



The End of History: An Upside to the Climate Crisis

A few days ago I was at a dinner party with several of my friends. During our table conversation, one woman was describing how she is always careful to use environmentally friendly products and only buy fair-trade, certified slave-free, chocolate. I replied: “You don’t have to worry about such things any more.” “What do you mean,” she asked, somewhat perplexed. “Look,” I went on: “This was the hottest week on record in the world. The polar icecaps are melting. There are droughts and wildfires in Canada and here in Europe, and flooding in Vermont and India. The ocean at Miami Beach is too warm to swim in. We’ve reached the climate-change tipping point. Life as we knew it on this planet is over.” Everyone looked at me with alarm. I waved my arms, palms up: “Everyone is going to die. There is no need to be concerned about minor things like endangered rhinos or child slavery.” (Yes, I do tend to be overdramatic, and my friends are used to me going on about death—see my essays “[Looking at Death](#)” and “[Accepting Senectitude: Some Thoughts on the Occasion of my Approaching Seventieth Birthday.](#)”)

I continued to hog the conversation: “When I used to teach an Intro to Philosophy class at the community college, I would ask my students if, were someone to take all of the nuclear bombs in the world, stuff them into a deep hole in the earth, and blow up the whole planet, would that be an immoral act?” My friends looked at me blankly. “It was a thought experiment designed to explore Kant’s categorical imperative. If there is a universal ethical principle that one should always respect the humanity of others, and that one should only act in accordance with rules that could hold for everyone, what happens if there is no humanity?”

My friends, as tolerant of my babbling on as they are, had had enough.

“But,” the woman rebutted, “even if there is no hope, one should still try to do what is right. I grew up protesting the Vietnam War and I was arrested at the Trojan nuclear power plant in Oregon. I’m not just going to stop trying to live my life doing

what I think is right.” There was a general agreement with this sentiment, although our conversation went on to the depressing conclusions that the world seemed unwilling to make the sort of drastic changes needed to halt global warming, and that, to be sustainable, the human population on the planet should be reduced by 90%.



The “End of History” has an interesting history. A philosophical concept first explored by Hegel, the End of History is *not* an apocalyptic end of humanity but, rather, an end of human political evolution, a period when there emerges a stable, world-wide, political structure that will endure through time. For Hegel, this would involve the emergence of an amorphous “absolute spirit” based on reason. For Marx, it is the victory of the proletariat. For the Russian-French philosopher Alexandre Kojève, it is the “time in which European history realizes its potential.”

The “End of History” is mostly associated with the American political scientist Francis Fukuyama, who published a prophetic paper with that title in 1989, a few months before the fall of the Berlin Wall, following it up with his 1992 book *The End of History and the Last Man*. For Fukuyama, the “End of History” is “the end-point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.” Liberal democracies and free-market capitalism are the best that humans can do.

Fukuyama became something of a hero for neo-liberals who called for the elimination of price controls, the deregulation of capital markets, and the lowering of trade barriers. But, of course, Fukuyama had his detractors as well. Jacques Derrida, in his 1994 *Specters of Marx: State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, gave the most scathing rebuke of Fukuyama’s thesis:

For it must be cried out, at a time when some have the audacity to neo-evangelize in the name of the ideal of a liberal democracy that has finally realized itself as the ideal of human history: never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and of humanity. Instead of singing the advent of the ideal of liberal democracy and of the capitalist market in the euphoria of the end of history, instead of celebrating the 'end of ideologies' and the end of the great emancipatory discourses, let us never neglect this obvious, macroscopic fact, made up of innumerable,

singular sites of suffering: no degree of progress allows one to ignore that never before, in absolute figures, have so many men, women and children been subjugated, starved or exterminated on the earth.

But Fukuyama was not unaware of the dangers that his “End of History” entailed. In the last section of his book, Fukuyama warns that in a stable, prosperous, and peaceful society, people won’t have anything to aspire to, that their desire to be recognized as greater than other people—an aspiration he terms *megalothymia*—cannot be satisfied. This frustration of *megalothymia* will lead to the rise of populism and nationalism. In a May 3, 2019 interview he gave to Stanford University’s *The American Interest* (on whose editorial board he serves), Fukuyama decried the rise of white supremacy groups in the US and the destructive effects of pathologically narcissistic leaders like Trump and Putin.



And now we are faced with a new kind of the end of history.

[An aside: it is ironic that neoliberal free-market capitalism, with its unfettered burning of fossil fuels, has led us to this point where the end of capitalism seems inevitable. I don’t know about the morality of my hypothetical person who might stuff all of our nuclear weapons into a hole and blow up the planet; it is clear, however, that the Exxon and BP executives who knew about global warming but, in order to keep their profit margins high, only funded pseudoscientists to promote climate denialism, were acting immorally. Perhaps the last globally immoral act of humanity.]

I am by no means any sort of expert on climate change, but it seems clear that we will soon enter a time when we see, if not the actual extinction of the species *homo sapiens*, such a dramatic overturning of the planet’s ecosystem that our beloved liberal democracies will cease to function. We have already begun to see the distressing rise of fascist totalitarianism and religious terrorism, a trend that will certainly get worse as rising ocean levels and the scarcity—or overabundance—of fresh water brought on by climate change moves us ever closer to a dog-eat-dog world. The breakdown of shared moral values—Kantian or otherwise—will lead to the end of the end of history.

But, as my friends around the dinner table noted, all may not be lost. Yes, maybe we—or at least some of us—will stop worrying about being environmentally responsible, but maybe the tipping point of AI will come before we slip back into a prehistoric, preindustrial, age. Humanity might survive, if only in a Chatgpt or Bing version.