be the emissaries of the ruined future, its embodiment in the present. We might see ourselves as people out of time, terribly inconvenient to our contemporaries—ambassadors charged with interrupting our moment with bad news, cracking open today's complacencies with a dire message from coming generations. We would warn our compatriots of the disaster to come.

If we saw ourselves in this light, some might suggest that we would be the secular counterparts of the biblical prophets, who warned their hearers of what would follow in the absence of repentance. But we would also have to extend that scenario to contemplate the failure of our warnings. In the biblical world, when prophecy failed, the hope for apocalypse followed; the redemption that did not come to pass in history could only take place through a divine decision to bring history to an end, pass judgment on the living and the dead, separate the elect from the damned, and create a new heaven and earth. (Apocalypse in the biblical sense does not refer to a cataclysmic, final event, but to a final *redemptive* event, one that liberates the redeemed from the horrors of history. The book of Revelation, or of Apocalypse, is after all full of *good* news for true believers.)

In our time, however, we face the possibility that redemption will not come in any form, neither from within history nor from its end, leaving us without divine guarantees, without a judgment day that could impose a moral significance on all time. In that case, we endure in a post-biblical landscape, abandoned to a history that provides no ultimate justice, no final consolation. Our willingness to serve as emissaries of the future

would make us nothing like the biblical prophets; we would instead simply serve as messengers from our own future selves, spokespeople for those whom we will otherwise have damned. We would merely be fallible citizens who wish to do the least harm to those who will follow.¹²¹

Yet even the prospect of acting in that way is now disappearing. Although the case for action is extremely compelling, indeed definitive, our society is now taking the opposite course. As I have argued above, the odds of our taking the necessary action in time are slender indeed and are virtually gone. We are thus in the position of outlining the overall implications of the right choice primarily to grasp its opposite. Understanding responsibility at this late hour may be most useful in helping us comprehend the full force of a radical *irresponsibility*.

What might that irresponsibility look like? Today, although the effects of climate change are already quite visible around the world, we still hesitate to act. It thus seems very likely that those effects will get our serious attention only when they are more widespread, continuous, and severe—only when they are significantly worse. In short, it seems we will act only when the consequences of climate change have become much harsher than today.

A concerted effort in a decade or two, of course, would come far too late; it would not counteract the climate patterns that will have already set in. As a result, in the years after we do act, people will soon notice that their efforts will seem to have accomplished nothing. They will ask, “Why are all the eco-friendly measures not working? Why are we not seeing the results we hoped for?” The usual relation between action and result will be suspended, raising tough questions about the value of addressing the problem at all. Only then, perhaps, will we finally experience the nightmare of enduring in a world that is much more difficult to inhabit, whatever we do.

At that point, we might be tempted to abandon ethical action altogether. Because we will be living in wounded ecosystems, shrinking economies, and distressed societies, we might well cast aside the attempt to live responsibly, choosing instead to hunker down and weather it out on our own terms. For many, only the promise that ethical action might alleviate *further* suffering later on, by ourselves or others, could sustain a choice for ecologically responsible living. But because by then we will

already be enduring the partial collapse of the civilization we know, surviving social conflicts, natural disasters, and food shortages that are unprecedented for us, we may not even have the luxury of worrying about our future fate. We may discover that we are living in the ruins of ethical action itself. Our position might be akin to that of a person who has endured an amputation but must nevertheless save someone from drowning, or a person who has had a lung removed but still must help carry the wounded. In such a situation, acting to help others might be possible, but it is far more difficult and may not occur much at all.¹²²

It is thus all the more astonishing that we will not act today, when doing so might actually prevent that nightmare scenario from coming to pass. The possibility that we might act freely to save the Earth, however, helps clarify that a failure to act is also a choice: a choice to destroy. The ecological revolution is missing today, and will be missing tomorrow, not because it is impossible for us to carry it out but because we *will* not; it speaks of our *decision* to remain relatively indifferent to the destructive aspects of modern culture, to sustain that destruction well into the future, and thus to remain caught by the habits of our common history. This decision, too, we should regard as freely given, as an instance of moral assertion—this time, however, *for* inertia, ineptitude, and ultimately for disaster. It would freely allow our traditions and the bounds of circumstance to define us without limit, to saturate us through and through, and to make us exemplars of what could well be judged as idiocy, mendacity, and moral cowardice. If we made this choice in full awareness of its consequences, we would do so with a certain negative dignity, perhaps, as if we were intent on displaying willful blindness and self-destruction, in embracing intoxication, excess, conflict, and death. But it is far more likely that we will make this decision without noticing it, without truly asserting ourselves at all, lapsing into self-destruction as if it came over us in our sleep.

So far, at least, we may go if we adhere to that slight possibility that acting *now* will enable us to salvage a bit of the stolen future. But if we are honest about the lateness of the hour, we must acknowledge that we may well have *already* decided for calamity without consciously choosing a thing. That numbed decision for disaster grows stronger every day;

irreversible climate change draws nigh; the world we dread is upon us, for it will be almost impossible for us to ward it off now.

What does responsibility look like in the midst of this surrender, as our ecosystems and societies undergo a slow and irreversible collapse? How can we remain responsible in the midst of this general indifference, as the benefits of action are continually superseded, cancelled, or ignored? In these circumstances, the case for responsibility becomes even more difficult; the paradoxes of climate change hit home with terrible force. If we try to sustain an ecological ethics today we would face the stunningly difficult, if not impossible, prospect of *deciding to preserve a future even after it has been largely destroyed*. Even further, we would find ourselves *living forward into the very disaster we are fighting to prevent*. If we take such action, the momentum of history would still carry us directly into the fate we did not and do not choose. In our moment, history not only fails to reply to such efforts; it directly *contradicts* such efforts, as if to mock us for believing in the purpose of action at all. In effect, we would attempt to sustain responsibility amidst its ruins, to remain just when the frameworks in which justice is effective have dissolved.

To sustain an intentional sense of human life in this context takes a supreme moral effort, a belief in human freedom that can defy nearly all odds, a sense of integrity that insists on justice even where it retreats beyond virtually every horizon of possibility. All the overtones of free responsibility I outlined above would be tested to the breaking point, for in our new setting we would be asked to take up a *responsibility seemingly without purpose*.

The difficulty of that moment would come home to us in other ways as well. Once severe climate change kicks in for good, the Earth's temperatures will not return to their former levels, nor will the climate restore itself; on the human time scale, the loss will be permanent. Moreover, the harsher the climate, the greater harm it will do to the communities and people we know, and the more we will grieve for the climate's impact on our lives as well as on the Earth itself. But our grief will have few effective outlets, little space for meaningful resolution. Instead of embarking on a process of mourning that will absorb what we have experienced and renew us, we will find that *there is nothing beyond this loss to move on to*.

Many observers have written about the experience of environmental grief, of mourning for ruined ecosystems. In ordinary circumstances, grief enables us to accept the loss, to acknowledge a new absence within the reality in which we must live, and to face the future having integrated that past into our lives. Through this process of recovery, in some sense we recover our sense of reality, regaining a future through absorbing that loss.¹²³

But grief in the era of climate change can no longer operate in this way. Grieving for those we have lost, we will move forward into *more* loss, into a generalized experience of even *greater* mourning. In effect, because we will face those losses and absorb further devastation *without end*, we will *never fully recover* from them. The process of mourning, which will become inevitable for virtually everyone, will lead to little healing at all. Furthermore, if we acknowledge the prospect that we are not likely to act in time, our emotional situation today transforms as well. Facing a stolen future, mindful of the immense social crises to blossom around the world, already enduring the traumas to come, we have little choice but to mourn *forward*, to mourn *into* the very disaster we grieve. Even the specific emotional future promised by the process of grieving disappears, replaced by nothing that grief can overcome. Already today, and to a greater degree in the years to come, we will have to take on a kind of second-order process of grieving *for the future and for grief itself*, for the very *possibility* of integrating such losses into our lives and surviving.

Because of that fact, we cannot rely on grief, or indeed on any other emotional process, to carry us through this moment. However devastating the crisis for longing, hope, grief, and despair, however harrowing our emotional lives may be at this moment, we cannot salvage them on any familiar terms; we simply must find *another basis* on which to build any prospect of ethical integrity.

The same difficulty confronts us if we contemplate our responsibility to the generations to come. In our era, as the future is disappearing, any ethics that grounds itself in a future good is in danger of shattering beyond repair. Abandoned to history, living without guarantees, we may soon discover that the basis of our efforts to safeguard the biosphere for ourselves and others to come will fail. A purely secular description of our moment may falter as much as a purely religious one; both dissolve

when we attempt to do justice in the midst of the ruins. Once irreversible, severe climate change arrives, once the domain of indifferent events sweep away nearly every positive consequence that might arise from our actions, what could possibly inspire us to be just?

Our only choice in that case would be to abandon all reference to the future—a future for ourselves, for others, or for the biosphere itself. Although I argued earlier in this book that nearly every action we take is grounded on our orientation to the future, under the unrelenting pressure of severe climate change we would have to construct an ethics that has no such orientation, that takes its inspiration from a radically different resource. We would have to adopt an ethics that would no longer have for its ultimate basis a belief that just action would necessarily lead to an eventual good for ourselves or others or a material benefit that might actually arrive. Adopting such an ethics, we would enact justice for another purpose entirely—one realized in the act itself. We would respond to others without calculating whether our action would pay off in the long run, without measuring our action according to the demands of a realistic common sense, accepting the possibility that our actions may have no results that would ever be visible to us or to others. In effect, we would accept a responsibility that would be infinite in still another sense—one that would bear upon us beyond all pragmatic, finite considerations, aiming for a good that is valuable in itself—a good visible, perhaps, only in our intention, in our sense of a justice without which the value of *all* action disappears.¹²⁴

An ethics of this kind—an ethics *in extremis*—can endure nearly any circumstance. In the midst of disaster, where pragmatic action may fail us, where grief itself must run aground, when all the familiar scenarios of daily life and of human emotion decay, we can still enact justice for its own sake. If we act on these terms, we accept a world without redemption, whether religious *or* secular; giving up any appeal for a transcendental solution, by the same token we release ourselves from a purely material history, discovering instead our ability to do justice beyond all calculation. From a certain point of view, it might seem that this mode of justice would enact a caring that could not heal, a politics that could not liberate, a hope that could not come to pass. Yet in fact, if we take action whose benefits we cannot know, giving ourselves to what may never

come to pass, we discover a integrity in the very act of doing justice and show respect for a sanity that may endure even in the ruins.

It might seem that anyone who could adopt such a practice would truly have exceeded the limits of self-interest and become something other than human. But acting in that manner, while exceptional, is not outside ordinary human experience. Today if someone we love contracts a terminal illness, we do not abandon that person; on the contrary, we care and love that person to the bitter end. Love's purpose is the person, not the future. Does it follow that love is somehow religious, that it aims for transcendental ends? Not at all: love ignores transcendence, too, realizing nothing but itself, and as a result constitutes a form of action that aims beyond the religious *or* the secular, one that beyond all others realizes itself through its own acts. However strange it may sound, then, it follows that those who practice an apparently impossible ethics enact a version of this love on another scale.

But even these reflections do not bring us face to face with the most difficult challenge of all. If we found ourselves in the midst of disaster, how would we take responsibility for that disaster itself? Since it would have arrived thanks to human activity as well as human indifference about the harm our activity has been doing to the biosphere, we would have to take the final and unbearable step of accepting the burden of that failure itself.

Some might do almost anything to avoid taking this step. After all, they might say, we have done all we could to save the environment, reducing the harm we do in our own lives and fighting for years to bring about the necessary actions. No doubt for certain people such a protest could ring true. Nevertheless, none of us can claim innocence; all of us in developed societies are implicated in the harm wrought by modern industrial culture. Our very knowledge of climate change depends on the technological infrastructure available to contemporary scientists as they do their research; our very ability to converse about it, to organize activism against it, relies on modern publishing, communication technology, and forms of mobility. We couldn't even participate in a movement to save the Earth without inhabiting the structures we fight against. No doubt it is entirely understandable that we who endure a horror created by human beings might be tempted to sink into resentment and anger against others. Such

a gesture might be bitterly pleasurable and even be partly accurate, but it would enable us to evade the fact that we benefited from and participated in the practices that brought about such devastation.

We would thus do far better to take this failure as our own, to wear the mantle of defeat, to take responsibility for the collective decision not to do the right thing—in short, to accept untold loss as a consequence of our own collective history. Such a step might seem almost impossible to contemplate, so directly does it name our futility and humiliation. Yet by taking that step, we would achieve a certain integrity in our power to assume the full measure of our defeat, to name as our own what would then be visible as the true contours of human being: its ultimate inhumanity. In that bleakest moment, we would accept responsibility even for the fact that our attempts at responsibility fail, taking to our charge what would then be revealed as the nullity of our entire history.¹²⁵

Here is the ultimate, most unbearable level of responsibility: the task of *owning* disaster, putting it to our charge, taking its burden on ourselves as human beings. At first such a step might seem to take us to the furthest, most bitter reach of self-contempt and humiliation; here at last, it might appear, we truly give up, collapse, dissolve into ruin ourselves. But such is not the case. Here, at last, we would move beyond our horror at our inhumanity as well as our grief for the passing of the societies and ecosystems we knew. By taking responsibility for a vast failure, we would in that same gesture accept absolute loss without nostalgia and without condemnation. Giving up the temptation to dismiss humanity as a mere evolutionary anomaly or to cling to some faint idealization of our kind, we would accept humanity in all its inhumanity and thus find ourselves in a space of radical openness, capable of affirming the entire process that brought us into being. Marooned on the junk heap of history, facing no prospect of redemption, we might attain a great serenity, broken and destroyed though we may be.

So it seems that the baffled, broken life I described in the past four chapters can ultimately lead to something more, to a basis for a renewed integrity even in the midst of the ruins. That basis is not a new hope, but the capacity to affirm and endure the worst. To find our way beyond the trauma of our time, to push beyond a scenario of endless grief, we can abandon anything that might heal us and instead *embrace trauma*

and grief themselves without reserve—and discover that by doing so they subtly change: through embracing trauma more fully we can accept the broken world without being haunted and distressed by it; and through submitting fully to grief, even a grief for grief itself, we might find how to relinquish our attachment to recovery, accepting instead a serenity in destitution. By owning disaster in these and other ways, we might relinquish that fidelity to a sense of our innocence and that belief in the validity of our culture which made the shattering of both so painful. Through that process, we may at last lay hold of a new foundation—one so radical that on its basis we may endure whatever may come. On the other side of a mutilated happiness we might discover vaster possibilities, including a capacity for affirmation without limit and a power to love without the hope of return.

In discovering that we may persist in doing justice even in the ruins, we can find the basis for an *ethical* optimism that can survive even in the midst of utter defeat. We need not fear, now or later, that political or climatological realities will cancel our capacity to follow through on our responsibility to others and to the forms of life that have sustained us. By working through the series of potential ethical challenges to the bitter end, by imagining the worst that may befall—and finding that we can survive even *that* horror with integrity—we discover an indestructible ethical agency we may never have known we possessed, discerning hints of possibility that lie unremarked within the impossible challenges of our era, sources of strength that will remain to us even if the future disappears. Through that same encounter with the worst, we learn how to dwell with the full range, however painful, of emotions that arise in response to the dilemmas of our time, at last overcoming the dissociation habitual to our culture.

Bringing these discoveries with us back from this hypothetical future to our own moment, when we cannot yet be certain that all action is futile or that the future has utterly disappeared, we may realize that we can make good *even now* on the agency we have gained through this foray into the future and as a result can face our present difficulties with a surprising authority. Moreover, by returning to the present in this way, we expand the significance of that future ethical decision outward, to include our own present as well. But by assuming responsibility *today*

for the disaster that may come, we necessarily accept the demand to renounce any further participation in the practices that are leading to catastrophe and to make reparation, as far as is possible, for the harm we have done. No doubt our ability to do either is severely constrained; for most of us, simply living our lives does far more harm than we wish, and the task of reparation requires far more of us than we will ever achieve. We who are the inheritors of a disastrous history were never meant to carry that entire history on our backs; it is only understandable that as we try to do so, we may stagger under the load. We will have to develop new reserves of humility, new levels of resilience, new styles of dark comedy to endure. The task we accept seems well-nigh impossible. Yet by taking it as our own we become the agents, and not merely the heirs, of our shared history—even if, as agents, we necessarily have in our hands a truly horrific power to destroy as well as save. In accepting this task, we finally acknowledge what would be true in any case, that at this juncture, as in no other, ours is an infinite responsibility.

What does that power mean for us today in our ordinary lives, as we inevitably face a wide array of decisions about our everyday practices? We cannot do better than to take the most transformative, constructive steps available to us. Because our task is to reduce those practices that do the greatest *physical* harm to the biosphere, the ultimate measure of our willingness to do justice is not purity of heart or intensity of spirit but the practical, measurable effect of our actions. Yet to bring about those concrete results requires a real ethical commitment. As a result, we find ourselves today in what might seem to be a paradox: we accept an incalculable responsibility best when we calculate with great rigor exactly what we can do to make the most difference in our ordinary practices—and carry through on that calculation as well as we can. In short, we must cultivate nothing other than a *pragmatism of infinite responsibility*, one that is endlessly resourceful in discovering and implementing the most sophisticated ideas for salvaging a future. To that task I now turn.

Notes

114. For a harrowing discussion of a recent failure to halt genocide, see Roméo Dallaire and Brent Beardsley, *Shake Hands with the Devil: The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2004).
115. Library of Congress, Bill Summary and Status, 105th Congress (1997–1998), S. Res 98, <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/z?d105:S.RES.98.>
116. Al Gore, *Our Choice: A Plan to Solve the Climate Crisis* (Emmaus, Pennsylvania: Rodale, 2009).
117. For classic discussions of infinite responsibility, see Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), especially 220–247, and Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being: Beyond Essence*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), especially 131–162. For a recent meditation on similar themes as they bear on our current ethical and political dilemmas, see Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (New York: Verso, 2007).
118. Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Penguin, 2006).
119. Diamond, *Collapse*, 277–308.
120. Stephen Jay Gould, *Ever Since Darwin: Reflections in Natural History* (New York: Norton, 1977), 14; see also 38, 62.
121. For further reflections on biblical religion and its relevance for our response to climate change, see chapter twelve.
122. In the midst of disaster, people can demonstrate an amazing capacity for generosity; see Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster* (New York: Penguin, 2009). But if climate change becomes truly severe, it will constitute an ongoing, endless disaster, in contrast to the specific, local events Solnit describes, stretching the human capacity for generosity much further.
123. For discussions of grieving for environmental devastation and loss, see Phyllis Whindle, “The Ecology of Grief,” in *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*, edited by Thomas Roszak, Mary Gomes, and Allen Kanner (New York: Sierra Club Books, 1995), 136–149; Kristine Kevorkian, “Environmental Grief,” *Ecology Global Network*, February 15, 2012, <http://www.ecology.com/2012/02/15/environmental-grief/>; and Marie Eaton, “Environmental Trauma and Grief,” Curriculum for the Bioregion Initiative, Science Education Resource Center at Carleton College, August 2012, http://serc.carleton.edu/bioregion/sustain_lc/essays/67207.html.

124. For related arguments in recent critical theory, see Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, second edition, and *Literature in Secret*, translated by David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 82–116; the essays by Slavoj Žižek, Eric L. Santner, and Kenneth Reinhard collected in *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); and Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*. Such discussions emphasize the demand to love others beyond all thought of merit or return, but they do not consider the unprecedented ethical challenges posed by climate change, including that of enacting justice even without a future. On the need to extend Derrida's thinking in response to climate change, see Tom Cohen, "Anecgraphics: Climate Change and 'Late' Deconstruction," in *Impasses of the Post-Global: Theory in the Era of Climate Change*, volume 2, edited by Henry Sussman (MPublishing, University of Michigan Library; Open Humanities Press, 2012), <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/o/ohp/10803281.0001.001/1:3/--impasses-of-the-post-global-theory-in-the-era-of-climate?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.
125. Compare the account of how the subject can assume responsibility for state of things, thereby converting substance into subject, in Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), 217, and how, by working through the fundamental fantasy that sustains one's being, "the subject accepts the void of his [sic] nonexistence," Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (New York: Verso, 1999), 281.