

Title: Ragnarok - Twilight of the Humans

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In antiquity, cultures grappled with their powerlessness in the face of a terrifying world by placing control of that world within a panoply of gods. Thus, it was not unusual for different gods to be associated with and in control of different aspects of the natural world. It rendered the chaotic and incomprehensible controlled and comprehensible. Currently, humanity is faced with the question of what it means to be “human” in an age of massive anthropogenic climate change. I propose that in order to help answer this complex question, we need to look not to the humans of antiquity, but their gods, as we now wield the powers and responsibilities of mythological godheads. There is, of course, a wide variety of options for which mythologies and panoplies we might look at, and very likely each of them will reveal fascinating examples -- both negative and positive -- for us to consider. In this paper, I focus on Norse mythology and seek to glean a few interesting insights into our place and role in the modern world. My focus on Norse mythology comes in large part due to the fact that climate change is built into the mythology in the idea of fimbulwinter -- a devastating winter that heralds the end of the world. I argue in this paper that the Norse gods’ response to and preparation for the world-altering details of Ragnarok can prove enlightening for us as we move ever closer to global catastrophe. In particular, we can find in Norse mythology expressions of a virtue ethic that seems particularly important in the face of climate change, as it avoids some of the problematic pitfalls of a utilitarian approach to the problem. Further, I look at the way in which the gods’ use of tools augmented their powers, making them more formidable and more capable. This has obvious import for our current situation as we struggle with questions about the ethics and wisdom of environmental engineering. In short, mythologies provide us windows into what it is like to be the sort of being that can radically affect earth systems. They give us snapshots of the successes and failures, as well as potential pitfalls, that await us as we inhabit this new god-like role of 21st century human.

Timothy McGarvey

PhD candidate

[mccgarveyt@mail.usf.edu](mailto:mccgarveyt@mail.usf.edu)

University of South Florida

FAO #236

4202 E Fowler Ave.

Tampa, FL 33620

Bio: Timothy McGarvey is a PhD candidate working on his dissertation at the University of South Florida. His dissertation is on Climate Ethics and Friedrich Nietzsche. He also does work on the intersection between Philosophy and Mythology, particularly as it pertains to Climate Ethics.

