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Ethical implications of anticipating and witnessing societal collapse: report of a discussion with international scholars.

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Abstract

The prospect of impending societal collapse raises important ethical questions, both about the role of ethics in how our institutions make decisions related to societal disruption and collapse and also about how anticipating it might cause our own values to shift. To stimulate reflection and map out some of the views held on questions related to societal disruption and collapse, including risks associated with new arguments about ethics and the scope for useful action, a focus group on behalf of the international Scholars Warning was convened. A series of questions guided the discussions, with some participants providing additional written responses. In this paper a diversity of the views expressed are presented before some brief analysis for each question, before the authors' reflections on emerging themes. This paper is intended as a basis for further discussions about ethics and values among a broader population of social activists and decision-makers who might influence how societal disruption and collapse is addressed or experienced.

Contents

Introduction and methodology

As our civilisation enters the shadow of possible and even imminent widespread societal disruption and collapse, with a possible fundamental transformation of human existence on our planet, the central questions of ethics can take on a new light.[1,2] Some analysts, including the second author of this paper, go further and conclude that on current trends, widespread societal collapse is inevitable in the coming decades, perhaps imminently in some countries.[3] While ethics means somewhat different things to different people, essentially it's about how to live with one another in society, and deciding on the rules, principles, ideas, virtues and even calculations we want to promote and apply, and why.[4] How does ethical thinking influence how we conceptualise and anticipate societal collapse? Conversely, how does the anticipation of collapse influence our values?

With the prospect of societal collapse being taken increasingly seriously in a variety of societal fora and institutional settings, discussions will occur that are explicitly or implicitly about values and ethics. These discussions may occur within university departments, political parties and movements, environmental organisations and movements, charitable organisations, intergovernmental organisations and civil society groups, military and security agencies, established religions, legal professions and institutions, and medical institutions. Can ethical thinking positively influence how such institutions make decisions that will affect all people, and ultimately mitigate some of the negative consequences of collapse? Before ethically and socially conscious members of society engage with such institutions, it would be helpful to clarify what values we hold and why.

Proposing greater attention to values and ethics in this field is not without its own risks. One of the perennial challenges for philosophers and ethicists, as well as anyone engaging in discussions of "right and wrong", is that we are limited by the processes of human conceptualisation and language. Beyond human conceptualisation and language, there are infinitely interconnected and flowing relationships between energy and matter and the generation of sentient experience. Therefore, any conceptualisation and description require subdivisions of that totality in ways that will always be contextual and thus fallible. Therefore, conceptualisation and description should always be provisional. Unfortunately, some of the attraction to clarity on philosophy and ethics can derive from an uncomfortable relationship of an individual with this inherent ambiguity. Therefore, many of the world's wisdom traditions warn of the dangers of the hubris of human certainty about right and wrong, and instead invite people to calm any grasping at being right, and experience oneself as less separate from wider life, allowing the energy and ideas from that awareness to shape further ideas and behaviours.[5] We note that perennial challenge at the outset of this paper because a focus on knowing and doing what's universally "right" might produce as much violence as kindness, as we notice from both history and contemporary events. In particular, a large literature in sociology and psychology over the past 90 years has identified how a desire for ethical simplicity and generalisability can morph into pathological support for violent forms of imposition within an authoritarian personality type.[6]

In an attempt to stimulate reflection and map out some of the views held on the many ethical questions relating to societal collapse, in what is a new field of inquiry, we invited a focus group[7] to participate in a webinar[8] on 17 June 2021, convened on behalf of Scholars Warning.[9] Although the webinar was initially aimed at the small number of Scholars Warning signatories whose primary field is philosophy, participants included many others from a range of other fields whose work includes a focus on societal collapse. In order to guide the discussions, we provided a series of questions related to values and collapse. We chose themes we identified as important and of perceived interest, based on the attention they received in recent books on societal collapse[2 10 11] as well as in discussions in the Deep Adaptation Forum (DAF).[12] The questions were discussed in small groups during the webinar, and supplemental written responses were provided by some participants through an online form provided in advance.

Discussions were less about the technical aspects of ethical frameworks and how they might evolve than about the actual values held by the participants and other members of society, and how these values themselves might shift as collapse is anticipated and experienced. Participants reflected on the scope for useful action and mitigation, including expanding these discussions within the general public, and the possibility of some degree of societal convergence around universal values.

There is diversity amongst the 600+ scholars who signed the international Scholars Warning declaration on societal disruption and collapse. Despite efforts towards diversity in the invitation stage of the consultation and focus group, this paper reports on discussions in which a majority are from white, Western, middle-class society, and we offer this conversation with that limitation. We look forward to hearing from similar dialogues in other parts of the world, representing a broader spectrum of humanity, including those for whom aspects of societal collapse are already an everyday reality.[13]

This discussion paper captures the views expressed for each of the questions posed to the participants, which appear here as section titles. Much of the phrasing is taken directly from participants'

comments, but we do not name the participants in the body of the paper, and generally avoid quotations. We share many but not all of the perspectives expressed, and at the end of each section, we provide our own brief analysis. One of our goals is to caution against non-critical acceptance of views that appear "commonsensical" to some people regarding what is reasonable and practical. At the end of the paper is a discussion section where we offer a synthesis of what was discussed, as well as a suggestion on how some of the different and sometimes conflicting views on values might begin to be reconciled within a more holistic framework.[14] Readers who are less concerned with the details of what was said may choose to just read the analyses at the end of each section, or even skip the main body of this paper altogether and go straight to the discussion section to see what we view as key cross-cutting themes. Before proceeding to the participants' reflections on each of the themes, we first offer some background reflections.

Background reflections

To start with, it can be worthwhile to try to understand our current situation within a larger, historical context. In discussions in the DAF's philosophy group, some contributors see collapse as the result of capitalism, or more deeply, of "enlightenment" values, modern scientism and our separation from nature, while for others it is a reflection and outcome of our human nature itself, and even more deeply, of life, with its tendency to expand until it reaches limits. With the possible exception of critiques of capitalism, these perspectives are not often heard within the mainstream environmental discourse, where the emphasis tends to be on a perceived need to better control human behaviour in relation to the environment, and ethical discussions centre on how to redirect that behaviour.[15].

Away from the collapse-focused discussions, some ethically formulated visions for the future aim to increase value (often described in terms of happiness or other positive goods) in the long term and to realise humanity's potential through technology. Classical utilitarianism is one such ethical framework, but a vision based less explicitly on a mathematical calculation of value can also favour continuous progress and the pursuit of long-term human flourishing. From this perspective, societal collapse can be regarded as catastrophic – not just for those anticipating and experiencing it, but, some argue, for the loss to those who won't exist and the lost opportunity to create a particular material utopia on earth. Implicit is that people who don't yet exist can still be harmed – a controversial stance. A different analysis would be that existing modes of urban industrial society are oppressing and causing harm to billions of people in order to generate resources for those societies, and collapse of such societies might not be regarded as so catastrophic if it enables people to achieve their needs and wants without such oppression – also a highly uncertain proposition.

Suffering-focused ethical views, which have much in common with the Buddhist understanding of existence and its focus on alleviating suffering, consider suffering as a universal ethical call to action.[1617] According to this view, it is suffering that is problematic, not the void of non-existence *per se*. This suffering can be either physical or psychological, and represents basic needs not being fulfilled. Applied to collapse anticipation, suffering can include personal feelings of grief as well as loss of meaning and hope, and the loss of feeling of life being worthwhile. Many mainstream ethical frameworks accord great importance to the alleviation of suffering. Whether such suffering is solely viewed as problematic or sometimes also developmentally useful for future wellbeing is another area of debate, with concepts such as "positive disintegration"[18] of identities due to psychological suffering being closely aligned with Buddhist and mystic insights on how we can learn from suffering – without necessarily justifying any need for such suffering to take place. Buddhism, with its emphasis on the relinquishment of craving and attachment as a key to reducing suffering,

offers an important perspective on what a healthier society might look like, but also on how we can better deal emotionally with collapse and all its consequences.

There is also an important distinction, not often made in these discussions, between the priority of preserving life and the environment, and ensuring the wellbeing and reduction of suffering of sentient beings. These goals can both overlap and conflict with one another. A suffering-focused view might deny the possibility of causing harm to someone who will not exist, and also prioritise the wellbeing of individuals over a concept such as "species".

Anticipation and experience of collapse could cause a shift in prioritisation to those worst off, as people's inclination towards altruism and solidarity is triggered by a shared predicament.[19] Indeed, Servigne and Stevens wrote in *How Everything Can Collapse*, "After a catastrophe, i.e., an event that suspends normal activities and threatens or causes serious damage to a broad community, most human beings behave in extraordinarily altruistic, calm and composed ways."[10] But the opposite reaction is also possible, as a survival instinct combined with fear causes some people to fend for themselves and those closest to them. As the same authors wrote, "We know that in time of war (especially civil war), social order sometimes breaks down so quickly that the most barbaric acts can be committed in the most 'normal' populations." How we imagine human nature to be, and how it may be expressed within difficult circumstances, will likely shape the way we imagine the scope and form of ethical decision-making in the future. Such perspectives on human nature are not prior to, or separate from, social influence through the stories of the cultures we live within, and therefore promoting reflection on assumptions about human nature is key as we explore the ethics of collapse.[20]

Webinar themes and participants' reflections

1. Personal values of participants and how they have changed with anticipation of collapse

Webinar participants were first asked to reflect on the values that were most important to them personally, and how these values could change as collapse is anticipated. As all of the participants are socially engaged and take a strong interest in the wellbeing of society and our planet, the values mentioned are hardly representative of the full spectrum of values held in society. Yet the struggle that many participants recognised between their desires for self-care and to remain altruistic may be one of the most central and generalisable ethical issues our society will face.

Participants cited a range of personal values, such as learning and advancing, fostering personal growth and actualising potentials, sharing, solidarity and service, kindness, compassion, the capacity to love, justice and fairness, authenticity and integrity, being present, responding to one's emotions and experiences of others, freedom, truth, expression, safety and wellness, and groundedness.

Some participants said they have already experienced a shift in values to focus more on sustenance of themselves and others. A few others expressed concern that their own values may shift in the future towards self-preservation. For example, one participant noted that his journey over the past 7 years has been about the alignment of his life with a new set of values. As an academic, nothing was more important to him than learning. But he thinks collapse has already begun, and he tries to live now by the values that he thinks will carry him and the people around him through

it. He attempts to find the most important things and hold and nurture them now, casting away what is extraneous, including modernist conceptions of progress. For him, crises are one of the gateways to changing values. Similarly, another participant found the whole entry into collapse consciousness to be a completely transformative experience that changed his values, or at least revealed values that were already there but hidden. Essential for him is solidarity, as a protest against individualism and as a necessity for us to get along and survive.

Another participant noted that his set of values are already informed by nearly dying of cancer, and his values shifted to the quality of his relationships. He thinks that in the US, collapse is already "on schedule" if one compares the present situation with past civilisations, and he is not investing any energy into transforming things because he doesn't think it possible. The value that matters most to him now is therefore to do as much good and as little harm as possible – not just individually, but as a society. He described the committing of long-term damage to the planet and its capacity to sustain life as "geologically evil".

One participant said he only allows himself to connect with an anticipation of collapse at times, because otherwise it's too much. In the past, it created a fear response in him, a belief that he must change. Now he has neither. He said, "When my current mindstate is in relation to collapse, I have the feeling that nothing else matters but the deepest existential questions, and inviting others to look at them, and aligning my life with provisional answers to those questions. It's less about saving lives than liberating souls, including my own." He added that staying safe and well feels less important at the moment than spirituality.

Another participant resonated with what he heard, not as helplessness, but being overwhelmed by the scope and scale, adding that he had also gone through a "dark night of the soul". What helped him was coming to understand the full meaning of non-attachment to outcomes, and trying to do the best that he can in the narrow scope of his own life, and being content with that, because putting the whole weight of the world on your shoulders will crush you. Another commented that we are experiencing a sense of uncertainty and need to embrace and surrender to the unknown.

It was suggested that challenge brings the value of service to the fore, strengthening it rather than weakening it. But the same participant commented that it's interesting to reflect where one's personal values sit alongside the need to protect oneself.

One participant expressed some shame about possibly looking after himself more than others, and his concern that with collapse, a defence mechanism to build a protective place could dominate. Similarly, another participant who is a philosopher also found tension in himself regarding how he wants to secure his own future, saying he wants to be safe and not precarious, but also have values that connect him to other people and the future – a balancing act. He asked, how do you live a good life in a system which is in many ways irredeemable? A lot of things that matter to him seem to require both a future and interpersonal harmony in society. As he put it, we are connected in our mutual flourishing or otherwise, and we stand or fall together.

One activist most values being altruistic, using what she has to try to make a positive impact, even though it means making life and career decisions that cause precarity. In the case of entering an abject state of collapse, she asked what she would do without much safety net, and whether it

would bring up more selfishness, more concern for herself above others. But she was optimistic that there are people around to help, and that things tend to fall into place.

Summary/analysis:
The balance between self-care and altruism is a running theme in societal ethics. But many of the things that matter to people individually could be seen as the attributes of a functional society that feels worth living in. In a crisis situation, the relative importance people place on these values might shift towards their most urgent considerations.

Although in theory one can try to adopt an entirely neutral perspective in which the survival and wellbeing of oneself and one's loved ones have no greater importance than that of anyone else, much research supports the view that when experiencing crisis, many people will attribute higher priority to the survival of themselves and their loved ones. This does not mean that people will not cooperate with others, or even carry out altruistic acts that put themselves at risk.

One question therefore arises as to how people can be helped to deal with their fears, so that many changes to our lifestyles might be accepted without us regarding them as a threat to our survival and wellbeing. Another question is whether people could be helped to assess what we wish to uphold in ourselves and society, and why, no matter what disruptions and risks arise. A question that follows on from that is how to support the emotional co-regulation of people so that we are not driven by our fears as our societies become more disrupted. History is full of examples of people choosing hardship and risking their lives for a cause. Considering how such approaches could be encouraged today, without any framing of war against another group, would be a useful exercise.

2. Societal values as revealed by current institutions and collective behaviours

Participants identified both destructive and constructive values in current societies. One participant saw politics in the UK as being inherently corrupt, but on the flip side this realization suggests that people value trust. Increasing GDP was mentioned as a value in society, which could be seen as a belief in progress and innovation, although the question was asked, to what benefit in 2021? Referring to Australia, one participant said that the values are largely consistent with the dominant Western culture: material security, the pursuit of material wealth, and notions of (technological) progress. And that most other values have been obscured by or at least made subservient to those values. These other values include civic or religious duty, community service, stewardship of the environment, care and compassion for the weak and vulnerable, etc. While this participant has observed a marked rise in values around individualism and identity, all, it seems, is subservient to values around material security and the generation and accumulation of material wealth.

Competition was also mentioned as a mixed value: towards what end is it used? Similarly, another participant mentioned efficiency and calmness as positive values, yet said we are not getting the priorities right and are operating on a very short-term horizon. On the same register, market dominance was cited, with increasing income and decreasing expenditure and taxes, for the purpose of wealth accumulation.

One participant said that the existence of the National Health Service in the UK might suggest that we think everyone deserves care. There are also many place-based initiatives emerging, such as to tackle homelessness and help vulnerable people, and an increased shift towards reducing individual carbon footprints. Another participant, on the other hand, was ambivalent about the

increasing encouragement of place-based and local initiatives, presumably because of their limited ability to address global issues.

One participant saw the emphasis on individual responsibility as negative, placing too much responsibility onto the shoulders of those who are not the strongest. On the other hand, despite the political zeitgeist, another participant saw the response to COVID and the climate emergency as showing that there is "good planted more deeply than all that is wrong," and that there is a sense of collective responsibility.

Equality and initiatives to increase diversity and inclusion were mentioned, as well as many people's wish, in specific reference to Australia, that they lived in a more compassionate, generous country. Also mentioned were increasing awareness of power imbalances and social justice issues, and increasing discussions regarding decolonisation. It was noted that a willingness to act in service to others and the world in time of need has not been extinguished, even to the point of putting personal liberty at risk, e.g. the Extinction Rebellion (XR) movement.

Conservatism was named as something mixed, as it is important to hold and maintain what is worthy, yet there is so much that needs to change. Similarly, another participant was concerned about the limited capacity of human beings to grasp what is going on and escape the grip of the "functional" personality and unconscious shadows of fear. Another participant mentioned insularity as a negative value.

The use of social media to spread racist and nationalist propaganda was mentioned as one of the ways that control and power are exercised. Colonialism and prioritising mainstream white perspectives, such as in Australia, was also mentioned, along with discrimination and a wide range of negative consequences of this mentality. On the other hand, from the perspective of freedom of expression and exchange of ideas, cancel culture, no-platforming and groupthink were also identified as negative values.

Finally, on a more spiritual register, one participant mentioned that a receptivity to the possibility of the "something other" lingers, beyond theistic or existentialist concepts, that permits some people to embrace the possibility of other planes of consciousness.

Summary/analysis:

We observe the tension between, on the one hand, the view that, since large-scale institutions have failed in protecting us from collapse, we will need to become more self-reliant, taking individual responsibility for reducing impact on the environment and focusing on local initiatives where we can more directly impact people's lives; and, on the other hand, the view that any hopes of staving off the worst consequences of climate change will require coordinated action by governments and corporations. There is also obvious tension between what many people seem to value, and how the world economy actually functions today. Therefore, one line of thought amongst people who anticipate the collapse of industrial consumer societies is that it can be a welcome event, as it will reduce the suffering being caused to maintain those societies today.

The amount of suffering already caused by industrial consumer societies brings into question the authenticity of the espoused universality of values of those of us who live privileged positions within such societies. If the level of commitment to values by the professional classes that engage in processes such as the one reported in this paper is actually a superficial elaboration of identity,

rather than something deeper that will sustain itself during periods of personal vulnerability, then the benefit of processes like this one is in doubt. For some insight on that matter, the responses of the professional classes to contemporary ethical challenges, such as those arising from the responses to the pandemic, is something to give critical attention to.

3. Dependence of societal values on the assumption of certainty of material progress

Some of the values mentioned above are explicitly related to material progress, which itself was identified as one of the core values of modern Western society. Other values may still be contingent on the assumption that material progress will continue.

GDP growth is of course intimately tied with material progress, though it is not identical to it. One participant suggested that corruption is actually the antithesis of progress and therefore not contingent on it, but that, in parallel, trust is being eroded by the failure to deal with the scale of the problems we face, and the value attributed to innovation might similarly be dependent upon a deluded sense of forward motion. She suggested that the whole notion of progress might shift from the technical to the social sense.

One participant suggested that efficiency and calmness (peacefulness) are very much related to a certain level of material wellbeing in Germany, though not necessarily to progress itself. Another contended that institutional values perpetuate a need for material progress.

Another participant suggested that individual responsibility and conservatism align with neoliberal policies that allow for plundering the earth. Assumptions about continued growth in wealth keep people numbed to inequality and from caring more about measures to combat climate change. Similarly, the use of technology is premised on the overconsumption and plundering of resources as if there's no tomorrow.

As another participant put it, huge numbers of people seem trapped in the materialist paradigm, and that in the UK at the moment, all the talk is of recovery – that we will all be happy again once we can shop/drink/holiday abroad. At the same time, the pandemic and climate emergency have been a wakeup call to many, helping them to discover, and “dis-cover” as he put it, what really matters in life and to deepen and act upon these values. The last thing we therefore need is recovery – “re-covering” – of what has been discovered.

One participant mentioned that insularity and competition seem key within the aspiring lower-middle classes, and while insularity could decline, the pandemic has produced more of it. Competition may begin to be seen as somehow profligate in unstable or difficult situations, as the admiration of it is based on an assumption of progress and how it helps that occur. Fairness could be reinvigorated in difficult new circumstances.

Finally, one participant suspects that it is a perception of certainty of material security that has led to the rise in current values and the fall in others. Looking at the history of his own family and community, he sees that periods of hardship, crises and uncertainty possibly give rise to different values than periods of material security and prosperity. And that uncertainty, insecurity and often loss of material security resulted in a much greater reliance on others and the promotion of values that fostered community and, to some extent, a greater connection to and respect for the environment on which survival obviously depends. But, he continued, perhaps during a period of some

70 years of consistently increasing material security, the importance of those values has been lost. Good relations with your neighbours and townsfolk, and the reliance on your local reputation and on your local community to literally save your life in times of conflict or natural disaster, are no longer necessary. In evolutionary terms, the selection pressure for these values has been removed. Material security and a shift to relationships that are primarily economic in nature results in the ascendance of different values – namely those that support a money-based economy.

Summary/analysis:
Research shows that the assumption that the standard of living experienced by oneself and one's children will be better in the future than today has been declining around the world for over a decade. There is the possibility that such a belief has enabled people to compromise the present due to a story of a better tomorrow, so that the unravelling of that story will have a major effect on how people live, and what they value. Although the current materialist paradigm continues to wield power over people, the COVID pandemic has given many an opportunity to rethink what matters. That may be a reason for the massive uptick in resignations from work that has been reported in many countries around the world. There is some evidence that climate anxiety is also playing a role in people's reassessment of life priorities. This situation could mean that societies are ready for a period of transformative change in values, for good or ill.

4. How societal collapse may influence people's ethical views

There were mixed views about the degree to which societal collapse might result in a surge of compassion and solidarity. Some participants expressed explicit interest in exploring the evidence that people tend to meet catastrophe with compassion.

One hopeful response was that a sense of humility might wash over us all as we gradually come to terms with the nature of our imperial history, although the same person suspects that things could go either way. She added that the media, with its toxicity, is more likely to hinder rather than help in a collapse scenario, and that a greater polarisation in societal values might just be starting. Expressing a similarly mitigated view, one participant suggested that many people will realise that solidarity is an important value, yet it will not extend to people of colour or to the Global South. Another participant also thought that the influence on people's ethical views would be varied, with the circle of ethical concern narrowing and society becoming more insular and indifferent, or even hostile, towards the perceived "others", but with less selfish behaviours and attitudes within those narrower circles. She added that sudden catastrophic events might cause people to turn to religion and/or charismatic spiritual leaders for guidance.

One participant expressed the belief that power and control, or desperate attempts to avoid being vulnerable, are likely to increase during times of constraint and uncertainty, as seen during the COVID pandemic with increased hoarding and even physical altercations in supermarkets over supplies like toilet paper. However, there were parallel increases in altruistic behaviour during this time as well.

Another participant expressed similar views, that a good part of Western society will, at least initially, attempt to navigate their way based on their current value set, including competition, dominance and other more or less subtle forms of violence. However, he didn't think this will necessarily be dominant or long-lived, and the uncertainty and insecurity presented by climate change and other elements of progressive collapse will reassert some selection pressure for different values. He suspects that we will tread both paths simultaneously and dynamically. He also pointed

out that that collapse is anything but uniform, and many people won't even know that collapse is occurring around them. Most of the things that science predicts will happen in the West as a result of climate change have already happened to many people in other parts of the world, and “societal collapse” is typically something that is described in retrospect. He suggested that people have difficulty tracking social or environmental change over any prolonged period, and each new generation has no personal memory of the past. Similarly, even major changes are accommodated fairly quickly and simply become "the new normal”.

Another participant suggested that people might stop investing their time and attention in things that don't matter when everything collapses, pausing to ask what really matters for them and how they may want to proceed, and with whom, and what resources they have for doing that. But she also wondered about the darker side of collapse anticipation, expecting that others may turn cynical and say, if everything is ending we may as well live selfishly without regard for others.

Another view was that feelings of impotence and denial, and a retreat into “looking after number one", might dominate, showing a lack of emotional resilience and enlightened thinking necessary to deal with the situation with the collective urgency required. Another participant observes a variety of stances along a continuum, from a reaction based on simplistic certainties – populism and even fascism – and the projection of deep inner fears onto childlike solutions relying on parental figures/organisations that can fix things for us, to defensive indifference, through to compassionate action.

A somewhat different prediction is that we will see a paradox. There may be a greater sense of pulling together, where people espouse community concern, but accompanied by a sense of conformism, and a lack of accountability and dissent, along with shaming those who do not pull together in the ways that the corporate state manipulates people to believe they should. This may already be happening in the current pandemic response.

Summary/analysis:

Clearly there will not be a homogeneous response to societal collapse, but a key question is: what kinds of responses are likely to dominate? This is a question that studies of past crises may provide insights into, especially those such as wars and genocides where people’s worlds fell apart. But our situation has characteristics that distinguish it from past crises, including the power of social media to both spread misinformation and deliver targeted corporate propaganda, the polarisation of some societies, and our high degree of dependence, especially in developed, urban societies, on technology and industrial supply chains for meeting our most essential needs.

In exploring such a question, it is important not to limit ourselves to modernist assumptions of the nature of humanity and the role of values and ethics. As mentioned earlier, there is growing evidence of a positive disintegration of people’s existing identities as they allow their anticipation of collapse to remove many of their previous preoccupations. Those preoccupations typically relate to societal expectations and goals related to future material security. Many people report feeling freed to be more present to their emotions and to prioritise living according to their values right now. This resonates with ancient wisdoms about basic human nature. For instance, the pre-Buddhist philosophy of the “brahma vihara” (then adopted into Buddhism) is that humans have four innate virtues, which are natural for any of us if we are feeling neither fear nor succumbing to the pressures of our acculturation. The first is a general gratitude for being alive that generates a sense of benevolence towards all life. Second is compassion towards all sentient life where we feel

pain at another's pain. Third is a vicarious pleasure where we feel joy at another's pleasure. Fourth is a general non-attachment to any of those feelings as they come and go in flow. From that perspective (which we are not both claiming to be the "correct one"), the matter of improving the behaviour of individuals is less about us learning values and ethics, or better conforming to them, but removing the impediments to us living in a "naturally positive" way where we work out the right course of action in any given context due to those four underlying virtues.[21] The limited diversity of the focus group, as well as the cultural context of the authors, means that some deep assumptions about humanity and consciousness may be limiting our discussion, which is why more diverse participation in dialogue on these topics will be important in future.

5. Conflict between personal desires and what matters universally

Most of the participants expressed strong alignment between their personal values/desires and more universal ethical values. For example, one activist said she has already confronted the possibility of a significant prison term and throwing away her teaching career as a result, even if she once would have liked a family and greater stability and security, and has given them up. It remains difficult for her to see others who maintain conventional, comfortable lives, expecting others to do the work of social activism and make sacrifices. Another mentioned her privileged life and willingness to let go of many things, with just a reluctance to give up flying to see close family members, a conflict echoed by another participant who nonetheless sees the gap increasingly shrinking between how she lives and how she aspires to. One participant said he is keen to live in a society that desires to live more compassionately, and another sees the needs of his immediate family and their wellbeing as aligned with tackling the climate emergency collectively. Another with a more mystical perspective also sees little conflict as he participates and serves in this new reality, which includes helping others to "wake up" in his role as a spiritual director, and feeling at ease in the deep process of the cosmos that he says is doing exactly what it is supposed to be doing. Another participant said he has been actively engaged in self-development for some years now to live by, model and teach the values he thinks will be sorely needed in the coming decades, and although this makes him "insane" by the measures of contemporary society, he thinks that very soon the world will be crying out for elders who have a different kind of wisdom.

One participant admitted honestly that she does not deliberately seek hardship and suffering, even though she believes it is a necessary condition for spiritual growth, and that her selfish actions, which allow her to experience pleasure and avoid pain, may cause harm to other people and other beings that surround her, live in the wider world, or will come after her. While she does limit herself to an extent by living very simply by current standards in the society she is part of, she still lives comfortably enough to feel guilty that she causes harm with every step and purchase she makes, beyond what would be strictly needed for her survival and basic needs. To behave in a less harmful way, her self-described selfishness would have to be curtailed by some major internal shift or external circumstances – ideally, a radical shift in wider cultural attitudes and worldview that would make selfish behaviour socially unacceptable. She thinks she would welcome such a change, so long as it is not imposed by violence or a threat of violence, and is equitable. However, she does not expect it will happen.

Summary/analysis:

The participants of this focus group expressed being closely aligned with universal, pro-social values. That may not be reflective of the general population in their countries. That many others are not as aligned with these values may prove both a personal challenge and a considerable obstacle as we anticipate and seek to mitigate the worst consequences of collapse. However, over past

decades, the necessary support for universal values and human rights to become norms and laws has arisen from the solidarity of ordinary working people, rather than the minds of the professional classes. Current elite-owned and controlled means of mass communication may not be favouring the articulation of such values, and so there may be a role for people with the skills, time, resources and opportunity to articulate them and what they mean in a contemporary context, to reflect sentiments amongst the general public.

6. How to retain and develop one's own values in anticipation of societal disruption and collapse

One activist mentioned the usefulness of ongoing education, including reading and listening to lectures, as well as therapy, and said that more ethical inquiry would be good, as well as more coaching from elders. But she stressed the importance of actually putting your body on the line and confronting the powers that be, and not just preaching while sitting on a cushion. Similarly, another participant mentioned not only changing her own ways (e.g. nutrition, energy use, travel) but also taking to the streets with XR, joining start-up groups and engaging in civil disobedience. For her, even though it affects her career, it is an issue of integrity.

Another participant also mentioned reading novels that deeply affected her and made her imagine a world where everything has collapsed, as well as reading collapsology literature. She mentioned learning gardening and strengthening friendships with people who have a sensitivity to these issues as well, teaching about it and thereby engaging constantly with it, and also developing an interest in different forms of awareness and mindfulness trainings.

A participant who was previously involved with XR and focusing more on mitigation is thinking more about adaptation, including considering where to live and how to protect his own children and family. But he also seeks to retain and develop his own values through education – reading, reflecting, and trying to understand what the elements of collapse might be and imagining scenarios that will help him prepare and be more resilient.

One participant engages in Zen and animism, and has switched careers back to training holistic psychotherapists, whom he says we are going to need. Another is deepening his spiritual life, working within institutions to support the raising of consciousness, and helping others to maintain their humanity and values. He admitted that it's tough spiritual work not to "give in to that fear", and he fears that by increasing the knowledge of forthcoming collapse he increases the tendency for more people to enter their egoist bodies. He is not confident that he can hold his loving awareness in the face of violence.

Yet another has hired a spiritually guided life coach, retreats to bimonthly meditation weekends, and prioritises time to dialogue with friends for whom matters of ethics, compassion, connection, love and the divine are central to their life choices. Another said that there's no point in trying to imagine collapse because we won't know what it looks like, and therefore her focus so far has been on accepting the uncertainty and learning to live with it. Having lived through a mild collapse, she says it's not all just violence, that there's a lot of beauty, and that we may need simply to live moment by moment.

One participant likes to engage in public debate with those who may disagree with him about the urgency of the problem, and also encourages his students in seminars to think about the scale of the task ahead of us. For him, this is also about building resilience to avoid the situation of people

doing horrific, barbaric things to one another. He said he hopes his existing values will prove robust. He believes we simply don't have the time to invent new ethical frameworks, and so we need to bring out and draw upon what humans already know. The focus is what will be transformative, and jettisoning of the values that are responsible for our current predicament. Another participant took a somewhat different view, saying that while there's some preparation to be done, we have to be ready to be changed by the experience, and it's naive to think some things we take for granted today can be preserved.

A few participants explicitly endorsed a list of possible concrete suggestions provided in the question, which included relying on and developing one's own intuitions, engaging with new views, exploring wisdom traditions, exploring different philosophical and ethical concepts, and pursuing practices that affect body and mind in ways that then influence one's ethical priorities. One participant said she seeks for these approaches to become embedded within multiple systems and organisations locally.

One participant offered a dissenting view – not merely to this question, but to the whole approach of using an ethical or values framework to address the issue of collapse. He claimed that it is implausible to bring in different possible pre-existing value frameworks to contemplation of the consequences of collapse, because societal collapse of the kind being considered, accompanied by the unravelling of life-support systems across the globe, will present humanity with a wholly unprecedented existential challenge, and experiencing it is bound to involve similarly existential forms of upheaval. He felt that intelligent anticipation of this process must envisage something open-endedly transformative, and one important structure that will certainly be subject to such transformation is our framework of values. In his phrasing, as with all tragic experience, we might take inherited or accustomed values into the furnace of such a trial, but there can be no guarantee at all that those with which we come out on the other side (for those of us for whom there may be a further side) will have survived unaltered. Rather, he suggested, in approaching this unprecedented crisis there is a premium on finding some "non-ethical way" of understanding the kind of responsibility which those concerned for the human future must now bring to bear, and one aspect of our responsibility will be the "reinventing of a workable ethical framework for an unprecedentedly broken world."

Summary/analysis:
We see a tension in many responses between anxious anticipation of the unknown and future struggles, and a desire to continue to be the best person one can be while supporting others to be resilient as well. It's important to distinguish between core values that are universal across situations – most importantly, the compassion that drives us to try, when possible, to reduce the suffering of others, in the same way that we want to see our own suffering reduced – and narrower values that may be more context-specific, or that are more about lifestyle choices and the elements that we prioritise.

The dissenting view expressed above therefore reveals scepticism about the role of ethics during collapse that might be unfounded. As societies contend with greater disruptions and possible collapse, perhaps developing new structures for survival and governance, some core values will be helpful guides, as well as helping to constitute what we mean by society, and therefore what we are concerned is collapsing. For instance, the age-old Golden Rule – the ethic of reciprocity, of treating others as one would want to be treated – which is found across many diverse cultures, remains as relevant as ever. The urgent call to action – relieving intense suffering – cannot wait to

be firmly incorporated into our ethical thinking, and even the existential challenge of collapse, where people may be struggling to survive, does not lessen the importance of kindness and compassion as values we will continue to aspire to. The risk associated with arguing that necessity means we ditch commitments to long-held values is that it will empower an elite to justify whatever it is they deem necessary to undertake for the best of humanity. That is a topic we return to below.

7. The possible shift in balance between achieving maximum impact and respecting moral intuitions when resources are scarce

A core issue in ethics, applicable to countless real-world situations, is the question of how to reconcile utilitarian or, more generally, consequentialist thinking,[22] with its focus on outcomes and aiming to help as many as possible (usually saving lives or preventing/alleviating suffering), with deontological, rule-based ethics, which often seeks alignment with our moral intuitions, such as not causing harm or treating everyone equally. In the event of collapse, with available resources even more limited, would a more utilitarian triage need to take place in determining whom "we" can help? Would "we" take greater care to help the worst off because their suffering is so great, or would we be guided by other moral intuitions? Both maximising impact and following our moral intuitions can be driven by care and the desire to help those in need, but the policy implications can be very different.

One activist observed the inherent harshness of this dilemma and the question of who makes such decisions, and who decides who makes the decisions, but recognised that it's important to think about it in advance. This requires getting a discourse going on a concrete issue such as what to do with a billion displaced or stateless people, and admitting that it is going to happen relatively soon. She sees a duty to prevent fascist populism, a high risk in nations with developed economies. During the webinar, she also mentioned conversations among activists about trying to take people from utilitarian thinking towards virtue ethics, which might be more aligned with intuitions, but that people question whether it's the right response, as they want to get the most bang for their buck.

A self-described XR rebel said that real democracy, with citizen participation, needs to take care of this balancing act, and that as an academic in participatory research, she thinks we are not nearly as democratic as we should be – in our research, in our policy advice and in our teaching. She doesn't believe we would take greater care to help the worst off because, contrary to the COVID pandemic, the climate crisis is slowly creeping up upon us, and the idea of a sudden Armageddon denies the fact that the crisis is actually the result of centuries-long activities benefitting the richest countries. On this view, there is no reason to think that we will suddenly start applying a more impact-based approach aimed at helping the worse off. But then, it seems, neither should we expect a more intuitively caring ethical approach either.

One participant, advocating an impartial, egalitarian approach to meeting needs, said that collective international goals will require global perspectives that don't necessarily distinguish between nation states, and we need to identify common humanitarian values that can facilitate equal and fair distribution of finite resources and joint responsibility for our collective predicament. Another participant took a more spiritual approach to impartiality by advocating that we get the "I" out of the way.

One participant said there is no way around justice, solidarity and sharing, while another said that his moral intuition is to challenge hierarchy and patriarchy in all of this, to try to do his bit "to reduce the ease of proud cowards creating horrific outcomes". Another participant said that while the current system in Australia indicates that "we" would not care for the worst off in future scenarios, she and others are working to make changes to the system.

Another participant offered a different perspective, saying he suspects that these two alternatives – impact and intuition – dominate at opposite ends of the spectrum of scale and organisational complexity. In his words, an individual is free to act intuitively, and in fact may typically prefer to, as it is an easy and powerful response. But as more and more people get involved in any action or decision, the personal freedom to act by intuition is curtailed and a more rational approach tends to win out, certainly at governance levels beyond the local community. Issues of process, accountability, efficiency and transparency become more important. His own experience helping the needy in his local community has been a case study in exactly this, and he has been aware of significant tension in himself between his and others' intuitive response on the one hand, and the more principled, rational, utilitarian response on the other. During the webinar, he noted that COVID vaccine distribution may be a good example of a crisis forcing thinking about resources, and how countries tend to look after themselves even more – an example of the strong intuition towards self-preservation.

One participant who has observed from within how existing institutions contribute to maintaining the status quo asked whether she is just reinforcing structures that we don't need anymore, and thereby impacting the wrong things. Yet she is afraid to cause more suffering in the short term, even if it causes more suffering in the long term – a point echoed by another participant. She suggested that collapse might bring this question more to the front. But she also felt that, because we are living in an unknowable situation, the question of impact vs intuition is not relevant, as it comes from a rational mindset that may not be applicable. Another participant mentioned the usefulness of brainstorming in groups about various scenarios, as it is hard to talk about them in a detached, theoretical way.

Summary/analysis:
It's important to point out that impartiality is crucial for achieving maximum impact, but that it is also aligned with the moral intuition many people have against discrimination. It is therefore an essential element of ethical decision-making, though it doesn't itself necessarily resolve the difficult question of when to carry out triage, and the degree to which those worst off are to be prioritised, or who gets to be involved in such decisions.

It seems plausible that as global coordination becomes increasingly difficult and as populations focus more on their own self-preservation, impartiality may be applied at most to local populations. Utilitarian triage might well be carried out by local authorities to ensure the survival of as many of their population as possible, unless authoritarians in power favour the survival of an economic elite. Whether those suffering the most will be given prioritised attention seems less certain, as the dominant ethics of our current societies are focused more on survival and growth than on the alleviation of suffering. In our view, a shift towards prioritising the alleviation of the worst suffering is warranted. Individuals might still be most motivated by the intuition to care for those they are closest to, physically or emotionally, whether or not such efforts lead to the greatest impact overall.

8. Whom do we want making decisions about values and policies, and how?

There was strong agreement on the need for participatory decision-making, carried out by "conscious" people who are well informed, including through consultations with experts. Citizens' assemblies were cited by several participants as a model of real democracy, based on integrity and care, which removes lobbying from decision-making and prevents minds and options being shaped by corporate and elite power. As one participant put it, people who are informed and supported by a dialogical method will be able to jointly make decisions, as humanity has done for ages. This means hearing a multiplicity of voices, including those of the marginalised and disempowered, who are allowed to represent themselves, and also learning from good experiments. One participant suggested we need to clarify more deeply the intention and motivation, i.e. the ethical drivers, before acting, including who acts and what is acted upon. This also includes how we convene people and the identities of people who get heard, and also whether we choose to engage if processes seem non-diverse or illegitimate. There was also mention of a global assembly, whereby communities anywhere can have an assembly process that feeds into a larger assembly.

One participant cautioned that even frameworks set up with good intentions can end up harming people, and another expressed scepticism about citizens' assemblies working in practice. Yet another suggested that who makes decisions and how may well be out of our control – he doesn't see that he can effectively influence his own government's policies, let alone that of another country. He thinks that the dominant culture's response to the COVID pandemic shows this, and he expects that the situation is only going to get worse in the coming years. He sees his key sphere of influence as being his local community, including the modelling and teaching of the values that he thinks will be necessary to the survival and wellbeing of that community in the coming decades, and he focuses the vast majority of his efforts there.

Others echoed the scepticism about being able to make the necessary changes in time. In practice, the question is how to deconstruct hierarchical power relations and expand deliberative democracy, so people and communities can be more agile and responsive. But if we don't have time to work on a cultural shift, then what do we do? Effecting change within the existing system is difficult, and even though there are people working in the current system, such as in local governments, who want to do the right thing, they may be constrained by their roles. How then can people, including those who are marginalised, help shape the ways that dialogue and decision-making occur, including the ethical frameworks that are used? And what can white middle-class people do to promote this?

One participant mentioned that neofascism is arising because of societal destabilisation, and that even if some people think that we might be naive in wanting more grassroots deliberative democracy, it is both right to maintain and develop it and it is also helpful for enabling agile smart decisions. It was also suggested that there is both a need and space for pragmatic policy decisions from existing institutions and persons with power, because there are concrete things that need doing right now to prevent great harm on a geological timescale, such as helping species of trees to migrate with a changing climate, helping to secure nuclear waste, etc.

A lone dissenter, mentioned earlier, suggested, in his words, that the most hopeful response to societal collapse is that the vanguard of the intelligent, imaginative and reflective who can see it coming might, at last, summon the courage to take the power to prevent or mitigate it into their own hands by revolutionary means. Their doing so, he continued, would be undemocratic by the value systems to which most of us adhere at the moment, but "it is quite open-ended whether in

the fires of existential transition there might be forged a new concept of democracy more fitting for these times, one where 'the voice of the people' is understood not as the upshot of Benthamite head-counting but as the will of those who retain and act from their whole, life-responsible human being on behalf of humanity as a whole." This view was questioned by others who wondered about the legitimacy of the people who would wish to appoint themselves into such a vanguard, especially given the role they would adopt for themselves might affect millions of people.

Summary/analysis:
There was a near-consensus that more participatory decision-making mechanisms (which might be more capable of responding to needs and ensure greater impartiality in making decisions about scarce resources), should be put in place if possible, though there was scepticism about how likely it is to happen. The lone view that a self-appointed benevolent oligarchy acting on their views of what to do for humanity might be the ideal response to collapse raises serious concerns. Most fundamentally, any form of dictatorial governance that sheds many core ethical principles in order to promote survival, even if seeking to do so impartially and prioritising the least well off, not only has questionable legitimacy but will not be responsive to different forms of knowledge. Compassion, freedom and fairness are not disposable simply because a severe crisis is underway and elites choose to see such values as unhelpful for the survival of humanity. Secondly, even if these core principles were retained, there would be no system in place to check the power usurped by such an oligarchy. Huge atrocities have been repeatedly committed throughout history by totalitarian leaders who claimed to know what was best for their populations. Societies run by dictatorial elites might also be more likely to engage in domestic and international conflicts over resources. Dictatorship also serves as a poor model for any societies that eventually emerge from the chaos.

We would strongly argue that any shift in governance mechanisms needs to be towards more participation rather than less, and that civil discourse and scrutiny of power, including claims made by those in power, are a necessary bulwark against the horrors of totalitarianism. It is with this in mind that we are wary of some of the ideas that have been promoted under the banner of "longtermism". It is a concept that values the potential of future lives more than current lives, due to a simplistic assumption that there are many more potential future people than presently alive. Adherents to such a perspective may find themselves convinced of an ethical need to sacrifice the lives and wellbeing of people today based on their projections of how many people might live in future. It is an 'ethical' framework that could be attractive to people who want to have a way of caring less about the dignity and wellbeing of people in the present to justify their own attempts at global societal control.[23]

9. Opportunities for ethical impact that become available as our current lifestyles prove tenuous

One activist suggested that collapse might be the only hope we have for a post-capitalist society to emerge. Yet she thinks there is still such widespread denial, even within movements and fields of experts, that it may preclude sufficiently good discourse and the exploration of ideas, and allow things to continue to worsen. She sees the popularisation of non-violence by XR as a good thing, ahead of massive disruption, upheaval and collapse.[24] She also mentioned the duality of possible paths, one where people double down on self-defence, the other where people step up and help one another rather than rape and pillage, and that it would be interesting to better understand how these dynamics happen.

One participant sees an opportunity for improved health when people will have (better) access to unrefined plant-based food, unpolluted environments and work that is not damaging. Another participant expects that large percentages of people will turn back to spirituality and love of nature, and another sees the possibility of working towards a mass raising of consciousness, of who "I am". Other participants see a chance to connect differently or more closely to one another, and to give up our individualistic lifestyles of trying to achieve ever more. One of them believes that large-scale impact may happen in the very concrete infrastructures of organisation of social and political life, and in the distribution of property and access to resources. Another participant, observing that overconsumption generally does not make people happier or help them to realise what's important in life, thereby sees an opportunity in the collapse of the current system. Another sees the opportunity to reduce the resource demands of the rich urban centres on the rest of the world.

One participant harbours the hope that a more compassionate human society might arise from the wreckage at some point somewhere, and she would also not discount the possibility that significant ethical impact can be achieved in the short term as well by rethinking/introducing ethics education focused on selflessness and compassion in the anticipation of societal collapse in public schools and towns and cities, as well as mass virtual campaigns, or by some other means.

Another participant sees the possibility of large-scale impact, to the extent that small-scale impact is replicated over and over, but sees the prospect of global and national-level policy changes that have a positive ethical impact as being highly uncertain, though not impossible. Small-scale impact at a person-to-person, neighbour-to-neighbour level is an absolute certainty. He suspects that in this digital/online age, an inestimable amount of time and energy is utterly wasted on fruitless activity.

A participant who used to be a banker before changing career and becoming involved in XR observed that in the UK, the pandemic has caused us to realise who the key workers are, and they're not the bankers or the lawyers – they're the frontline health workers, delivery people, care workers. Similarly, with collapse and its possible implications, if it all goes badly wrong, there will be a humbling, and it might help to shift the Overton window. He believes that mitigation is going to be a failure, and this will hopefully allow a more public discussion about preparing for collapse, and encourage people to engage with what a fairer, more equal world might look like.

Summary/analysis:
Instability can be a driver of change, and our question was focused on the possible upsides. The crumbling of our current system might conceivably lead to something kinder, fairer and more compassionate, though this scenario is entirely speculative. But anticipation of collapse can at least provide the impetus to steer our society in this direction even before things further deteriorate. With the formation of groups like Post Carbon Institute, Deep Adaptation Forum, Momentum Institute and Just Collapse, it appears that there is interest and energy for changing lives as a result of the anticipation of societal collapse.

10. The possibility of some degree of global convergence around universal values as we anticipate collapse

This question touches more directly on the role of ethics itself as a driver of change, on whether the formalisation of values and ethical frameworks would be helpful, and who would be natural allies in such an endeavour.

One of the participants said this seems to be one of the biggest and most important challenges, and she takes much hope from the different global movements that demand change. Another said it will always be helpful to promote the idea that if values matter then they should be universal, and that we have key agreements, hard won, at the intergovernmental level. He admitted to prior deep scepticism about discussions about values, other than how we agree to show up in dialogue, with compassion, curiosity, respect. And a reason he was against the idea of convergence or universal values was that he thought it would be populated by people who need order and control, who are afraid of complexity and not knowing. However, he feels that it would be good to have a group that advocates in society for universal values, which are not the stories we are already starting to hear from the new fascists – the idea that humans are fundamentally bad and need to be controlled for their own good, rather than us being forced to compete and destroy and lie to each other. He sees a deep difference in the underlying assumption about human nature, which can be an excuse for fascist stories. So there is an effort we can be involved in to articulate a different value set, and therefore a different understanding of who we are and how we got into this mess. He added that we could do with further agreements to protect people from abuses of power in the name of adaptation.

In a separate reflection, he wondered whether values can actually be a distraction from a more Buddhist focus on mind states, aversions and cravings. He suggested that in a state of loving kindness and presence where one observes one's inner world, the "right/moral" action will arise, and we might get confused by trying to codify it all. He asked, does rewiring become a question of practices, such as breathwork, meditation, dance?

One activist pointed to healthcare, collective organising and social design, intentionally built under the umbrella of mutual care. She mentioned that some people ask, what if politicians had to take the Hippocratic Oath, and suggested, what if we all did? Another participant mentioned health as a universal value, along with safety, and referred to their formalisation in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. She mentioned the UN and WHO as natural allies, while another participant said that public intellectuals need to step up alongside civic leaders. Another participant mentioned a few universal values such as autonomy, integrity, respect for dignity and rights of humanity, but said that place-based values are also important, particularly in parts of the world where colonisation has impacted First Nation communities.

One participant thought it would be very helpful to try and formalise universal values while we still can. Another pointed out that there is already much work done on universal values, and an approach would be to share them. There are already many global movements sharing common ground, including interfaith movements and the shared values of the mystical traditions. Another participant similarly said that there are already certain values that are universally held, citing for example the work of the Common Cause Foundation, and the question is, how do you exercise and sustain them? How does consensus emerge on the values we need to see us through when there will be competing circles?

One philosopher felt that more convergence seems likely, even if not around "universal" values, especially in communities that develop around collapse. Another participant said that, while some degree of global convergence on values *per se* is certainly possible in response to major crises – as we have seen in the 20th century with the formation of the UN, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, international treaties and courts, etc. – NATO and the IMF also represent convergence around values in response to crises. He senses that values in general emerge in response to the

social and physical environment, and while certain universal values might be strengthened as a result of social and environmental change, other, less desirable values may be as well. He doesn't see any reason the world will become neater or less chaotic in the future than it is now, but rather, that the situation will remain heterogeneous and dynamic. This doesn't mean we can't still aim for global convergence, and in a sense, he thinks we already have done the formalising at an international level.

One of the participants observed that it's a really acute and good question, what level of structure will engender values. He noted that values can be quite prescriptive and constrain people in how they want to be and wish to engage. Creating a safe space where everyone is respected can also inhibit free speech. The advantage of prescriptive values can be efficiency, yet efficient structures can also be vulnerable to subversion. He therefore felt that one of the things we need to avoid is over-prescriptiveness in the way we manage discourse. He thinks it is fundamentally important to include everybody, and to try to win people over through the power of reason – that is the only way is to engage with critics and denialists.

Another participant asked if the endeavour would be worthwhile, as there seems to be a difference between what we say we value and what we really value. We say we value peace, respect, equality, justice, etc., but the collective result is pretty abysmal: we seem to value consumption and destruction over everything else, although none of us would explicitly say that. So he is sceptical about a conversation about universal values, as the real ones could be very different from the ones we imagine we're embracing. This view was echoed by another participant, who also suggested that as situations become more pressured, the gap increases between the values we would like to be upholding and those that we are living out. Furthermore, the first participant mentioned here added that it's hard to teach values, as we pick them up through socialisation. He also expressed doubt about whether it's always a good idea to set universal narratives against each other, because it can categorise people. The fascism of old used a lot of ecological imagery to sustain itself. He thinks we should be thinking of values as neurobiological conditions, rather than something we can conceptually agree on. The question then becomes, how can we rewire ourselves to a different kind of behaviour or mode of relationality, and how can we change the social reward system? At the moment, humility is not socially rewarded.

Summary/analysis:
Any attempt to achieve convergence around universal values requires that the values have a validity about them that applies to all people, regardless of culture and context, and further, that the values be perceived as reflecting what makes life feel worth living. A prerequisite is impartiality – that the interests of every human being have equal weight. A focus on relieving suffering of all kinds is a response to the phenomenon that ultimately underlines most of our issues, and allows some degree of prioritisation based on the intensity of that suffering. An enhanced, more universal approach would take into account the needs of non-human animals as well. This is not to suggest that suffering is the only value that matters to people. For example, safety, fairness and freedom all matter as well, even though it could be argued that part of the reason they matter is that their absence ultimately causes suffering, whether due to frustration, anxiety or physical harm.

11. How important is it for members of the general public to know about the discussions underway, and to try to influence these discussions?

There was a consensus among nearly all participants on the importance of public awareness and engagement on these discussions. One participant felt it important to open up these

conversations so that people can challenge what is thought to be the best way forward, bringing in broader, more creative perspectives. Another noted that in the Netherlands, for example, not many people are anticipating societal collapse, and the idea that there is actually a climate crisis is only now beginning to sink in – hence the importance of influencing the discussion and trying to get the message across. Another participant observed that diversification of the media carries problems relating to fake news, conspiracy theories and greater challenges for education – again speaking to the importance of providing the public with reliable facts. Another felt that the more we can get people to talk about it, the better, as the causes of climate change are in the "rear view mirror", and there is a need to offer humility, that our techno-fixes for climate change might not work. Another participant noted that the work of most of those in the XR and Deep Adaptation (DA) movements is driven by the idea that by anticipating collapse and embracing the idea that it is happening we can achieve some moral good by helping people to prepare and navigate.

A more Biblical perspective offered was the "Jesus model" – the idea of speaking the truth to any and all who will listen and trusting that those who are able to hear will do so, while helping more to be able to hear. This may require a deep trust in humanity that "the good" will indeed prevail if enough people are informed and encouraged. At the same time, we don't have to be attached to outcomes, but instead trust the process.

On a more philosophical level, one activist suggested that there's a deep sense in which people know the depth of rot in the system, that we've built our Western system on things that are deeply immoral and violent. If people become more acutely aware that our civilisation and culture look like they are going to come crashing down, it might allow people to better face the underlying truth.

A member of XR said he was drawn to the movement to educate people about the situation. While he agrees that it is the most important work, he questioned whether it could be counterproductive by causing panic and regression. Does the benefit outweigh the negative? Another participant responded that the issue needs to be framed in the right way, and that those who define it effectively can take the lead. The XR member also expressed concern from an educational perspective, that different material hits people in different ways, depending on where they're at. He also referred to the opportunity of what he termed a "disorienting dilemma", an initial awareness that profoundly unmoors you and shifts your world view and identity – a de-patternisation. This can happen to all of us at the personal level, and COVID was one for the whole planetary population. This offers the possibility for radical transformative change, especially if the conversations are had in the right way.

A participant who has worked for a long time in the space of mitigation and adaptation said that it is still very technocratic and managerial, and that we've distanced ourselves from our personal stories. The conversation needs to shift to a deeper, personal level. Another participant similarly spoke about the need for discovering hidden values by sustaining deeper inquiry. He warned of the need to stay alert to those places where the consciousness slips into fear and away from love. Another participant expressed discomfort with the opposition of fear and love, suggesting that we fear precisely because we love and want to protect family, and asking whether we can't acknowledge our vulnerability and find the truth in our fears. In fact, he believes that fear, including of collapse, is crucial too, because if you're not sometimes fearful, you're not paying attention. The previous participant suggested that it isn't a duality, and our task is to hold both. But do we seek to protect family from a place of loving or of fear? The latter can lead to aggression and

violence. He suggested that we must therefore discern the intention/consciousness with which people do it, and that if we approach the current dilemma from a place of fear in ourselves, the results of our actions will be distorted or compromised, or even work out evilly. Another participant warned that the process of informing the public must be set up carefully, noting that from her research on right-wing mobilisation she knows how much fascists love the idea of societal collapse, connecting it to fantasies of a takeover of power, an ultimate race war, etc.

Summary/analysis:
It seems clear that the possibility of collapse needs to make its way into public conversations so that society and individuals can better prepare, but that there are also risks that many people may panic and react regressively. It is therefore important to try to ensure that these conversations are conducted in an appropriate way, even it is far from clear how to manage this process without suppressing the truth about the deepening crises that lie ahead. In our view, it is essential that these conversations be held within the framework of a commitment to kindness, compassion and respect, and a willingness to question some of the assumptions on which our current societal structures are based.

Questions of ethics need to be part of such public dialogues. One of the reasons is that it will help members of the general public from being manipulated by vested interests that target their existing values to win attention. The situation with COVID illustrates how an ethical concept can be utilised by creators of communications materials, whether mainstream or alternative media, via use of wrongly or misleadingly presented information, to achieve support for a particular view on science, policy or people. If you believe in freedom of the individual, then you often saw a wrongly presented piece of information to emotionally connect with you on that. If you believe in social solidarity for public health, you often saw a wrongly presented piece of information to emotionally connect with you on that instead. Therefore, it is not only helpful to promote awareness of ethical frameworks but also their fallibility and contingency on circumstances, how our emotions function in relation to them, and the way ethical concepts can be used to manipulate people.

Discussion

This paper elicited reflections on several issues associated with collapse, including participants' own coping mechanisms and struggle to maintain the values of their ideal selves, the huge gap between the world as it is run and the world as we would like it to be, and the role of ethics in accompanying us through societal disruption and collapse and possibly helping to determine what comes out the other side. Despite the variety of views expressed and the differences in the issues and approaches participants considered most important, there are some overall conclusions we can draw, without overly simplifying:

- Within this relatively narrow focus group, there appeared to be a near-consensus on many of the things that matter to people, and that they wish to maintain as situations become more challenging, including such values as care, kindness, service, fairness, safety and authenticity.
- There is great uncertainty about how societal collapse might unfold as well as our ability to influence it.
- There is a strong belief in the need for inclusive, participatory decision-making.
- There is hope that there will be positive consequences for how humans live together,[25,26] including a dismantling or transformation of the exploitative, greedy and corrupt aspects of our current system.[11]

The main purpose of the focus group study was not to draw up a list of all possible values we hope to preserve and that will guide us as we anticipate and experience collapse, but to explore some of the ways that anticipating collapse might influence our own values and those of society at large, and whether there is usefulness in trying to achieve some kind of consensus and convergence around some key, universal values before we enter the maelstrom. That is particularly relevant as certain powerful groups in society, such as military strategists, are already discussing and preparing. We don't have to – nor can we expect to – agree on all the priorities or the precise concepts, though we are all trying our best to be helpful. And as most of us won't have much influence, we can support each other in promoting some good things, and do that in kind and curious ways.

In our attempt to make sense of the many views held about values and the degree of potential convergence that might be possible, the following reflection could be helpful. As mentioned earlier, many of the things we care about are ultimately connected to suffering, in that suffering occurs when they are absent. These include the satisfaction of basic needs, such as food, shelter, healthcare and good relationships. The value of avoiding suffering is intrinsic and doesn't change due to circumstances – nobody wants to suffer, whether or not collapse occurs. There is universality about the desire to avoid suffering, and intense suffering has an urgency about it that gives it particular priority. This is especially relevant to collapse and all the associated suffering it is likely to entail. It also applies to all sentient beings, human and non-human, and therefore no thorough discussion of the ethics of collapse can omit a discussion of the implications for the animals with whom we share the planet.[27] We therefore think it helpful if ethical reflections around collapse acknowledge some of the limitations of past ethical framings and adopt a perspective that a. seeks to understand and consider the implications of any situation or action for the experiences of all sentient beings, including non-human animals; b. seeks to meet the needs of all; and c. attributes high priority to preventing the worst forms of suffering from occurring, in the present and in the future.

On the other hand, there are many other things that we care about, less directly (though arguably still indirectly) because of suffering, but because they are essential elements of a world that feels worth living in, and it would feel strongly unintuitive to deny the importance of such values. In fact, the continued existence of our species is itself one of these widely held intuitions (though not universally held).

Values may still change in relative importance as a function of circumstances. When our society and the world itself undergo dramatic transformation, there may be a strong shift in the things we feel are worth preserving or striving for. On the one hand, many people regard it as self-evident that the degree to which people are prepared to be altruistic will shift when personal wellbeing and self-preservation are threatened. On the other hand, there is already evidence of the sense of near-term mortality that some people are already feeling in response to anticipation of societal collapse and which is transforming them to act in bolder and more complete forms of altruistic service. What appears most salient is the matter of boundaries of the group within which people may seek to express their concern for others. Such group boundaries are not self-evident but are socially constructed through processes of framing, with institutional interests involved in the creation and promotion of those frames. For instance, nationality, race, religion, age, and now biomedical status, are all ways that "in" and "out" groups are arbitrarily defined by systems of power working through language.

So even accepting the importance of meeting basic needs and preventing suffering, there is no single ethical framework that could be applied in society to determine precisely what to value in a way that would be universally acceptable, as the needs and wants of some may conflict with those of others. The strongly voiced recommendation among the participants of this webinar to create inclusive, participatory decision-making processes may be the best hope to achieve some sense of perceived fairness, while still ensuring that those in greatest need are attended to with the appropriate amount of care. This does not obviate the need for such decision-making itself to be based on values such as compassion, fairness and mutual respect. It is this emphasis on process that shapes the values charters of two collapse-related initiatives (see Boxes 1 and 2, with the Deep Adaptation Forum's Charter and Scholars Warning principles, respectively).

One common response we observe in many who anticipate collapse is a desire to let go of modernity – or at least extremes of modernist ways of thinking, such as a belief in the inevitability and beneficence of technological progress and human control.[28] Although there is much to be learned from wisdom traditions that have been hitherto marginalised, we offer a caveat against any desire for personal purity and redemption by seeking to separate oneself from the culture that created the current crises. A desire for personal purity can itself be regarded as arising from the individualism in our culture of modernity. In some cases, a rejection of modernity is associated with an embrace of indigenous spirituality and philosophy, whether from one's own geography or elsewhere. However, modern interpretations of indigenous spiritualities may be flawed and therefore counterproductive. In particular, indigenous philosophies generally share a perspective on human conceptualisation and language that is different to the one in modern societies and much of the field of philosophy and ethics. It doubts the idea that people can define and communicate in language coherent, context-transcending truths about right and wrong, rather than gaining context-specific insight by other means. Those other means include altered states of consciousness as well as nature immersion. Therefore, it would be a misreading of indigenous philosophies to reduce them to simple statements of principle, such as the primacy of the continuity of all species, or the need to base every decision on the impact on the next seven generations. It is also a misreading to suggest that such philosophies have no interest in the value of the individual. Instead, such philosophies are inviting us to use different ways of making sense of ourselves and the world, where the implications will be context-specific.

We mention this here, as a non-critical embrace of indigenous philosophies might lead to poor decisions about the rights and wellbeing of others, including even indigenous peoples themselves. Sometimes the rejection of the system and values that led us to our current predicament is accompanied by an unreserved glorification of nature. There may be a couple of limitations from such a perspective. First, romanticising nature as the source of all answers will downplay the role of the person and their culture in choosing what to "read off" from nature and seek to apply within societies. Second, romanticising nature as a beautiful extended self could blind people to the suffering contained within nature, which could undermine their attention to the wellbeing of sentient beings other than ourselves.[29]

By mapping out some of the potential and pitfalls of various ways of ethical reflection on societal disruption and collapse, we have identified the need for ongoing dialogue. Therefore, our main recommendation going forward is to establish an ethics and values process in global civil society, on the premise of an anticipation of societal disruption and collapse, to help future decision-making regarding societal disruption and collapse that upholds key ethical principles. The aim of such a process would not be to arrive at an agreement about a set of values, but to help people avoid

unquestioned assumptions about ethics that might lead to regressive views and policies. This process could be designed to reduce the likelihood of philosophers and ethicists accidentally using their intellects to defend themselves from existential dread, which could lead to justifications for new societal aggressions. Emphasis would also need to be given to processes of emotional exploration and sharing, which have been pioneered in the Deep Adaptation movement. [30]

Whereas a plurality of views will be essential to this process and to all future decision-making, there would be a risk in allowing those who seek to disregard or undermine plurality from exerting too much influence (as evoked by Karl Popper and his paradox of tolerance). Furthermore, a true commitment to plurality requires addressing systematic biases and oppressions, in order to ensure that existing power structures do not unduly influence which views are heard and given support. Therefore, any future global dialogue on ethics in the face of societal disruption and collapse should be designed and financed to actively enable a diversity of perspectives, and support for that approach should be made a requirement for participation.

In conclusion, we believe that as many of us become more deeply engaged in this topic, we would do well to return to simple questions about our intentions and impacts. Is my current story of right and wrong enabling more tenacious and impactful kindness at all scales, from local and immediate, to wider and long-term? If not, am I being honest with myself about what am I trying to achieve or to feel by working on this topic? How can I avoid making this work a form of self-soothing or distraction from the existential dread that pervades any work on societal collapse, whether acknowledged or not?

Box 1: Deep Adaptation Forum's Charter

This living Charter is meant to shape and guide our aspiration to embody loving responses to our predicament.
Governance: We actively support and seek to create connections that bring people together globally as we engage in projects, events, skills development, and mutual care. We involve people in evolving the decisions that affect them, primarily via consent decision-making. We support project integration as long as it's in the spirit of our mission and charter. As our environment shifts, we question and reflect on how to travel together as we explore new horizons.
Compassion: We centre compassion in all our work. We do this by noticing and listening within ourselves when anger, fear, panic, or insecurity may be influencing our thoughts or behaviours. And we invite others to similarly rest within their vulnerability. A shared effort to embody compassion warms and strengthens our hearts, offering an antidote to personal and collective trauma.
Curiosity: We recognise and acknowledge our unknowing. We do not prescribe answers to specific scientific, technical, or policy matters. Instead, our aim is to provide spaces that forge creative conditions for collaboration as constraints emerge. We invite participatory, generative dialogue that is founded in kindness, curiosity, and truth-telling.
Inclusivity: We value and celebrate the spectrum of perceptions and ways of being that enrich our community and the world we inhabit. We strive to be anti-racist, globalising our perspective to include, integrate, and foreground 'othered' histories, perspectives, voices, and realities, especially from the non-white, majority world, and places where collapse has long been unfolding and ongoing, as a result of processes of colonisation, exploitation, and genocide. We are expressly committed to making DAF spaces safer for everyone, especially Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour.
Respect: We respect others' perspectives however they may be reacting to our predicament. However, our stance is resolutely nonviolent. We favour persuasion over force, and reject any purported solutions which result in "othering". Specifically, we condemn all authoritarian, fascist, or racist discourses and responses.
Belonging: We coordinate nourishing spaces for mutual support, listening, and dialogue, nurturing profound human relationships and self-organizing collaborations. As individuals and in community we unlearn and relearn what it means to be fully present at any given moment.

Box 2: Scholars Warning principles

1. Transdisciplinarity: each academic discipline is one lens on what exists and is occurring in the environment, society and the individual. Therefore, each discipline has its preoccupations, limitations and oversights. In order for scholars and scholarship to be useful to decision making, at all levels, an openness and capability for triangulating insights from different disciplines is beneficial, as well as open recognition of limitations and biases. Therefore, one scientific discipline will not be privileged at the expense of insights from other fields of scholarship.
2. Diversity: the environmental predicament affects the whole world, but is disproportionately affecting people in the Global South, including women, the poor and marginalised minorities. Meanwhile, the mainstream communication from scholars at national and global levels is still influenced more by men, white people and the rich from the largest cities. It is also influenced by people who have sought roles as public commentators in combative media environments. For the national and global dialogue on what to do about our environmental predicament to better reflect a diversity of views in the world, substantial attention and resources must be given to this matter.
3. Rights: the effects of the environmental predicament on society, economics and politics is one of destabilisation, within which context, people can react either collaboratively in solidarity, or divisively in defensiveness. Claims from some scientists that they have no view on the moral implications of their findings and analysis, while at the same time influencing policy discussions, will not be tenable as we enter a more disruptive period for humanity worldwide. An aspect of responsible scholarly communication is to recognise and uphold the importance of universal human rights when considering the potential policy implications of research findings.

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