

New Interdisciplinary Perspectives On and Beyond Autonomy

Edited by Christopher Watkin and Oliver Davis

First published 2023

ISBN: 978-1-032-36407-0 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-36409-4 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-33178-0 (ebk)

9 Climate anxiety, fatalism and the capacity to act

Dan Taylor

CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

DOI: 10.4324/9781003331780-13

The funder: The Open University



 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

9 Climate anxiety, fatalism and the capacity to act

Dan Taylor

Since 2017, growing numbers of people around the world have been reporting anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation as a result of the impact of climate change (Nugent 2019; Clayton 2020; Cianconi et al. 2020; Leiserowitz et al. 2021). On the one hand, this reflects greater public awareness and acceptance of climate change as an existential risk facing humanity. But it has also correlated in some cases with an increased sense of fatalism about our shared capacity to act in response to this risk (Clayton et al. 2017, 27). While for some, a debilitating anxiety has paralysed a sense of agency and replaced it with hopelessness about our apparent near-term extinction (Barnett and Anand 2020; Messenger 2021), for others, influenced by a strand of muscular, if not masculine, ‘doomism’ propagated by some journalists, novelists and marginalised academics, the end is nigh and resistance is futile (Bendell 2018; Franzen 2019). Such responses present a puzzle for personal autonomy, traditionally understood as one’s capacity to act, think and decide according to one’s reasons, motives and values, independent of external restraints. Such a view of autonomy is foundational to most ethical approaches to agency and freedom. But what happens when knowledge of how (or why) one ought to act is overcome by a belief that one lacks the power to control what is conceived as inevitable or fated – where fatalism diminishes the capacity to act?

This chapter will use the example of climate anxiety to explore this puzzle for autonomy. The first part introduces the problem of climate anxiety. It begins with an overview of the recent framing of imminent climate-caused threats to humanity over the coming decades, then explores the claims of Jem Bendell and other ‘doomist’ commentators that humanity consequentially faces near-term societal collapse. It then assesses recent reports on climate anxiety. The second part debates the challenge of climate anxiety to autonomy. It draws on Kant’s moral philosophy and anthropology to introduce a traditional conception of autonomy capable of steadfastly refusing affects and passions like anxiety and fear. It identifies a similar deontology in the climate activism of Greta Thunberg but highlights the difficulty of popularising such an approach. It then evaluates philosophical approaches to anxiety or fear and their

impact on ethics in Martha Nussbaum and Benedict de Spinoza. Through the latter, it argues that the traditional, individual-focused conception of autonomy overlooks the value of democracy and collegial reasoning. The conclusion sets out the utility of this argument for climate change activism: the best way to achieve the agency and motivation required to challenge the causes of climate change, and to transform societies to live in more sustainable and resilient ways, is through conceiving the solution as political and social, and not solely technological or driven by personal lifestyle choice.

The implications of this argument go beyond current philosophical debates about autonomy or anxiety. Deciding that it is too late to act now in response to an undetermined future existential risk can lead to dangerous consequences where, for example, it demotivates individual and collective action in the present that might mitigate and significantly reduce that risk. In the case of the climate, these include changes in energy consumption, food production, construction or individual lifestyles to restrictions on greenhouse gas emissions. Unchecked doom-laden fatalism can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Just as, in most cases, we would direct others in situations of existential risk to do what they can to minimise that risk and not give up – for example someone with a frightening malady to seek a medical diagnosis, another in serious debt to get financial help or another in a burning house to try to escape, no matter the difficulty (to adapt an analogy from Greta Thunberg) – so for all of us living through and facing unprecedented climate change and biodiversity loss over the coming decades, our responses today must be driven by a sense of urgency to reimagine and collectively transform our shared ways of life.

Hothouse Earth

Scientific understanding of anthropogenic climate change is not new. In 1896, the Swedish physical chemist Svante Arrhenius demonstrated that increases in atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO₂) trapped heat energy in a ‘greenhouse effect’, warming the Earth’s surface. In 1965, the US President’s Science Advisory Committee (PSAC) predicted that, by the year 2000, there would be ‘measurable and perhaps marked changes in climate’ that ‘will almost certainly cause significant changes in the temperature and other properties of the stratosphere’ (PSAC 1965, 126–127). That same year, President Johnson announced to Congress, a half-century before President Biden’s Green New Deal, that ‘[t]his generation has altered the composition of the atmosphere on a global scale through ... a steady increase in carbon dioxide from the burning of fossil fuels’ (Bailey 2016, 49). In 1972, the United Nations brought together governmental agencies and researchers to explore how to reduce environmental damage as part of its new Environmental Programme (UNEP). In 1988, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was established to

assess the risks of man-made global warming. That same year, NASA scientist James Hansen memorably testified to a US congressional committee that a new era of global warming had begun – ‘the greenhouse effect is here’ (Shabecoff 1988). By 1992, international policymakers gathered at the ‘Earth Summit’ in Rio de Janeiro to establish the first UN Climate Change framework, with the Kyoto Protocol to restrict greenhouse gas emissions internationally adopted in 1997.

Some of these events may be familiar. For while scientific understanding of climate change dates back to the late 19th century, as I have shown, it took many more decades before this was registered in public debate and policymakers began to address the issue. Indeed, their failed promise to restrict emissions and re-establish economies on more sustainable grounds accounts for some of the doomism and anxiety examined in the next section. Back then however, most were concerned with a future to come at an undetermined but not immediate point. By the middle of the second decade of the 21st century, this framing had changed. While the term ‘Anthropocene’ had been speculatively introduced by Paul Crutzen in 2000 to suggest that humanity had become the dominant influence on climate and the environment, from 2011 it was being backed by geological evidence, and proclamations in *National Geographic*, *The Economist* and elsewhere that we had entered a new and uncertain era. By 2014, the year the Oxford English Dictionary introduced the term ‘Anthropocene’, evidence was emerging of a sixth mass extinction caused by biodiversity loss, popularised by Elizabeth Kolbert’s bestseller *The Sixth Extinction*. Over 2015–2016, North and South America and East Asia were spectacularly rocked by droughts, floods, heat waves and hurricanes caused by El Niño. By 2017, David Wallace-Wells published ‘The Uninhabitable Earth’ in *New York Magazine*; this became its most read essay in history, presenting a near-future catastrophic scenario of ecological and societal collapse. By the end of the year, David Attenborough broadcast widely shared images of ocean plastics on BBC’s *Blue Planet*.

If not 2017, then 2018 marked the tipping point of a new framing of climate change as one of near-term crisis and collapse. Will Steffen, an important figure in developing scientific consensus around the Anthropocene periodisation, co-authored a think-piece in the prestigious *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. Titled ‘Trajectories of the Earth System in the Anthropocene’, it cautiously explored the future risk that greenhouse gas emissions might tip the planet towards runaway heating – what it memorably called a ‘Hothouse Earth’ (Steffen et al. 2018, 8252). While its co-authors patiently expressed the urgency of ‘[c]ollective human action’ of a social, political and technological nature to prevent such possibility, this terrifying scenario was reported as gospel across the global press. Two months later, a widely reported IPCC report on the impacts of ‘Global warming of 1.5°C’ declared that human beings had 12 years to reduce greenhouse emissions by 45% from 2010 levels, and by 100% by 2050, to avoid more than 1.5°C of warming by that

period (IPCC 2018, B.5.1, C.1). Above that, and particularly above 2°C, many regions would become uninhabitable, with food production and drinking water supplies substantially diminished and a mass extinction of insects, birds, animals and fish. With 1.5°C, at least 14% of the world's population would be exposed to severe heatwaves every five years, increasing to 37% with 2°C. If this trend were to go unchecked, hundreds of millions of refugees would be forced to migrate by the mid-21st century. An UNEP report concluded that, without sudden, rapid and unlikely reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, the 1.5°C target of the Paris Agreement 'will slip out of reach' (2019, xii). Failing a substantial turnaround in the next decade, the Earth would warm by at least 3.2°C if all nations met their Paris targets, and if not, up to 4°C, 5°C or 6°C.

What reports like the IPCC's call for are ambitious political solutions: globally, ending the use of coal, substantially reducing fossil fuels and shifting to renewables. They call for the use of carbon capture technologies not yet existing at viable scale. Changes like this, if implemented, would totally transform a globalised capitalist economy reliant on fossil fuel extraction and uncoded air, road and sea emissions and disposable goods. Taken together they would involve a substantial modification of what we currently recognise as the global economy.

'You will fear being violently killed'

The scale and difficulty of the rapid economic and societal transformation suggested by the IPCC (2018) recommendations is immense. Global warming also transforms our relationship with time. On the one hand, historic greenhouse gas emissions mean that our present is transformed by what Andreas Malm calls 'the heat of this ongoing past' (2018, 11, emphasis removed). On the other, it loads our present actions (and inactions) with consequences of seemingly biblical proportions. As David Wallace-Wells writes,

Global warming has improbably compressed into two generations the entire story of human civilization. First, the project of remaking the planet so that it is undeniably ours [...] That second generation faces a very different task: the project of preserving our collective future, forestalling that devastation and engineering an alternate path.

(2019, 29)

In 2009, the late cultural theorist Mark Fisher popularised a line of Fredric Jameson's: it was easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (2009, 2). While Fisher marshalled it to support the naturalisation of what he called 'capitalist realism', giving a 21st-century gloss on the Frankfurt School critique of Adorno and Horkheimer, it usefully taps into a fatalism about politics, a preoccupation with dystopias and

a sense of doom about climate change which began around this period. Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hine's 2009 *Dark Mountain Project* was one outlier, proceeding from the premise that 'our whole way of living is already passing into history' (2009). But it was Wallace-Wells' 2017 essay, and subsequent 2019 book of the same title, that popularised a doom-narrative about human life at the end of the 21st century. Consulting a range of climate science forecasts about ocean acidification, biodiversity loss, polar ice loss and soaring temperatures, though often drawing on worst-case scenarios, Wallace-Wells claims that the 'best-case outcome is death and suffering at the scale of twenty-five Holocausts' and the 'worst-case outcome puts us on the brink of extinction' (2019, 29). While both essay and book became immensely popular, their claims were widely disputed by scientists. *Climate Feedback*, a not-for-profit NGO and global network of climate scientists that offers evidence-driven, non-partisan commentary and fact-checking on climate change coverage, had 17 eminent academics review the material, judging it 'Alarmist, Imprecise/Unclear, Misleading' (Mann 2021, 208).

While Wallace-Wells' gloomy account related to the end of the century, a 2018 self-published article by Jem Bendell, a sustainability management academic at the University of Cumbria, argued that 'climate-induced societal collapse is now inevitable in the near term' (2018, 2) and invited scholars to consider its implications. Titled 'Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating Climate Tragedy' and rejected at peer-review, it has nevertheless been subsequently downloaded over half a million times and has led to radical lifestyle changes for some of its readers (Pearl 2019). Like Wallace-Wells, Bendell drew selectively on disputed and discredited forecasts about imminent polar ice melting and thawing permafrost methane emissions, claiming it was now 'too late to avert a global environmental catastrophe in the lifetimes of people alive today' (2018, 5). Indeed, while some pessimistic leftists like Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright (2018) had speculated on the need for a Hobbesian Leviathan-like authoritarian government to hold together broken societies in the future, Bendell's vision is most reminiscent of life nasty, brutish and short:

When I say starvation, destruction, migration, disease and war, I mean in your own life. With the power down, soon you wouldn't have water coming out of your tap. You will depend on your neighbours for food and some warmth. You will become malnourished. You won't know whether to stay or go. You will fear being violently killed before starving to death.

(2018, 11)

In its place, Bendell set out a vaguely moralistic 'Deep Adaptation Agenda'. Those fortunate enough to have survived beyond the 2030s would demonstrate 'resilience' in adapting to changing circumstances 'with valued norms and behaviours', and 'relinquishment' of unsustainable activities

and beliefs that ‘could make matters worse’ (2018, 19). Extinction Rebellion would develop a similar form of rhetorical persuasion, appealing neither to fear nor hope but ‘grief’ and ‘courage’ (Bradbrook 2018).

For Bendell and for Extinction Rebellion, clear-sighted recognition of catastrophe will motivate others to engage in climate activism now and abandon unsustainable ways of living. But that requires a pre-existing and not widely shared faith in the efficacy of such activism. Moreover, evidence suggests that fear-based messaging is counterproductive, causing public disengagement (Smith and Leiserowitz 2014, 943–944). Alongside debunking its reading of climate science, critics like Michael E. Mann argue that such catastrophism demotivates people through despair and undermines their agency. On a public level, such depoliticization serves the interests of fossil fuel emitters. ‘Bendell’s paper is a more powerful tool for disengagement than any article ever written by a climate-change denier’ (2021, 200).

This bears on the broader problem of autonomy. It is not merely that such accounts are founded on selective interpretations of disputed sources; they moreover diminish any rational hope or motivation to respond to the existential risk in the present. This is particularly so with climate change forecasts, which often rely on complex modelling and prior specialist expertise that is often difficult to understand for the layperson. It is the headlines and taglines of widely shared articles like those of Bendell, Wallace-Wells or, more recently, the novelist Jonathan Franzen’s 2019 ‘What if we stopped pretending?’ in the *New Yorker* that have had wider public influence. Indeed, climate activist Emily Atkin sardonically describes the ‘wheel’ of ‘first time climate dudes’, usually novelists, journalists or filmmakers without any prior expertise in climate science, who undertake minimal research into the topic then publish fatalistic, Cassandra-like prophecies often based on a flawed and partial reading of the evidence (Atkin 2020). The criticism is reminiscent, in a very different context, of French novelist Annie Leclerc’s line in *Parole de Femme* against the morbid ‘phallic consciousness’ of Georges Bataille and others: ‘Death. Death. Death. ... Horror and fascination, death haunts them, these fanatics of desire’ (1987, 77). Taken together, they have contributed to a broader narrative that it is too late to prevent impending environmental doom. As one journalist who surveyed respondents to Bendell concluded, ‘climate despair is making people give up on life’ (Pearl 2019).

Climate anxiety

We have established that awareness of greenhouse gas emissions and their impact on the Earth are by no means new. Concern about the spoliation of an idealised ‘Nature’ goes back at least as far the Romantic period in England and Germany, coinciding with rapid industrialisation, land enclosures, clearances and overseas colonisation. Yet it is the recent

framing of this concern in terms of a shared belief of impending societal collapse in the last section that lays down the gauntlet for autonomy.

While terms like ‘climate anxiety’ and ‘eco-anxiety’ had been introduced by sustainability academics from 2007 (e.g. Albrecht et al.), the terms gained much wider currency from 2017, when the American Psychological Association (APA) and ecoAmerica published a 69-page guide, defining ‘eco-anxiety’ as ‘a chronic fear of environmental doom’ (Clayton et al. 2017, 68). Mental health studies across the developed world, from Australia and Greenland to the US and UK, have begun to indicate rising numbers of people reporting stress or depression about the climate. The topic has received prominent coverage in major news outlets, from CNN and *Time* magazine to the BBC, *Guardian* and *New York Times*, sometimes in the context of the ethics of bringing children into a soon-to-be catastrophe-inflicted world. In *The Lancet*, a comment-piece made a call to action on climate anxiety, defining it as ‘anxiety related to the global climate crisis and the threat of environmental disaster’ with symptoms including ‘panic attacks, insomnia, and obsessive thinking’ (Wu et al. 2020, E435). Its authors were concerned that it may exacerbate existing conditions like depression, anxiety disorders and substance use disorders. An American Psychiatric Association poll in October 2020 found that 67% of Americans surveyed were ‘somewhat or extremely anxious’ about the impact of climate change on the planet. Meanwhile, a 2020 report by the Yale Program on Climate Change found that over 40% of Americans felt ‘helpless’ or ‘disgusted’ about climate change, with 49% fearing their families will be harmed by it (Leiserowitz et al. 2021, 4).

Above all, climate anxiety is frequently diagnosed in the young. A BBC survey of 2000 eight to 16-year-olds found that one in five were having bad dreams about it, with three in four worried about the state of the planet right now (Atherton 2020). An October 2020 poll by the American Psychiatric Association found that 67% of those aged 18–23 were ‘somewhat or very concerned’ about the impact of climate change on their mental health, compared to 42% of those aged 56–74. While some of the reasons are obvious – young people may live long enough to witness some of the more catastrophic effects of climate change, the phenomena of similarly aged exemplars like Greta Thunberg and the school climate strikers from 2018 also resonated (Wu et al. 2020). But the underlying themes – unpredictability, uncontrollability, decades of relative inaction – affect all of us.

Living in an ‘age of anxiety’ is nothing new: W.H. Auden used the term to describe an alienated society in 1947 where ‘lies and lethargies police the world’ (2011, 17). Historian Mark Jackson describes the period from the 1930s to 1950s as an ‘age of stress’, defined by heightened concern (and discourse) around stress, anxiety and existential threat, from the Cold War to suburban domestic misery. This framing has continued in other ways. A 1986 analysis of ‘The Medical Implications of Nuclear

War' by the US Institute of Medicine found a not dissimilar 'profound sense of fear about the future' and 'helplessness' among young people about another looming apocalypse (Beardslee 1986, 413).

Climate anxiety differs from these previous forms of anxiety in two ways: first, the evidence for the 'existential threat' of climate change increases with each year, particularly with more spectacular forest fires, floods, coral reef die-off and receding polar ice. Second, the complexity of allocating responsibility or simple countermeasures. Whereas the probability of nuclear war could be reduced by weapons treaties between two organised superpowers, the causes of climate change seem to implicate all of us.

As the foreword to the APA-ecoAmerica report observes, the 'psychological responses to climate change such as conflict avoidance, fatalism, fear, helplessness and resignation are growing' (Clayton et al. 2017, 4). But, paradoxically, 'these responses are keeping us ... from properly addressing the core causes of and solutions for our changing climate and from building and supporting psychological resiliency'. This is the paradox for autonomy: when we explore and confront a shared global threat of great significance, and of almost-universally agreed provenance, we encounter a debilitating anxiety that diminishes our capacity to act. Where action is needed, we cannot act because we are impaired by a helpless feeling that we are powerless to influence events. This becomes a paradox precisely because we are, in fact, capable of transforming our individual and collective behaviour in response to the problem; however, in believing that such a change is not possible, or would come too late, we make no such effort, and so the scale of the problem magnifies.

Anxiety and autonomy

This is a problem not simply for climate change activism, but for traditional accounts of personal autonomy more broadly. Considerations of what it means to be autonomous, that is, self-governing, have often focused on the internal account of agency – such as the will or free will that initiates action, or which reflects our capacity to act.

We can approach this problem using Kant's account of autonomy in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785). This is a work concerned with understanding the basic principles of morality and their bearing on human life, and it generates the universalist, duty-based understanding of morality for which Kant is now famous. For Kant, autonomy is the subject's effective self-imposition of a universalizable moral law above their own hypothetical considerations. Beneath this lies a problem of epistemology (how to recognise such a law) and a problem of agency – our capacity to act according to such a law, and the internal and external factors that can impair this capacity.

The weight of these hypotheticals is not lost on Kant. '[F]or the human being is affected by so many inclinations that, though capable of the idea

of a practical pure reason, he is not so easily able to make it effective *in concreto* in the conduct of his life' (1998, 3). Yet reason 'is to be aimed at no matter what else is the case; which is why our private plans must stand out of its way'. Throughout the account, Kant insists that autonomy is difficult, that pursuing 'universal law' over 'self-love' must come out of pure will and without anticipation of reward. In a famous example of someone who weighs up borrowing money they cannot realistically repay, Kant shifts the would-be debtor's reasoning towards 'universal law' by asking 'how would it be if my maxim became a universal law? I then see at once that it could never hold as a universal law of nature and be consistent with itself, but must necessarily contradict itself' (1998, 32).

This deontological approach has long been considered unsatisfying in its grasp of human psychology and motivation. But Kant purposefully excludes the affects and the passions from transcendently grounded reason in his critical philosophy, only restoring an intellectualised awe of the sublime in the third *Critique*. Yet in the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798), he supplies some rationale for this position. The danger of the affects and the passions – variously described as self-enchainment, 'diseased occurrences' and 'a deformity which requires an inner or an outer physician of the soul' (2006, §74, §76) – is that they obstruct the free self-legislation of practical reason.

Kant reaches a more credible basis for this view in his discussion of foresight. 'To possess this faculty interests us more than any other', he writes, 'because it is the condition of all possible practice' (2006, §35). But where we view the future as a terrain crisscrossed not by our own intentionality or that of others, but the mysterious forces of fate, we are overcome with fearful 'premonitions', of which anxiety is a species. Anticipating Sigmund Freud, Kant defined anxiety as '[f]ear concerning an object that threatens an undetermined ill' (2006, §76). Anxiety jeopardises foresight in its debilitating 'aversion to danger', thereby preventing the agent from taking on the fear with composure or 'manly courage' (2006, §77, §50). But this point betrays a naivety about how fears operate at the margins of awareness even where we might try to exclude them.

While Kant cites Shakespeare's *Henry IV* in the *Anthropology*, it is *Macbeth* that is more pertinent. While Lady Macbeth entreats her husband to 'screw your courage to the sticking place' in plotting the death of King Duncan, Macbeth's anxieties, premonitions and hallucinations serve him rightly in indicating the moral and personal danger ahead. This dynamic of *exclusion-haunting*, in which the exclusion of a given source of anxiety inadvertently brings about its more menacing presence through its haunting on the periphery, plays out even in the philosophical canon. For Bettina Berge, the post-Kantian philosophy of Schelling, Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche is defined in part by a reintroduction of passions like anxiety as motive forces or processes in philosophy – the very thing Kant had sought to exclude (2021, 37).

Kant's unflagging emphasis on acting on universal duty is reminiscent of the approach of Greta Thunberg, whose route into climate activism comes not just through a now-familiar shock response to man-made environmental degradation, but also a duty-bound imperative to act on the information. As she explained to two journalists,

We saw these horrifying pictures of plastic in the oceans and floodings and so on, and everyone was very moved by that. But then it just seemed like everyone went back to normal [...] And I couldn't go back to normal because those pictures were stuck in my head. [...] When everyone else seems to just compromise [...] I want to walk the talk, and to practice as I preach'.

(Chappell and Chang 2019)

Thunberg and the school climate strikers are often cited as reasons for why this issue is more publicised among young people. But note the lack of anxiety or fatalism here, a sense that even hopelessness is not an option given the urgency of the issue. While such heroism is useful for climate activism and has been emulated in a few cases, it is in the main a minority response, and so does not explain the problem of fatalism, indecision, apathy and anxiety that impede the capacity to act for many others.

Indeed, an unintended risk for such a moral approach is that it inadvertently focuses attention on personal behaviour. This has allowed fossil fuel interests to focus attacks on supposed instances of personal 'hypocrisy', e.g. campaigners like Leonardo DiCaprio or Emma Thompson flying by private aircraft, or even Thunberg travelling to New York by a boat that contained 'non-recyclable plastic' (Mann 2021, 88). In making climate change activism an issue of individual and sometimes expensive or prohibitive lifestyle choice, a matter of good will rather than good politics, motivation and desire are drawn away from the national and international measures required to collectively decarbonise economies, reduce greenhouse gas emissions and transform work, food and energy to a more sustainable footing.

Fear and democracy

For climate anxiety then, our problem lies in its public and not individual implications. The philosopher Martha Nussbaum describes fear as a narrowing emotion that 'often hijacks thought powerfully, making it difficult to think about anything else but oneself' (2013, 322). Fear jeopardises a generalised sympathy foundational for public culture. In *The Monarchy of Fear* (2018), written in response to the unexpected election of President Donald Trump in 2016, she draws out a politics of fear – a sense of powerlessness that many Americans feel, a fear which drove many to vote Trump. The problem with fear, or feeling powerless,

is that it compels us towards wanting to regain control, embracing leaders who make us feel safe and blaming minorities for the perceived threat. 'It drives out all thoughts of others' (2018, 29), she says, using the perceived threat to limit our sense of obligation to others and focusing just on ourselves. This differs from climate anxiety then, which, if not focused on our future self/selves, is also focused on harm to future loved ones.

For Nussbaum, the task is to gain 'moral adulthood' through 'a capacity for concern' with others in our society. How might this capacity be publicly cultivated? She makes a bland appeal to an embattled liberal public culture and marketplace of ideas: 'Correct facts, informed public debate, and, most important, a spirit of dissent and independence on the part of citizens' (2018, 50). Increased right-wing radicalisation, polarisation and disinformation have diminished the power of circulating ideas, nor would this account for economic factors like insecurity and poverty or social factors like relative decline in status. For some fears can be rational, like the inevitability of climate change, mass extinctions or nuclear war. Not all fears inevitably lead to an aggressive desire to control, or to lash out at the perceived harm. Nor does the emphasis on restoring a liberal public sphere confront, for our problem at least, an entrenched globalised capitalism where resource extraction and production are increasingly offshored.

Instead, we can find in Benedict de Spinoza a foundation for confronting the problem of climate anxiety as a public problem for democracy. Spinoza was an early modern philosopher who made substantial contributions to democratic republican theory and the understanding of the affects in two separate works, the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (*TTP*, 1670) and the *Ethics* (1677). Often considered separately, the two share a profound interest in the social and political consequences of fear. In the *Ethics*, a work concerned with identifying human knowledge and blessedness through the intellectual love of 'God or Nature', Spinoza often turns to the influence of hope and fear on our decisions. They are complementary, referring to 'inconstant joy [or sadness], arising from the image of a thing future or past, of whose outcome we are in doubt' (*Ethics* Part III, Proposition 11, 1985). They arise in response to the adversity we inevitably experience in the pursuit of our lives. But they can diminish our capacity to act because they are rooted in uncertainty and answer that uncertainty not with an effort to understand its causes, but by falling under the spell of paralysing fantasies or nightmares that speak to our lack of capacity. While the *Ethics* dwells on the psychological implications, as well as the genesis of anthropomorphic theism, in the *TTP* Spinoza explores how hope and fear form the root of credulous and dangerous superstition. They can make people gullible to the bewitching promises of organised religion and political strongmen such that they 'will fight for slavery as they would for their survival' (2016, Preface, Paragraph 10). Yet they are rooted in vulnerabilities in our human nature.

The discussion of Kant above indicated that it is facile, if not impossible, to seek to rid oneself entirely of hopes, fears or other affects. By its very relational nature, human life is affective. Spinoza writes that ‘nothing is more useful to a human being than another human being’ (*Ethics* Part IV, Proposition 18 Scholium, 1985), and throughout his works he presents the value of friendship and association with others of a common nature, through which our power is multiplied collectively. At a societal level though, by my reading, our hopes and fears are best addressed through public discussion. Spinoza understood democracy as a form of collegial deliberation, in which public assemblies of egalitarian citizens would gather to debate the widest and freest range of ideas and testimonies to ensure that representative and well-informed decisions are made (*TTP* chapter 16, Paragraph 25; chapter 20, Paragraph 37). Through this, citizens might come to understand and proactively respond to the causes of fear and adversity, and arrive upon collective actions to deal with present and future dangers. Anticipating something like the citizens assemblies taken up by climate activists in our own era, Spinoza saw the strength of a republic being in the free and active participation of all citizens in the politics and economies of their communities, acting towards the common good. Through this emerge two advantages of developing spaces for public deliberation around climate change: first, citizens can become better informed about the nature of climate change and the claims made about it; they can hear and debate proposed responses to adapt and mitigate accordingly; and they can better understand ways in which individuals can participate in driving these adaptations. Second, citizens can become more aware of the hopes, fears and common nature of others affected by the problem, and come to realise that they are not alone, which creates a sense of commonality and agency that engenders confidence in a shared capacity to act. In this way, Spinoza’s insight about collegial deliberation affirms the cognitive and affective motivators that, taken together, alleviate the paralysis of climate anxiety.

Conclusion

Such a vista can seem rather remote. But it speaks to a common occurrence in the climate anxiety literature, of individuals struggling to articulate vague fears about possible human oblivion and a general failure, over the last few decades, to radically change course on climate change. In their survey of Americans, Leiserowitz et al. found that while 66% said global warming was somewhat very or extremely important to them, 62% rarely or never discussed it with family or friends (2021, 4). Likewise, it is largely through the efforts of counsellors and psychologists to give a name to the despair and anxiety heard in their consulting rooms that literature on climate anxiety is emerging. There is immense value in listening to and learning to ‘abide’ with anxiety, as Bergo writes (2021, 35), without rushing to the exits of hope or despair.

Yet by the foregoing discussion, moving from fatalism to agency requires shifting the traditional perspective of autonomy. Our individual capacity to self-legislate and act is reliant, in the case of climate change at least, on conceiving the problem as necessitating collective, political solutions. While discussion of what we might do has often rested on lifestyle issues like meat consumption, travel or childrearing, this focus on personal morality and good will leads to a debilitating preoccupation with hypocrisy and conspicuous consumption that diminishes the collective solidarity needed to accomplish radically ambitious transformation in the present and near-future. With technological breakthroughs in renewables and public support for Green New Deal-type policies now growing around the world, the obstacles to agency in the age of climate crisis become perforce democratic and political in nature.

References

- Albrecht, Glenn, Gina-Maree Sartore, Linda Connor et al. 2007. 'Solastalgia: The Distress Caused by Environmental Change'. *Australasian Psychiatry* 15, 1 (supplement), ss.95–98. doi:10.1080/10398560701701288
- American Psychiatric Association. 2020. 'New APA Poll Reveals That Americans Are Increasingly Anxious About Climate Change's Impact on Planet, Mental Health'. October 21. www.psychiatry.org/newsroom/news-releases/climate-poll-2020
- Atherton, Richard. 2020. 'Climate Anxiety: Survey for BBC Newsround Shows Children Losing Sleep over Climate Change and the Environment. BBC. March 3. www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/51451737
- Atkin, Lisa. 2020. 'The Wheel of First-Time Climate Dudes'. *Heated*. April 23. <https://heated.world/p/the-wheel-of-first-time-climate-dudes>
- Auden, W.H. 2011. *The Age of Anxiety*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Bailey, Christopher J. 2016. *US Climate Change Policy*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Barnett, Brian and Amit Anand. 2020. 'Climate Anxiety and Mental Illness'. *Scientific American*. October 10. www.scientificamerican.com/article/climate-anxiety-and-mental-illness/
- Beardslee, William R. 1986. 'Children's and Adolescents' Perceptions of the Threat of Nuclear War: Implications of Recent Studies'. In *The Medical Implications of Nuclear War*, ed. Fredric Solomon and Robert Q. Marston. Washington DC: National Academy Press, 413–434.
- Bendell, Jem. 2018. 'Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating Climate Tragedy'. *IPLAS Occasional Papers* 2. July 28. <https://mahb.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/deeppadaptation.pdf>
- Bergo, Bettina. 2021. *Anxiety: A Philosophical History*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bradbrook, Gail. 2018. 'Heading for Extinction and What to Do About It'. Extinction Rebellion. September 18. www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2Vkc45nwY0
- Chappell, Bill and Ailsa Chang. 2019. 'Greta Thunberg to U.S.: "You Have a Moral Responsibility" On Climate Change'. NPR. September 13. www.npr.org/2019/09/13/760538254/greta-thunberg-to-u-s-you-have-a-moral-responsibility-on-climate-change?t=1621025689843

- Cianconi, Paolo, Sophia Betrò and Luigi Janiri. 2020. 'The Impact of Climate Change on Mental Health: A Systematic Descriptive Review'. *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 11, 74, 1–15. doi:10.3389/fpsy.2020.00074
- Clayton, Susan. 2020. 'Climate Anxiety: Psychological Responses to Climate Change'. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders* 74 (102263), 1–7. doi:10.1016/j.janxdis.2020.102263
- Clayton, Susan, Christie Manning, Kirra Krygsman and Meighen Speiser. 2017. *Mental Health and Our Changing Climate*. American Psychological Association, and ecoAmerica. www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2017/03/mental-health-climate.pdf
- Fisher, Mark. 2009. *Capitalist Realism*. Ropley: Zero.
- Franzen, Jonathan. 2019. 'What If We Stopped Pretending?' *New Yorker*. September 8. www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/what-if-we-stopped-pretending
- IPCC. 2018. *Special Report: Global Warming of 1.5°C*. www.ipcc.ch/sr15/
- Jackson, Mark. 2013. *The Age of Stress*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1998. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Translated and edited by Mary Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, Immanuel. 2006. *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. Translated and edited by Robert B. Loudon. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kingsnorth, Paul and Dougal Hine. 2009. *Uncivilisation: The Dark Mountain Manifesto*. https://dark-mountain.net/about/manifesto/
- Leclerc, Annie. 1987. 'Parole de femme'. In Toril Moi (ed.), *French Feminist Thought: A Reader*. New York: Basil Blackwell, 73–79.
- Leiserowitz, Anthony, Edward Maibach, Seth Rosenthal and John Kotcher. 2021. Climate Change in the American Mind: December 2020. New Haven, CT: Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, Yale University and George Mason University.
- Malm, Andreas. 2018. *The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World*. London; New York: Verso.
- Mann, Geoff and Joel Wainwright. 2018. *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future*. London: Verso.
- Mann, Michael E. 2021. *The New Climate War: The Fight to Take Back the Planet*. New York: Hachette.
- Messenger, Steffan. 2021. 'Climate Change Anxiety: Young People "Feel Hopeless"'. BBC News. June 24. www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-57555760
- Nugent, Ciara. 2019. 'Terrified of Climate Change? You Might Have Eco-Anxiety'. *Time*. November 21. https://time.com/5735388/climate-change-eco-anxiety/
- Nussbaum, Martha C. 2013. *Political Emotions*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. 2018. *The Monarchy of Fear*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pearl, Mike. 2019. "'Climate Despair' Is Making People Give Up on Life". *Vice*. July 11. www.vice.com/en/article/j5w374/climate-despair-is-making-people-give-up-on-life
- President's Science Advisory Committee. 1965. *Restoring the Quality of Our Environment. Report of the Environmental Pollution Panel*. Washington: The White House.
- Shabecoff, Philip. 1988. 'Global Warming Has Begun, Expert Tells Senate'. *New York Times*. June 24. www.nytimes.com/1988/06/24/us/global-warming-has-begun-expert-tells-senate.html

- Smith, Nicholas and Anthony Leiserowitz. 2014. 'The Role of Emotion in Global Warming Policy Support and Opposition'. *Risk Analysis*, 34, 5, 937–948. doi: 10.1111/risa.12140
- Spinoza, Benedict de. 1985, 2016. *The Collected Works of Spinoza. Volumes 1–2*. Translated and edited by Edwin Curley. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Steffen, Will, Johan Rockström, Katherine Richardson, Timothy M. Lenton, Carl Folke, Diana Liverman, Colin P. Summerhayes, et al. 2018. 'Trajectories of the Earth System in the Anthropocene'. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115, 33, 8252–8259. doi:10.1073/pnas.1810141115
- UNEP. 2019. *Emissions Gap Report*. www.unep.org/resources/emissions-gap-report-2019
- Wallace-Wells, David. 2019. *The Uninhabitable Earth: A Story of the Future*. London: Allen Lane.
- Wu, Judy, Gaelen Snell and Hasina Samji. 2020. 'Climate Anxiety in Young People: A Call to Action'. *The Lancet* 4, 10, E435–E436. doi:10.1016/S2542-5196(20)30223-0