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The Philosophy of *Survival*

This book is about facing threats that we know little about, and yet can have enormous consequences. We face uncertain, random events every day. The critical distinction we make here is between the more mundane, day-to-day risks and those that affect our very survival. The focus on catastrophic, or what we might generally call *high-stakes* risks, brings an existential character to an otherwise technical discussion. We emphasize this existential character because it affects not only the methods of risk management, but also how we view its goals. In this first chapter, we identify issues in the philosophy of existence (our own and that of other sentient beings that we depend on), including the idea of purpose and our ability to *know* that purpose.

In simplest terms, risk management is about reducing worry. The goals of the endeavor are made complex when we try to identify what we are, or should be, most worried about. The complexities of this whole endeavor add a layer of uncertainty beyond mere chance. The implication of imperfect knowledge of our world, and even our place in this world, makes our journey into the unknown all that more perilous. As it turns out, a respect for a more natural approach to the world, guided by
properly honed intuitions, may serve as our best guide to navigating through a world in which many aspects are beyond our direct control.

1.1 Ethics and the treatment of existential risk

A key feature of dealing with existential risk is that it requires a deeper philosophy of risk, and, indeed, existence. As risk is itself something humans create, or at least respond to in different ways, it behooves us to establish a moral attitude toward risk – a *survival ethic*. That is, we need to determine the difference between right and wrong behavior, especially with respect to other entities that may be affected. In turn, our moral approach to risk strongly influences the technical aspects of how we deal with risk. Once settled, our morals become the basis of a system of ethics and ethical behavior.

Moral philosophy usually splits along two lines. The first deals with basic intuitions of how we *ought* to respond to this world, with actual outcomes, or consequences, being secondary. This stance is often referred to as *deontological*. Its ethic of survival boils down to simply doing the right thing. On the other hand, *consequentialism* says that all our goals are ultimately focused on observable ends. In the management of risk, consequentialism is often applied on a utilitarian basis. That is, all acts, including those that entail risk, are ultimately judged by the direct satisfaction, or utility, they provide to those sentient beings that can experience such satisfaction. The idea of utility as a measurable quantity of satisfaction also introduces the idea of tradeoffs. In living our lives to the fullest, we often make tradeoffs among goals, or in the use of otherwise scarce resources, in order to get the most satisfaction from our actions.