

New book takes philosophical approach to deep time

September 6 2024, by Josh McAuliffe

The Memory of the World

Deep Time, Animality, and Eschatology

Ted Toadvine

Ted Toadvine, Nancy Tuana Director of the Rock Ethics Institute and professor of philosophy in Penn State's College of the Liberal Arts, is the author of the new book, "The Memory of the World: Deep Time, Animality, and Eschatology," published by the University of Minnesota Press. Credit: University of Minnesota Press

Contemporary life is rife with talk of impending apocalypse, from the plots of countless books and movies to the increasingly grim predictions associated with climate change.

This mindset, however, often fails to fully take into account the very nature of time, argues Ted Toadvine, Nancy Tuana Director of the Rock Ethics Institute and professor of philosophy in Penn State's College of the Liberal Arts.

In his new [book](#), "The Memory of the World: Deep Time, Animality, and Eschatology," published by the University of Minnesota Press, Toadvine examines deep time—or geologic time, measured in billions of years—to show how humans' obsession with the precariousness of life "relies on a flawed understanding of time that neglects the past and present with the goal of managing the future," in turn diminishing our relationship with the world.

A specialist in contemporary European philosophy and environmental philosophy, Toadvine recently discussed some of the book's findings.

Q: How did the idea for the book come about—what made you want to tackle the subject of deep time?

Toadvine: I've always been fascinated by deep time. I open my book talking about my experience searching for fossils on England's Jurassic

Coast, and how I felt a connection between [geological time](#) and my [personal experience](#) of being there on the edge of the ocean, sifting through the remnants of dinosaurs.

In everyday life, we think of time in terms of minutes, or years, or human generations. But geologists count time in millions and billions of years. This raises interesting questions about how these distinct scales of time relate and how it is possible for us to bridge them conceptually.

Second, like so many children, I was raised around animals; I grew up on a farm with goats, pigs, turkeys, guinea fowl, ducks, chickens, rabbits, dogs and cats. I want to understand how we relate to the experiences of other animals, who have their own perspective on the world.

We don't know how to imagine what animals think and feel, and there are ongoing debates about how much we can empathize with or understand animals without projecting our own fears and desires onto them. For me, this relates to criticisms that have been raised about preserving biodiversity and whether there are better ways to understand what we value about the diversity of distinct forms of life.

Third, I have been struck by the recent obsession with apocalypse in popular culture—the many novels and movies that imagine human beings destroying the world in one fashion or another: "Mad Max," "Snowpiercer," "I Am Legend," "Interstellar," "The Road" and so many others. Why is imagining the collapse of our current way of life so compelling for many people today?

The insight behind my book is that these three themes are linked, that they all reflect particular ways of understanding time. I propose a new way of thinking about deep time in terms of the materiality of memory, which is something that we share with other forms of life that we have evolved alongside. This provides a critical perspective on how we

envision the far future and imagine apocalypse as a way to avoid responsibilities for past injustices.

Q: What were some of the surprising things you learned while researching the book?

Our usual ways of thinking about time miss the complexity of our actual temporal experiences. For instance, we think of time in terms of homogenous units, such as minutes or hours, that are substitutable for each other. This overlooks the historical character of time, which makes each moment of our lives unique.

Furthermore, our experiences of time are entangled with many temporal events that unfold over much longer durations than we usually realize. For example, as cultural beings, we inherit languages and landscapes whose origins precede written history, and as living, organic beings, we have evolved from and alongside other forms of life over billions of years.

The complexities of our temporal experiences can offer us a much richer appreciation of our own identities and our responsibilities toward each other, other forms of life and the planet itself. This perspective also allows us to take a step back from the ways that we imagine the distant future and the influence that we might have on it.

Our factual predictions as well as our speculative fantasies often express desires and anxieties in the present that depend on problematic assumptions about time and our ability to manage and control the future.

Q: How are the ideas you're exploring relevant to our current times?

The idea that human beings can cause our own extinction or destroy the planet is still a recent discovery in terms of our technological capacities and intellectual history, and traditional conceptions of ethics fail to provide much guidance for thinking about these challenges.

As we struggle to come to terms with the risks of emerging technologies, as well as the histories of colonial and racist violence, we need to avoid the temptation of believing that we can program the future and manage the planet as we think best.

We should also be suspicious of apocalyptic fantasies that promise the opportunity to wipe the slate clean and build a better world. We cannot escape our past by moving to Mars or uploading our minds to computers. Instead, we can learn to appreciate that each present moment demands a singular ethical response, that it always carries forward debts from the past, and that it always opens onto a future that is unpredictable.

Q: What is it about environmental philosophy that appeals to you as a scholar? How does it continue to challenge and fascinate you?

Nature and our relation to it is arguably the oldest theme in philosophy, and it is a theme that will never stop being important for understanding ourselves and the meaning of our lives. The name "environmental philosophy" might suggest a narrow focus on current environmental problems and their solutions. We do face pressing problems, certainly, and we understand better all the time how they call into question long-standing assumptions about nature and human nature.

As my book demonstrates, I think of environmental philosophy in a broad way that encompasses our relationship with time, the material elements, non-human life, the planet, and our common future. My

approach to these questions is shaped by my training in Western philosophy, but I also seek out insights from other disciplines, including the emerging fields of the environmental humanities as well as natural and social sciences.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

Citation: New book takes philosophical approach to deep time (2024, September 6) retrieved 7 September 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-09-philosophical-approach-deep.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.