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The Weak-Willed Heart of Transhumanism's Dreaming

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Calamity Theory: Three Critiques of Existential Risk

Joshua Schuster and Derek Woods

University of Minnesota Press, 2021

136 pp.

What is most interesting about *Calamity Theory* is the irony at its heart. Using the problematics of the existentialist tradition to critique Nick Bostrom's existential risk project is fruitful. Despite the coincidence of word choice, existentialist philosophy has so little in common with any aspects of Bostrom's transhumanist program that it is more of a naked opponent. Such a powerful and succinct critique of such a problematic project as Bostrom's is necessary. Joshua Shuster and Derek Woods should become as widely read and promoted as Bostrom's own works, as well as the fawning content spray of Bostrom's acolytes and allies.

There is no serious flaw in *Calamity Theory*. It is a strong polemic, a solid and clear intellectual argument. What is most important about the book is what it is not yet. This book reads like the start of a new existentialist project. Their critique of Bostrom's transhumanism is correct enough to convince. It is also incisive and fierce enough to implicate the wider culture of coldly optimistic techno-futurism. From this launchpad, one can revive the existential problematic to confront the challenges of our era's unique chaos. Existentialism's creative philosophical tradition is to extract dignity from the most abject human life. Now is the time for a new conception of dignity.

Existentialism as a Historical Heritage

Existentialism has been a subject for the history of philosophy since about the mid-20th century. Historians would define it as a collision of several common themes in philosophy that arose from social and scientific developments in the mid-19th century. Its themes and concerns were shaped by the first wave of scientific atheism to sweep European culture. The New Atheism of this era was the popular uptake of the challenge that Darwin's demonstration of evolution gave to the more pedantic and propagandistic Christian dogma of humanity's cosmic purpose. Existentialist philosophy grappled with understanding existence without relying on a transcendent moral order that justified suffering as a role in a cosmic purpose.

The works that first grappled with this radical absence of humanity's moral guarantor included philosophy, literature, and uncategorizable experiments. The era whose greats included Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky, and Kierkegaard produced works that remain useful in navigating today's political and philosophical chaos. By finding violent power in unyielding submission to dogma, Aleksandr Dugin may be a frightening grandson of Dostoyevsky the person, though the impact of his leap of faith would crush the fragile Kierkegaard. That Nietzsche needed rehabilitation from volkitsch mutation and Heidegger's unfaithful reverence makes a scarily relevant case study of how fascists can twist the most hopeful and empowering words into grist for their bloody fantasies.

Yet there is more value in existentialism than analogical lessons we can learn from works that speak to another time. Existentialism is a philosophical approach whose problems have never been settled. Despite this, it is no longer considered a viable school of philosophy in most academic departments. Most consider existentialism a part of philosophy's past because that continuity of tradition from post-Darwinist Europe through the industrial mass destruction of the World Wars and Holocaust broke with Camus' death and Sartre's slide into open marxism. Existentialist problems were never resolved, only forgotten.

Existentialism's Contemporary Potential

Shuster and Woods return to existentialist problems with an approach adapted to the challenges of our time. Peoples and nations throughout the world who have long been oppressed under Western guns and cultural chauvinism now reassert themselves, and those intellectual expressions themselves respond to the 21st century's challenges. Modern networks of trade, travel, and communication unite the world as its plurality vibrantly explodes. Original existentialism was a tradition of philosophical development for a culture that had lost all universals. Philosophical thinking today occurs in a world with a proliferating diversity of legitimate universals.

Existentialism for the 21st century must, therefore, embrace the possibilities of such pluralism. Shuster and Woods do exactly this when they describe existential thinking as "the philosophical basis for expanding the possibility and accessibility of world-making and world-sharing across the space of existences."¹ The link to the historical tradition of existentialism is clear: the responsibility to create a new order of ethics was a solemn duty when still mourning God's death, but it is now an empowering creative activity. Solidarity and a mutual respect in exchange can be the new political order of such an existentially empowered society.

For Shuster and Woods, existentialist philosophies share a fundamental premise: any existence, including one's own and humanity's, is finite. Breaking this down into three elements, they begin with the object of existential thought: analyzing the "structural conditions and phenomenal 'lived experience' of everyday existence."² Existentialism requires accepting limit conditions on thought itself. There are boundaries on what a person can conceive. Those boundaries may expand, contract, and alter as people's societies and conditions of life change. The boundaries of someone's understanding is a matter of their life and place in the world, so we can change those boundaries by mapping and experimenting with their limits. Yet however adaptable our thinking may be, thought will always have limits. "Existentialism took philosophy in the direction of becoming open to the undecidable and precarious relationship between referentiality and reality."³ The universe is always capable of surprising us.

¹ Shuster and Woods, *Calamity Theory*, 14.

² Shuster and Woods, 13.

³ Shuster and Woods, 83.

That necessary principle of existentialist thinking, an inevitable implication of our finitude, makes it a principled enemy of Bostrom's transhumanism. Existential thought at its purest probes the limits of lived experience itself: mortality, death, and extinction. In doing so, existentialist thought seeks not escape, but better understanding. This would make Bostrom's transhumanism a frothing, rabid enemy of existentialist thought.

Having a Future Means Escaping Humanity

I foregrounded existentialism in this review because developing existentialism for a globalized, plural society is the best positive direction that such philosophy can take. *Calamity Theory's* engagement with the works of Bostrom, a critique in which Shuster and Wood spend the bulk of the book's time and argument, is mostly negative. It is a successful criticism of Bostrom's transhumanism project and the callousness of the broader culture that incubates it. It develops existentialism for the 21st century, however, by explaining what it cannot be.

That said, such a new existentialism has a formidable opponent, if only in cultural cachet, popular fascination, and financial support. Like most such ideas popular among the techno-gelord set, Bostrom's transhumanism is less interesting and innovative than it appears, as *Calamity Theory* precisely describes. Bostrom's research field of existential risk analysis considers risk of the literal extinction of humanity, or the permanent destruction of our technological civilization. The scale of his concerns is so huge as to render trivial the actual crises we face that could reduce our population by billions – pandemics, ecosystem collapse, climate shifts rendering tropical regions uninhabitable.

Existential risk's calculus envisions four categories of human future that can come to pass, only one of which, for Bostrom and the transhumanists of his ilk, is desirable. Extinction is the end of humanity, and so the outcome that existential risk research seeks most strongly to avoid. Bostrom also theorizes an outcome for human civilization of recurrent collapse, where humanity collapses into chaos, poverty, and destruction and rebuilds periodically, only to collapse again. Even the plateau, an indefinitely sustained technological and social state where nothing substantially improves or worsens, is a negative outcome. To subsist and live is, for Bostrom, a failure because humanity as it is already fails to reach its highest potential.

The only good outcome for humanity, as Shuster and Woods identify in Bostrom's thinking, is transhumanism. Such a humanity beyond the human will have overcome vulnerability to pandemics, pollution, ecological destruction, and at the individual scale, disease and death itself. Humanity achieves its full potential only when it abandons all that is mortal and capable of passing away.

Bostrom's transhumanism opposes existentialist thinking because transhumanism's goal is to overcome everything about the human condition that makes existentialism relevant. Its dovetail with existential risk is that transhuman development is the solution to existential risk. Existential risk theory describes the end point and purpose of transhumanism because

the purpose of transhumanism is to overcome all such existential risks: “Transhumanism would exchange existential risk for indefinite existential security.”⁴

The term may be more friendly to the technocratic, atheistic culture where Bostrom has found his most loyal followers and funding streams, but we should not let the flavour of its language distract us from its substance. Indefinite existential security means immortality.

A Scientific Imaginary Becomes Science-Fictional

Theorizing how humanity can transition from the mortal to the immortal is often presented in transhumanist publications as scientific and philosophical matters, but Shuster and Woods rightly identify that these speculations end up in an imaginary grounded more in science-fiction. It is to the detriment of *Calamity Theory*, which Shuster and Woods admit, that they lack the background knowledge in literature and cinema to explore that influence substantively.

The sci-fi aesthetics that most profoundly influence transhumanist thinking overall, Bostrom’s included, centre scientific, ideologically rationalist conceptions of what science and reason are. The exclusivity of this approach necessarily ghettoizes less rationalistic approaches to existential risk problems. Transhumanist thinkers presume that only technological, technocratic, and utilitarian approaches can solve humanity’s problems, even those problems which such rationalism created. Transhumanist methods to overcome immortality most often involve people’s technological augmentation and transformation, as well as interplanetary and interstellar expansion of human societies. As literature, this vision most often produces works that dwell primarily on the details of technological assemblages, rather than emotional characterization or political exploration.⁵

But one does not need to rely on such superficial visions of technological immortality to find literary or cinematic transhumanist imagination. Writers like Philip K. Dick, Octavia Butler, Steven Moffatt, and N. K. Jemisen have all, for example, developed conceptions of transhuman technology and futures that explore how the problems of human nature can persist in conditions of immortality. Dick’s *Ubik* envisions a society where cryogenic suspension provides immortality in a shared dream consciousness, but the greedy and immature still kill at will to survive. Iain M. Banks’ Culture novels describe a civilization transhuman in all but label, where people remain consumed with petty jealousies and the will to violence.⁶

A notable character in Doctor Who becomes immortal, and grows so cold and indifferent to the concerns of anything else alive that she renames herself Me, an order of being apart from all finitude that persists until the end of the universe.⁷ Narratives like these are challenges to the simplicities of Bostrom’s transhumanism, since progress against mortality need not bring

⁴ Shuster and Woods, 94.

⁵ Sandifer, *Guided by the Beauty of Their Weapons*, 5-10.

⁶ Banks, *Excession*, 334-349.

⁷ Tregenna, “The Woman Who Lived.”

the ethical enlightenment required to sustain immortality. It exposes the flaws in a core presumption of Bostrom's thinking that associates progress toward transhumanism with progress across all categories of human life.

What Would a Transhuman Society Be?

Bostrom himself is quick to dismiss opponents of transhumanist goals as enemies of progress, "bioconservatives," anthropocentrically prejudiced people who are too attached to their limited organic being. To Bostrom, transhumanism is a route to "technological maturity," contrasting opponents as juvenile and petty themselves.⁸ Yet his popular depiction of such technological maturity purposely obscures a lot of the radical content in transhumanist ambitions. The closing sections of *Calamity Theory* analyze Bostrom's "Letter from Utopia," in which he describes post-humans as mere effete intellectuals. In our transhuman future, he says in the "Letter," we will spend our time discussing philosophy, mathematics, and high art instead of watching silly social media videos, arguing over sports stats, and gossiping over dating shows and celebrity culture.⁹

Perhaps Bostrom's transhumanist community remains fearful of public rejection if most people were to know the true scale and quality of what humanity would be after overcoming mortality itself. Bostrom's vision of a transhuman is a person whose intelligence is no longer an organism, with perceptual and intellectual abilities more akin to a world-ship powered by its own private sun. The "Letter to Utopia" describes nothing more advanced than John Stuart Mill's account of the higher pleasures in 1861's *Utilitarianism*. Given the political horses to which Bostrom has hooked his program's wagons, thanks to his corporate supporters, he may be afraid to let them know the full extremity of his vision.

Because that extremity also includes a calculus of utilitarian good whose scale constitutes a horrifying brutality. Achieving permanent existential security for humanity necessarily operates on time scales far beyond any human existence thus far. For the future of a species that has only existed for a few hundred thousand years, Bostrom calculates the good on a time scale of tens of millions of years, such as when one predicts what improvements will come to human society if we can persist for the next 50 million years. Over such a time period, the number of humans alive or who have lived could grow as high as 10^{52} people.

The Brutality of Amoral Gods

The perversities of such thinking quickly become evident. Consider that a utilitarian calculation would consider it reasonable to kill 10^9 people to save 10^{15} in the future; a billion dead for a quadrillion to live.¹⁰ Care, love, and mercy are annihilated with utilitarian thinking on these massive scales, thinking which is the prime focus of existential risk calculations. Despite its ostensible focus on achieving ultimate good for humanity, all the attitudes of

⁸ Shuster and Woods, 92.

⁹ Shuster and Woods, 116-117.

¹⁰ Shuster and Woods, 50.

ethics disappear. As Shuster and Wood write, “Instead of the hard work of building a safer world together through universalizing norms of respect, dignity, and consent across varied ways of existential flourishing and social solidarity, Bostrom offers a list of calamitous scenarios and transhuman rescue fantasies that aim to eventually pan out in ‘masters of the universe’ powers.”¹¹

Existential risk thinking focusses on the total extinction of humanity and strategizes the species’ survival, persistence, and victory over tens of millions, even billions of years. Such a scale inevitably trivializes great injustices and crimes like genocides. Bostrom then uses that very restrictive and extreme definition of what existentially matters for humanity rhetorically. It becomes an accusation that all other thinkers ignore the problem of existential risk. That accusation implies that all the more diverse thought about threats to human existence are irrelevant because they think on scales smaller than his own cosmic eye.

How can a pandemic that causes tens of millions of deaths, or climate shifts that render the homes of a billion or more people uninhabitable be minor? Practically speaking, it is because some enclaves of human societies can survive in such conditions. Imagine a multi-billionaire using a portion of his fortune to build a complex in Wyoming or Central Asia with enough farmland to sustain a community of a few thousand and their servants, fortified against bandits and roving gangs. The existential risk field calculates probabilities and prepares for scenarios which threaten the annihilation of humanity as a whole. Any crisis on smaller scales, no matter the suffering and death it entails, is irrelevant to such a scale of destruction.

All Exceptionalism Is Delusion

Any thinking that qualifies as transhumanist shares an important presumption: humanity is an exceptional species because it is capable of overcoming its own mortality. Existentialism, in contrast, accepts that such exceptionalism is false. Any existentialist thinking, especially the new existentialism for our plural and globalized context, must confront the finitude and mortality of the human. There is nothing about humanity that gives us any potential to avoid the fate of all things: that we must pass.

Human exceptionalism necessarily presumes some unique power: the gift, unrealized so far, of overcoming the natural inevitability of passing away. The transhumanist philosopher Phil Torres describes it as “our cosmic endowment of negentropy.”¹² Despite the epic register of his language, Torres actually reveals a fundamental weakness in transhumanist thinking: the presumption that humanity has a mandate to escape the order of being because it is always already an exception. Negentropy is a term developed by a physicist, which sounds like a product of theoretical physics, but is actually an empty postulate.

Erwin Schrödinger postulated in 1944’s *What Is Life?* that the physical structure of chromosomes obeyed a unique set of quantum mechanical laws, which reversed the increase

¹¹ Shuster and Woods, 8.

¹² Torres, “Facing Disaster,” 5.

of entropy itself. Schrödinger never described such laws, nor did anyone else because there are no such laws. Organisms are not exceptions from the inevitability of entropy, but a fine-tuned holding pattern. Isabelle Stengers describes how chemists, particularly Ilya Prigogine, came to understand how processes that were close to equilibrium's entropic stability could roil indefinitely, as long as the process took in more energy. This is the chemistry of metabolism. Dissipating energy constantly, metabolism, and so life, is no exception from the mortality of all else; it can fuel itself.¹³ The order of life, humanity included, is no exception from entropy, though life is best at managing it.

We Demand Our Exemption from Mortality! Transhumanist Ideology

Yet transhumanist thinkers envision humanity with a unique negentropy, even though Schrödinger turned out to be incorrect. There may be, and likely are, a variety of reasons behind this error. Mainstream analytic philosophy of science tends to over-emphasize a particular interpretation of physics as providing the fundamental epistemic framework of all sciences. So it would be understandable if transhumanist thinkers coming from the analytic tradition took the speculations of a physicist more seriously than the empirical research of an organic chemist.

But a more profound ideological commitment conditions why a transhumanist like Torres or Bostrom would use a concept like negentropy, when late 20th century organic chemistry research has rendered it less scientifically significant than phlogiston. That commitment is the refusal to consider humanity and human intelligence to be finite existence. Such refusal is to create a transhumanist program like Nick Bostrom's existential risk. Overcoming the possibility of human extinction, whether in twenty million or two hundred years, is to overcome existentialism as philosophy.

The intensity of that refusal is so extreme that the finite, mortal existence we all live is rendered worthless. The highest good of transhumanist ethics is to overcome the limitations of mortality, which as a moral imperative deems any finite life a failure. It is a philosophical concept with the form and malevolence of Roko's Basilisk. As an ethical principle, the malevolence of Yudkowski's imagined future AI becomes the biting strictness of a moral obligation without leniency or forgiveness. Whatever value there is in humanity now will depend on our future success in overcoming our mortality, in becoming infinite.

The rejection of finitude reveals a conflict at the heart of transhumanist philosophy and all the attached projects and research institutes like Bostrom's edifice. I hesitate to call it a paradox or a contradiction, that implies a more strict and logical structure in what appears to be a psychological matter. It is a refusal to recognize the motives of your own acts. It is the transhumanist's unknown known. Shuster and Woods begin their own, more detailed critique of this problem, "The ostensibly secular and scientific arguments of transhumanism,

¹³ Stengers, *Cosmopolitics II*, 240-241.

especially when they push for the disembodiment of mind into AI, defer to deep-seated patterns of religious thought.”¹⁴

Transhumanism is thoroughly atheistic as an ontology and a society. There is no god to save us, so human technology and innovation must be the means of our rescue from finitude. But the presumption that our mortality is something from which we need rescue is to condemn the entire ontological order of the finite. A transhumanist lives in a universe no better than Hell, and works to build a Heaven in which he may become God. Bostrom is a gnostic atheist. Able to rely on no gods, his work is a prayer for the power to deliver our own salvation.

Care Is Possible Only for That Which Dies

The existential risk project, on the face of it, sounds like a profoundly ethical project. Bostrom’s centre unites creative thinking, statistical analysis, and technological innovation to build a social and economic framework in which humans no longer face death or harm. If the gnostic conception of the world in transhumanism sees ordinary existence as an inherent violence that destroys our potential, then to escape ordinary existence would appear to be the goal of any ethics.

But philosophies of existentialism understand ethics as emerging from the very precarity and vulnerability of finite existence. Shuster and Woods write “Ethics is the granting of care to the precarious, not granting perfection to the imperfect. As Jonas states, ‘Only for the changeable and the perishable can one be responsible.’”¹⁵ Ethics is to orient yourself around responsibility for another, and there are many ways to express that responsibility. Existential risk research does express this, with its focus on securing a future for all humans who may eventually come to exist over the next millennia and cosmic epochs. The ultimate goal of existential risk projects responds to precarity by seeking to end it. But that focus only on most catastrophic or triumphal scales reduces any smaller or more immediate ethical responsibility to the invisibility of a rounding error. That is the case for pandemics and famines enabled by severe climate disruption as well as personal relationships reveals that the cosmic ambitions of existential risk have grotesquely limited its relevance.

The existentialism toward which *Calamity Theory* is a launching pad has far greater potential than existential risk for a more complete ethical application. If existentialism expands “the possibility and accessibility of world-making and world-sharing across the space of existences,” then its basic framework for thinking must include the fundamental elements of how we make and share our worlds. Such sharing “thus proposes a kinship of becoming: no telos, no deus ex machina to rescue us, no clockwork to keep us ticking along; and on the other hand, the rich plenitude, with all its joys and hazards, of our entanglement in the place, time, and multispecies complexities of life on Earth.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Shuster and Woods, 29.

¹⁵ Shuster and Woods, 111.

¹⁶ Rose, *Wild Dog Dreaming*, 44. Shuster and Woods quote this exact passage in *Calamity Theory* 111-112.

The quote above from Deborah Bird Rose appears in *Calamity Theory*, but because of the book's polemical focus on an enemy philosophy with considerable material advantages in promotion, Shuster and Woods do not follow it up in deep or comprehensive directions. Those directions appear to flow through the revival, as part of the global resurgence from Western empires, of Indigenous philosophy as living thought traditions. Existential concerns find their solutions as the ethics of ecological philosophy.

Our concerns for the precarious and fragile are fulfilled in a politics whose purpose is transforming our economic and industrial systems away from combustion toward renewal and regeneration. Much of this philosophy has already been developed in the work of the Anishnaabeg thinker Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. It describes a society whose economy has no wealth accumulation, neither in capital nor the state. The fundamental principle of its ethics and politics is symbiosis, mutual productivity.¹⁷

Capitalist Contradictions in the Transhumanist Project

The possibility of such a world does not appear to play a major role in Bostrom's work, in the wider transhumanist project, or in existential risk research, according to Shuster and Woods. Despite the apparent radical nature of viewing human endeavours from the cosmic standpoint of million-year timelines, existential risk researchers tend to avoid any radical political solutions. While Bostrom considers the spectre of more horrifying pandemics or ecological destruction from climate change inadequate threats to human existence, he is concerned about the totalizing destruction of nuclear war. Despite this, Bostrom's existential risk research group does no advocacy for disarmament. Beyond even this quietism, think tanks linked to Bostrom and related transhumanist projects receive funding from the world's most powerful nuclear-armed military, that of the United States of America, for their potential applications in artificial intelligence.¹⁸

The reason why may lie in the continuity that the futuristic visions of transhumanism and existential risk shares with everyday risk management in capitalist economics. Such risk management strategies are less about preventing harm than they are rendering the destructive effects of profitable processes invisible for those powerful enough to stop them. Colonialism's exploitation continues despite ostensible political freedom for impoverished populations: they shoulder the risk of our global capitalist economy whose fundamental energy input is fossil fuel combustion.¹⁹

Risk management for the sake of maintaining corporate profit from the minerals and petroleum industry considers it reasonable to, for example, destroy whole ecosystems and communities' health to build coal mines in Mozambique,²⁰ raze villages in mass violence to

¹⁷ Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 76-80. In terms of today's states, Simpson is a Canadian philosopher, but her philosophical tradition is more properly understood as Anishnaabeg, not Western.

¹⁸ Shuster and Woods, 40.

¹⁹ Malm and Zetkin, *White Skin Black Fuel*, 14-17.

²⁰ Valoi, "When People Cough."

build mines in Guatemala,²¹ and spark a civil war over control of copper resources in Papua New Guinea.²² It is the same brutal utilitarian calculation that would write off billions of lives for the sake of the species' immortality in the projected future.²³

The continuity of Bostrom's existential risk project with the banal brutality of corporate risk management is more than pathetic. It violates any argument for an ethical motivation of transhumanist thinking and existential risk research and preparation overall. Bostrom promotes the existential risk project as an investment in the future of humanity, and calculates the good for populations of septendecillions living over tens of millions of years. But the model of risk management betrays any ethical interest in its mitigation. The problematic pedigree of the existential risk project becomes more clear when we consider its main funders: Elon Musk, Dustin Moskovitz, Jaan Tallinn among other multibillionaires increasingly famous for how they gouge profit from the suffering and deprivation of millions. That such delusional robber barons guarantee the wealth of transhumanist research institutes is a sign of where their benefits will likely accrue. Whatever technology may eventually develop to rescue humanity from its mortality, only the most wealth and powerful will have access.²⁴

Conclusion: What Is the True Waste Here?

The shining pretence of transhumanism and existential risk research collapse into billionaire-funded fantasies of divine salvation. He cries for a god to save us, praying that in becoming gods we save ourselves. Yet he remains devoted to god as the lowliest, most abject sinner, unable to accept that reality is inherently finite. The angels of Bostrom's heaven may play synthesizers instead of harps, but he still prays to be among them. Bostrom's entire transhumanist project is driven by fear of finitude, fear that what is will dissolve, fear of the oblivion in that dissolution. He takes for nobility the quiver of a coward in the face of our finitude.

I think Bostrom's project of achieving transhuman ascension is impossible, but impossibility is no reason to abandon a worthwhile aim. Bostrom's transhumanist project is not worthwhile because it takes dejection for nobility, and sees only foolishness in the noble.

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²¹ Findlay, "Canadian Mining Companies."

²² Laslett, *State Crime on the Margins of Empire*.

²³ Shuster and Woods, 41.

²⁴ Shuster and Woods, 6.

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