Introduction

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We all now know just how challenging an unexpected event can be. Every aspect of our lives was transformed by the appearance of Covid-19, as governments across the world struggled to limit the damage while vaccines were invented, produced, and administered. The ongoing implications of this pandemic remain unpredictable as the virus continues to mutate.

Our planet's climate is now changing at a rapid pace due to greenhouse gas emissions. Extreme temperatures and changes to traditional weather patterns are widespread, wildfires are more frequent, and the sea levels are rising. One effect of this will be the movement of people and their livestock away from lands that can no longer sustain them. These mass migrations may well cause wars over fertile land and water sources, displacing people as refugees and further reducing food supplies. They will also increase the likelihood of new viral pandemics.

Climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic have been fuelled by the rapid development of technology, which has brought an enormous increase in movement of people and goods around the world. At the same time, the emergence of almost ubiquitous digital technology has radically altered our interactions with one another and with our natural and built environments, with profound effects on our understanding of ourselves and one another, our emotional lives and wellbeing, our styles of inquiring and reasoning, our general political outlooks, and our aesthetic tastes.

All of this makes for an increasingly unpredictable physical and social environment. Even the most radical action to limit climate change will only stabilise the environment after a few decades. In the meantime, we are likely to be faced, both locally and globally, with a series of new challenges that will only be understood in detail some time after they have arisen.

How should we prepare for this unpredictability? What attitudes, skills, and values should we foster in ourselves and one another to enable us to respond well to the challenges of a rapidly changing world? The contributors to this volume present a range of suggestions, unified by a few recurring themes.

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One theme is that we need to counteract the growth of political polarisation, which seems to be an effect of technological change and the emergence of social media. Polarisation is movement towards a society's division into two sharply opposing ethical and political outlooks. It strongly mitigates against the development and deployment of effective responses to new situations by reducing the common ground from which consensus might emerge about which changes should be seen as problems, how these should be prioritised, and how best to solve them.

Contributors to this volume identify various sources of polarisation. The use of moral and political statements to identify oneself as a member of some social group and, conversely, the effect of peer pressure on opinions within an already constituted group are both amplified on social media, where a single message can easily reach hundreds of thousands of people at high speed and low cost.

These tendencies increase one's susceptibility to forming beliefs on partial information or outright misinformation without critical scrutiny, encourage the unthinking reproduction of other people's claims and conclusions in one's own social communications, both online and offline, and facilitate emphasising one ethical value at the expense of others in considering difficult problems.

All of this is compounded by the preference for certainty over uncertainty, even where the situation cannot justify any conclusion with a high degree of confidence, and by the propensity to give reasons for a belief or decision regardless of whether those reasons actually motivated it.

In response, the contributors to this volume argue that we should foster a more collective and collaborative outlook, where people act together to identify problems, analyse them, and work out how to solve them. The essays emphasise appropriate recognition of one's own limitations, the importance of understanding other people's perspectives on situations, and the need for serious commitment to open-minded reasoning. They recommend cultivating the concern to understand the world as it really is and the tendency to think honestly about what really matters.

That is not to say that the contributors to this volume each subscribe to a single multifaceted approach to preparing for unpredictability. Rather, each contributor addresses a different aspect of this overall problem and makes a specific recommendation. As a result, there are various tensions and contradictions between the essays. Yet in their collective emphasis on care, creativity, collaboration, curiosity, discernment, diversity, fallibility, forbearance, hope, integrity, responsibility, self-regulation, understanding, and

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wisdom, their recommendations together bring into view, if not entirely into sharp focus, an overall image of how we should prepare to deal with the challenges of an unpredictable world.

One major feature of this image is the recognition that our immediate responses, both in feelings and intuitive thoughts, can shape our behaviour in profound ways even when they do not represent the opinions we would form by reasoning about the situation. By learning how to reason better about how the world really is and how we should respond to it – reasoning that can be undertaken both individually and collectively – we can reduce the influence of our immediate responses and, at the same time, attune them to what really matters and bring them closer to the conclusions of our reasoning.

Another major feature is the role of our social environment in fostering the values and virtues we need in a challenging world. This includes thinking about how education can cultivate in students a better approach to facing new challenges, both online and offline, but also about how changes to the design of social media can reduce the kinds of behaviour that make it difficult to think clearly about new challenges as they arise.

We are very grateful to the Royal Institute of Philosophy for the opportunity to produce this collection of essays and to the authors for their excellent contributions. We hope this volume will inspire further work to bring its overall image of how to be prepared for unpredictability into sharper focus. This would involve enriching that image with details that have not been mentioned in this volume and resolving disagreements between these essays. We hope these ideas about our social environment will be refined and applied, but also extended to consider, for example, the regulation of mass media, the structures of companies and other organisations, and the designs of buildings and urban spaces.

There is certainly much more thinking to be done. We are well aware that we cannot predict the directions it will take. For that reason, we present this volume as an example of the open-minded, carefully considered, and public-spirited collaborative approach that its essays recommend, and we encourage its readers to continue the conversation in the same way.

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