Book Redux

Toby Ord. *The Precipice: Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity* (New York: Hatchet Books, 2020), x + 470 pp. $21.99

Reviewed by Nils I. Borquist

Toby Ord ultimately presents the argument that humans need to prepare for the dangers associated with potentially catastrophic existential threats. According to Ord, humanity precariously sits at the precipice of existential devastation where multiple known possibilities, and presumably just as many unknown ones, appear to possess the capability to cause tremendous damage. In order to build a defense, Ord believes that international human populations and the governments connected therewith should be vigilant and construct as many contingency plans as are possible to counter the threats that could lead to the near or even absolute extinction of both humanity and possibly all of the world's living organisms. While Ord's concerns certainly warrant consideration, the admirable notion of being attentive to perils often gives way to an undercurrent of fear and helplessness in the face of risks from cosmic phenomena down to microscopic entities as well as a possible overlooking of attainable contentment today.

Ord claims that the greatest overall challenge of the present generation, a challenge that will continue in perpetuity, comes from the difficulty of keeping humans protected so they can continue to progress in productive ways. Humans face several threats, however, with humans themselves serving as the greatest danger to continued survival due to a multitude of harmful and reckless actions and even the problem of inaction pertaining to problem solving and dealing with foreseeable potential issues. Such avoidance shows a possible lack of concern for current and future populations, especially when people possess the capabilities to heighten optimal conditions while simultaneously producing immense damage.

The rapid development of innovation that marks humanity's growth in power and knowledge over several millennia gets encapsulated in four separate periods: the Agricultural Revolution brought about the further development of communities in conjunction with widespread farming and economic growth; the Scientific Revolution delivered technological advancements due to mathematical understanding and application; the Industrial Revolution witnessed humans beginning to create

machines to assist in utilizing the Earth's energy resources; and the Nuclear Revolution arrived with unprecedented harnessing of enormous power. With these productive and largely positive leaps in human development, including morality and ethics as well as philanthropic pursuits, came the increasing ability to harm one another and the planet, which finally culminated in the construction of weapons of mass destruction that Ord believes exist as quite possibly the most pressing danger to continued global life.

Ord provides a detailed set of pressing risks, from those possibly approaching from beyond Earth to those emerging from microscopic environments. Ord's first list contains what he deems natural risks: asteroids, comets, exploding stars, another Ice Age, and pandemics. While he deems such threats statistically unlikely, the potential for immense global devastation from a natural risk demands human attention. The second set of risks, anthropogenic, includes nuclear war, artificial or manmade diseases, climate change catalysts, and overall environmental damage. Ord believes this set to contain the likeliest threats to humanity while simultaneously being the most controllable and, therefore, the most avoidable. Ord's final category lists future risks, which contains pandemics from biological labs, dystopias, and artificial intelligence concerns. For Ord, artificial intelligence's eventual capability to completely transform global economic networks, overtake control of city infrastructures, and manipulate humans into subservient roles, comes as a particularly prominent existential threat.

Considering the dire subject matter, the thread of pessimism understandably runs throughout the pages of Ord's book. The looming presence of cataclysmic events persists in an age of constant media coverage highlighting the worst of human acts and ideologies. In a form of paralysis by analysis, Ord claims that such warnings go largely ignored by substantial numbers of people, hubristically dismissed as a problem for tomorrow. However, Ord declares the dangers of overlooking not only extinction-level possibilities but those that may result in catastrophic losses to cultural heritage and the chance of continued international community development.

When assessing the threats delivered by Ord, one cannot help but feel somewhat overwhelmed. Certainly, nothing he presents seems utterly ridiculous nor overly farfetched. While some risks appear remote in possibility or are not fully understood, others should force immediate consideration, such as lab-made diseases and the possible effects of artificial intelligence. The latter definitely deserves focus. In the six years since Ord published *The Precipice*, the impact derived from advancements in A.I. capabilities in conjunction with the authority granted to such systems has given greater salience to his argument regarding the wide spectrum of potential benefits as well as potential for harm to the sustaining of life.

Even as people become more aware of the common beliefs, interests, and reasons to care about civilization on a global scale, a side effect emerges wherein people do not necessarily care less for others based on spatial relations but instead based on temporal relations. Essentially, a lack of concern for future generations comes easily simply because those people do not exist—for Ord, this negligence displays a moral decay of sorts, one wherein both past and future generations get abandoned for the sake of the present day's blissful ignorance and indulgences.

A valuable question emerges from Ord's text: can humans avoid risks entirely or even substantially? Those with a more optimistic outlook believe that with enough effort and investment into prevention, humans can significantly mitigate threats; however, others maintain that the answer was, is, and will remain a "no." Fortunately, though, minimizing certain threats through identification and commonsensical defensive strategies is possible and can bring the greatest potential for continuation of the human species and for most life on the planet.

One specific tactic Ord offers involves avoiding spreading out defenses or aiming at multiple risks simultaneously and instead targeting a single risk to resolve, beginning with the closest risk, the one deemed most likely to occur that also lies within humans' purview to alter or eliminate. Once that issue gets addressed, risk managers repeat the procedure to tackle a second concern as effectively as possible, and then the process continues in this manner. While this seems efficient, neglecting the multitude of problems to deal with one may result in manageable issues growing to levels of unmanageability.

Ord eventually provides a three-phase approach as a "grand strategy" (189) for the continuation of humanity. The first phase comes with attaining a stage of existential comfort or safety through preservation and protection of humanity, the second phase involves substantial reflection on long-term goals for humanity, and the third phase occurs when humanity reaches its full potential. Ord's strategies certainly aim for the overall safety of humankind and for the world at large, but such a plan likely extends into perpetuity with the cycle of achieving goals before reassessing and reestablishing new goals. Additionally, determining who is allowed to or expected to establish the markers for such potential remains undecided.

Fortunately, Ord recognizes possible pitfalls with his plan. The first considers problematic global alliances wherein imbalanced laws, rules, and biased safeguarding get instituted. Proper planning and restrictions could help with avoiding this challenge. A second concern comes via technological issues, be they those involving artificial intelligence as well as those with less nefarious undertones, such as a lack of effective progress. A third challenge points to misguided research leading scholars and scientists to unforeseen negative consequences. While research into

dubious methods definitely exists, sometimes even the most well-meaning studies produce the most damaging outcomes.

An ultimate solution Ord puts forth pertains to eventual migration altogether from the planet. Even with a one hundred percent success rate of safety measures for the foreseeable future, the Earth will be annihilated in a few billion years. As such, investing in galactic travel and research into living conditions in space for humans and other species must be undertaken. The research alone will require almost unfathomable amounts of money and time, and the inherent dangers appear nearly insurmountable, at least in the present. Perhaps, though, Ord and others who believe this to be the undeniable hope for the long-term survival of humans will prove correct. More so, perhaps such worries and such plans simply delay the inevitable.

An alternative outlook involves accepting the fact that the human species, like every other, emerges, progresses, thrives, deteriorates, then dies, thus allowing the next species to spring forth and prosper. Ord appears quite concerned with known existential risks, a feeling that is understandable. However, a singular focus on that which could destroy Earth often also means a lack of focus on those things that are beautiful, valuable, and fulfilling. Preparation to save humanity later should not come with a neglect of humanity now, yet the text's argument appears to produce such a tradeoff. With that mindset, a preoccupation on the question of potential risks might result in a life already in a state of non-existence, devoid of connections and care.

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