

**Incorporating Information:
Nietzsche and Foucault on Embodied Responses to the Climate Change Event**
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On September 27, 2013, after an all night session, The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released a summary for policymakers detailing the current state of climate science and its predictions for the future. Later that morning, meteorologist Eric Holthaus published a short article on the report entitled: “The world’s best scientists agree: On our current path, global warming is irreversible—and getting worse.”¹

He found it an easy and straightforward, perhaps even routine task to convey the information contained in that report: that humans cause global warming, that severe impacts are on the horizon, that geoengineering is not an option, and that something must be done immediately. No problem. Later in the day, he began “thinking about the report more existentially. Any hope for a healthy planet seemed to be dwindling, a death warrant written in stark, black-and-white data. It came as a shock.”² So, after switching from scientific, analytical, and journalistic way of thinking about the report to an existential mode, it became a shock that interrupted his life. The data printed across the page was transfigured into death warrant in which everyday human action authorized sovereign nature to execute the species.

What then happened in a boarding area in San Francisco International Airport has been described as an “epiphany,”³ and as a “meltdown.”⁴ Holthaus himself called it a “hopeless

1 Eric Holthaus, “The world’s best scientists agree: On our current path, global warming is irreversible—and getting worse,” *Quartz*, September 27, 2013, <http://qz.com/129122/the-worlds-best-scientists-agree-on-our-current-path-global-warming-is-irreversible-and-getting-worse/>

2 Eric Holthaus, “Why I’m never flying again,” *Quartz*, October 1, 2013, <http://qz.com/129477/why-im-never-flying-again/>.

3 “What Triggers a Climate Epiphany? With Eric Holthaus,” by Tom Bowman, www.tombowman.com, October 26, 2013, tombowman.com/posts/what-triggers-a-climate-epiphany/.

4 Fox News Insider, “Gutfeld Reacts to Meteorologist Quitting Air Travel Over Climate Report,” *Fox News*

moment.”⁵ While talking to his wife on the phone, Holthaus suddenly found himself weeping. Shortly afterward, he sent out the following tweet:

I just broke down in tears in boarding area at SFO while on phone with my wife. I've never cried because of a science report before. #IPCC⁶

Two minutes later, he tweeted:

I realized, just now: This has to be the last flight I ever take. I'm committing right now to stop flying. It's not worth the climate.⁷

He then tweeted:

Totally agree. RT @Mer1968: @EricHolthaus No children, happy to go extinct, which in and of itself, carries a certain sadness. #IPCC⁸

And then:

Unfortunately, yes. Its a very emotional decision. Mixed feelings. RT @ibidibid: @EricHolthaus adios babies? :/⁹

And then tweeted that he was “thinking of a vasectomy.”¹⁰

How does a science report turn into an emotional eruption? How does it then become a commitment to a radically different mode of behavior?

Neither the dangers of climate change nor efforts toward carbon footprint reduction were new to Holthaus. He already engaged in a number of typical green behaviors such as recycling, turning off the lights, and using reusable bags. He had also adopted a couple more substantial

Insider (blog), Fox News Channel, September 30, 2013, <http://foxnewsinsider.com/2013/09/30/meteorologist-eric-holthaus-quits-air-travel-over-un-climate-report>

5 Suzanne Goldenberg, “IPCC report makes US meteorologist cry – and give up flying,” *The Guardian*, October 3, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2013/oct/03/ipcc-climate-report-eric-holthaus>.

6 Holthaus, “Why I'm never flying again.”

7 Ibid.

8 Marie-Louise Olson, “A weather man breaks down in tears and vows NEVER to fly again due to grim climate-change report,” *Daily Mail*, September 28, 2013, accessed March 30, 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2436551/A-weatherman-breaks-tears-vows-NEVER-fly-grim-climate-change-report.html>

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

commitments: vegetarianism and sharing a car. But he still traveled extensively by plane, racking up 75,000 miles in the previous year.¹¹ Holthaus also gained a lot of popularity for being an excellent source of weather information during Hurricane Sandy. His coverage was notable for the links he drew between the storm and climate change.¹²

So again, why did someone who knew about the dangers of climate change and who had already taken steps to live more responsibly all of a sudden make such a dramatic commitment? In retrospect, he was able to see how he had been engaging in both personal denial, where people believe that their “daily actions are not part of the climate change problem,” and practical denial, in which individuals believe that there is nothing they can “do personally that will have any significant effect on limiting climate change.”¹³

Before his breakdown he already thought he was acting responsibly yet at the same time he knew it wasn't enough since he had used a carbon calculator to evaluate his way of life. He also already knew what other carbon sources he had in his life, and how to reduce them. So the report intensified things he already knew in such a way that they produced something like a conversion experience that both enabled and compelled him to live in accordance with what he believed to be true.¹⁴

One way of thinking about Holthaus's reaction to the report is through Pierre Klossowski's reading of Nietzsche on the Eternal Return. For him, interruptive events take the

11 Holthaus, “Why I'm never flying again.”

12 Eric Berger, “Who is Eric Holthaus, and why did he give up flying today?,” *SciGuy (blog), The Houston Chronicle*, September 27, 2013, <http://blog.chron.com/sciguy/2013/09/who-is-eric-holthaus-and-why-did-he-give-up-flying-today/>

13 Eric Holthaus, “I Spent 28 Hours on a Bus. I Loved It.,” *Slate*, February 4, 2014, http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/future_tense/2014/02/why_a_meteorologist_took_the_bus_for_28_hours_instead_of_flying.html.

14 Ibid, and Goldenberg, “IPCC report makes US meteorologist cry – and give up flying.”

form of an “abrupt awakening” infused with a high “tonality of soul.”¹⁵ Such an event cannot be comprehended or systematized. “[R]ather, does not this event...first have to be *mimed*, in accordance with the gestural semiotic of the Soothsayers and the Prophets?”¹⁶ One has to mime the event, experimenting with different ways of expressing it to make it tangible. The way that the IPCC report interrupted Holthaus's life is just one expression of the many interruptions it entails. Since, as Bruno Latour has said, climate change may not be representable,¹⁷ communicating and responding to it may require mimicking that interruptive mood. Having suddenly broken down, Holthaus sought ways to express that experience.

Holthaus's attempt to rework established behavior links with Nietzsche's own refusal of established morality.

We must break with the classic rule of morality, which – on the pretext of realizing a human potential – makes humanity dependent upon habits adopted *once and for all*...Behavior can never be limited by its regular repetition, nor can it limit thinking itself. A mode of thought that would restrict behavior, or a mode of behavior that would restrict thought – both comply with an extremely useful automatism: they ensure *security*...By contrast, any thought that allows itself to be called into question, whether by an internal or external event, reveals a certain capacity for starting over.¹⁸

Nietzsche and Holthaus break away from a morality which limits thought and behavior by imposing a regular repetition upon the world in the name of security. Holthaus notes three different levels of secure behavior that his commitment unsettles: the discomfort of giving up forms of leisure dependent on long-distance travel; the potential loss of a job that requires one to fly; and the impact on the economy if many people were to dramatically curtail their flying habits or consumption in general.¹⁹ Regular behavior broke down in an experience which

15 Pierre Klossowski. *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*. Trans. Daniel W. Smith. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997. 56.

16 Ibid, 3-4.

17 Kellie C. Payne, “Representing the Unrepresentable,” May 17, 2010, <http://kelliipayne.wordpress.com/category/bruno-latour/>

18 Ibid, 4.

19 Holthaus, “Why I'm never flying again,” and Holthaus, “I Spent 28 Hours on a Bus. I Loved It.”

Holthaus connects with death and hopelessness. As Klossowski suggests, “Depending on the strength of its intensity...[the impulsive state] can bring about a de-actualization of that institution itself....That every reality as such comes to be de-actualized in relation to the singular case, that the resulting emotion seizes the subject's behavior and forces it into action – this is an adventure that can modify the course of events....”²⁰ Institutionalized language, comprehension, habit, and norms became de-actualized in the moment of Holthaus's breakdown.

This spurs Holthaus to a different kind of behavior that must in some way reflect and enact the intensities that he experienced in that emotional state. “As soon as we act practically, [Nietzsche] says, 'we have to follow the prejudices of our sentiments.’”²¹ Most sentiment organizes the play of intensities that we experience according to established moral codes, prejudicing behavior in favor of regularized sociality. The question is how to rework sentiment and thereby rework experience and behavior. Klossowski suggests that Nietzsche did this through inventing simulacra, which is a matter of producing an invented constellation of intensities.²² These simulacra then imitate the event as a way of reorganizing sentiment. Perhaps we can read Holthaus's commitment as a simulacra that reproduces the event. That commitment continues to interrupt established ways of living, compelling him to reorganize his vacations, his professional life, and his activist commitments. It becomes “an exercise in continually maintaining oneself in a discontinuity with respect to everyday continuity.”²³ In this way, invented simulacra enact “a positive notion of the false” which can “generate new conditions of life.”²⁴

20 Klossowski, 80.

21 Ibid, 121.

22 Ibid, Translator's Preface, x-xi.

23 Ibid, 132-3.

24 Ibid, 132.

Through the active production and embodiment of simulacra, the event has its effects, with those effects ultimately repeating the event through their own efficacy. “Thought must itself have the same *effectiveness* as what happens *outside of it* and *without it*. This type of thought, in the long run, must therefore *come to pass* as an *event*.”²⁵ The production of simulacra is a de-actualization and transformation of the subject's experience and sentiment. But this transformation is also immediately lived and thereby becomes part of the experience of those in contact with the individual. Holthaus's friends, relatives and professional associates have to consider reorganizing their own way of living to adapt to his interruptive commitment. He also pushed broader group of people to confront the extent to which they live what they believe in relation to his embodied commitment. This can be seen in the responses to Holthaus's twitter announcement. Some people expressed support or admiration; others felt compelled to make pledges to cut their carbon footprint. Yet others expressed disdain, suggesting that Holthaus was a “beta male” or that he should commit suicide.²⁶ Other climate writers suggested that his emotional reaction had compromised his professionalism and objectivity, or that he was overreacting to the IPCC report.²⁷ Klossowski notes a similar effect when Nietzsche tried to tell his friends about the eternal return. Though he communicated it through a disturbing mental and physical condition, they refused to see a connection between the idea and the affect.²⁸ But “when Nietzsche invited them to think with him, he was really inviting them to feel, and thus to feel his own prior emotion.” In disrupting other lives, Holthaus invites others to feel the disruption he felt. Yet clearly the most common response was to refuse that invitation and suppress the

25 Ibid, 168-9.

26 Holthaus, “I Spent 28 Hours on a Bus. I Loved It.”

27 Jason Samenow, “Meteorologist Eric Holthaus’ vow to never to fly again draws praise, criticism,” *Capital Weather Gang (blog)*, *Washington Post*, October 1, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/capital-weather-gang/wp/2013/10/01/meteorologist-eric-holthaus-vow-to-never-to-fly-again-draws-praise-criticism/>.

28 Klossowski, 213, 217-220.

disruption with affirmations of established morality. An isolated individual emotional experience is thus able to effectively extend itself into institutionalized life in a number of ways, embodying the event as a way to disrupt and reorganize those institutions.

Foucault suggests an alternative approach for understanding how we might incorporate information about climate change into our behavior. For him, it is a matter of developing an “*Ēthos*...a mode of being for the subject, along with a certain way of acting, a way visible to others. A person's *ēthos* was evident in his clothing, appearance, gait, in the calm with which he responded to every event, and so on...But extensive work by the self on the self is required for this practice of freedom to take shape in an *ēthos* that is good, beautiful, honorable, estimable, memorable, and exemplary.”²⁹ If Holthaus was able to effectively commit to stop flying after the breakdown caused by the IPCC report, it may be because he had already developed an *ēthos* that enable his response to that event. The extent to which Holthaus's *ēthos* is estimable might be judged by the influence his personal commitment had on others. I will point to three characteristics that Foucault highlights in the development of a robust *ēthos*.

The first point in the importance of adopting a positive relation to the event, whether it be a fire, robbery, death, or climate change. This begins with examining a particular event to think about the what its nature is, what its effect on the self is, in what way the self depends upon it, in what way the self is free from it, how one should judge it, etc.³⁰ Foucault highlights different sets of techniques used to produce positive orientations toward events. These include attempts to understand how all events are ontologically good insofar as they are part of a rational order,³¹

29 Michel Foucault, “Ethics of the Concern of Self as a Practice of Freedom,” *Ethics Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, New York: The New Press, 1997, 286.

30 Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Ed. Frédéric Gros, Trans. Graham Burchell, New York: Picador, 2005, 298.

31 Ibid, 442.

producing a disposition of detachment from events,³² preparing oneself by regularly imagining that the worst events will surely happen and even that they are already happening,³³ and developing “a steadfast soul, serene in adversity, a soul that accepts every event as if it were desired.”³⁴ Many of these techniques are interesting in that they deliberately explore, modify and distort representations of the world in order to reconfigure the internal relations of the self. This shares some affinity with Klossowski's take on Nietzsche's use of simulacra.

One invented technique is the practice of hearing, understanding, learning, repeating, and memorizing a series of discourses. These discourses are ideas, truths, phrases, behavioral guides, and principles. Through the learning, understanding, and memorizing of these principles they become incorporated into the self. “All the verbal repetitions must be part of the preparation so that the saying can be integrated into the individual and control his action, becoming part, as it were, of his muscles and nerves...when the event occurs, the *logos* at that point must have become itself the subject of action, the subject of action must himself have become at that point *logos* and, without having to sing the phrase anew, without even having to utter it, acts as he ought to act.”³⁵ The learned and practiced discourses are always virtually present, ready to control the action of the subject at crucial moments. They are preparations made for an unexpected event, with a material existence that extends into our behavior. It may be that Holthaus's continual learning about climate change, evaluating his own life, and internalizing ways to act better drove his commitment to stop flying.

Second, just as Klossowski's simulacra change the experience of the subject, so too must the adopted practices. “For the subject to have right of access to the truth he must be changed,

32 429.

33 Ibid, 469-73, 477-80.

34 Ibid, 265.

35 Ibid, 326.

transformed, shifted, and become, to some extent and up to a certain point, other than himself. The truth is only given to the subject at a price that brings the subject's being into play. For as he is, the subject is not capable of truth.”³⁶ In this understanding, truth is not something expressed by a specific knowledge, but rather is only attained through a particular mode of being. This makes “truth-telling a mode of being of the subject.”³⁷ Rather than limiting truth to knowledge, it becomes an ethos reached through spiritual transformation. Holthaus risked his job, his lifestyle and his established way of living in making this commitment, but only in doing so was he able to express the truth about how we cause climate change.

The way of living produced by the spiritual transformation brings the subject's behavior in line with their beliefs. Foucault stresses in particular how in the first and second centuries A.D., “the art of living and the art of oneself are identical; at least they become or tend to become, identical.”³⁸ Practices and principles reach into daily life, into regularized habits and expectations. Care of the self as a way of living enables one to live the truth obtained through spiritual transformation. Foucault argues that for the ancients it was a matter of “knowing the extent to which the fact of knowing the truth, of speaking the truth, and of practicing and exercising the truth enables the subject not only to act as he ought, but also to be as he ought to be and wishes to be.”³⁹ The result of undertaking the project of caring for oneself is that one experiences and lives the truth that they know. He uses the practice of *parrhēsia* to elucidate this. *Parrhēsia* is a form of particularly free and open speech that is characterized primarily by the fact that it is a realization of spiritual truth. “What must be shown is not just that this is right, the truth, but also that I who am speaking am the person who judges these thoughts to be really true

36 Ibid, 15.

37 Ibid, 327.

38 Ibid, 205-6. See also 82-6.

39 Ibid, 318.

and I am also the person for whom they are true...What characterizes *parrhēsia, libertas*, is this perfect fit between the subject who speaks, or the subject of enunciation, and the subject of conduct.”⁴⁰ A person vouches for the truths they know with their existence since it really is the life that they are living. Contrarily, when one's actions and their claims about truth do not line up, it is clear that they are not caring for themselves, that they have not developed an estimable ethos. The difference between Eric Holthaus and others who purport to believe that climate change is a real problem becomes clear in this light.

Finally, care of the self is an entry point into politics and an essential political task for us today. “I think we may have to suspect that we find it impossible today to constitute an ethic of the self, even though it may be an urgent, fundamental, and politically indispensable task, if it is true after all that there is no first or final point of resistance to political power other than in the relationship one has to oneself.”⁴¹ Amidst the network of cultural and social imperatives and incentives to be individually economically successful, to consume any of a myriad of goods and lifestyles, to draw lines between us and those who threaten our safety and well-being, to promote certain forms of strength and power, to adhere to a limited view of time, and so on, the relationship that one has to oneself can be a checkpoint for these comforts, values, and impulses. Caring for oneself, insofar as it brings the spiritual dimension into play, insofar as it involves risking one's mode of being, is already a political mode of engagement.

One thing that this suggests is that we may be able to better understand our relation to climate change by looking at how Holthaus's declaration makes us feel. Klossowski notes that when Nietzsche tried to communicate the eternal return to his friends, “they *felt* the delirium.”⁴²

40 Ibid, 405-6.

41 Ibid, 252.

42 Klossowski, 217.

What is our reaction when someone tells us the truth which they believe and live? I mentioned a number of affirmations and resistances to Holthaus, but only some were able to take that truth and implement it in their own lives, making commitments to reduce their carbon footprint and become more politically involved. Whether our own organization of sentiment leads us to feel joy or anger at a move such as Holthaus's does not matter if both are ways of avoiding the interruptive discomfort or truth of climate change. While it is good to have more scientific information about climate change, we also need to attend to the way that information gets taken up in our bodies, sentiments, and spirits.