

BOOK REVIEW by Sally Pulley – Extrinsic Services Ltd

The Precipice: Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity by Toby Ord

"This book is not just a familiar story about the perils of climate change or nuclear war. These risks that first awoke us to the possibilities of destroying ourselves are just the beginning. There are emerging risks, such as those arising from biotechnology and advanced artificial intelligence, that may pose much greater risk to humanity in the coming century".

Toby Ord is a Senior Research Fellow in Philosophy at Oxford University's [Future of Humanity Institute](#). He gives credit to the vast amount of research support that he received from others, and the many experts who gave time to ensure that the book contains state-of-the-art knowledge.

What attracted me to the book was the exploration of the science behind the risks that we face, and the discussion about how such risks can be quantified.

Overall, the author thinks that the chance of an existential catastrophe striking humanity in the next hundred years is about one in six. These odds are comparable to playing Russian roulette.

"Understanding the risks requires delving into physics, biology, earth science, and computer science; situating this in the larger story of humanity requires history and anthropology; discerning just how much is at stake requires moral philosophy and economics; and finding solutions requires international relations and political science."

The discussion of our history includes examples of nuclear close calls, which are quite chilling, as is the list of the escapes of pathogens from laboratories. These lists of incidents are themselves incomplete, because humanity does not have a full picture of what has happened in countries where the reporting of such incidents is sparse, non-existent, or politically suppressed.

So why is the book relevant to readers of RiskPost?

The book was written before the Covid-19 pandemic. Pre-Covid, a pandemic may not have appeared on many organisation's risk registers, even with the many advance warnings provided by experts and global risk forecasts.

During the Covid pandemic, organisations and professional bodies have reviewed approaches to managing risk, and we can expect this reflection to continue as impacts of the pandemic run into the future. Looking to the longer-term, the unforeseen shocks and impacts of this pandemic may influence the manner in which organisations consider their future risk landscapes.

Rhetorically, how many people have experienced problems when discussing the future, and foreseen risks that have the highest rating of consequence (potentially catastrophic for an organisation) but very low ratings of probability (or likelihood, to use the term adopted in the standards)?

Terminology such as 'improbable', and 'highly unlikely', may lead to the sceptical dismissal of such risks, which may sink to the bottom of an organisation's risk register – if the risks ever appear on the risk register at all. When such a risk becomes reality, an organisation may sink into a morass of recrimination and legal battles and take a long time to recover, if recovery is possible at all.

This book contains approaches and reference materials that support discussion of future risks, and how to quantify them. Importantly, the discussion addresses how risks combine, compare and interact.

The first half of the book contains the main text, which runs to 240 pages. The second half contains another 225 pages of useful reference materials: resources; acknowledgements; appendices; further reading; notes; bibliography; and index.

We as individuals may feel that discussion of existential risk to humanity is not part of our 'day jobs', and that we have no power to effect change. The book's [website](#) identifies what you can do, and provides resources for individuals interested in safeguarding humanity's future. This includes a link to the nonprofit [80,000 hours](#), which provides research and support to help people switch into careers that tackle the world's most pressing problems.

[The Precipice: Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity, by Toby Ord](#)

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Sally is a director of Extrinsic Services Ltd. Extrinsic melds the crafts of intelligence with risk management and project disciplines to help organisations explore and own their unique futures. Sally was a member of the RiskNZ Board from 2015 to 2020.

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