

Concepts and Perspectives

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Abstract

Non-technical summary. The polycrisis, an inadvertent peril of our own making, poses an existential threat to the modern world. Given humanity's innate desire to live safely, and to prosper, what explains this self-inflicted danger? Root causes of the polycrisis are both material and ideational. This essay focuses on the latter, exploring the impact of an exaggerated sense of human exceptionalism which legitimizes profligate behavior and releases us from accountability to each other, to the planet, and to future generations.

Technical summary. The polycrisis presents an existential threat to modern civilization on Earth. Neither desirable nor purposeful, it is an inadvertent consequence of collective human agency, a dangerous phenomenon with the power to override prudent, morally sound behavior. Emerging from the totality of multiple global stresses interlinked by myriad causal pathways, the polycrisis is a coherent entity which can, and does, amplify and accelerate local crises (such as supply chain disruptions, political uprisings and war, or natural catastrophes) into a cascading storm of alarming scale and intensity. I argue that these material features of the polycrisis find their origin in and are authorized by an underlying ideational stratum – a belief system – which lends legitimacy and strong forward momentum to the creation of entangled component stresses. This stratum features an exaggerated sense of human exceptionalism, an anthropocentric zeitgeist, and a licentious conception of freedom, all of which have released us from accountability to each other, to ethical forbearance, to future generations, and to the planet.

Social media summary. Multiple entangled stresses threaten our world. This 'polycrisis' emerges from the pathology of human exceptionalism.

1. Introduction: part I

As defined and described in the lead article for this collection, the polycrisis in which we are now entangled is not the result of bad luck, nor is it a perfect storm, the unhappy confluence of separate streams of disruptive events and trends. It is a unique phenomenon of our own making, rarely encountered in history and never at today's scale, merging multiple global stresses into a single, composite mass. As such, disruptions in social, built, and natural systems, linked by myriad causal pathways, spread rapidly, disproportionately affecting and further destabilizing each other. The polycrisis now coming into clearer view is complexly structured, dynamic, dangerous, and intensifying aggressively.

I adopt here the perspective which illuminates the polycrisis as a singular entity, an emergent phenomenon in a reciprocal relationship with its component parts. Its functionality is informed by the nature of and linkages among those parts but, inversely, the whole can guide and influence their individual behaviors (O'Connor, 2021). Highlighting this influence is the essential advantage that can be brought to bear by the holist approach. For example, problematic causal pathways not visible from the reductionist perspective may come into view, opening the possibility of unique corrective interventions which complement bottom-up mitigation efforts. Second, a wider perspective may help to prioritize the pathways of which we are already aware, thus sharpening the timeliness and effectiveness of any corrective action taken. And third, a holist methodology and ontology may help determine whether the polycrisis has a root cause and, if it does, what we may do about that. This third problematic will be the central focus of this essay.

Insufficient attention has been paid to the origin of the polycrisis. As mentioned above, it is a phenomenon of our own making, not an historical accident. But to what can we attribute this dubious accomplishment? Granting that the existence of such a dangerous entity cannot reasonably be construed as desirable or purposeful, its creation – its scope, complexity, and aggressiveness – must be an unintended consequence of human behavior, the unfortunate outcome of something gone wrong. Given our hegemonic status on Earth and associated freedom to forge our own future, and, presumably, our embedded intention to survive and prosper as a species, it defies logic that we would 'significantly degrade humanity's prospects' as Lawrence et al. put it (2024, p. 6), or permit the self-induced termination of our tenure here, as a worst-case cascading polycrisis certainly implies. Unwanted and unbidden, the polycrisis is therefore paradoxical and requires explanation. I will argue that its most important explanans, and its

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most telling feature, is its dysfunctional normative character; that it may be usefully characterized as a manifestation of a social pathology with the power to override the human predilection for prudent behavior, thus aggravating global stresses.

2. Introduction: part II

Regarding the problem of origins, we may identify both material and ideational roots. The material elements of polycrisis are already familiar, starting from the foundational fact that multiple global instabilities (in energy, finance, food and water supply, and much more) prefigure the international landscape. These incipient crises, though usually treated independently, share several common stresses (climate change, market volatility, technological vulnerability) and conduits along which the vectors of disruption can move rapidly (electrical grids, banking systems, commercial trade routes). Stochastic trigger events (supply chain disruptions, natural catastrophes, political uprisings and war) can ignite cascading turbulence among interlocked systems, leading to a worldwide storm of surprising scale and intensity. These material elements of the polycritical present are well-known but they do not tell the full story. Alongside the (unrealized) intention to keep global stresses within manageable limits, there also exists an ideational feature of human behavior on Earth which supports and encourages the unstable architecture of the polycrisis. Unexplored and poorly understood, the character and formative power of this ideational domain will be examined in this essay.

If the polycrisis is in fact an emergent phenomenon with influential properties and autonomous capabilities, then those properties and capabilities extend beyond but must originate from its component parts, both physical and metaphysical. The latter include beliefs, values, intentions, worldviews, and so forth, often taking the form of narratives which add depth and personality to social life. Stories about power and money, culture and religion, land and nature, fashions and fancies, abound. Under propitious circumstances, however, one may rise above all others as a dominant metanarrative, a story so pervasive and compelling that it can inform the macro-behavior of much of humanity, even determine our trajectory into the future. I will argue that such a metanarrative exists now as a hegemonic worldview, a story featuring the optimistic expectation of equal prosperity for all, and for future generations too.

We are the lead actors in the performance of this laudatory story. Our unique evolutionary endowments have granted us dominion on Earth and, thereby, practically unlimited freedom to demand for ourselves the best of all possible worlds. This Panglossian aspiration, the ideational complement to the material elements of the polycrisis, has promoted an anthropocentric zeitgeist that forms the deeper ground from which it emerges.

Anthropocentrism is a contested term (Plumwood, 2001, Chapter 6) which stirs debate about the assignment of intrinsic value and the allotment of relative rights to humans amid other species. The use intended here, however, is merely descriptive and therefore simpler. There is, after all, no question that we are an extraordinary, even exceptional, species, so our self-importance – our anthropocentrism – is well-warranted. None other knows science and technology, music and money, poetry and prose, none other has explored the universe or our origins in deep time. Our status at the top of the evolutionary ladder is secure, and the self-referential zeitgeist we enjoy is unsurprising. But the downside of anthropocentrism is conceit and a rejection of contextual constraint. In this darker light, the polycrisis has

occurred because species dominance and a credulous sense of freedom have released us from accountability to the limits of the natural world, to the vitality of other species, and to our responsibility to deal modestly with exorbitant success. Shedding corrective light on this story – that is, on the misfit between our aspirations and responsibilities – will be the burden of this essay. How and by whom such corrections may be realized are questions of agency which I take up in my concluding section.

Before proceeding, however, it is important to acknowledge that the focus here on the (aberrant) ideational underpinnings of the polycrisis is not the only plausible explanation of it. Capitalism, for example, has often been fingered as the socio-economic cause of a multitude of globally interlocked ills because it is extractive, consumptive, prone to distributive injustice, to monopolism, and to expansionism (Klein, 2014). I will subsume this argument into my broader perspective below.

Relatedly, Ulrich Beck's 'risk society' (1986/1992) names the modernization and industrialization of world society as the origin of a host of global, multi-generational threats including, for example, climate change and food insecurity, which have prompted a radical decline in public confidence in expert knowledge and, thereby, a crisis of illegitimacy and ineffective governance.

Another more visceral approach to understanding macro-human behavior might point to our species' hard-wired focus on the atavistic satisfaction of immediate needs and impulses, and on fear of any competitive humanoid group which may contest access to territory and/or vital resources. This 'realist' point of view – very much in the mainstream of contemporary political science – rests upon an unflattering portrayal of human nature, even as it offers a persuasive explanation for the causal forces that have led us so compulsively to overrun the planet in a competitive race for survival. I will append this argument to my own in subsequent sections.

This brief survey is not exhaustive. It simply indicates that other analyses of the root cause of the polycrisis are very much in play, and deserve attention.

3. Social pathology: part I

By using inclusive words such as 'we' and 'our' in the foregoing text, I have referred to our species on Earth as a singular entity. This may seem inappropriate, or simply wrong. It is quite clear, after all, that multiple civilizations and communities around the world exhibit unique histories, cultures and varieties of economic and political systems which present in their totality a kaleidoscopic image of human society, the diversity of which is one of its most important features. To overlook this rich diversity is to do a disservice to the manifold complexities of human inventiveness and adaptive resilience.

On the other hand, highlighting diversity can obscure the general form, function and character of the whole which comprises those various parts; one can lose the forest for the trees, to employ a familiar aphorism. The diversity lens brings to focus a medley of human social projects, and along with that a complicated matrix of dynamic relationships among those projects. By gathering all these elements together, however, the whole point of view brings to light features which are unique to the aggregated totality, such as the fact that one incumbent story – one metanarrative – covertly rules the contemporary mindscape; and that our species in its entirety is embedded in a planet-wide social-ecological system which may or may not evolve according to our wishes and

requirements. On this account, it is useful, even necessary, to posit a singular entity called ‘human society’ which now finds itself entangled in a self-induced existential struggle on one indivisible planet.

Where the unit of study is the human population as a whole, comparative analyses of how the metanarrative is performed across different socio-cultural systems lose their immediate relevance. More useful are those common behaviors that drive the polycrisis forward. The most egregious example of this must surely be the worldwide political commitment to perpetual economic growth, an open-ended ideational phenomenon with material implications that run afoul of Earth’s finitude. This commitment expresses unambiguously our belief in freedom from limits, and freedom to pursue a cornucopian future which ostensibly serves the well-being of all.

It is worth reflecting on this for a moment because the ‘growth and prosperity’ mantra is sometimes branded a Western phenomenon, and analysts who portray it as global in scope are regarded as failing to take into account the life stories and diversely hopeful expectations of any number of other local, regional, and national non-materialistic cultural narratives around the world. But this point of view, which sees the world through the ‘diversity’ lens described earlier, does not capture the larger picture which envelops all such non-Western social projects. This is so because governments – the final arbiter of competing visions and the public face of any polity – express the dominant bearing of any people (whether voluntarily or not) and portray that bearing to the rest of the world. When this crucial actor is included in the full comprehension and calculus of today’s metanarrative, the ubiquity of the commitment to prosperity through growth becomes apparent; in fact, is seen to be remarkably consistent, not to mention unique in history (Purdey, 2024, pp. 22–23, 51–52).

Without important exception, the growth paradigm encompasses all types of national government – capitalist, socialist, authoritarian, or otherwise – in the world’s North and South sectors and remains constant despite variations in domestic policies which reflect divergent opinions about how best to realize it. The G7 and G20, the OECD and informal organizations such as the Trilateral Commission and the World Economic Forum, endorse and encourage growth. All regional trading blocs in the Americas, Europe, and Asia were constructed to enhance the potential for growth. Multinational corporations pursue growth wherever and whenever possible as a charter responsibility to shareholders, and civil societies around the world are eager to fulfill their crucial role as consumers in a growing global economy. This alloy of public policy and consumer compliance constitutes, in effect, an international Gramscian hegemony (Cox, 1993; Purdey, 2010, p. 4) which rests on the admixture of coercion and consent, and on the ethical foundation of a firm belief that economic growth, by promising a better tomorrow, is ‘the right thing to do’. All these institutional and social forces reveal, enhance, and drive forward the story of prosperity, and of freedom without reservation.

Canonized in Milton Friedman’s classic *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962), neoliberalism is an aggressive, laissez-faire driver of the growth imperative. By stripping away social and environmental safeguards and maximizing efficiency for profit, its ideological power has ‘exacerbated both homogenization and hyper-connectivity in the global economy’ (Lawrence et al., 2024, p. 10), making the overall system more vulnerable to disturbances and aggravating the social pathology of the polycrisis. Neoliberalism valorizes, indeed adamantly insists upon, freedom from socio-political oversight so that prosperity may be quickly

brought within reach of everyone, and that the rush to a better future may be pursued without encumbrance (Harvey, 2005). This rejection of restraint – in effect, the absence of authoritative moderation of the natural power of *H. sapiens* – legitimizes profligate human behavior on Earth even as it heightens the public perception that the rapid pace of change in the world has slipped beyond our control.

The pursuit of progress and prosperity is a laudable objective, but one which easily becomes malignant if not constrained within bio-geophysical limits, and by an ethic of sufficiency. If these constraints are not imposed endogenously – that is, within the societal psyche – then they must be imposed exogenously, by government (understood generally as a restraining authority). Neither of these is now being effectively realized. Limits have been breached (Richardson collaboration, 2023) with the shared understanding that they do not apply to humanity – that we are exceptions, fully competent to deal with any costs rendered by expansionist behavior. A non-negotiable commitment to material growth and economic homogenization are the progeny of the valorization of freedom; they magnify the inherent instability of the polycrisis by adding desirability and ersatz legitimacy to the pursuit of extravagant goals. They are, in effect, dysfunctional outcomes of the otherwise well-meaning objective of universal betterment.

4. Social pathology: part II

4.1 Emergence

No one (in the main) promotes the explicit purpose of inflicting lethal harm on our species, or on the planet. Because much of the disjuncture between ‘good intentions’ and existential danger can be attributed to the process of emergence, by which unwanted outcomes may arise inadvertently, the following section will briefly introduce the concept, and describe the relevance of, emergence.

Emergent phenomena are built into the natural order of things, and are not uncommon. All material, biotic, and social systems comprise, indeed are constituted fundamentally by, emergent phenomena, nor are those systems limited by size. At small scale, for example, the novel characteristic of ‘saltiness’ arises when two highly reactive elements, sodium and chlorine, combine to form a simple, stable molecule. Hydrogen and oxygen, also highly reactive, together produce ‘wetness’. At medium scale, ant colonies perform complex group problem-solving behaviors resulting from the perception of chemical stimuli by individual ants. And in the human domain, the single interactions of traders produce market prices, trends, and, sometimes, enormous fluctuations. Even the large-scale structure of the universe emerges from the gravitational attraction of myriad individual units of mass. In all cases, constituents and structure interact reciprocally.

Emergent properties are extra, unanticipated features which emanate from the synergistic interactions of a complex system’s component parts. For example, the (poorly understood) existence of human consciousness and subjective experience cannot be predicted to arise from the objective world of inanimate matter. The ability to perceive and engage with intangibles such as ideas, values, beliefs, and worldviews is an emergent property of the individual human body and brain which affects action and intentionality. Likewise, society affects the personality and preferences of individual people, and a shared worldview affects the evolutionary development of human society on Earth. These are all instances of ‘downward causation’.

Emergent properties become manifest as one moves (synchronically) up the ladder of complexity from atoms to the cosmos, or as one moves (diachronically) through time with respect to, for example, biological evolutionary history. Novelty and wholeness are clearly visible features of unique phenomena which occur at each new level of organization, at each step in the progression from physics to chemistry to biology to psychology to sociology and beyond. The larger picture, then, presents a series of nested systems (Holling, 2001), each involved in a dynamic whole/part relationship with its neighbors according to which that duality is mutually constituted, and according to which the behavior of parts is influenced by supervening emergent structures. Contextual effects and novel patterns of organization are the result (Purdey, 2024, pp. 105–106). The emergent patterns which render the polycrisis uniquely dangerous have been clearly articulated in the lead article. *Amplification* occurs when positive feedback cycles (e.g. forest loss/climate change or fear/market meltdown) make difficult situations worse, or when tipping points in vital planetary operating systems are breached (e.g. disruption of oceanic currents). *Acceleration* is a direct result of the hyper-connectivity which locks business, industry, and finance into reciprocal dependencies. And *synchronization* occurs when crises become aggressively contagious – when ‘everything happens everywhere all at once’. These are the unwanted manifestations of the polycrisis, and of the brash enthusiasm of a species enamored of itself.

4.2 Morality

The many injuries imposed by the polycrisis, from food and water shortages to the viral dissemination of cruel or false information, may be characterized as ethical breaches which spawn inconvenient, unfair, or tragic consequences. But ethical quandaries sometimes extend to the existentially lethal, which is what takes the immorality of the polycrisis to a new level. Two such examples are prominent. First, to expropriate the living spaces of non-human species for the benefit of the human animal – to diminish biodiversity – is to diminish the life chances for all but, more to the point, when we humans arbitrarily terminate other life forms, we arrogate to ourselves undeserved power, the effect of which is now manifest as The Sixth Extinction, now underway, of which we are the thoughtless perpetrators (Kolbert, 2014). This destructive behavior insults life, weakens Earth’s vitality, erodes sustainability, and is emphatically unconscionable.

But, second, our anthropocentric zeitgeist and inflated sense of exceptionalism render the planet-wide loss of biodiversity almost invisible, blinding us to the possibility of our own self-destruction instigated by, for example, runaway climate change and permanent damage to the productivity and stability of essential life support systems on the planet. This potentially ruinous consequence of irresponsible human behavior is embedded in the polycrisis as a perceptible possibility and, if it were to occur, would surely be a demeaning failure of will, of merit, of foresight, and of moral intelligence. This too would be emphatically unconscionable. The wanton razing of life combined with (even the possibility of) the terminal interruption of the flow of human history should now be the main ingredients of contemporary moral discourse, much of which must address the problem of having granted to ourselves the right to do anything we want, to take anything we want, and to be anything we want (Purdey, 2024, pp. 26–27).

Unrestrained freedom is illusory if it ignores the limitations of Earth’s finitude, reckless if it promises a cornucopian future for

all, and licentious if it releases decision-makers from the need to make ethically informed choices which may blunt expansionism and temper our sense of exceptionalism. False freedom and the moral laxity it engenders are the poison pills of the modern human story which lie at the root of the polycrisis. Edmund Burke sums this up admirably:

Men (sic) are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites ... Society cannot exist, unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere; and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without ... men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters. (Goodreads, 2024)

5. Agency

The polycrisis represents a grave dilemma which foreshadows the self-induced foreclosure of our own future and that of countless other species on Earth. On this view, what we are doing to ourselves, and to the planet, is not just practically problematic, it is also morally reprehensible. Making sense of this situation, and who might do something about it, are questions of agency. This issue is under-theorized in the polycrisis framework as written. The stated objective to produce policy-relevant research outcomes relies on the assumption that policymakers will respond rationally (and urgently) to facts and evidence, when clearly this is not the case. Agency cannot be relegated to political and corporate leaders whose perspectives, expectations, and capabilities are tightly constrained within a socially constructed (and truth-averse) worldview.

Our future is not pre-determined by the polycritical present. Social structures of any kind, whether emergent or not, are not agents; they cannot think, feel, perceive, or act. Only individuals can. Only individuals have motives guided by subjective purpose, and understand their own behavior. But, if individual agency is not exercised, it will be ceded to the brute force of the polycrisis – in effect, to the mindless herd behavior and witless emotionalism typical of intemperate collectivities (Jung, 1985, p. 6). Empirically, ecological science showcases this undesirable portrait, which I attend to below (Purdey, 2024, pp. 34–35, 74).

By any objective measure humanity is a planetary hegemon, a super-species armed with a unique and powerful set of adaptive capabilities, and with a sophisticated intelligence which obliterates boundaries. But the ecological lens also makes clear that our collective behavior is indistinguishable from that of any other species which enjoys easy access to resources, and which no other animal can resist. The ‘boom and bust’ dynamic that characterizes such situations is common and well-documented (Rees, 2023), whether it applies to deer without wolves on a leafy island or bacteria free to grow only to expire at the edges of a nutrient Petrie dish. These comparisons are unwelcome and yet eminent ecologist William Rees has concluded unambiguously that human numbers on Earth are now pushing through the ‘plague phase’ which, as in all similar cycles, is chaotic, immediately preceding a population bust. In this light and in a very unfortunate sense we are not distinctively human at all. As Rees puts it: ‘[I]f the world’s nations cannot come together to fully engage their common fate, humanity proclaims itself to have no more practical intelligence or conscious moral agency ... than does any other species in overshoot at the brink of collapse’ (ibid., p. 19).

The imagery deployed above sees us as having forfeited agency to powerful evolutionary forces which operate beneath the threshold of perception but which have contributed inevitably and, as it

were, naturally to our modern predicament. That story is counter-vailed by the more flattering one which brings socio-cultural factors back into view, the qualities that ostensibly allow us to override atavistic impulses, and that define us as creatures fully capable of purpose, of constructing our own socio-political, economic, and ecological relations. The human enterprise, on this view, is a malleable social project amenable to effective management based on choice. If this is the case, however, what wisdom has taken us to this precarious moment in history? How is it possible to have seriously endangered our health and well-being, our jobs, our security, even our continued tenure on Earth? What purpose prevails? Hopeful visions of green, sustainable civilizations abound (Berry, 2003; Korten, 2013), and notable local/regional success stories are plentiful, but in the larger context they are still rare and seem only remotely capable of being realized on a planetary scale.

If in fact we are engaged with a 'malleable social project', then three distinct modalities of agency to defuse the polycrisis come into view. The first of these targets the multitude of causal pathways and vectors of disruption which together characterize its material structure. With sufficient knowledge in hand, technical experts, business professionals, and economists may form the working groups required to dismantle the dangerous linkages and negative synergies of the polycrisis, an agenda for change informed by the root principle of resilience. This familiar concept expresses the ability to survive disturbances. It recommends decentralizing dense nodes of system control, distributing capabilities across a richer and more varied socio-industrial landscape (thereby increasing redundancy and novelty), and, with respect to social systems, optimizing self-sufficiency and autonomy. The motive force and *sine qua non* for these changes is the robust and comprehensive exercise of political will. Here enters the second modality of agency (Purdey, 2024, pp. 113–117).

Ruling political and corporate elites stand firmly opposed to the changes listed above. Political will, in short, is missing. The agency required to correct this deficiency is public pressure. Bottom-up, citizen-driven mobilization is the primary *modus operandi* of transformative change in today's political landscape. It amounts to people rising against a status quo they deem unacceptable, people rising against the holders of power and the institutions which normalize and legitimize the polycritical present. Useful though such pressure undoubtedly is with respect to driving political will, however, it is being undertaken only by a minority, and with only modest success. It remains fragmentary and, in the main, ineffective as it inevitably runs into the hard ceiling of a deeply entrenched worldview and private interests which have to date been unassailable. Can the resolution of the polycrisis, still rushing forward, depend upon desultory public remonstrance? Urgency and imminent danger stipulate that public pressure is not enough, that it must be emboldened by vanguard leadership, the third modality of agency.

To expedite a global paradigm shift of sufficient proportion – in this case, to resolve the social pathology of the polycrisis – Thomas Kuhn recommends a 'proliferation of competing articulations, the willingness to try anything, the expression of explicit discontent, the recourse to philosophy and to debate over fundamentals' (Kuhn, 1962/1996, p. 91). In the spirit of 'competing articulations', then, the form of agency adumbrated here is a self-appointed cadre of individuals intended to provide the leading edge that the blunt pressure of public activism now lacks. Its purpose is to penetrate the veneer of legitimacy which now protects the status quo, and to expose its dubious normative status.

Novel change must find its voice through autonomous individual action and norm entrepreneurs (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). This supposition is elaborated by Hannah Arendt who points out that every child born represents a new beginning by bringing novelty into the world. She calls this 'natality'.

[The] character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings ... The fact that man (sic) is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world. (Arendt, 1958, pp. 177–178)

This view is enriched by Reinhold Niebuhr's intimation in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932/1960) that reason and morality are most securely situated in the individual, and that the salience of these qualities diminishes from individual to group and diminishes even further as group size grows larger. The largest such group, and hence the location of least sensible oversight, is the human population writ large, where the polycrisis resides.

The first task of this imagined group will be to stake a dogmatic claim to our own future by moving beyond the defensive posture now adopted by counter-hegemonic movements, a posture which entails explaining, justifying, even beseeching. Instead, vanguard leadership will be vested with the challenge not to persuade but to declaim; to take it upon themselves not to demand, or to indulge in 'should' or 'must' expostulations (which imply entreaty to incumbent power), but to assert that which they believe to be true. The performative nature of this kind of agency draws explicitly on Speech Act theory (Searle, 1965), the details of which are important but beyond the scope of the present essay. Such declamations will comport with empirical fact even as they emulate the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis* (Rackham, 1934). Joining insight with practicality, *phronesis* entails pragmatic expressions of prudent moral knowledge grounded in and relevant to particular circumstances, namely, in this case, the various elements of the polycrisis. In effect, this performative process will function as a commandeering form of global governance. Such elite leadership would have no legitimate standing beyond the warrant of its members, however, relying exclusively on candor and a Habermasian force of (emancipatory) argument (Habermas, 1984). Whether such an exercise of vanguard power is effective will depend upon the cogency of declamations issued and upon which emotions, volitions, or expectations are aroused by the stories the individuals involved wish to tell.

Significantly and of equal or greater importance, such stories will address the broader context of compromised morality, risen from egoism, which has led to our present predicament. Self-regard and self-aggrandizement have distorted our sense of who we are. We valorize human life above all else yet serve it badly, harshly emphasized by, for example, our deplorable treatment of countless millions of children around the world. And when confronted with competition for resources or territory, or exposed to the 'other' whose culture may be different than our own, we are inclined to capitulate to violence, an immaturity to which the ugliness of the contemporary international landscape loudly testifies. In any mode of desperation, of which the polycrisis portends many, the first prohibition to shatter is morality, thus making lives forfeit in direct contradiction to the bloated sense of importance we have pridefully attached to all things human.

We should be under no illusion that the vanguard-led construction of effective socio-political oversight informed by a

morally sound context – a Superego, one might say – would be robust enough to contain the Id of the feral human personality. Having blundered this far, it is a certainty that the next several decades will be hard. If we make it through, we will have discovered the special strength of our humanity and the wisdom we now lack. If we fail, we will be recorded in the annals of geologic history as a spectacular but short-lived evolutionary experiment.

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