

## The Interstellar Stakes Against God

*Global Warming Hardly a Ringing Endorsement for an Architect*

by Julian Friedland

Let's assume, for the sake of argument, that something like the doomsday scenario depicted in Christopher Nolan's latest film, *Interstellar*, were actually to take place (minor spoilers ahead). Imagine that over the next few generations, humans continue despoiling the Earth to the point of wreaking such massive environmental havoc that their only option for survival is interstellar colonization. It's an extremely grim prospect, and one that most likely precludes rescue of the general population given that only a limited number of passengers could realistically be shipped into space and housed on extraterrestrial bases. In other words, we could only hope to rescue the species—not the people.

Then there's the unfortunate fact that no suitable planets reside nearby.

The best option is Mars, which has suitable gravity and contains water at its poles. Still, it doesn't have a breathable atmosphere. So, barring a breakthrough in space travel technology such as teleportation or bending space time, prospects for interstellar colonization following a global ecological collapse are bleak. And again, even if we found a way to travel great distances to a hospitable planet that may or may not even exist, the chances of transporting more than a small number of colonists would remain extremely low.

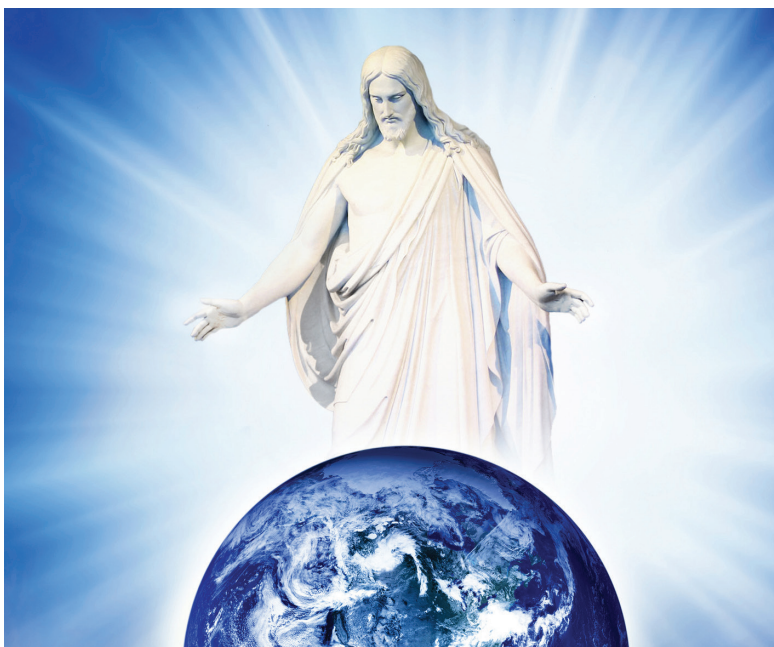
According to the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, global warming will continue to precipitate various increasingly dramatic weather patterns compounded by flooding from rising sea levels. As a result, an ecological doomsday sce-

nario could very well happen sometime in the near future. While such an unfortunate eventuality may yield sobering lessons about the destructive aspects of human nature, we cannot be held responsible for our own nature. That responsibility must fall on the one who actually made us, should that entity actually exist.

As it happens, Pope Francis has been making bold pronouncements of late on what he sees as empirical evidence of divine intention. He takes the Big Bang as supplying empirical evidence for God's existence, going so far as to credit God's will as the force behind natural selection. The pope also expresses openness to the possibility of God admitting alien life forms, should they exist, into heaven. He cautions us however not to think of God as "a magician, with a magic wand able to do everything," like, say, intervene to save the world. Basically, God does what he can, given what's possible.

This is an interesting reply to the classic theodicy critique against God's existence—namely, that if countless innocents suffer and prematurely die, then an all-good God can't be real. Theists have tried to solve this problem in various ways. The pope's strategy is to concede that God's power is limited. However, I'm afraid this doesn't get God entirely off the hook in the event of a human-caused, catastrophic doomsday scenario. For it's one thing to accept that many innocents suffer and prematurely die. It's another to accept that we all will (or nearly all will). The pope might then reply that this would only be the result of our own freely chosen sinful behavior.

But what if natural selection were actually to blame? According to Pope Francis's logic, God would be culpable too. Because if natural selection is the emanation of divine will, then so too is what Richard Dawkins calls the "selfish gene" underlying it, though the latter is also tempered by a benevolent or



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“eusocial” adaptation. According to eminent evolutionary biologist E.O. Wilson, both drives function as opposite and competing aspects of human nature that must coexist harmoniously for us to thrive individually and as groups. So far, so good.

The trouble is that the natural forces of self-interest may win out over the better angels of our nature, spelling disaster for the human species—and the planet sustaining it. For the drive of individual self-interest is the main fuel of capitalism, which has become the dominant global economic paradigm. And this unbridled self-interest is arguably most responsible for widespread environmental degradation. As Garrett Hardin demonstrated in his seminal 1968 *Science* article, *The Tragedy of the Commons*, when individual economic actors benefit from depleting a limited natural resource, none has any incentive to exercise the restraint required to sustain it. Unless individuals act together as a group to ensure that everyone exercises restraint, anyone who acts responsibly on their own suffers a competitive disadvantage. As such, any free market system inexorably tends to deplete its natural resources.

This perfectly describes the environmental tragedy taking place before us. Global warming continues mostly unabated because it's in the perceived individual self-interest of key economic actors in a free-market framework to continue producing and consuming energy as usual. Despite climatologists' dire warnings, most consumers continue over-consuming. Hummer sales are up again as gas prices fall back toward \$3 a gallon. Public transportation is generally shunned, as is shopping locally, traveling less, and making most of the personal sacrifices required to avoid runaway global warming. And while China and India only have one to two cars for every ten people, eco-



In the “By the Book” column of the October 9 *New York Times* Book Review, the novelist **Jodi Picoult** was asked, “What’s the one book you wish someone else would write?”

“ One that explores why our country is so contentiously divided along the fault line of religion—a construct meant to unite, but that more often creates schisms. All the hot-button political issues in this country—abortion, reproductive rights, gay rights, the death penalty—all have ideological roots in religious beliefs that are often archaic or that have been cherry-picked to support specific points of view. I hope that same book can explain why our country, which was founded on religious freedom, so often finds itself tangled up in the screen that should separate church and state. Also, I would like Jon Stewart to write it, because he has a way of swiftly illuminating the truth when you think you’re just there to be entertained.”

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In the November 2 “By the Book,” **Bruce Springsteen** was asked, “If you had to name one book that made you who you are today, what would it be?”

“ One would be difficult, but the short stories of Flannery O’Connor landed hard on me. You could feel within them the unknowability of God, the intangible mysteries of life that confounded her characters, and which I find by my side every day.”

PHOTO: “BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN 06 (6926922250)” BY GABBO.T LICENSED UNDER (CC BY-SA 2.0) VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS - [HTTP://COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG/WIKI/FILE:BRUCE\\_SPRINGSTEEN\\_06\\_\(6926922250\).JPG](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bruce_Springsteen_06_(6926922250).jpg)

conomic development adds tens of millions more each year.

Yet a few smaller countries such as Sweden, Germany, and Japan have managed to dramatically lower their global warming emissions by undertaking bold regulatory initiatives. And President Obama just unveiled an encouraging new agreement with China to curb greenhouse gases over the next fifteen years. However, it remains to be seen if the United States will actually follow through given the massive opposition the plan already faces from both Republican-led houses of Congress. Incoming Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) stated upon his re-election in November that his top priority is to stop the EPA from limiting any global warming emissions whatsoever. Furthermore, a CBS exit poll survey from the midterm elections shows that 84 percent of Republican voters do not consider climate change a serious problem while 70 percent of Democratic voters do. Until this gridlock is overcome, precious little hope remains of building enough international consensus to avoid the looming climatological disaster.

The root cause of this problem may well be a political economy fueled first and foremost by material self-interest. Indeed there is growing evidence that American corporate culture has become so excessively self-interested as to select for executives with latent sociopathic tendencies. And corporate interests now exert so much power over the government that eminent social scientists have concluded that the United States can no longer accurately be described as a majority-rule democracy. They see it more as a minority-rule plutocracy. If they're right, the U.S. government may no longer even have the power to enact the kinds of broad-based regulatory initiatives required to follow the lead of its more environmentally conscious counterparts.

If these dire trends continue over the next several generations, we may well witness a global dystopian apocalypse not unlike the one depicted in *Interstellar*, at which point a strong case could be made against human nature as shaped by natural selection—again, some say, designed by God. Incidentally, this may also help to explain why we still have yet to receive

any signals of intelligent life from outer space. It may be that all technologically advanced societies only last a few centuries before instigating their own ecological demise. Like a virus destroying its host, genes wrought from natural selection may also contain the seeds of their own ecological extinction.

So these are the stakes: should humanity ultimately expire as a direct result of its evolutionary adaptations, it won't exactly be a ringing endorsement of the architect of life, the universe, and everything. On the other hand, we may still find a way to avoid this dystopian story arc and secure a sustainable Earth-bound future. That would go a long way toward redeeming human nature and the image of its possible creator. Where's the screenplay for *that* scenario? [H](#)

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Julian Friedland is a French/American philosopher who received his Ph.D. from the Sorbonne and has taught at several American universities, last year as a visiting professor at George Washington University, and previously at Fordham and the University of Colorado at Boulder. He is currently writing a book on collective narcissism.

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## Who Deserves Compassion?

### *Considerations on the Eve of a Terrorist's Trial*

by Amée R. LaTour

The trial of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev is scheduled to begin in January, a year and nine months after the then nineteen-year-old lay bleeding in a stranger's boat in a backyard surrounded by police. This was just after he and his brother Tamerlan detonated two pressure cookers at the Boston Marathon on April 15, 2013, killing three people and injuring 260 more. Tamerlan died in the shootout with police, but I've

been haunted by Dzhokhar ever since. At the time I was too afraid to say that I felt sad for him; I knew that voicing my sadness for a person who committed an atrocity would be seen as misguided and offensive.

One of my friends, braver than me, confessed on Facebook that her heart was breaking for the boy. Her update invited several strong reactions along these lines: "That [monster/scum-

bag/worthless sack of shit] doesn't deserve compassion."

Compassion is defined as "empathy; consciousness of another's distress or suffering along with the desire to alleviate it." Compassion for all human beings is a main tenet of humanism, and while this looks pretty good on paper, practicing it consistently can be a real challenge. How do you feel compassion toward

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