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Born in 1951 in East Lansing, Mich., USA

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PROJECT

Disasters and Blame

The category of the natural disaster, for which neither God nor man is to blame, is a distinctive creation of the Enlightenment, and making sense of the suffering wrought by an earthquake, a volcano, a flood, or some other explosion of nature's raw power has been perhaps the central challenge to ethics ever since. The obverse of blameless evil – blameless natural disaster and blameless human victims – is meaninglessness: no one intended the evil done and no one deserved the evil suffered. It was all an accident. What, then, is the point? Is there a point? These questions tormented post-Enlightenment thinkers. When the Victorian poet Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote bitterly of nature as "A hollow form with empty hands" and refused to "Embrace her as my natural good," he captured the horrified vision of nature as a theater of senseless violence. In stark contrast to the injunctions of Enlightenment natural theology, moral philosophy, and political theory from Alexander Pope to Jean-Jacques Rousseau to seek the good in nature, nineteenth-century thinkers shuddered in the face of nature's waste and devastation, all of it devoid of purpose.

My question is: what happens when we lose the Enlightenment category of natural disaster, and with it, the concept of blameless evil? As in the Enlightenment, great tectonic plates seem to be crashing up against one another in our heads. In the age of anthropogenic climate change and genetic engineering, the very idea of nature, autonomous and impervious to human will, seems to be dissolving. For good or for ill, the radius of human foresight and power – and with it the radius of human responsibility – has at least in our imaginations lengthened to the point that we have reversed roles with nature: no longer almighty mother (or cruel stepmother) to us cowering children, nature is now imagined as our ward, fragile and in need of our protection.

Recommended Reading

Daston, Lorraine. *Against Nature*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019.

The End of Natural Disasters

The purely natural disaster, for which no one is to blame, is an Enlightenment category. Previously, there were just disasters ("tribulationes", in medieval Latin), of mixed divine, human, and natural causation, and plenty of blame to go around. In the age of anthropogenic climate change, we are fast losing the category of the natural disaster – and with it, the concept of blameless evil. Not so long ago, the legal recognition of catastrophes for which no one was responsible, which were regrettable but beyond human reckoning or control, seemed a mark of progress: we had rid ourselves of the yoke of religious portents and chastisements, of reading divine wrath into events that were just part of the course of nature. To look for culprits for the damage caused by droughts or hurricanes seemed as benighted as hunting witches. But now enlightened opinion increasingly wonders whether natural disasters are really all that natural and poses hard questions about human responsibility – and liability.

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These metaphysical and moral changes are far too vast to compass in a single short talk. Here I'll concentrate on the implications of the vanishing Enlightenment category of the purely natural disaster and the concomitant concepts of blameless evil and human responsibility. But instead of tracking these developments in philosophical treatises, I'll focus on how the concrete practices of law courts and insurance companies are redefining in real time what disasters are and who's responsible for them. My premise is that this is metaphysics (and ethics) in the becoming: these new practices for dealing with disasters are reshaping how we think about what nature and responsibility mean right now.

Daston, Lorraine J. (New York, NY, 2023)

Rivals : how scientists learned to cooperate

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1853724971>

Daston, Lorraine J. (Princeton, 2022)

Rules : a short history of what we live by

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1774520095>

The Lawrence Stone lectures

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1774520095>

Daston, Lorraine J. (Berlin, 2018)

Gegen die Natur

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1020901233>

Against nature

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1020901233>

Daston, Lorraine J. (Chicago, 2017)

Science in the archives : pasts, presents, futures

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=862821916>

Daston, Lorraine J. (Jerusalem, 2015)

Before the two cultures : big science and big humanities in the nineteenth century

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=868966738>

Proceedings / The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities ; Vol. 9, No. 1

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=868966738>

Daston, Lorraine J. (Chicago, Ill. [u.a.], 2013)

How reason almost lost its mind : the strange career of Cold War rationality

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1603382607>

Daston, Lorraine J. (Berlin, 2012)

Festkolloquium für Hans-Jörg Rheinberger : Beiträge zum Symposium am 24. 1. 2011 im Max-Planck-Institut für Wissenschaftsgeschichte

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1517019672>

Preprint ; 433

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1517019672>

Daston, Lorraine J. (2012)

Wissenschaftsgeschichte und Philosophie : Hans-Jörg Rheinberger und l'esprit de la fleuve

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=73622839X>

Daston, Lorraine J. (2011)

The empire of observation, 1600-1800

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=671522736>

Daston, Lorraine J. (Chicago, 2011)

Histories of scientific observation

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=627633331>