

**INQ 300**  
**End Of The World As We Know It**  
Fall 2025

**Instructor:** Dr. Richard Grant, Trexler 172B, Phone#: 375-2430, Email: grant@roanoke.edu

**Meeting Time/Location:** MWF 9:40 - 10:40 pm, Lucas 227

**Office Hours:** Mondays and Thursdays 1:00 – 2:00 pm, or by appointment through Navigate.

**Overview/Philosophy:** Across this country a growing number of Americans are preparing themselves for a catastrophic apocalypse. For reasons ranging from terrorist attacks to natural disasters or an economic meltdown, these individuals have been taking survival courses, constructing safe rooms and shelters, and stockpiling canned goods in preparation for the end of the world as we know it. Are their fears grounded in fact or fantasy? Does the data support the likelihood of an event occurring? Are there preparations we can/should take to ensure our survival if it does occur? In this course you will investigate a potential catastrophic event and the underlying science and technology, assess the level of threat based on all available evidence, and develop an action plan with persuasive arguments to advise others of the apparent danger and how to prepare and respond to the event.

**Intended Learning Outcomes:** By the end of this course, successful students will be able to

- apply their research findings to a formal project addressing the course topic question and will successfully present this proposal in an oral defense.
- write well-organized and clearly reasoned papers both individually and with a group. Papers will have clear theses, effective organization, and a minimum of sentence-level errors.
- contribute to meaningful, effective discussion and collaborative work that includes expressing, listening to, and debating ideas.
- apply critical thinking and quantitative reasoning skills in a meaningful way.
- make explicit, meaningful connections between past course work (both in the core and in their majors) and contemporary issues.
- demonstrate understanding of a contemporary issue or problem, an awareness of the types of inquiry needed to understand it, and the resources required for addressing it.

**Required Texts:** Free online writing guide: <https://owl.purdue.edu/>  
Additional readings will be provided.

**Course Structure:** In the first part of the course, we will read and discuss articles and book chapters pertinent to our topic. They will introduce us to “The end of the world as we know it,” and give us ideas for projects we will pursue in the second half of the course. These readings are important. Each should take you approximately 1-2 hours to complete. You will need to read these articles carefully and thoughtfully, as well as listen intently to what your classmates say about them. In this part of this course there will be a quiz or assignment on the readings every day. These are needed to support good discussions; they will count 20% toward the final grade. (If you miss a quiz or assignment for a good reason, you may make it up by writing a 1-2 paper on the reading. The paper will be due when you return to class.) If you have an upper respiratory illness, please do not attend class. Additionally, 10% of the final grade will be on your class participation in this part of the course. Class discussions are important for you to lead and participate in. They help us form our ideas, learn from others, and articulate our thoughts. If you miss 2-3 classes your final grade will certainly be affected, but more importantly, we will miss your contributions to the discussions.

Every session some of you will help lead our discussions, others will be asked to report the content of group discussions. When you lead a discussion, you might begin by letting us know what **you** think about specific ideas or claims made in the reading, as well as **why** you respond in the way you do. What are your insights? Generally speaking, it is *not helpful* to start a discussion by asking, ‘What do you guys think?’ or by saying that you found the reading ‘interesting,’ or by listing the points made in the reading: ‘first the article said this, then the article said that...’ It is best to start a discussion by telling us what **you** think.

It is likely that much of what you do in your professional life will be reading and analyzing reports, discussing them in teams, and presenting your insights to others. This part of the course should help develop those abilities.

Right after fall break, we will discuss possible topics, do preliminary research, and form project teams. For the remainder of the term, you will meet regularly with your team and with me to discuss your research, consider the perspectives you are developing, deliberate over the arguments you intend to formulate, and establish the organization of your final paper and oral presentation.

**Attendance Policy:** As discussed above, attendance in this class is important, especially given the interactive nature of the in-class experience. Please notify me in advance if you must miss class for a valid reason (an excused absence). For each unexcused absence past the third, two points will be deducted from your final semester average. Also discussed above, for missed classes, you are responsible for writing a 1-2 page paper on the reading.

**Grading:**

- Quizzes and Assignments – 20%
- Class Participation – 10%
- Individual Paper – 10%
- Topic Description and Annotated Bibliography – 10%
- Draft of Paper – 10%
- Final Paper – 30%
- Oral Presentation – 10%

You will each be graded individually on your respective contributions to the bibliography, draft, and final paper.

**Grading Scale:**

A: ≥93	C: 73-76.9
A-: 90-92.9	C-: 70-72.9
B+: 87-89.9	D+: 67-69.9
B: 83-86.9	D: 63-66.9
B-: 80-82.9	D-: 60-62.9
C+: 77-79.9	F: <60

**Quizzes and Assignments:** Since participation is an essential part of this course, it is critically important that you come to class prepared by reading the required material. As such, most class periods will begin with a quick quiz based on the daily reading assignment. Also, I will occasionally assign a short homework assignment related to the reading material.

**Individual Paper:** This is a three to four page paper that analyzes a particular article of your choice related to your team project. Your paper must include an analysis of the quantitative and scientific data presented, and a critique of the argument presented. Additional details will be provided.

**Team Project:** We will work in teams of three to five on projects you have decided upon. The projects should be neither too difficult to accomplish in the time available, nor too easy. “Climate change” is too big. “The threat terrorists pose to Three Mile Island” is too narrow. You will research your project from the angle of the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities, or from the perspectives of the three divisions in higher learning. In other words, you will need to understand the science behind these threats, their effects on society, their historical and cultural background, as well as the ethical issues they present. The idea is to draw upon what you learned in your Intellectual Inquiry courses, as well as studies in your major.

Generally speaking, you will put more work into this project than you would for a research paper in a typical course, though less than you would for a senior thesis, seminar, or policy paper. The team’s final paper will be approximately 30 pages and be presented and evaluated in an oral defense.

It is likely that much of what you do in your professional life will be working in project teams. Working on a common topic with people having different abilities and skills, and generating a product together will be in your future. This part of the course should help you develop those abilities.

**Tips About Your Team Project:** You will find that your research is easier, your reading more enjoyable, and your team discussions more enriching if you find a book to read together. Many books cover topics that will interest you. A book has already done much of the research and analyzed it for you, and it is easier to read than articles in academic journals. Here are some examples of interesting books you might like to read:

#### Social media

*Irresistible: the Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping us Hooked*, A. Alter  
*Hooked: How to Build Habit-forming Products*, Nir Eyal.

#### Assessing probable calamities

*The Precipice; Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity*, Toby Ord  
*What We Owe the Future*, William MacAskill

### Artificial Intelligence

*Moral AI*, Conitzer, Sinnott-Armstrong, Borg

*The Age of AI: And Our Human Future*, Henry A. Kissinger, et al

*2084: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Humanity*, John C. Lennox.

*Evil Robots, Killer Computers, and Other Myths: The truth about the future of humanity*, Steven Shwartz.

### Transhumanism

*Humanity's End: why we should reject radical enhancements*, N. Agar

*The Ethics of Human Enhancement*, Clarke and Savulescu

*Better than Human: The promise and perils of human enhancement*, Allen Buchanan

*CRISPR Chronicles: Navigating the Ethics, Promise, and Perils of Gene Editing*, James Ellis

*UFO: the inside story of the US government's search for alien life here—and out there*, Garrett M. Graff

### Prepping

*The Next Apocalypse*, Chris Begley

*Bunker: Building for the End Times*, B. Garrett.

### Collapse of civilization

*The End of Everything*, Victor Davis Hanson

*Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America*, Kathleen Belew

*Terrorists Among Us: The militia threat*, Robert L. Snow

*Survival of the Richest*, Douglas Rushkoff

*A City on Mars: the real practical problems*, Kelly and Zach Weinersmith

### Climate change

*How to Avoid a Climate Disaster*, Bill Gates

*Unsettled: What Climate Science Tells Us, What It doesn't, and Why It Matters*, Steven Koonin

### Population crisis

*Count Down: How our modern world is threatening sperm counts, altering male and female reproductive development, and imperiling the future of the human race*, Shanna H. Swan

### Weapons of mass destruction

*Nuclear War: A scenario*, Annie Jacobsen

*Nuclear Weapons and the Future of Humanity*, Avner Cohen

*This is How They Tell Me the World Ends: The cyberweapons arms race*, Nicole Perloth

### The End of Everything

*The End of Everything*, Katie Mack

*A Natural History of the Future*, Rob Dunn

*Big History and the Future of Humanity*, Fred Spier

*The Future of Humanity: Our destiny in the universe*, Michio Kaku

**Possible Topics to Explore:** For your team project, you will choose a topic which is of interest to all team members and approved by your instructor. Here are a few ideas to get you thinking but by no means is an exhaustive list:

Meteor impact (will we wind up like the dinosaurs?)

Biotech disasters (will we create mutants we can't control?)

Artificial Intelligence overwhelming humans (will it make us comparable to Neanderthals?)

Global pandemic (will they only get worse and worse?)

Internal collapse of our economic system or political order (is US democracy and capitalism doomed?)

Nuclear war (what will survival look like?)

Ecosystem collapse (a number of possibilities)

Loss of the global dominance of the US (will your children be speaking Chinese?)

Power grids incapacitated by hackers

Loss of individual freedom due to surveillance and weaponized data by government and Big Tech

Continual war sparked by terrorism, immigration, and conflict over resources

**Academic Integrity:** The College academic integrity policies are enforced. This includes proper reference of research all materials. Although you will be working in teams for the final project, your work turned in must be your own. Please familiarize yourself with the College's academic integrity policies. If you are in doubt as to what they mean and how they are applied, please ask me.

Regarding the use of generative AI tools such as ChatGPT, there are situations when the use of generative AI may be appropriate and educational. If you believe that your use of generative AI is appropriate for a given assignment, please contact me (via email, or in person) to explain your rationale for its use.

**Accessible Education Services:** AES is located on the first floor of the Bank Building. AES provides reasonable accommodations to students with documented disabilities. To register for services, students must self-identify to AES, complete the registration process, and provide current documentation of a disability along with recommendations from the qualified specialist. Please contact Dustin Persinger, Assistant Director of Academic Services for Accessible Education, at 540-375-2248 or by e-mail at [aes@roanoke.edu](mailto:aes@roanoke.edu) to schedule an appointment. If you have registered with AES in the past and would like to receive academic accommodations for this semester, please contact Dustin Persinger at your earliest convenience to schedule an appointment and/or obtain your accommodation letter for the current semester. The testing center, also located on the first floor of the Bank Building, can be reached at 540-375-2247.

**Proposed Schedule:** The following schedule will remind you of the topics being covered and due dates for your assignments. Any necessary changes will be discussed in class.

Dates	Topics, Readings, Assignments, and Due Dates
Wednesday, Aug 27 <sup>th</sup>	Introduction to INQ 300 and our Overarching Goals
Friday, Aug 29 <sup>th</sup> through Thursday, Sept 4 <sup>th</sup>	<p><b><u>First Reading and Assignment (~20 pages)</u></b></p> <p>The first assignment is to read a selection (Chapters 19-20) from <i>Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind</i> by Yuval Harari, and to discuss it one-on-one with the instructor. You will write-up a series of talking points including key ideas, quotations, agreements and objections (2-3 pages). Send this (as an email attachment) at least several hours before your meeting. Here are some key questions you might consider: Are we happier than our ancestors? How would you agree or disagree with Harari's discussion? He also considers conclusions researchers have come to concerning happiness. What do you make of them? Is a meaningful life delusional according to Harari? What does Harari think is the 'truth about ourselves'? Would Harari agree with this statement: from a purely scientific viewpoint, human life has absolutely no meaning? According to Buddhism, the key to happiness is...? What are some possibilities Harari imagines for Homo sapiens of the future? Do you think we are "dissatisfied gods who don't know what they want"? This is a graded assignment. It will count for 3 quizzes.</p>
Friday, Sept 5 <sup>th</sup>	<p><b><u>The Threat of Artificial Intelligence (~10 pages)</u></b></p> <p><i>How Worried Should We Be About AI's threat to Humanity? Even Tech Leaders Can't Agree</i>  <i>One Potential side effect of AI? Human extinction</i>  <i>A Six-Month AI Pause? No Longer Is Needed</i>  <i>Deus Homo: A Brief History of Tomorrow</i></p>
Monday, Sept 8 <sup>th</sup>	<p><b><u>Politics and War (~20 pages)</u></b></p> <p><i>The End of Everything</i>  <i>How Western Civilization Could Collapse</i></p>
Wednesday, Sept 10 <sup>th</sup>	<p><b><u>What Intelligent Agencies are Saying (~15 pages)</u></b></p> <p><i>Why Spy Agencies Say the Future is Bleak</i>  <i>The World in 2030 may be worse than in 2020</i>  <i>Is Violence History?</i></p>
Friday, Sept 12 <sup>th</sup>	<p><b><u>Preppers (~20 pages)</u></b></p> <p><i>At Fortitude Ranch, the Cabin is for Vacationing. The Shelters are for Surviving</i>  <i>The Super-rich 'Preppers' Planning to save themselves from the Apocalypse</i>  <i>We're preparing for the apocalypse wrong – and that could make things even worse</i></p>
Monday, Sept 15 <sup>th</sup> and Wednesday, Sept 17 <sup>th</sup>	<p><b><u>Understanding Your Strengths</u></b></p> <p>We'll take a break from the readings and discussions and do some activities to explore and understand your Clifton Strengths.</p>
Friday, Sept 19 <sup>th</sup>	<p><b><u>INQ, What's it Good For?</u></b></p> <p>In addition to your Clifton Strengths, you bring a lot of knowledge and skills to your team project. Some of those skills you've developed in your major, but also in the INQ curriculum. We'll do some activities to explore and understand these skills.</p>

Monday, Sept 22 <sup>nd</sup> and Wednesday, Sept 24 <sup>th</sup>	<b><u>The Science Behind the Risks (~40 pages)</u></b> <i>The Precipice: Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity</i>
Friday, Sept 26 <sup>th</sup>	<b><u>Humanism (9 pages)</u></b> <i>The End of Us</i> <i>The Importance of the Afterlife, Seriously</i>
Monday, Sept 29 <sup>th</sup>	<b><u>The Population Decline (~25 pages)</u></b> <i>To Breed or not to Beed?</i> <i>Long Slide Looms for World Population, with Sweeping Ramification</i> <i>Do You Want to Have Children Someday?</i> <i>Suddenly There Aren't Enough Babies. The Whole World is Alarmed</i>
Wednesday, Oct 1 <sup>st</sup> and Friday, Oct 3 <sup>rd</sup>	<b><u>A Philosophical Look Ahead (~40 pages)</u></b> <i>What We Owe the Future</i>
Monday, Oct 6 <sup>th</sup> and Wednesday, Oct 8 <sup>th</sup>	<b><u>What Gives Us Hope? (~45 pages)</u></b> <i>The Book of Hope: A Survival Guide for Trying Times</i>
Friday, Oct 10 <sup>th</sup>	<b><u>Space and the Evolution of the Universe (Pages TBD)</u></b> <i>The Future of Humanity: Our Destiny in the Universe</i> <i>The End of Everything (Astrophysically Speaking)</i> <b><i>By midnight, turn in two possible topics you would be interested in exploring.</i></b>
Monday, Oct 13 <sup>th</sup> through Friday, Oct 17 <sup>th</sup>	<b>Fall Break: No Classes</b>
Monday, Oct 20 <sup>th</sup> and Wednesday, Oct 22 <sup>nd</sup>	Form your teams. Write and submit topic description.
Friday, Oct 24 <sup>th</sup>	Meet as a team to discuss topic and its component parts.
Monday, Oct 27 <sup>th</sup>	Meet as a team to discuss topic and its component parts, and work on revised description and annotated bibliography. Each team member turns in their own annotated bibliography for their section(s) of the report.
Wednesday, Oct 29 <sup>th</sup>	Meet as a team to work on project.
Friday, Oct 31 <sup>st</sup>	Teams A and B meet with instructor – update #1. <b>Individual paper due by midnight.</b>
Monday, Nov 3 <sup>rd</sup>	Teams C, D, and E meet with instructor – update #1
Wednesday, Nov 5 <sup>th</sup>	Meet as a team to work on project.
Friday, Nov 7 <sup>th</sup>	Teams A and B meet with instructor – update #2
Monday, Nov 10 <sup>th</sup>	Teams C, D, and E meet with instructor – update #2
Wednesday, Nov 12 <sup>th</sup>	Meet as a team to work on project.
Friday, Nov 14 <sup>th</sup>	Teams A and B meet with instructor – update #3
Monday, Nov 17 <sup>th</sup>	Teams C, D, and E meet with instructor – update #3
Wednesday, Nov 19 <sup>th</sup>	Meet as a team to work on project.
Friday, Nov 21 <sup>st</sup>	Meet as a team to work on project. <b>Draft due by midnight.</b>
Monday, Nov 24 <sup>th</sup>	All teams meet with instructor.
Wednesday, Nov 26 <sup>th</sup> though Friday, Nov 28 <sup>th</sup>	<b>Thanksgiving: No Classes</b>
Monday, Dec 1 <sup>st</sup>	Teams A and B meet with instructor.
Wednesday, Dec 3 <sup>rd</sup>	Teams C, D, and E meet with instructor.
Friday, Dec 5 <sup>th</sup>	No class meeting. <b>Final project due by midnight.</b>
Tuesday, Dec 9 <sup>th</sup>	<b>Final Oral Presentation</b>

**Reading Prompts:** To help with your evaluation of the daily reading assignments and promote good discussions in class, here are some guiding questions for each reading:

- *How Worried Should We Be About AI's threat to Humanity? Even Tech Leaders Can't Agree*, Schechner and Seetharaman. **What conclusion do you draw?**
- *One Potential side effect of AI? Human extinction*, Emile P. Torres. **Really?**
- *A Six-Month AI Pause? No, Longer Is Needed*, Peggy Noonan. **Do you agree?**
- *Deus Homo: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (excerpts), Yuval Harari. **Will AI do the job you are preparing for? Will (does) AI know you better than you know yourself?**
- *The End of Everything* (excerpts), Victor Davis Hanson. **What were some noteworthy events he cites. Are there parallels we can learn from? Do you ever find yourself saying, 'It can't happen here,' or, 'That won't happen to me'?**
- *How Western Civilization could collapse*, Rachel Nuwer. **What historical parallels does she draw? What are the main occurrences she cites?**
- *Why Spy Agencies Say the Future Is Bleak*, Editorial board of the New York Times. **If you think that "the international system is directionless, chaotic, and volatile" what will you expect from it, or how will this affect your political point of view? The study says that we could change this and make societies more democratic, but.... Do you agree?**
- *The World in 2030 may be worse than in 2020*, Ishaan Tharoor. **This article suggests that liberal democracies like ours face real threats. What are some?**
- *Is Violence History?*, Review of *Better Angels of our Nature*, Steven Pinker. **What is Pinker's claim? Do you think he presents good reasons for it, or are there stronger reasons against it?**
- *At Fortitude Ranch, the Cabin is for vacationing. The Shelters are for Surviving*, Fredrick Kunkle. **Do you think that the "veneer of civilization is very thin"? Why or why not? What are the implications of your belief? Could this be your motto: "Prepare for the worst—enjoy the Present"? Why or why not? Would being part of that community give you "empowerment, security, and peace of mind"? Why or why not? Do you agree with Miller's response to the circumstances at the end of the article? Why or why not?**
- *The Super-rich 'Preppers' Planning to save themselves from the Apocalypse*, Douglass Rushkoff. **What does Rushkoff think these super-rich were *really* interested in? "It's as if they want to build a car that goes fast enough to escape from its own exhaust." Spell out what this means. Are we, in our own way, preppers?**
- *We're preparing for the apocalypse wrong—and that could make things even worse*, Chris Begley. **How do movies and video games get it wrong? Are we capable of adopting the mindset Begley proposes?**
- *The Precipice: Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity* (excerpts), Toby Ord. **"This book argues that..." (p. 3). What happened on October 27, 1962. What saved us? "This book aspires to..." (p. 7). What does that mean? "The central claim is that..." (p. 9). In your own words, what does he mean? The second quotation on p. 30 is from former President Obama. How can what he calls for happen? Comment on the author's risk assessments on p. 167. What does it have to do with Russian roulette?**
- *The End of Us*, from *The Revolt Against Humanity*, Adam Kirsch. **What is the difference between Anthropocene anti-humanism and Transhumanism?**
- *The Importance of the Afterlife, Seriously*, Samuel Scheffler. **What does Scheffler mean by the 'importance of an afterlife'? Would you be motivated to have children in the scenario he proposes? Imagine the scenario depicted in "The Children of Men." How would you react?**
- *To Breed or not to Breed?*, Alex Williams.  
*Long Slide Looms for World Population, with Sweeping Ramification*, Cave, Bubola, Sang-Hun.  
*Do You Want to Have Children Someday?*, Nicole Daniels.  
*Suddenly There Aren't Enough Babies. The Whole World is Alarmed*, Ip and Adamy.  
**What are your views about having children? What are your reasons? What do you think are some *bad* reasons for not having or for having children? Among the reasons people in the US give for having fewer babies and that young people give for not wanting children at all, are the priority of career, the expense, and overpopulation. Could this be another reason: we worry about bringing kids into a scary, messed-up world with a perilous, uncertain future, one we think we can do little to change. If so, does that mean we are pessimists about the future?**
- *What We Owe the Future*, William Macaskill. **Can you connect to Macaskill's call to "longtermism"? Do his metaphors 'work' for you? What might be pitfalls in his perspective? How do you assess the risk of engineered pathogens? How does the war in Ukraine change your view of a war between the great powers? If the average lifespan of a civilization is 340 years, should we wonder whether US civilization will collapse in the next century? Macaskill thinks we could reindustrialize after the collapse of our civilization. Why? Is technological progress slowing down?**

- *The Book of Hope: A Survival Guide for Trying Times* (excerpts), Jane Goodall. **Cite what you think are several important passages in Goodall's book. What do you take her to mean, and why do you think these ideas are important?**
- *The Future of Humanity: Our Destiny in the Universe* (excerpts), Michio Kaku. **Select two important observations in Kaku's book. Given his discussion in the *Introduction*, do you think there is intelligent life on other planets? Which of the technological advances he discusses on pp. 13-15 seem unlikely, plausible, or likely you?**
- *The End of Everything (Astrophysically Speaking)* (excerpts), Katie Mack. **Mack cites the reaction of a number of scientists to *The End*. Pick two that you responded to, positively or negatively.**