

# CHAPTER 1

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## INTRODUCTION: TOO MUCH OPTIMISM

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In a recent television interview<sup>1</sup> comedian Billy Connolly said he thought Australians were very optimistic when compared with the British – and, no doubt, the Scots. I thought about that – maybe the Scots were the only mob to truly understand optimism. On further reflection, I still think optimism is universally distributed – whatever Billy Connolly thinks. There may be something of an unequal distribution among national cultures, but when one considers that the Danes are rated very highly for happiness (see Chapter 3) it might be prudent to avoid snap judgements about the distribution of optimism.

However, optimism seems to widely underpin contemporary human cultures. Optimism is so pervasive that it has become integrated into all aspects of life, public and private. But optimism has not been widely understood as problematic – certainly not in the same way that anger, rage and frustration is a problem in the United States, and probably everywhere in a nearly post pandemic world.

Optimism, and a series of related emotional and intellectual moves, is so ever-present as to be almost invisible. The other emotions, feelings, and intellectual activities that closely accompany optimism include hope, happiness, faith and trust – all of which we take for granted as necessary in a good interpersonal relationship, and indeed in any relationship at all. But optimism is, in this book, the starting point in a great web of inter-connected cultural, social and material processes that constitute life in contemporary times. Optimism is an ideology in the sense of being a set of ideas and feelings that furthers interests of human growth, profit and development.

Indeed, as the world slowly declines into a complex of inter-related problems there is an urgent need to reflect on the direction that non-human life on Earth will take. The future of humanity will involve considerable reflection on living in a degraded world, whether we like it or not. From such a perspective there does not seem a great deal about which to be optimistic. Humanity might be creative, productive, and even at times empathetic, but there is an elephant in the room: us. With populations and lifestyles taking up ever more matter and space, humanity has turned to optimism to keep the wheels on the machine – over and above anger, depression, sadness and despair.

In other words, optimism has become a cultural syndrome; optimism is a pervasive and widespread ideology. Optimism may have become a veil behind which we are all hiding. However, optimism is definitely not all bad. It's good for one's health to be optimistic; it's professionally important to be optimistic – and assume the success of one's enterprises, with a minimum amount of collateral damage; it's good for interpersonal relationships to be optimistic – it's hard to love a pessimistic person. And it's good for the planet that people are optimistic and upbeat – but there's a fly in the ointment, as it were. Despite so much optimism, the effects of human expansion and domination are often negative. Optimism may serve to dampen reactions to the massive collateral damage that humanity inflicts on Earth's ecology, but because we have reached so many

ecological ‘tipping points’ (global warming, loss of species diversity, access to food and water) at some stage in the future, there will be, hopefully (optimistically), a ‘great awakening’ to the consequences of a declining global ecology, and the more general problem of human excess. At that point optimism may be seen as the negative accelerant it has been, and/or even more optimism will be called for. Either way optimism will continue to be important in the future of humanity on Earth – in this book I will argue that despite some saving graces, over-optimism has nonetheless become a major cultural problem.

In the mean time, one can wonder at the mass phenomena of climate change denial (which is still widespread despite all evidence to the contrary), vaccine hesitancy, and a widespread assumption about endless supplies of food and water, and endless growth. These phenomena all require great optimism about positive outcomes – that in the light of current scientific data seem very unlikely. The role of optimism is, however, only one strand in a complex story about human excess, and the way humanity has transformed its environment. Humanity has a range of attitudes, feelings and emotions that are relevant to excess and transformation – including aggression, arrogance, pride, cruelty, narcissism, and indifference on the negative side and empathy, humility, wonderment, tolerance and love on the positive side. But optimism is in a class of its own, and an invisible ‘sacred cow’.

The invisibility of optimism occurs because optimism has become a central component in ‘common sense’ – together with hope, happiness, trust, and faith. At a ‘deeper’ level ‘common sense’ is a way of describing a ‘world taken for granted’ (a necessity for normal waking consciousness); but this is for a world that is rapidly becoming unsustainable – if not uninhabitable. For that reason it is necessary to look more closely, and critically, at optimism, bearing in mind all the good effects of optimism, and ‘common sense’.

Science will play a pivotal role in any success we may have in changing ‘common sense’, and in dealing with a world requiring constant ‘crisis

management'. As I argue, science provides 'facts' in a world so dependent on opinion. Science, despite any limitations that might be perceived because of the fallibility of its practitioners, and because of the analytical, unemotional 'coldness' of its method, still holds a key to a better world. Therefore, the history of science is culturally important – and particularly during that period in western history when science rose to a more prominent position, the so-called 'scientific revolution'. There is a big issue about the public acceptance of scientific facts involved here – about what it takes to change 'common sense' beliefs about the role of humanity on Earth. The rise of science as a source of authoritative knowledge involved a reappraisal of humanity's role on Earth and in the Heavens – whatever one's view of the outcomes may be. Today, climate change and general ecological decline pose a new dilemma for the species. It does seem that overpopulation and climate change, consumerism and excessive pollution, economic growth and the question of sustainability each provide a sufficient cause for review of humanity's behaviour on Earth, and that 'common sense' notions about any of these limits needs to change. Whatever one's views of these matters might be, we can only hope that 'common sense' about these matters will change to better reflect scientific knowledge.

The current pandemic is a good indicator of how difficult it is to change 'common sense' about the need for vaccines and evidence based reason, and the willingness of mass populations to adjust economic, and social behaviours to avoid unnecessary infections. Even if a small number of people insist on their right to 'freedom' the possibility of avoiding global spread of contagious and dangerous viruses is drastically reduced. A similar argument applies to each of the ecological limits defined above, albeit with a different level of scale involved. It will take a consensus of all nations on Earth to achieve the political will to change ecological human behaviours, consumer behaviour, and industrial and agricultural practices. The ideas we have about the 'common sense' of these matters are critical to the success or failure of humanity to change in time. Perhaps it

is already too late to hope for much in the way of ecological success – but as I argue in this book we can only do what’s possible in the light of the best science, and in the light of evidence based metrics; we may need to adjust our levels of optimism accordingly.

Given that ‘common sense’ about the climate, public health, growth and progress has become so globally problematic, it is worth wondering about a previous time in history when ‘common sense’ underwent a major reconfiguration: the cosmological shift from an Earth centred universe to a Sun centred universe – that is, the period of the ‘scientific revolution’ in Europe. At this time it was not ‘common sense’ that Earth rotated around the Sun, or that an experimentally based scientific method could possibly challenge religious doctrine with the authority of ‘scientific facts’. It is now ‘common sense’ that both of these situations prevail. Even though it may have taken a long time for ‘common sense’ notions about the movement of Earth to prevail, today we should hope that vastly faster and more extensive processes of communication will allow ‘common sense’ notions about the climate, personal immunity, and the general importance of growth, to change rapidly enough to avoid a great human meltdown.

At the same time, the mixed reception experienced by scientists and other rationally inclined individuals and groups, over the last few hundred years, demonstrates how difficult it may be to change religious doctrines and associated ‘common sense’ notions. Some of the most famous points of ‘common sense’ resistance to changed scientific knowledge include Darwinism in the biological sciences, ‘catastrophism’ in geological sciences, probability theory in physics, vaccine science, and even the rise of ecological notions – among other scientific achievements. It follows that science, or science advocates, cannot be expected to ‘move mountains’ – even despite scientific research having a relatively higher cultural status today.

Nonetheless, today (as in the past) a major part of the burden of communicating the results of scientific and technological research rests

upon the shoulders of journalists and ‘popular’ writers – and upon the cultivation of audiences for such writing.

One important change that has occurred in recent times, however, has been the relative ‘defunding’ of journalism – largely due to the innovation of personal computing, mobile phone technologies and the loss of advertising revenues by newspapers. This ‘de-professionalisation’ has caused an increased reliance on scientists themselves communicating to non-scientists, and also total amateurs functioning as scientific journalists on Facebook, Twitter, and other media platforms. Thus far the prospects for accurate reporting of scientific events seem to be diminishing.<sup>2</sup>

Yet even if the non-scientific community remains sceptical about the possibilities of new scientific theories (about, say climate change, or vaccines), this does not mean that the world views of scientists do not experience radical changes, or that the world views of some non-professional scientists cannot be radically transformed by scientific discoveries or scientific developments.

Therefore, in a later chapter, inspired by the history of early science, I will take something of an even greater psychological turn and suggest that we are actually in the grip of a ‘mass psychosis’ – one serious consequence of ‘too much optimism’. The idea of ‘mass madness’ is a calculated risk on my part – there may be many readers who cannot resonate with such an idea. Even so, the idea of ‘madness’ is probably too kind in the light of the criminal culpability of governments and industry, and the voting public in the ‘free world’ (not to mention a large number of authoritarian regimes), in degrading a very nice planet.

In other words, taking a psychological turn is, no doubt, a sign of desperation. And further, for a trained sociologist to resort to psychological explanations requires considerable desperation – setting aside disciplinary rivalries, it has to be said that ‘common sense’ has for too long been ignored by sociologists. Not that psychologists have been any more forthcoming – a discipline based division of labour has meant that sociologists have avoided psychological issues and conversely psychologist, even

so called ‘social psychologists’, have avoided sociological issues. Perhaps it is time to ‘go for broke’ and accept the historical consequences of inviting phenomenologists to define terms philosophically, and then not pursue the subject into empirical details; perhaps the idea of a breakdown of reason was just unthinkable to sociologists, psychologists, and ‘the voting public’. Perhaps radical feminists are correct to insist upon a generally conscious (but also unconscious) bias towards the ‘male gaze’, and an unwavering dominance of masculine reason over all forms of experience.

In any case, mass popular culture and mass popular imaginations still do not appear to be science oriented or even evidentially oriented. Phenomena such as vaccine hesitancy are evidence that, despite intense PR campaigns about vaccine efficacy on the part of governments and public health authorities, ‘common sense’ is still strongly oriented by pre-scientific notions of ‘good health’ and ‘natural’ resistance. Climate change denial may actually be encouraged by governments in pursuit of revenues from fossil fuels, but this line of thought still flies in the face of scientific evidence and still fuels popular imaginations inclined to deny climate change – and other ‘green’ concerns.

There seems to be a major disconnect between the urgency required to deal with a changing climate and pandemics, and the perceived needs of all economies to keep growing – amongst a range of other contributing factors.<sup>3</sup>

The persistence of climate change denial and vaccine hesitancy would seem to indicate something very deep-rooted about humanity’s resistance to change. No doubt, just like the forward momentum of the Titanic, it’s very hard to change industrial practices such as the burning of fossil fuels to generate power, and smelt iron ore, and so on, in time to avoid hitting the iceberg. No doubt, the forward march of technological innovation is irresistible to entrepreneurs, politicians and financiers. Yet in both these instances a rational case can be easily made for the need to stop the use of fossil fuels and the need to better regulate new technologies so that harm can be minimised. The failure of governments and voting

publics to demand such changes seems to indicate a deeper problem – hence the focus of this book on the relationship between optimism (and ‘cultural optimism’) and ‘common sense’ – and the role they play in cultures generally, and in particular the avoidance of ‘pessimistic’ scientific outcomes. Further, I will argue that social-psychological hypotheses such as ‘mass psychosis’ may be sensibly called for.

Religion also remains important in these considerations. Whether or not religion and science are contradictory is beside the point of its dominance in the thoughts, emotions, and feelings of the vast majority of the planet’s human inhabitants. The relationship between science and religion is a perennial issue.

The great twentieth century polymath, Arthur Koestler felt that the relationship between science and religion was similar to that of a couple becoming bored with each other’s company. Nonetheless, whether or not the two should separate completely remains a matter of interest to scientists, theologians, historians, philosophers, and others. It is worth noting that, cosmologically speaking, scientific and technological research has never before provided so much data and imagery about the bigger universe of which we are part – a very minute part, as it happens. It is only in the last twenty years that scientists have been able to provide us with incontrovertible evidence of our place in the universe. Images generated by the Hubble orbiting telescope have shown the immensity of the visible universe, and the great beauty of many of its formations. This evidence of the relative insignificance of planet Earth in an enormous universe is at least as profound in implication as the understanding that Earth revolved around the Sun – hopefully we can rethink and re-evaluate the importance of all life on this planet.

The ‘bigger picture’ is however still conjectural, unlike the smaller picture of humanity on Earth – which is much more scientifically certain with respect to the limits of naturally occurring systems (including ecological systems). We might note that the ‘smaller picture’ of life on



earth has now obliged all governments to move into an era of ‘crisis management’, despite increased ecological knowledge.

It might be assumed that the destructive potential of new science and technology arises from the lack of a moral code in the methods employed by scientists and technologists – and that some agency with a moral code ought to direct the application of scientific and technological innovation. There are many reasons to question the validity of such a view. For example, the development of nuclear weapons remains a classic dilemma about the responsibility of scientists for the application of research findings to the cause of war by governments – we might note that the personal repercussions of theorising the conversion of nuclear mass into energy were horrific for Albert Einstein. The extent that scientists are responsible for findings that are ‘applied’ by politicians, governments and other entities (such as arms manufacturers and ‘the war machine’) remains a question.<sup>4</sup>

Despite their religious beliefs, senior politicians, and governments and CEO’s of technologically oriented organisations (the world over) appear sanguine about the collateral damage of any new technology and actively participate in the application of research findings to war and other harmful activities (such as pesticide usage and industrial pollution). This ‘fact’ rather resolves the issue of whether organisations other than science can and do provide a ‘moral compass’ for amoral scientific organisations (‘no’ and ‘no’ it would seem). The extent that scientific research can be regarded as ‘pure’ is still an issue to scientists, scientific advisers, governments and industry, however.

War and poverty may be perennial issues, but climate change and global pollution have ‘suddenly’ become very pressing issues, and need to be very much in all analytical frameworks. This is despite decades of research findings about global warming and environmental degradation, and decades of activist concerns. Ideally the subjects of over-population, and endless growth should also become part of all analytical frameworks,

but I'm not holding my breath – there are indeed limits to any person's optimism.

Nonetheless, 'common sense' understandings of all these matters needs to change, and in order to facilitate that, I have attempted to understand what makes 'common sense' tick, as it were. 'Common sense' provides an emotional home for us all, and optimism has become centrally important in making that emotional home so congenial – so far.

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## THE EMOTIONAL BODY

It seems to me that one's responses to the world are, in the first instance, usually emotional. This explains a great deal about a world that seems to have become so crazed. I say 'usually' because there may be exceptions in the case of a highly codified training regime overcoming personal emotional responses – for instance, I like to think that the generals in charge of 'pressing the button' on warfare are highly trained to make rational decisions (but who could possibly know?).<sup>5</sup>

Arguably then, our first responses to objects and situations are visceral. Our rational processes may kick in very quickly, but it is our emotions and feelings that tend to dictate our reactions. This assertion may seem to deny the power of an all-pervasive rational, calculating, 'male gaze', but in democratically based societies there is little to stop anyone's feelings being overwhelmed by the emotions and intentions of others – particularly when they are organised as media commentators, professions and advertising. This does not prevent any first response being over-ridden by rationalisations of any kind or quality.

Unsurprisingly, many men and women still bury their emotions and feelings in deference to a dominant masculinity, and beneath that to an overblown commitment to reason and rationality – advertising is particularly culpable in cultivating that set of responses. Emotional worlds can be complex, if not half crazed.

Of course, modern civilization has required reason and ‘technocracy’ for the great successes of planning and production that have enabled growing and globalised economies – these institutional processes emphasise bureaucracy and rational planning, as the pioneering sociologist Max Weber pointed out in the early twentieth century. Nonetheless, our individual responses to most situations are in the first instance emotional – despite all rational superstructures. Consumerism and advertising are built upon the assumption of our first responses being emotional.

The importance of our emotions has been long codified from ancient Chinese medicine (that thought emotions to be seated in various ‘organs’) to western medical traditions that assumed ‘humours’ and ‘constitutions’ as causing emotional types and related illnesses. Whether this meant, incidentally, that these medical traditions were more ‘feminine’ because of their assertion of the relevance of emotionality to diagnosis is debateable. In the light of these long traditions of study (for example, in ancient and modern China, in ancient and modern India, in old Western traditions of medicine), it is interesting that today in the west emotionally related ideas originating in rather obtruse academic contexts – such as a ‘body without organs’ (Deleuze and Guattari), and a ‘structure of emotions’ (in post-Derrida scholarship) – should have recently excited so many scholars. Undoubtedly the influence of a feminist revolution that reappraised taken for granted ideas about masculinity and the all-important place of reason in civilization has been at play here, and probably stimulated the imaginations of the men involved.

In any case, recent academic thought about emotions needs recasting for discourse about optimism. For a start we need to re-emphasise a distinction between the individual and society (even though this may sound very old fashioned in the light of the ‘poststructuralist’ ideas mentioned above that seem not to make such a distinction at all), and recognise that it is an individual person that in the first instance has an emotional response to objects and events. This would matter for any legal case pursuing individual responsibility, for example. It is also true that

a society or civilization predisposes an ‘emotional body’ or ‘structure of emotions’ as a transpersonal event, but that does not absolve individual responsibility – it just complicates the question. The source of emotions is important to know – for instance, my feelings (and thoughts) about climate change may not be altogether ‘mine’, and may therefore be negotiable (but when I vote, none of that matters any more).

Semantic complexity and desires for new paradigms about emotionality in contemporary western scholarship are not helpful in understanding institutionalised emotionality as it occurs now – in particular, reasons for slow governmental action on the abuse of women, environmental degradation, climate change, or pandemic control, and widespread carelessness about ecological impacts of human action are still not understood as ‘emotionally’ caused. I want to make the case in this book that optimism, defensiveness, and ultimately fear, are more to blame for this slowness than a failure to understand the nature of emotions in modern times. There are other reasons also – an ingrained patriarchy in governments, institutional inertia, and the ‘mass psychosis’ I describe in the final chapter. Also, the slowness of reaction in a world of ‘crisis management’ is caused by ‘double think’ (or ‘multi-think’): the human ability to entertain many contradictory thoughts and feelings at one time. And even though our emotions may have been downplayed they are always there, somewhere, disposing the direction of individual reaction.

There is another point about institutionalised emotionality that needs to be made early. This concerns the role of ‘advocacy’ media, and ‘leftist’ advocacy in promoting a certain kind of emotional response as an immediate response to all ‘crisis’ situations – such as civilian casualties in war, women and children in refugee camps and the loss of human rights in general. The point being that a combination of outrage and grief, when ritualised, can become more of a tribal marker than an invitation for an audience to develop an identifiable emotional response to a specific situation. Loss of nuance and loss of the ability of an individual in an audience to be reflective can be terribly counterproductive, particu-

larly when this ‘crisis’ mentality is wedded to a compulsive optimism. Audiences and individuals can become ‘passively aggressive’, and that is never a good outcome. Optimism, when combined with aggression can find extremist goals, and violence, as the worst outcomes.

It isn’t hard to understand that any individual’s first response to threatening situations should be emotional – probably some mixture of defensiveness and optimism – and this is important. For example, emotionality and defensiveness seems a better explanation of voting outcomes in western societies such as Australia and the United States of America, than simply blaming class position, race, gender, or capitalism. All of these ‘structural’ events are relevant, but they are an incomplete explanation of voting behaviour, or attitudes to the world.

The subject of optimism, I hope to show, can be a prism through which old metanarratives about death, decline and decay can be recast. Optimism, however, is in great need of a thorough decoding for this to be apparent. Unfortunately, optimism has come to occupy a cultural blind spot in modern societies, East and West. Recognition of compulsive optimism is highly necessary in a world that has moved to a mode of ‘crisis management’ – that renders old metanarratives incomplete, and is incapable of confronting the realities of a beautiful planet that has been hijacked by such an apparently reckless and uncaring species as humanity.

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## HUMAN CENTRISM

The one metanarrative that has never got off the ground, philosophically speaking, is human centrism. It has been understandable that any species should be ‘self centred’, but it is curious that the general idea has never managed to change attitudes and behaviours on any scale.

Humans have come to see ourselves as somehow entitled to plunder the earth. We have either declared ourselves to be entitled by being chosen by God to be in charge, allowed technological progress to dictate

the terms on which growth and change have occurred, or bowed down before the idea that only economic growth can provide happiness and wellbeing, or all of the above. The taken for granted natural superiority of our species has for millennia been seen as combination of superior mental and spiritual powers. History has shown all of these three imperatives as good reasons for the species to propel itself forward, over the top of all other species on the planet, notwithstanding the decline of all ecologies and habitats. Now that major damage has been done, we should at least review the carnage to see why it is that human centrism has been so damaging. Who knows, maybe there is hope yet? Perhaps the future may hold some promise for some of us. Optimism is always possible.

There are a number of immediately pressing reasons why human centrism has become so problematic for the future of humans and their planet: overpopulation, ecological decline, economic growth, climate change, warfare, and male dominance. These are all subjects that are difficult and emotionally fraught. Capitalism, it may surprise some, is not the main cause of all that is wrong with society. Whilst Capitalism has undoubtedly contributed to exploitation and economic obsession, there are more basic reasons for our contemporary malaise.

Human nature is basically an animal nature. It is only 'natural' that humans breed, organise and fight. It is only natural that 'might is right', that males should seek to dominate, and that comfort should be prioritised over pain. Civilisation is a constant and necessary struggle against this basic human nature. Collectively we have devised religion and other social forms to mitigate the dominance of basic human instincts. Humanity has institutionalised reason and law towards that end. That is, we have institutionalised various processes to deal with violence, corruption, crime, and other excesses of individual and collective self-interest.

Humanity has produced much that is wonderful: science and art for instance, but it should not be surprising that we should have eventually outreached the resources of the planet. This book seeks to undermine the smug optimism that so characterises our species, yet acknowledges

the fact of human over-reach. Thus, this book seeks to comprehend the perversity of a social world that knows few limits or bounds. In that context, optimism, hope and happiness are important to know about. So too are faith and trust. But most of all we need to know how it is that humans can be so apparently cruel and thoughtless.

# NOTES

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: TOO MUCH OPTIMISM

1. ABC, '7.30 Report', 15 October, 2021.
2. The importance of science reporting has become evident in the academic specialisation of communication studies – see, for example, M. Slater, E. Schofield and J. Conor Moore, 'Reporting on Science as an Ongoing Process (or Not)', *Frontiers in Communication*, 12 January 2021, online; T. Hayden and E. Hayden, 'Science Journalism's Unlikely Golden Age', *Frontiers in Communication*, 09 January 2018, online. In Australia there is the Science Journalists Association of Australia; see also *The Australian Journal of Communication*, Volume 40, Issue 3 (2013), and *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*.
3. I have catalogued the main causes of climate change in Tom Jagtenberg, *Beyond the Limits: A Planet in Crisis*. Sydney: Cilento Publishing, 2015.
4. This question of responsibility remains an issue for new specialisms such as science studies (which had a founding research interest in the topic of social responsibility in science/of scientists/and of advocacy groups).
5. The study of emotion is an established psychological specialism; see, for example, 'The Science Of Emotion: Exploring The Basics Of Emotional Psychology', June 27, 2019, *Psychology and Counselling News*, UWA. Psychologists report that some emotions (such as anger, or responses to facial expressions) are automatic – as opposed to feelings that follow emotional responses. The process of behaviour modification depends on this distinction.

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