The end of the world? The educational perspective

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Abstract
Confronted with climate change, political polarization, democratic failures, impotent policies, economic regression, war and violence apocalyptic views tend to obliterate perspectives on the future of humankind. This will affect first and foremost younger generations, and thus emphasizes the role of education. But fatalistic and pessimistic views about the possible end of the world cannot be remedied by education as such. It will be important *what* will be taught and *how* teaching proceeds. First, education should not only focus on the future but reflect on the past (showing that in the history of all civilizations ideas of decline and collapse have circulated), and analyse the present (showing that apocalyptic ideas are not uniform, but depending on socio-economic conditions, culture and religion). Second, focusing on the future, it should outline at least three responses to apocalyptic views: resignation (giving up the idea that collapse and decline can be averted), resistance (efforts to eliminate degeneration and produce renewal through science or social and genetic engineering), and re-evaluation (reappraise fundamental values and upwardly adjust rather than devaluate them). This last response aims at persistent and piecemeal transformation, inspired by the hope that change for the better is possible. It was in fact the basic motivation to launch the new discipline of bioethics in the 1970s. To avoid the possible extinction of humankind, all types of wisdom should be harnessed to counter global threats and to ensure survival. But in order to be inspirational, bioethical discourse should be more critical and prophetic. It should inspire hope that things can improve and we can do better.

Apocalyptic views

A global survey among 10,000 children and young adults (16-25 years old) in ten countries around the world reports that 75% feel that the future is frightening, and 56% that humanity is doomed. In some countries the percentages are even higher. In Brazil, Portugal and India 80% and more of the participants agree with the statement that the future is frightening. In India and the Philippines respectively 74% and 73% of the surveyed children and young adults think that humanity is doomed. [1] The feeling that there is no future is in all countries associated with feelings of betrayal and abandonment since governments are failing to act adequately and do not seem to care of future generations. Many people around the world experience anxiety about climate change: they are pessimistic about the time to come. This is especially bitter for young people who still have a future ahead of them.

Apocalyptic visions and sentiments of malaise and despair seem to amplify today because humans are confronted with mega-problems. There is a general feeling that the challenges are simply too big and global to be addressed by only one country, let alone individual persons. Since individual agency seems futile, human beings feel powerless against apocalyptic

threats. Apocalyptic feelings of doom and gloom are not only related to the magnitude of the challenges but also, as the survey mentioned above indicates, to failures to enact adequate responses. Governments and international bodies are not undertaking serious action; even when they agree on remediating policies implementation is weak, or only effectuated in some places and countries, and not at the global level, so that deterioration of the climate continues, risks of pandemics are not diminished, destructive wars continue, and development of artificial intelligence is not regulated. Apocalyptic scenarios are threatening in different ways. Nuclear war destroys human beings as well as their lifeworld, and can make life on earth unbearable, but it is a catastrophic event located in time and place as the result of human decisions. A pandemic apocalypse is primarily devastating for human (and perhaps other living) beings, without destruction of the lifeworld but it is also a localizable event although less clearly related to human activity. An AI apocalypse will be calamitous for human beings, reducing them to subjects controlled by more intelligent machines but it will not destroy the planet; it will be the result of a gradual process rather than of a distinct event, although ultimately produced by human decisions. A climate apocalypse seems to be of a different order; it is not an event located in time and place, but an irreversible transformation of the lifeworld that makes the planet uninhabitable. Its deleterious effects are, at least initially, not easy to perceive, but become increasingly undeniable; but then, the process of catastrophic deterioration can no longer be reversed. It takes time to recognize how human decisions in the past have impacted this process, and it is not certain how actual decisions will bring any relief, unless after a very long time. Doomsday scenarios should therefore be taken seriously, as argued in *Laudato Si'*, stating that "the present world system is certainly unsustainable from a number of points of view…" so that "Doomsday predictions can no longer be met with irony or disdain". [2] The risk is that we leave a destroyed and uninhabitable world to future generations.

The role of education in regard to apocalyptic views

In most societies education is regarded as an important force for change. In order to remedy and nuance fatalistic and pessimistic views about the possible end of the world it will be imperative to think about *what* to teach and *how* to teach. In this contribution, I will argue that education should not only focus on the future but reflect on the past (showing that in the history of all civilizations ideas of decline and collapse have circulated), and analyse the present (showing that apocalyptic ideas are not uniform, and depending on socio-economic conditions, culture and religion). Second, focusing on the future, it should critically examine

the prevailing responses to apocalyptic views: rejection (denying that there are serious problems endangering the future), resignation (giving up the idea that collapse and decline can be averted), resistance (efforts to eliminate degeneration and produce renewal through science or social and genetic engineering), and re-evaluation (reappraise fundamental values and upwardly adjust rather than devaluate them).

1. Taking some distance; analyse the past

Apocalyptic views are often associated with the belief that contemporary challenges are intractable and unsolvable. This belief is paradoxically reinforced through crisis talk: challenges are labelled as existential threats that require urgent action; little time for action is left before they reach a tipping point and morph into really uncontrollable disasters. When such wake-up calls are ignored, and no effective interventions are undertaken, the sense of impending apocalypse and powerlessness only becomes larger. Reflection on past experiences however can mitigate anxieties and provide a more nuanced and positive assessment of the resilience of human beings and the adaptive ability of civilizations. There is a long history of predicting the imminent collapse of civilization and the end of the world. [3] Doom and gloom has been foretold in famous works of Gibbon (in 1776), De Gobineau (in 1853-1855), Nordau (in 1892), Spengler (in 1918-1922) and Toynbee (in 1934) but in each case the predictions have not materialized. Cultures and civilizations have been transformed but not annihilated. The past therefore is not a long history of failures, and humanity has shown to overcome global disasters as the example of previous pandemics (plague and cholera) demonstrate, and in some cases even to eradicate global threats (for example smallpox). This is not an argument to conclude that apocalyptic views are without substance or simply terrifying. An apocalypse reveals dissatisfaction with the current state of the world, and necessitates critical reflection on contemporary society and culture. This critical analysis is provided in *Laudato Si'* when Pope Francis uses formulations such as "throwaway culture", "excessive anthropocentrism", lack of "sense of fraternity" and "dominant technocratic paradigm". But his conclusion is not pessimistic: "we know that things can change". [4]

2. Examine responses to apocalyptic views; analyse the present

The continuous articulation of the idea that the world as we know it will come to an end, and that the processes and challenges obliterating future perspectives are intractable leads to several responses, ranging from rejection, resignation, and resistance.

Rejection

A substantial minority of people do not believe in climate change as a serious threat. They reject the scientific evidence for the phenomenon and deny that it is caused by human behaviour. [5] Others think that the problem is exaggerated and that the threat is not as severe as posited by scientists and mainstream media. One argument is political: apocalyptic discourse is dangerous since it implies an authoritarian and linear deterministic view of history: the future is fixed, and human options are limited. Since the future is not open and alterable, this discourse leads to fatalism and passivity, and undermines debate, pluralism, and dissent in the present time. [6] Another argument against apocalypticism is historical. It underlines that humankind has continuously been confronted with minor and major catastrophes but has always survived. Apocalyptic views are unnecessarily alarmistic, and therefore tend to paralyze the capacity to cope with threats and challenges. This argument has two sides: on the one hand it disputes that contemporary problems will magnify and endanger the survival of humankind and the planet; it won't be that bad. On the other hand, it is confident that human beings are determined and resourceful enough to find timely solutions and responses. The third argument to reject apocalyptic scenarios refers to science and technology. It is twofold, first arguing that contemporary challenges are not new, and second, that scientific and technological knowledge have solved and reduced numerous past challenges and can do that again. [7]

Resignation

The Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa illustrates another response to apocalyptic views. Recognizing his vulnerability and the horrors of life, he decided to perfect the art of abstinence: "I decided to abstain from everything, to go forward in nothing, to reduce action to a minimum…"[8]. He has no belief or hope in the future, and cultivates an attitude of indifference towards the world and its course. This response articulates that we have to accept the inevitable. It is pointless to reject that the apocalypse is approaching, and useless to offer resistance. The best we can do is to assume a position of nihilism and indifference.

The response of resignation has several versions. One is based on the traditional concept of apocalypse: annihilation will be followed by a new beginning. In this perspective, destruction is necessary, even if the time until extinction will be horrifying, but if we endure it there will be hope of renewal. This response has been manifested in religious and secular millenarist movements emphasizing that total destruction of the present corrupted world is inevitable to build a new world order. [9] Another version of the resignation response points out that

human action is futile. The belief that apocalypses can be prevented, and that in particular climate can be managed and governed is an illusion. First of all, catastrophes are generally not the result of discrete human interventions or decisions but rather of gradual underlying processes that take some time to develop. Second, there is no mechanism or institution that is able to prevent or mitigate catastrophes. That would require cross-border cooperation and global collective action which is at the current moment more and more unlikely given the retreat in nationalistic approaches in numerous countries. A third version articulates that humans can to a certain extent at least do one thing: drastically reduce the human population of the planet. Accepting that the world is heading towards its end, and is thus without a future, it would be immoral to bring children into existence. In this perspective, the disappearance of humanity is not a valuable loss. Without new persons born, the exploitation and deterioration of the natural environment would stop. [10] This last view is related to a final version of the resignation response. It argues that humans cannot abstract themselves from the apocalyptic scenery; since they are part of it, they do not have the power to make any changes. The new era of the Anthropocene has begun and humans are subjected to its processes and consequences; they are already in the process of the Sixth Extinction. This version is the expression of a philosophy of anti-humanism, formulated in the final sentence of a famous book of Michel Foucault: "…man would be erased, like a face in sand at the edge of the sea." [11] In this view humanism as the project of the Enlightenment should be rejected. Traditional anthropological concepts such as human nature, humanity, rationality, agency, and responsibility reflect a specific anthropological configuration of knowledge and mode of self-understanding that regards the human being as a sovereign subject that organizes the world around him in order to objectify, control and bring it to submission. As an epistemological project, humanism assuming that knowledge is grounded in the essential characteristics of humanity is coming to an end.

Resistance

Rather than rejecting or accepting the impending apocalypse, the third response envisions that the doomsday scenario can be prevented, or at least delayed or made less worse by immediate and sustained action. Well-known in Europe is Extinction Rebellion (XR); its aim is to compel governments into action through non-violent civil disobedience. Activists feel a moral obligation to act in the present out of concern for future generations, and are prepared to break the law in order to save the world. [12] Another form of resistance proceeds from a more positive perspective. The notion of apocalypse itself in a certain way is the expression of

resistance. It emerges within a worldview of deep dissatisfaction and fundamental critique of the current civilization with its practices of oppression and injustice. Apocalyptic discourse invites identifying, analysing and countering the causes of decline, such as capitalism, neoliberalism, globalisation, racial degeneration, the myth of progress, or the liberal state. The idea of doom should be welcomed since it is a possible beginning of a new, just and free world. The end of the world is only the end of this world, not the end of time or history, but the annihilation of a particular way of life rather than of humankind. Herbert Marcuse, for example, predicted the demise of Western civilization because of its material affluence. The root of apocalyptic global threats such as the risks of nuclear war and of technological catastrophes in Marcuse's time, but also of apocalypses due to environmental collapse and artificial intelligence in our times, is not human activity but rather the system in which humans live, with ruthless exploitation of nature and thoughtless application of technology. Nonetheless, the future could be better. Marcuse's critical diagnosis of the present presupposed the existence of a human subject with freedom, values, hopes, and aspirations in opposition to the present world and society. [13] A different form of resistance is rational optimism, directed against apocalyptic views themselves. These views are not rejected; they are considered as real concerns about possible dangers that jeopardize the future of humankind but we can be more optimistic towards the current situation and possibilities to influence potential apocalyptic trends. Doom scenarios are not denied but taken seriously while at the same time relativized and nuanced because they are analysed in the perspective of factual data and historical trends. [14]

Reappraisal

The idea of an apocalypse is unsettling because it predicts the breakdown of the world we know, but even more because of the loss of values that we cherish or the moral ideals that are not realized or are seriously corrupted. If it is assumed that an apocalypse will not be the final end, but the transition to a new beginning, current values and ideals are definitely lost, and need to be lost to allow a new beginning but new ones need to be imagined and articulated as tools to construct a better world. Apocalyptic views are associated with a moral assessment. They present a critical and ominous diagnosis of what is wrong with the current human predicament, an expression of lethal and fateful vulnerability, and are therefore a kind of moral inventory of the evils and deficiencies of our times. Moreover, it is clear that the responses to apocalyptic views also imply a specific ethical stance. Rejection assumes that current human well-being is paramount and concern with future generations is insignificant.

Resignation attributes no value to human agency since the fundamental vulnerability of the current world order cannot be undone; anthropocentrism, humanism and belief in scientific progress are deceiving and futile. The ethical underpinnings of responses of resistance are more articulated. They express the value of collective action, *in casu* civil disobedience, formulate visions of a future society with freedom, justice and equality, or emphasize the values of science and technology as well as international cooperation and regulation. Curiously, why and how apocalyptic views should be resisted is often not elaborated in ethical terms. Ethical discourse is obviously not regarded as a powerful motivator to effectuate transformations. It is not clear how citizens should be motivated to act, nor how governments should come to agree on certain regulations and why they should feel obliged to implement them, and neither is the question raised who is responsible, and thus to blame, for ecological destruction. In the end, these are basic ethical concerns that need to be addressed. Because apocalyptic scenarios are mobilizing moral values and activate issues of blame and responsibility, they are not merely diagnostic but simultaneously prognostic. They predict the end but call at the same time for reflection. This is due to the double meaning of 'the end': it is the final period of time for the world but also the purpose, aim or meaning of the world. It will finish but has it accomplished its purpose, aspirations, and intentions? To conclude that it is better for the world, or for this world to end, or that it is useless to undertake efforts to prevent its demise, implies the belief that there is no reason why the world should exist or continue to exists: it has lost its end. Apocalyptic visions are not only projected on the future but they instigate a critical look at the past and the present which have produced the current disastrous situation. The most important thing is that they disclose a range of possibilities for the future, opening up new horizons of expectations. The recognition of vulnerabilities experienced in the present is therefore taken as incitement to the moral imagination to go beyond apocalyptic imagery, and to conceive new and alternative ways of thinking the human presence in the world, and to promote a moral discourse of hope, focused on the question what are fundamental values to preserve for the future. Resistance to apocalyptic views is not first of all aimed at saving the world but is trying to remake it. Since the future is not closed and determined, it conceals alternative possibilities. The predicted apocalyptic future creates a normative motivational framework. [15] Imagery about the end of the world (in the sense of its termination) therefore leads to reappraisal, new thinking about the end of the world (in the sense of its purpose or meaning). Why are we on Earth? What kind of world do we want to leave to our children and grandchildren? What is needed, according to *Laudato Si'* is "a

distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking", otherwise "a bold cultural revolution." [16]

3. Enlarge the moral imagination

While moral concerns are reflected, explicitly or implicitly, in most responses to apocalyptic views, as argued above, ethical discourse itself seems rather powerless in the debates about the end of the world. From an ethical perspective, we know what we should do, but we don't do it, neither individually nor collectively. Earlier, bioethical approaches have been criticized because they are too narrowly concerned with individual and short-term perspectives, and ignore the social and environmental context of challenges. However, a broader notion of bioethics is developing that widens the perspective into a really global and planetary one which is enlarging the moral imagination, making ethical discourse more prophetic and focused on the future.

Recent philosophers have rehabilitated the role of the imagination in the field of science, philosophy and ethics. Ernst Cassirer, for example, argues that it is characteristic of all the great ethical philosophers that they do not think in terms of mere actuality. Their ideas cannot advance a single step without enlarging and even transcending the limits of the actual world. Possessed of great intellectual and moral power, the ethical teachers of mankind were endowed too with a profound imagination. Their imaginative insight permeates and animates all their assertions. [17] Mary Midgley points out that imaginary visions of how the world is and should be "are the necessary background of all our living. They are likely to be much more important to use, much more influential than our factual knowledge." [18]

Imagination as an activity of the mind is not merely representational, making copies of sense experiences, reproducing actual experiences, but it is creative, constructive, and productive; it takes us beyond the limitations of empirical experiences; it is the ability to detach ourselves from our actual situation. It takes us to the dimension of the future.[19] In this sense it is transcendent, as explained in the philosophy of Gaston Bachelard: "Imagination is not … the faculty of forming images of reality; it is rather the faculty of forming images that go beyond reality, which *sing* reality." [20] Since it opens our eyes to new types of vision, Bachelard calls imagination "spiritual mobility": it renews the heart and the soul. [21]

Imagination is a powerful resource for ethics. Moral imagination generates different framings of situations. First, it enlarges the horizon and expand sympathies. It allows the ability to empathize with others, recognizing situations that demand moral action. I imagine myself in the situation of another person, going beyond the limits of my own experience. Edith Stein has argued that we can imagine ourselves as the other since we recognize what we share. Imagination makes us aware of values beyond the limits of our own experience. [22] It is the capacity of shifting perspectives; it places us in the standpoint of others, envisioning a variety of moral viewpoints and expanding our moral horizon. An example is the emergence of human rights discourse in the 18th century. [23] Second, imagination is a creative power. It conceives alternatives to problematic situations and identifies various possibilities for acting, envisioning how harm can be prevented and potential help can be offered. It opens up an horizon of possibilities, producing worldviews, ideals, and values to guide moral perception and direct human action. Moral deliberation, according to John Dewey, is "dramatic rehearsal": in the imagination we try out various alternative and possible lines of action. [24]

Moral imagination and education

To address the issue of the end of the world in education the moral imagination can play an inspiring role. How can moral imagination be made operational, especially when faced with apocalyptic scenarios? These scenarios demonstrate that imagination can be misguided and misdirected. It can be confounded and captured in the past, regarding the future as closed so that it distorts our vision and is dominated by images of doom and gloom rather than hope and expectation. In this way, imagination is 'truncated'; it is restricted and mobilizes only one of its dimensions since it is narrowly reproductive and no longer creative and constructive. Its fascination with the end of the world as ultimate catastrophe interferes with the values and ideals that give sense to what life is all about, and that defines the end of the world as purpose and meaning. In order to fully engage the potentials of the moral imagination, two ways are available to ethical discourse, and can be demonstrated in educational efforts.

On the one hand, it should be recognized that a broad ethical framework is available for the analysis and clarification of contemporary global threats. Such framework as presented in global bioethics which is not only focused on individual concerns but also on the perspective of society, community, as well as the planet [25] If there is a need, as Pope Francis argues, to have a "new way of thinking about human beings, life, society and our relationship with nature", then the role of education is to create new habits focused on harmony "within

ourselves, with others, with nature and other living creatures, and with God". [26] Education should cultivate the virtues of a balanced lifestyle, in harmony with creation, but also the virtues of a culture of care. These virtues can be fostered through considering and employing principles of global bioethics, that not only ask respect for human dignity and respect for individual autonomy, but also for vulnerability, justice, solidarity, the environment, and future generations.

On the other hand, education could use a range of tools to stimulate and enlarge the moral imagination of students, employing for example stories, cases, exemplars, simulations, games, poetic languages and metaphors. [27] Since fears of the future for most people are no longer abstract but real and concrete personal concerns, the focus should be on practical experiences. The virtues recommended by Pope Francis can be seen at work for instance in exemplars, individuals who are admirable and who we might want to imitate or resemble, even if they are exceptional. *Laudato Si'* makes many references to exemplars, among others Saint Francis and Saint Thèrèse of Lisieux. In the educational perspective of global bioethics, numerous exemplars are available. I would like to mention only two who have inspired me.

Jacques-Désiré Laval (1803-1864), also called the 'apostle of Ile Maurice', a medical doctor from Normandy, became a priest after a near-fatal accident, and decided to go to the island of Mauritius to work among the recently liberated slaves, but also among a diverse population of poor and marginalized immigrants. He lived among them and learned their language, using his medical expertise to improve living conditions as well as agriculture. He also set up programmes of mutual assistance in various communities. Initially, the white colonists and the British administration did not trust him; he was threatened and had for some time to work under police protection. When he died in 1864 more than half of the population of the island attended his funeral. His life illustrates how even under the worst circumstances divisions among people and racial prejudices can be overcome, and how care can be extended to all people on the island: Hindus, Muslims, Catholics and Protestants. [28]

Another exemplar is Paul Farmer (1959-2022), an American medical doctor and anthropologist from Harvard Medical School who became involved with Haitian migrant workers and did volunteer work in a hospital in Haiti. He established Partners in Health, an international non-profit organization providing free healthcare to ill people living in the poorest areas of the world. Its motto is: Together, we can repair the world. But also: injustice

has a cure. The organization provided last year more than 3 million outpatient visits, 2.1 million women's health checkups, and over 2,2 million home visits conducted by community health workers in countries like Haiti, Rwanda, Malawi, and Kazakhstan. Farmer has inspired many students and colleagues to reimagine the field of global health. He rejected the assumption that the same level of high-quality health care available to the rich could not be provided to the poor. [29] He called this 'failures of the imagination' and he devoted his live to show that this assumption was wrong and that imagination can produce a bolder vision of what is possible, and how this could translate into practical activities. He left "a legacy of light and hope" [30]

Conclusion

Michel de Montaigne writing his *Essays* in the 16th century was impressed by the power of imagination. It allows us to envision other modes of living, other thoughts and ideas than our own, opening up to diverse forms of humanity; it tears us away from the present. In his chapter on the education of children he gives the example of Socrates who answered when asked where he came from, not Athens but from the world. His imagination was "fuller and wider, embraced the whole world for his country, and extended his society and friendship to all mankind; not as we do, who look no further than our feet" [31] Through imagination we can go outside of ourselves and putting ourselves in the place of others, opening our being to new perspectives and ideas. Living in a time of violent conflict and civil war, Montaigne was constantly having the image of death and destruction before him. [32] But he was hoping to understand these images of doom and decline, using the imagination to see the world in perpetual motion, not as ending but as becoming a better and more humane one in the future. [33]

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