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Philosophy and Disaster*

Naomi Zack

Abstract

Philosophers have traditionally written from the perspective of ordinary people and they are as vulnerable to fear as other members of the public. Academic philosophers can contribute to the multi-disciplinary field of homeland security and disaster studies through extensions of social contract theory from political philosophy, and applications of moral systems. The idea of a state of nature is relevant to government's role in disaster preparation, response and planning, because disasters often result in a second state of nature. All three of the main ethical systems of virtue ethics, deontology, and consequentialism, are relevant to disaster-related situations in ways that suggest the importance of being able to combine all three. Both the applications of political philosophy and moral theory can be augmented by John Rawls's idea of distributive justice and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's idea of the common good. Finally, the inevitability of human mortality, as emphasized by existentialist philosophers, can create a wider perspective on disaster.

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Not a whit, we defy augury. There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all.

Hamlet, 5.2, 217-20.
William Shakespeare

INTRODUCTION

The growing field of homeland security and disaster studies is practical. Its theories and models are linked to specific problems and contingencies. Besides studies in public policy, law, law enforcement, emergency response, and relevant applied sciences (both civilian and military), the academic side of this subject might support investigations in sociology, psychology, anthropology and history, while literature and journalism could help flesh out its human face. Art, music, architecture, theater, film and dance can all reflect and shape the anticipation of disasters and our reactions to them. Academic philosophy, with its focus on analysis, argumentation, and criticism of common sense (not to mention its pettifogging obsession with the abstract and abstruse) hardly seems relevant.

But academic philosophy could make an important contribution to homeland security and disaster studies while at the same time adding another relevant subject to its own “applied” subfields.¹ Although philosophers are specialists in critical thinking, the perspective of philosophers tends to be that of ordinary people who are neither government officials nor public policy planners. Much of the professional literature on homeland security and disaster is written from the perspective of existing leaders and officials, with the result that civilians or the public are often regarded as the passive objects of actions taken by authorities to protect and assist them. And of course it is members of the public who are potentially the most numerous victims of those events that are properly called “disasters.” The innocence of the civilian public occasions the “terror” evoked by terrorism, and the public’s absorption in daily routines sets it up as victims of catastrophe in earthquakes and floods. Despite the abstraction and abstruseness of philosophical discourse, it should be understood that as civilians and members of the public themselves, philosophers share the ordinary perspective on disaster. This is a wary and sometimes fearful perspective.² It comes from a sense of being unprepared and lacking the knowledge and skill to either become prepared on one’s own or justify demands for official assistance.

In this paper I will suggest two dimensions through which contemporary academic philosophers might develop a contribution to disaster studies, from the standpoint of the public: social contract theory and moral theory. I will then conclude with brief suggestions about additional philosophical approaches to disaster studies. I begin with several assumptions about disasters, and one caveat. Here are the assumptions. A disaster is an event that harms or kills a significant number of people or otherwise severely impairs or interrupts their daily lives in civil society. Disasters may be natural, or the result of accidental or deliberate human action. Disasters include but are not limited to: fires, floods, storms, earthquakes, chemical spills, leaks of or infiltration by toxic substances, terrorist attack by conventional, nuclear or biological weapons, epidemics, pandemics, and mass failures in electronic communications. Disasters always occasion surprise and shock; they are unwanted by those affected by them, although not always unpredictable. In this sense, the effects of war on civilian populations may

be disastrous, although wars have elements of agency, systematic planning, and the active involvement of legitimate government, which distinguish them from disasters.

The caveat is that I cannot speak for all or even a few philosophers, because philosophers always disagree. It is exactly disagreement among philosophers that sustains innovation in our discipline, because it “furthers the discussion.” So my hope here is to introduce a new subject to philosophers and at the same time suggest how philosophers might contribute to an existing discipline.

SOCIAL CONTRACT THEORY AND THE SECOND STATE OF NATURE

The philosophical idea of a social contract at the foundation of civil society, or society under government, dates back to John Locke and Thomas Hobbes in the seventeenth century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the eighteenth century and most recently, John Rawls during the second half of the twentieth century.³ Hobbes and Locke are pertinent to the most general thought about disaster in political philosophy, whereas Rousseau is relevant to public policy ideas concerning the ethics of disaster preparation, prevention and response, and Rawls offers key insights that are useful for considering social justice issues in disaster. The focus in this section will be on Locke and Hobbes.

The social contract is an explicit or implicit agreement among citizens which justifies the formation of government and emphasizes the rights of citizens in their relationship to government. Social contract theory posits those rights of citizens that are prior to and more fundamental than the organization of society under government. Such rights are presumed in the United States’ Declaration of Independence and protected by the first ten amendments to the United States Constitution.

The ultimate justification for the existence of government according to social contract theory is that government makes life better for those governed. Locke and Hobbes used the idea of a state of nature, or a description of human life without government, to give a historical account of how government came to be, and to explain the benefits of government. Both Hobbes and Locke assumed that there was an original ungoverned condition of humankind in the state of nature. Locke thought humans were cooperative and industrious in the state of nature, whereas Hobbes thought their lives were solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.⁴

Both Locke and Hobbes implied that even if there never were a state of nature in human history, positing it afforded political theorists an idea of human life without government, to which human life *with* government could be compared and justified. That comparison and justification is the main theme of social contract theory. Social contract theory requires that government not be accepted as inevitable and beyond the control of those governed, but that its very existence requires the consent of those governed. This consent constitutes a social contract that places specific obligations on government.

Because life was tolerable in a state of nature according to Locke, he had a minimal view of government functions which were limited to: the protection of private property, the unbiased settlement of disputes, punishment of criminals domestically, and protection from foreign enemies.⁵ Although Locke emphasized the importance of protecting private property, his notion of property was robust, because it extended to life and liberty as well as material possessions (or what he called “estate”).⁶ By contrast, Hobbes believed that the competitive and aggressive nature of human beings required strong (what we would consider despotic) central authority, to enforce the peace.⁷ As a result, Locke defined the social contract as an agreement between citizens and their rulers, whereas Hobbes thought that the social contract was an agreement among citizens to give up their own rights to make war on each other and, at the same time, make an irrevocable gift of those rights to an absolute ruler or

Leviathan.⁸

Hobbes and Locke shared a strong conviction that the powers of government derived from the powers and consent of those governed. Locke, insofar as he thought society could exist without government, believed if government collapsed, its powers would revert to the people, but if society collapsed, government would no longer exist.⁹ Hobbes thought the gift of power to government by those who would be governed was irrevocable and there could not be anything resembling peaceful and cooperative society without government.¹⁰ Both Locke and Hobbes were addressing the doctrine of the divine right of kings in the seventeenth century and they spoke to the interests of a new mercantile and capitalist economic group not previously represented in European governments. Because rulers did not derive their right to rule from God, but from the people, according to both Locke and Hobbes, social contract theory has been understood as a secular political theory. Still, this is not to say that the most fundamental principles of government are independent of beliefs about Natural Law, which consisted of God's rules for men in the state of nature, or independent of moral intuitions from other sources. Both Locke and Hobbes began with Natural Law in constructing their theories about the role of government and its justification. The difference between them was that Locke thought humankind obeyed the first principle of Natural Law, that they not harm one another, whereas Hobbes thought humans were incapable of keeping the peace without government.¹¹

Locke endured as the political philosopher for the foundation of American democracy in those documents and legal traditions that both protect the rights of individuals and provide a method of decision-making via majority rule. Locke held that citizens are entitled to representation in a legislative body and that the decision of the majority is binding on all citizens.¹² For example, no matter how divided votes are along party lines, the winning candidates in American presidential elections become presidents of those who voted for their opponents, as well as those who voted for them. However, Hobbes' view of the warlike and dangerous nature of human beings in conditions without government seems to have provided the most prudent description of what can happen domestically when government breaks down. Both thinkers remain highly relevant to thinking about disaster.

It is presently inconceivable, and probably beyond the scope of political theory, that any disaster could result in the total and permanent failure of government as we know it.¹³ However, the temporary dysfunction of government in responding to some disasters, and different abilities of citizens to prepare for or effectively respond to disasters without functional government, raise fundamental political questions that bring us back to Locke and Hobbes. At first, it may seem as though conditions under which individual survival requires private measures are a return to a state of nature, however temporarily. But this is not the literal case because present social and material structures have not only removed us from an original condition, but made it very difficult to return to one in a short period of time. The inability to self-subsist in the absence of government characterizes urban subcultures in the U.S., such as parts of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, and also rural communities in parts of the world that have not yet fully industrialized. Many residents of the Ninth Ward of New Orleans remained displaced and unable to return home months after Katrina and in the Kashmir district after the 2005 Pakistan earthquake millions were homeless months later. Moreover, disasters that cause great physical destruction leave victims without the most basic survival ingredients in their immediate environments, rural or urban.

The destruction of an existing society's material basis of human life does not return human beings to an original state of nature, because it does not return them to conditions under which self-sufficient survival is possible. It is not possible to "return" to some manner of "living off the land" after most

modern disasters. However, the conditions of immediate environmental privation during the time period in which government is not functioning normally to repair material conditions, qualify as a *second state of nature*.

The question in terms of social contract theory is this: What does government owe citizens in situations in which government is temporarily dysfunctional, that is, in the second state of nature? If property is privately owned or owned by the local community, government does not owe restitution to citizens who have lost their property or had it destroyed. But as part of government's benevolence, it is appropriate that it offer some compensation in those cases, much as a good neighbor might. The material resources of government in democratic capitalistic countries are the results of taxation, so such compensation amounts to some members of society helping other members who have sustained losses through no fault of their own. However, there is a more fundamental issue raised by the inability of citizens to systematically prepare for or take an active role in the response to disaster.

The material base of modern industrial society is a dynamic system kept in motion by exchanges through commerce. Orderly private commerce indirectly depends on systems of government regulation and oversight, while utilities such as power, transportation and clean water and air, as well as protection and security, are more directly dependent on government oversight. These indirect and direct dependencies on government have been broadly and deeply institutionalized in the very ways that render even a temporary return to an original state of nature impossible. Even if a disaster did not make it impossible to "live off the land" and the land itself were intact, a disaster can still make it impossible for citizens to function normally in society without government, because their functioning in society has come to require the functions of government. In addition to the first destruction and disruption attending disasters, there is a second more profound breakdown in civil society which is made worse by the dysfunction of government. For example, it is bad when people are killed but worse when their remains cannot be removed; unfortunate when people are injured, but cause for despair when medical treatment is unavailable. Such conditions are part of the disadvantages of life in a second state of nature, when government function has been interrupted by disaster. And the inability of civilians to create, in a short period of time, a useful social condition that will sustain their lives entails that the second state of nature may more resemble a brutal Hobbesian condition than a peaceful, cooperative and productive Lockean community.

The second state of nature in disasters is only a temporary condition without government. The usual justifications for government are not put in question by it, but rather second states of nature create conditions in which many citizens accept, and some actively welcome, unusually strong expressions of government authority (for example, martial law). It has been demonstrated countless times that private individuals, institutions and companies are unable to maintain effective long-term preparations for disaster response, or to refrain from high-risk activities in terms of future disasters. Social scientists and public policy experts refer to stages in disaster response that range from high readiness to complacent ignorance as the time span after any particular disaster increases.¹⁴ Structures washed away in floods may be replaced by more expensive ones which are just as vulnerable, brick buildings may not be retro-fitted in the face of earthquake predictions, local emergency response resources are at the mercy of fluctuating budgets, individuals may misplace, use up or fail to procure emergencies supplies, and so forth.

However, the general failure in civilian disaster preparation does not in itself imply that government must be the preparer or responder of last resort. Such a "last resort" role is not, strictly speaking, an obligation of government. Any obligation of government concerning second states of

nature would have to stem from the basic principles of social contract theory. The argument based on social contract theory for the obligation of government to prepare for and respond to disaster would go like this: Government has a continual obligation to benefit those governed by rendering them better off than they would have been in the first state of nature. The temporary dysfunction of government in disasters results in a second state of nature for those governed. Therefore, government has an extended obligation to render citizens better off than they may be in a second state of nature. That is, government is obligated to ensure adequate disaster preparation and planning, for all probable disasters, in precisely those ways in which the public has demonstrated its inabilities. The scholarly foundations for such an obligation would consist of new work in political science, political philosophy, and law.

A public policy analyst might comment here that sound legal and philosophical reasoning is all well and good, but it does not tell us how government could fulfill new social contract theory obligations, in addition to policies that are already in place. A partial answer to the question of the usefulness of the kind of new political theory proposed is that a new theory may suggest new practices. A view of emergency preparation as a fundamental obligation of government could motivate new policies. It might, for example, lead to more encouragement of private companies to produce adequate supplies, educational products, and services that are appropriate to modern disasters. A variety of locale-specific disaster kits could be permanently on sale in supermarkets and chain stores.¹⁵ Standardized region-specific training courses could be required as curricula at all levels of the educational system. The insurance industry could be extended to include *disaster logistics insurance*, so that localities, institutions, campuses, and corporate and residential complexes register with companies outside of their locales the kinds of information necessary for the co-ordination of emergency and relief efforts. (Such distant “command centers” would be able to assess injuries and damages, and locate and facilitate the delivery of appropriate supplies and services more quickly than could be done from close but damaged centers.)¹⁶ Development of projects of this nature is within the existing functions of the federal executive and legislature, through tax-cut incentives. (And because they would be incentives to produce new goods and services, they would not represent a decrease in existing revenues.)

MORAL THEORY AND THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT IN DISASTER

The ultimate test of political principles, including those principles underlying social contract theory, is whether they are morally right. If political principles are not morally right then political life becomes a matter of force, rhetoric, and coercion. Many of the functions of government also need to withstand a moral test because moral matters are those issues and events in which human harm or well-being is at stake. In the Western philosophical tradition, the intrinsic value of human beings is the basic intuition that underlies all moral actions and moral reasoning. It amounts to the same thing whether human beings are considered valuable because they have been created in God’s image, or whether the value of human beings is a purely secular intuition, independent of religion; Government principles and actions that result in harm to human beings or do not respect the value of human life require extensive justification.

While morality is often associated with religion in contemporary culture, ever since Plato philosophers have relied on a secular, rational definition of morality. As Plato recounts it, when Socrates was on the way to his trial for “corrupting the youth of Athens” by asking questions of leaders that revealed the ignorance of those leaders, he met Euthyphro. Euthyphro was on his way to prosecute

his own father for the death of his servant and Socrates engaged him in a dialogue about moral goodness. Euthyphro, who believed his action was just, said justice or goodness is what pleases God. Socrates then asked Euthyphro whether something is morally good because God approves of it, or whether God approves of it because it is morally good. This is a dilemma, because if one assents to the first alternative, it becomes necessary to explain why God is a source of moral goodness while in the second alternative, goodness is independent of God and must be defined. Socrates favored the second alternative and since that time Western philosophers have been trying to pin down exactly what it is that makes an action right, or a person good.¹⁷ The main result has been three systems of morality: virtue or character ethics; deontology or duty ethics; and consequentialism or utilitarianism. Let's take them in turn.

Aristotle offered a comprehensive account of virtues in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, which has not required much revision in over two thousand years. According to Aristotle, virtue is a rational activity of the soul. It is neither determined nor precluded by nature, but requires both childhood training and adult practice. There are many virtues or desirable traits of character, such as courage, benevolence, generosity, righteous indignation. A virtue is a disposition to do the right thing in a concrete real-life situation, and to do it for the right reasons, in the right way, and as a result of a well-developed trait of character. A trait of character that is named by a virtue is created by acting in accordance with the virtue. Thus, a person develops courage by performing courageous acts and part of what makes an action courageous is that it is done by a courageous person. This is not a circular process because it is assumed that individuals first begin to develop their characters while they are children, as the result of training. Indeed, Aristotle thought that a society has to be virtuous to further virtues in individuals and that the continued virtuousness of a society requires that virtuous individuals participate in its government.¹⁸

Immanuel Kant began his moral theory with the insight that the only thing in the world good without qualification is a good will, or benevolence. Kant developed *deontology*, or duty ethics, on the basis of his idea of the *categorical imperative*. Kant offered two main formulations of the categorical imperative. The first is: Act so that the generalization or maxim of your action can be willed by you to be a general rule. (This formulation of the categorical imperative is not the same as The Golden Rule, which requires only that one be willing to be a recipient of how one acts, and not that one wants everyone to act the same way.) Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative is: Never treat another human being as a means, but always treat others and oneself, as ends.¹⁹

Kant contrasted the categorical imperative with hypothetical imperatives that could be directives to act in specific ways to achieve specific results. The categorical imperative admits of no exceptions because it is the foundation for action by rational beings, each of which has intrinsic worth as an end, and is a sovereign being with free will as a member of "the kingdom of ends."²⁰ Kant also developed ideas of specific duties, such as truthfulness, integrity and generosity, which did not admit of exceptions and were never relative. The biggest weakness of Kant's system is that he offered no rules for ranking duties or deciding which to fulfill when two or more duties conflict.

Consequentialism is the contemporary version of utilitarianism that was developed by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill.²¹ Utilitarianism is the principle that the ultimate good is always the greatest happiness of the greatest number of sentient beings, whereby everyone, including the moral agent, counts for one unit and no one counts for more than one. Bentham did not distinguish between happiness and pleasure, although Mill attempted to do so by distinguishing between higher pleasures, such as friendship and the appreciation of art, and lower pleasures, which are mainly physical. Mill

argued that higher pleasures are better, because they are more enduring and those individuals who have tried both kinds of pleasure prefer the higher pleasures.²² Consequentialism is more abstract than utilitarianism because its followers talk about *maximizing* consequences: an action is good if it has good consequences, so when we maximize, we are increasing the good consequences. (However, consequentialists often leave open what the good consequences are and in principle there could be a version of consequentialism that is the opposite of utilitarianism in that it seeks to maximize human misery and pain.)

Virtue ethics, duty ethics, and consequentialism are all relevant to disaster prevention and response. There are always individuals who perform virtuous acts in disasters, that is, heroes. People have duties in disasters; for example, parents must save their children. The consequences to human well-being are primary factors in deciding what to do in disasters. In fact, most moral philosophers are already familiar with thinking about disasters because they often use them as hypothetical situations in order to show how their moral systems are superior, which is to say more consistent and comprehensive, to those of their opponents. Deontologists often criticize consequentialists by describing situations in which actions that maximize consequences are morally wrong. Examples have included the torture of children to get information from hardened adult terrorists, and killing individuals so that others may survive or to preserve the peace of communities.²³ Consequentialists have responded in one of two ways. Either they have tried to show that long-term thinking about consequences does not commit them to committing morally repugnant acts, or else they have directly argued that morally repugnant acts that maximize [human well-being] are not morally repugnant, precisely because they do maximize.²⁴

Some thinkers have claimed that the use of disaster scenarios does not provide valid examples for moral reasoning because they are improbable and do not reflect the real choices and meanings that most people experience in their lives.²⁵ Such a generalization would seem to depend on the nature of the times. In times such as our own, that seem to have more than their fair share of disasters, it is important for philosophers to develop applications of their moral systems that are specifically relevant to the extreme conditions of disasters. It may be difficult to determine whether individuals should be held morally accountable for legal actions that result in harm to others during times of disaster, or what such accountability would entail. But insofar as, and according to social contract theory, governments are obligated to prepare for or respond to disasters, it is important to be able to refer to moral principles that do or do not justify specific government actions.

It is important to engage in moral reasoning about new laws and the actions of officials in times of disaster. Recent headlines of such actions undertaken in the Global War on Terrorism have provided examples that are more extreme than even the bizarre scenarios cooked up by philosophers. There have, for instance, been situations in which police or military officials immediately killed suspected suicide bombers, because the detonation of a bomb would cause certain death and injury to the public or their colleagues.²⁶ When such suspects turn out to have been unarmed, questions about moral theory arise. We know that the officials were acting in accordance with their duties or orders, which were in fulfillment of a general government obligation to protect the public. If there is a moral assumption that all human life is valuable, then killing a terrorist would be justified on consequentialist grounds, because more people will remain alive if the terrorist is killed. However, if the suspected terrorist turns out not to have been a terrorist, then killing him or her did not “maximize” good consequences, because it resulted in the death of one innocent individual who would otherwise have remained alive. Nonetheless, many would claim that shooting the suspected terrorist was, at the time of the shooting,

justified on consequentialist grounds, because those who decided to shoot the suspect had sufficient evidence that the lives of others were at stake. This leads to questions about what counts as sufficient evidence in urgent situations and whether or not urgency itself may be reason to revise evidence criteria.

It is interesting that even when consequentialism is the preferred moral system, it is not so much actual consequences that determine moral worth, but what moral agents are justified in believing the consequences of their action or non-action will be. Thus, even though extreme situations may seem to call for consequentialist ethics, they may ultimately require virtue ethics because the right actions depend on abilities to deliberate rationally about probable outcomes in situations of great stress. Such skill in deliberation that leads to action is an example of the intellectual virtue of *phronesis* or practical reasoning, in an Aristotelian sense. It requires training and would have to manifest itself consistently to count as a trait of character, or a desirable professional skill.²⁷

It has already been suggested that in disasters the practice of virtues is constrained by pre-existing duties. And it seems to go without saying that in disaster preparation, prevention, and response, the goal is to maximize human life. A task is thereby set for moral philosophers to develop new ways of combining virtue ethics, deontology and consequentialism, so that we can all lucidly evaluate the morality of government actions in preventing and responding to disaster.

FURTHER PHILOSOPHICAL DIRECTIONS

The applicability of social contract theory and moral theory to disaster studies barely scratches the surface of what the philosophical contribution might be. There are myriad specific ways in which philosophers working in applied areas could contribute to existing applied fields. Philosophers of science might take up the task of elucidating, for others in the humanities, studies by architects, geologists and engineers that are relevant to disasters. Medical ethicists could examine policies for triage, in all disasters, and isolation and triage in the advent of pandemics. Probability theorists might take a look at what it means to say something like, “The probability of a major earthquake in Cascadia, in the next fifty years, is five percent,” and similar predictions.²⁸ Cultural critics who study the media might evaluate the specific contribution made by media to the public’s response to disaster. This is a small and vague list. In developing the political and moral focus of the first two sections of this paper, it might be useful to now consider issues of social justice and finish up with a return to the philosophically motivating theme of the ordinary person’s fear, via a brief discussion of existentialism and disaster.

Social Justice

John Rawls, in *A Theory of Justice* begins with the premise that justice is the cardinal virtue of societies. The classic definition of justice, going back to ancient philosophy is: Treat equals equally. Rules, laws, and their applications are just if those who are already equal, in a relevant respect, receive the same treatment. This idea of justice as fairness is expanded by Rawls in his analysis of the foundations of a just society.²⁹ Still, justice as fairness, which remains the classic definition after Rawls, is not the full story according to those humanistic thinkers who have addressed issues of inequality within society, particularly entrenched and inter-generational poverty, sexism, and racism. Social critics who have ideals of equal opportunities and equal possession of at least the basic necessities of life usually work with a concept of *distributive justice*, or some measure of sameness in

the distribution of some goods. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights relies on a conception of distributive justice in this sense.³⁰

However, in contemporary politics, the two ideas of justice as fairness and distributive justice often appear to be opposed. For instance, debates about the merits of social welfare programs and affirmative action may turn on questions of whether justice requires that those who are treated fairly according to the law, but nonetheless consistently end up disadvantaged, are entitled to some form of compensation. The compensation is assumed to work as a form of distributive justice, with the goal of making all citizens equally able to benefit from the formal equality guaranteed by the justice as fairness principle. But not everyone agrees about the necessity for compensation or distributive justice.

It would be preferable if the subject of justice in relation to disaster prevention, preparation and response, were not politically contentious and if there were a theoretical ground that could support those humanitarian intuitions and sentiments which are broadly shared. That is, regardless of who is exactly deserving of what, many believe that in situations of disaster, the primary and immediate goal should be to alleviate everyone's suffering and minimize all deaths. There are at least two philosophical ways in which such a consensus could be served, the first suggested by Rawls and the second by Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

In addressing the fundamental rules and institutions of a just society, Rawls does not believe that government need make provision for equality of distribution, provided that any new set of rules or institutions does not leave those who are less well off worse off than they were before.³¹ We could accordingly suggest that in preparing for and responding to situations of disaster, those who are already disadvantaged due to age, infirmity, poverty, or bias against them ought not, as a result of disaster, be worse off relative to others than they were before. For example, if both middle-class and poor families lose their houses, poor families are relatively worse off because they have fewer additional resources. Thus, the compounded disadvantages of the black urban poor of New Orleans as a result of Hurricane Katrina, which months later left many jobless, homeless, and without hope of future community, when before they had some measure of all those things, would not be acceptable.³² If this application of Rawls's principle entails that those victims of disaster who are less well off would require greater per capita compensation than others, it could be justified by something like Rousseau's principle of the *common good*. According to Rousseau, part of the function of government is to further what is good for society as a whole, in ways that are not necessarily decided by majority rule, or that amount to the greatest well-being of the greatest number.³³ It could on those grounds be argued that society as a whole is better off if there is amelioration of the conditions of a disadvantaged numerical minority that is less well off relative to the majority, as the result of a disaster. The justification would be that a society as a whole is morally diminished when the conditions of those who are already disadvantaged deteriorate further. Such increased inequality might undermine assumptions of commonality based on nationality or shared humanity, and radically divide groups at the cost of general social cohesiveness.

These applications to disaster conditions of principles developed by Rawls and Rousseau are different from usual ideas of compensation because they require extra compensation in some cases, but without dependence on either ideological ideals of a welfare state, or pure benevolence. If such applications need justification beyond the justifications offered by social contract theory discussed earlier, the new justifications would fall under the general rubric of humanitarian concerns. Humanitarian concerns tend at present to be theoretically addressed by scholars of international affairs, rather than political theorists or ethicists, but in the case of disasters they might be addressed by political philosophers who are otherwise concerned with the normal conditions of life in relatively

secure and affluent societies. This extension or application of political philosophy would be highly relevant during times in which relatively secure and affluent societies face new dangers.

Existentialism

Finally, there is the existentialist dimension. *Existentialism* became famous during the middle of the twentieth century, through the novels, plays, and philosophical work of Jean-Paul Sartre.³⁴ It was popularized as a gloomy, nihilistic outlook on life, generated by Frenchmen in smoke-filled cafes. But as Sartre emphasized in “Existentialism is a Humanism,” the aim of existentialism was to provide a realistic description of the universal human condition, with an emphasis on free choice. According to Sartre, and in the tradition of Socrates (who counseled his followers to take care of their souls and “practice dying”), what human beings are at any given time is the result of their past choices in life. There is no pre-formed human nature, or “essence,” and what we become is the result of our own projects; what we become is what we make of ourselves. We must continually make choices in our existence and there is no way to evade that requirement or the responsibility it entails. However, we are mortal beings and our eventual death is not something that we can avoid. But (and here one of Sartre’s major influences, Martin Heidegger, is pertinent) most people live in the bad faith or inauthenticity of pretending that death has nothing to do with them personally, as their own death, but is rather always something that happens to other people.³⁵

The relevance of existentialism to a philosophy of disaster is the fact of human mortality and the tendency of members of the public in modern society to pretend that death is not something that concerns them immediately and inevitably. With or without disasters, we will all surely die and, worse than that, we are all subject to dying at any given moment. But even though the public seems to have a robust acceptance of images of death and destruction in both entertainment and news reporting, this does not mean that most ordinary people have come to terms with the basic facts about their own mortality and vulnerability. A (perhaps universal) tendency to deny one’s own death can make it seem as though any unusual threat to human life, from terrorist bombs, to earthquakes, to a flu virus that has “crossed over” to our species from birds, is the only thing that can possibly kill us. Victims killed in a disaster may be grieved as though they would have lived forever had they not been killed in that disaster, as though they would not have eventually died from something else. The philosophical point is that the horrific nature of death by disaster turns on a question of how we choose to die. The first step is for individuals to acknowledge that they will inevitably die. The second step is to reflect on how one would prefer to die. The third step is decide that one does not want to die in this or that disaster. This decision can motivate an insistence that all reasonable steps be taken to minimize the loss of human life in future disasters, steps that range from the informed actions of ordinary people to the broadest policy decisions of their leaders.

CONCLUSION

I have offered a general sketch of how philosophers might contribute to the multi-disciplinary field of homeland security and disaster studies, while at the same time extending political and moral philosophy. Modern political philosophy in the West has proceeded from the idea of a state of nature, as a standard of human life, according to which the very existence of government is justified. The temporary dysfunction of government in some disasters may lead to a *second state of nature* that

requires new thought about the social contract. Moral philosophers often treat virtue ethics, deontology and consequentialism as contending ethical theories, but situations of disaster may require combinations of all three systems. Similarly, thought about disaster can motivate combinations of justice as fairness and distributive justice, in ways that are otherwise precluded in political debate. And finally, the emphasis on human mortality developed by existentialists may require a distinction between death by normal causes and death in disaster.

This sketch of a philosophical contribution and application is intended to be both general and open-ended. Its purpose is to stimulate multi-disciplinary theoretical discussion.

¹ Applied philosophy now includes: professional ethics, business ethics, medical ethics, philosophy of film and other media, philosophy of sports, environmental philosophy, animal rights, philosophy of race, and philosophies of science, law, international studies, policy, education, friendship, marriage, family, and contemporary social controversies.

² The fear of the public seems to be rationally based since 9-11. As this paper will stress, the issue is not only destruction by disasters, but the inability of government to respond. Many have come to realize that there is good reason to fear many things besides terrorism. But short of being empowered to help itself, the public now faces castigation by pundits, for its very fear. See Linton Weeks, "Today's Americans have everything to fear but fear itself," *Washington Post*, December 11, 2005, reprinted in *Register Guard* (Eugene, Oregon), December 11, 2005.

³ The texts referred to in this article are: Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Edwin Curley ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1994); John Locke, *Second Treatise in Two Treatises of Government*, Peter Laslett, ed. (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1991); John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, 1971); Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, Maurice Cranston, ed. (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 1961), Book III.

⁴ Locke, *Second Treatise*, chap. VII, VIII, IX.; Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapter XIII, 76.

⁵ Locke, *Second Treatise*, chap. VII and VIII.

⁶ Locke, *Second Treatise*, chap. V.

⁷ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap XVII, XVIII.

⁸ Locke, *Second Treatise*, chap. XIX.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. XXI-XXVI.

¹¹ Ibid., chap. XIV, XV.

¹² Locke, *Second Treatise*, chap. VIII, Sec. 95, 96, 97, pp. 330-332.

¹³ Human life without all forms of government as we know them would probably be a subject for anthropology, rather than political theory.

¹⁴ In "Changing Homeland Security: The Issue-Attention Cycle," *Homeland Security Affairs*, Vol. I, no. 1, (Summer 2005) Article 1, <http://www.hsaj.org>, Christopher Bellavita discusses Anthony Downs' 1972 article, "The Issue-Attention Cycle," *Public Interest* 28 (Summer 1972):38-50.

¹⁵ There is of course much information available on the components of disaster kits, which members of the public are urged to assemble on their own (for instance, the comprehensive information available from FEMA at www.fema.gov/library/emfdwtr.shtm) but in a high-tech society with elaborate claims on consumers' time and attention, this "do-it-yourself" approach probably contributes to a general impression that individual disaster preparation is unconventional and eccentric.

¹⁶ Disaster logistics appear to be a bigger problem at this time than the existence of emergency supplies. Thus far, military, private and corporate philanthropic efforts have been effective in ad hoc rescue missions abroad. See, “Just in Time: In Year of Disasters, Experts Bring Order to Chaos of Relief,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 22, 2005.

¹⁷ Plato, “Euthyphro,” Lane Cooper trans. In *Plato: Collected Dialogues*, Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, trans. (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1961), 160-185.

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Terence Irwin, trans. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1985), Books II, III, IV.

¹⁹ Immanuel Kant, “Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals,” in *Immanuel Kant: Ethical Philosophy*, James W. Ellington, trans. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1994).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

²¹ John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* and Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, reprinted in Alan Ryan ed., *Utilitarianism and Other Essays: J.S. Mill and Jeremy Bentham* (New York, NY, London: Penguin Books, 1987).

²² Mill, “Bentham,” in *ibid.*, 132-176; Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 276-283.

²³ Perhaps the classic case of “lifeboat ethics” is John William Wallace’s report, “Seaman Homes and the Longboat of William Brown,” in *United States v. Homes (case no. 15,383)* Circuit Court E. d. Pennsylvania, April 22, 1842, reprinted in Louis P. Pojman, ed. *The Moral Life: An Introductory Reader in Ethics and Literature* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 229-30.

²⁴ See Samuel Scheffler, ed. *Consequentialism and its Critics* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

²⁵ On a rejection of extreme situations for moral argument, see Ayn Rand, “The Ethics of Emergency,” reprinted from *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism*, in Nina Rosenstand, ed. *The Moral of the Story: An Introduction to Ethics* (Boston, MA: McGraw Hill, 2006), 105-198.

²⁶ Abby Goudnough, “Fretful Passenger, Turmoil on Jet and Fatal Shots,” *New York Times*, December 9, 2005.

²⁷ For a contemporary discussion of how instant decisions by experts can reflect their extensive experience, see Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (New York, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), especially. Chap. 6, about the shooting of Amadou Diallo, 189-244.

²⁸ Residents of the Pacific Northwest have recently been informed that there is a 5% probability that a major earthquake and related tsunami will strike the region within the next 50 years. Such information raises questions of what the rational response should be to events that are unlikely at any given time but which represent great harm.

²⁹ Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, Chapter I, 3-53.

³⁰ Article 25, (1) of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948-1998) provides for distributive justice, as follows:

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control. (www.un.org/Overview/rights.html)

³¹ What is paraphrased as the disadvantaged not ending up worse off is called “the difference principle” by Rawls, which (again, roughly speaking) he describes as even the disadvantaged benefiting from inequalities in a just system. See *Theory of Justice*, 60-80.

³² On the lasting effects of Hurricane Katrina and the earthquake in Pakistan on the poor, see, respectively: Jodi Wilgoren, “In 14 Weeks Since Storm, 14 Places Called Home,” *New York Times*, December 13, 2005; Manabu

Kitagawa, "Asia: Winter threatens to compound horror of Pakistani Earthquake," December 17, 2005 at www.asahi.com.

³³ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, Book II, 59-101.

³⁴ Sartre's most comprehensive philosophical work is *Being and Nothingness*, Hazel Barnes trans. (New York, NY: Philosophical Library, 1952).

³⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," Bernard Fretman, trans., reprinted in L. Nathan Oaklander, ed. *Existentialist Philosophy: An Introduction* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996), 310-319. On Heidegger's views about the denial of their death by individuals, see Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, trans. (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1962), Division II, Chapter I, 279-311.