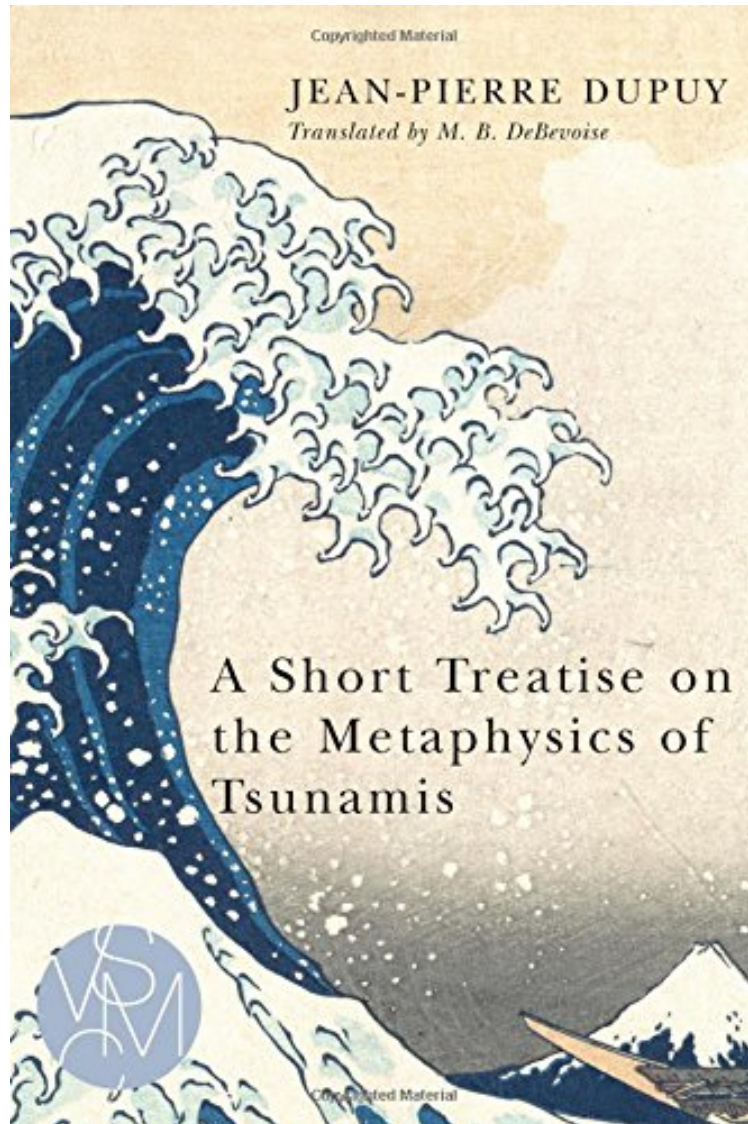


(Download pdf) A Short Treatise on the Metaphysics of Tsunamis (Studies in Violence, Mimesis, Culture)

## A Short Treatise on the Metaphysics of Tsunamis (Studies in Violence, Mimesis, Culture)

*Jean-Pierre Dupuy*

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**Jean-Pierre Dupuy : A Short Treatise on the Metaphysics of Tsunamis (Studies in Violence, Mimesis, Culture)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised A Short Treatise on the Metaphysics of Tsunamis (Studies in Violence, Mimesis, Culture):

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. We can only hope that someday we'll laugh at this book for shortsightedness or false prophecy - may it succeed by failing...By ewomackCould simple thoughtlessness bring about

the end of humanity? Similar to many pre-2008 homeowners who believed that their housing investments would never decrease in value, many probably find the end of humanity an equally unlikely prospect. One problem remains the nebulosity of "the end." How would we know when the end arrived? And how do we know the warning signs? What signs are enough to justify action or panic? The human race doesn't exactly have loads of experience with its own extinction, so perhaps the foundation of all our hope lies only in our nescience? "A Short Treatise on the Metaphysics of Tsunamis," by French philosopher Jean-Pierre Dupuy, examines these questions and finds potential hope for humanity in a "metaphysical ruse" called "enlightened doomsaying." The book takes the stance, inspired partially by German philosopher Gnter Anders, that technology has brought humanity to a place it has never before experienced. In our unique situation, we moderns now hold ultimate responsibility for our continued existence. Destruction could come in many forms, including, as the book lists, "environmental pollution, a worsening climate, the exhaustion of fossil fuels, the dangers associated with advanced technologies, growing economic inequalities on a global scale, terrorism, war, and the spread of weapons of mass destruction." Nothing precludes the possibility of many, or even all, of these occurring simultaneously. Furthermore, we who live in this modern era now know that humanity possesses the power to obliterate itself through various means, whereas previous generations did not (or they could only envision the possibilities). Humans also now arguably harness more destructive power than nature itself. A fleet of nuclear missiles would probably inflict more carnage than any earthquake, tsunami or volcanic eruption imaginable (the book does not mention meteor or asteroid strikes). Hiroshima and Nagasaki demonstrated this with only a single bomb for each city. And those were mere prototypes. Many doomsayers of the past have suffered ridicule for "crying wolf" about potential catastrophes. For example, Paul Ehrlich's book "The Population Bomb" foretold of the death of millions through famine. Then Norman Bourlaug and the "Green Revolution" made Ehrlich wrong. Ehrlich was undoubtedly delighted to have been wrong, but who can say for sure that his false prophecy didn't somehow inspire the saviors? Sometimes crying wolf makes the wolf go away. So blithely dismissing such warnings could spell doom. Further emphasizing our responsibility, the book traces the history of the concept of evil from Leibniz and Voltaire to Rousseau. At one time "evil" came in two forms: moral and natural. Many thought humans caused moral evil and that God caused, or allowed, natural evil. In a Spinozistic turn, nature or "fate" later replaced God as the source of natural evil. Given horrific disasters such as the 1755 destruction of Lisbon, some wallowed in the meaninglessness of fate. Only the arrogant believe that we can know the workings and ultimate meaning of the world and existence. Leibniz and Voltaire tended to fall into this camp. Rousseau countered that humans alone create and cause evil. With Rousseau theodicy becomes "anthropodicy." Not surprisingly, the book largely supports the Rousseauian view of human moral responsibility. Referencing another unquestionable human-made tragedy, the Holocaust (or, as some prefer, "Shoah"), Hannah Arendt's controversial depiction of Adolph Eichmann underscores the terrifying risks of obliviousness to our responsibility. In "Eichmann in Jerusalem," Arendt considers Eichmann an everyday bureaucrat doing his job to please his superiors. She doesn't dismiss his obvious crimes, but argues that a true evil arose through simply being in the world under a particular circumstance. She encapsulates this as "thoughtlessness." In her view, Eichmann didn't comprehend the implications of his actions while he went about his business. In short, he lost sight of a larger moral responsibility. Arendt's conception implies that this could possibly happen to anyone. Building on that idea, the book argues that, as we go about the business of the modern world, we risk a similar loss of perspective about the consequences of our collective actions. Our own thoughtlessness and myopia to larger consequences may unknowingly bring about unimaginable disasters. One passage quotes automobile executive Carlos Gnosn, who claims that "performance is a duty." But does the automobile industry consider the pollution spewed by countless billions of people driving? The book doesn't mention the possibility that hybrid or electric vehicles may greatly reduce environmental damage, but then what about depletion of resources and the costs and effects of manufacturing? Technology seems to always give and take away simultaneously. Do its benefits outweigh its costs? Maybe. How will humanity escape this predicament? "Enlightened doomsaying" aims to awaken people to their greater moral responsibilities beyond the worries of the moment. Right now, society seems to have trouble envisioning future disasters, even in the face of evidence. After all, how much evidence is enough? In a way it relegates these future possibilities to an unrealized possibility, akin almost to something unreal or "it can't happen here" type of events. The "metaphysical ruse" of enlightened doomsaying involves imagining such future catastrophes as completely real, though they obviously remain problematically metaphysically unreal. In this way people would, or should, acknowledge, embrace and face their moral responsibility for those yet unrealized future events. The book admits that this trick may not work, but factual knowledge should awaken our moral senses. Yet it doesn't always seem to. Regardless, we need to realize, or trick ourselves into realizing, that all of humanity rests on the reality and possibilities of the future. Without it, as the book quotes Ander's poignant retelling of the Noah story, "everything that is will have never existed." In other words, when the future goes, the present and past will go with it. In strict ontological terms, the past may still exist even if no humans do, but without humans to actively interact with that past, its ontological status may not have much value outside of an abstract existential quantifier. A future with an active humanity that extends farther into an active future seems to hold the closest thing humans have to a meaning understandable by everyone, regardless of ideological persuasion. In some strange sense, we are our future. If that isn't

sacred, then what is? This tiny book, despite some inevitable flaws, contains almost endless food for thought and reflection. It even attempts to offer solutions for the conundrum that civilization finds itself in, though these solutions of course rest on countless assumptions and "maybes." It neither says "the end is nigh" nor "we're in the clear, everything is ok," but it definitely does not paint an optimistic portrait of the present. What it does best is delineate the challenges that now face humanity along with some of the seemingly insurmountable hurdles that stand in the way of overcoming our situation. In the face of voluminous forces that may result in human annihilation, the book presents an alarmist position, again quoting Anders, "so that it may become false." We can only hope that a future exists in which we laugh at this book for shortsightedness, false prophecy or for just getting everything wrong. In that future this little treatise, through its very failure, may have simultaneously successfully accomplished its goal.

In 1755 the city of Lisbon was destroyed by a terrible earthquake. Almost 250 years later, an earthquake beneath the Indian Ocean unleashed a tsunami whose devastating effects were felt over a vast area. In each case, a natural catastrophe came to be interpreted as a consequence of human evil. Between these two events, two indisputably moral catastrophes occurred: Auschwitz and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And yet the nuclear holocaust survivors likened the horror they had suffered to a natural disaster a tsunami. Jean-Pierre Dupuy asks whether, from Lisbon to Sumatra, mankind has really learned nothing about evil. When moral crimes are unbearably great, he argues, our ability to judge evil is gravely impaired, and the temptation to regard human atrocity as an attack on the natural order of the world becomes irresistible. This impulse also suggests a kind of metaphysical ruse that makes it possible to convert evil into fate, only a fate that human beings may choose to avoid. Postponing an apocalyptic future will depend on embracing this paradox and regarding the future itself in a radically new way. The American edition of Dupuy's classic essay, first published in 2005, also includes a postscript on the 2011 nuclear accident that occurred in Japan, again as the result of a tsunami.

About the Author Jean-Pierre Dupuy is Professor of Social and Political Philosophy at the cole Polytechnique, Paris.