Article

Climate Pessimism and Human Nature

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Abstract: This article builds on scholarship that understands climate change not only as a geophysical phenomenon, but also as a complex idea. It argues for a historicised analysis of what it terms "climate pessimism": the belief that catastrophic global heating cannot be prevented. Focusing especially on nonfictional texts by Jonathan Franzen and Roy Scranton, it suggests that climate pessimism draws on a Western intellectual tradition that takes a sceptical view of human capacities and the possibility of progress. At the same time, climate pessimism tends to evoke an idea of atomised human nature associated with capitalistic modernity. Franzen draws on ideas from evolutionary psychology in a rather simplistic way. Scranton, a more complex thinker, engages not only with Buddhist thought but also with the philosophies of Benedict Spinoza and Arthur Schopenhauer. Although often criticised as a "doomer", he sometimes moves towards an epistemological pluralism and sense of human potentiality. The concluding section brings in the concept of the pluriverse as both a corrective to climate pessimism's tendency to Westerncentrism, and a point of connection to Scranton's work.

Keywords: environmental humanities; climate change; philosophy; nonfiction; capitalism; modernity; catastrophe

1. Introduction

Climate pessimists argue that it is too late to stop runaway global heating. They predict widespread suffering, death, and societal collapse, possibly in the near term. Such views are unpopular and often attacked, with pessimists described as alarmists, doomers, or even "de-nihilists" (Heglar 2019). A dislike of climate pessimism offers a rare point of agreement between those who claim that climate change can be addressed through market-based solutions and those who argue that capitalism must be dismantled. Pessimistic pronouncements receive numerous criticisms, including: (1) they generate fear and despair, which only encourage inaction; (2) they ignore evidence showing that the world is becoming a better place for human flourishing; (3) they cherry pick scientific data and select the worst from a range of possibilities; (4) they underestimate human creativity and the potential of new technologies; (5) they are the product of Western white male privilege and misanthropy; (6) they underplay human agency, particularly as it is expressed through activism and political change. The leading climate scientist Michael Mann has even stated that "doomism today arguably poses a greater threat to climate action than outright denial" (Mann 2021, p. 179; see also Lamb et al. 2020). However, the boundaries between climate pessimism and radical calls for change are porous. One might ask whether there is a substantive difference between preaching doom and preaching a form of hope that depends on targets that are logistically implausible, such as the UK reaching net zero emissions by 2025 (Extinction Rebellion 2022). Given the escalating physical effects of climate change (IPCC 2021) and the growth of eco-anxiety, particularly among young people, climate pessimism is only likely to become more prevalent and powerful (Hickman et al. 2021).

Although climate pessimists are often lumped together by their critics, there are significant differences between the individualist-quietist pessimism of Jonathan Franzen, Paul Kingsnorth, and Roy Scranton, the social-activist pessimism of Rupert Read, Roger Hallam, and Jem Bendell, and the extreme pessimism of outliers like Guy McPherson.[1] It is also important to distinguish between full-fat pessimists and those writers who use grim

climate scenarios as heuristics to inspire action.[2] For example, in *Falter*, a nonfictional book about existential risks facing humanity, Bill McKibben (2019, p. 1) writes that "between ecological destruction and technological hubris, the human experiment is now in question. The stakes feel very high, and the odds very long, and the trends very ominous". David Wallace-Wells (2019, p. 3) begins the best-selling *The Uninhabitable Earth* by stating "it is worse, much worse, than you think".[3] As Roy Scranton (2019) points out in a review of both books, although they offer "alarming visions of the near human future", they ultimately emphasise the power of humanity to address climate change. For Scranton, this kind of "magical thinking" produces "monitory ecological sermon[s]" (ibid) that fail to recognise the systemic problems standing in the way of addressing environmental destruction. This article examines thinkers who see these problems as insurmountable, and who take an individualist-quietist approach rather than an activist one. By "individualist-quietist", I mean that they focus on the psychological and philosophical impact on individuals of understanding that severe global heating and socio-ecological collapse cannot be prevented. Their writings describe how they wrestle with this understanding, and suggest to their readers how they might themselves learn to accept this grim reality. The prescription tends to involve a letting go of mechanisms of distraction and denial, as well as the desire to come up with solutions: hence my use of the term *quietism*.

In analysing climate pessimism, I build on scholarship that understands climate change not only as a geophysical phenomenon, but also as a powerful, complex, and contested idea.[4] A key challenge of making sense of present-day climate discourse, particularly as it manifests in the febrile online environment, is that it often mixes up different epistemological spheres. For example, those who claim that limiting global warming to within two degrees is technically feasible are challenged by those who claim that doing so is not socially, politically, or economically plausible.[5] Such discussions tend to lead nowhere, for these are not just different claims, but different kinds of claim. This article's central argument is that, although climate pessimism often invokes scientific evidence and assessments of global society, it is fundamentally a philosophical and psychological position with normative implications. The visions of the future produced by "climate imaginaries" are always "politically charged", as Mike Hulme (2021, p. 230) has argued. Usually implicitly, climate pessimism draws on a Western intellectual tradition that takes a sceptical view of human capacities and the possibility of progress. At the same time, and to some extent in tension with this tradition, it also evokes an idea of atomised human nature associated with capitalistic modernity. Climate pessimism mediates philosophical ideas to new audiences but does not always do so in a reflective fashion, based as it can be on soundbites and unexamined assumptions. This article uncovers climate pessimism's intellectual genealogy and, in doing so, makes the case for a historicised understanding of contemporary climate change discourse.

I begin with the novelist Jonathan Franzen, a high-profile figure who provoked considerable controversy with an essay on climate change published in 2019. I argue that a view of human beings as essentially individualistic and self-interested lies at its core, and I examine it in relation to the work of other writers on climate such as Paul Kingsnorth, Ezra Klein, and Dale Jamieson. The following section addresses the writer and academic Roy Scranton: another controversial figure, but a more subtle thinker than Franzen. I suggest that Scranton tends towards a similarly downbeat view of "human nature" and proposes a quietistic response to climate change that draws not only on Buddhist thought but also the philosophies of Benedict Spinoza and Arthur Schopenhauer. However, at times he moves towards an epistemological pluralism and sense of human potentiality, both of which suggest that he is a more complex writer than the "doomer" label suggests. In the concluding section on climate pessimism and hope, I draw on postdevelopment studies and particularly the concept of the pluriverse: "a multiplicity of worlds and ways of worlding life" (Escobar 2020, p. 26). I find in this idea both a corrective to climate pessimism's tendency to Westerncentrism, and a point of connection to Scranton's work. I argue, too,

that a key problem with climate pessimism is that it is too certain in its predictions, and fails to match philosophical pessimism's self-reflexive scepticism.

2. Jonathan Franzen's Climate Models

Although Franzen is not the most sophisticated of the mainstream climate pessimists, he has the highest profile due to his success as an essayist and novelist best known for *The Corrections* (2001). His writings, as well as attacks on him by scientists and activists, reveal much about what is at stake in debates about climate pessimism. In this section, I focus particularly on the claims about human nature that ground his analysis, and address related claims by Paul Kingsnorth, Ezra Klein, and Dale Jamieson. Franzen's article "What If We Stopped Pretending" was published in *The New Yorker* in September 2019, and provoked considerable controversy. It was subsequently published as a short book in 2021, with the addition of a foreword by the author, and an interview from 2019. The essay builds on two earlier *New Yorker* pieces—"Carbon Capture" (2015) and "The End of the End of the World" (2016)—and a *Guardian* essay "Is it too late to save the world?" (2017).[6] "Carbon Capture" argues that environmental organisations such as the National Audobon Society are obsessed by the increasingly futile fight against climate change—"drastic planetary heating is a done deal" (Franzen 2018, p. 52)—and should be more focused on localised conservation work. Part of its argument is that the fight against climate change can actually be ecologically detrimental:

> The Earth as we now know it resembles a patient with bad cancer. We can choose to treat it with disfiguring aggression, damming every river and blighting every landscape with biofuel agriculture, solar farms, and wind turbines ... Or we can adopt a course of treatment that permits a higher quality of life. (Franzen 2018, pp. 52–53)

The 2016 essay is a more personal and less combative account of a trip taken by the author to Antarctica that ends by reflecting on children, hope, and environmental crisis (Franzen 2018, pp. 195–225). The third essay reflects on the composition of the "Carbon Capture" essay and the attacks it elicited, which Franzen views as largely unfair (Franzen 2018, pp. 17–22). His basic position on climate change has not moved and he criticises Naomi Klein's (2014) "optimism" in the influential *This Changes Everything* as "a kind of denialism". He argues that "even before the election of Donald Trump, there was no evidence to suggest that humanity is capable—politically, psychologically, ethically, economically—of slashing carbon emissions quickly and deeply enough to change everything". He makes the dubious suggestion that "barring a worldwide revolt against free-market capitalism in the next 10 years ... the most *likely* temperature rise this century is on the order of six degrees" (p. 15). This claim was later challenged by the leading climate activist Bill McKibben as "an overstatement" in a *New York Times* review that also criticised Franzen for picking on environmental groups rather than fossil fuel companies, and for ignoring the "significant victories" achieved by the climate justice movement (McKibben 2018).

Franzen's (2019) essay "What If We Stopped Pretending" restates old claims and refights old battles. Even the essay's title, whether written by Franzen or his editor, is second-hand and might charitably be described as alluding to the work of Kingsnorth and Dougald Hine, founders of The Dark Mountain Project, who were making similar claims (under similar headings) to Franzen's nearly ten years earlier.[7] Indeed, in a 2012 essay Kingsnorth (2017, pp. 68–72) forcefully made what would become the central argument of Franzen's "Carbon Capture": that environmentalists have become obsessed by climate change to the extent that they are not only failing to protect but also destroying wild landscapes and creatures. For Kingsnorth and Hine, the pretence is that the imminent collapse of industrial civilisation can be prevented by technological solutions and "sustainability". Franzen clearly shares their declensionist framing, but focuses particularly on the "pretence" that global heating can be kept within two degrees. He sees this view as mere wishful thinking: a denial of reality. The next few decades are almost guaranteed to see "the radical destabilization of life on earth" (Franzen 2021, p. 20). A rise of over two degrees—"maybe

more, but also maybe less"—is likely to mark a "point of no return" as the climate spins out of control due to "various feedback loops" (Franzen 2021, p. 24).[8] In response to this assessment, Franzen does not (at least *prima facie*) encourage inaction. He emphasises that there is "still a strong practical and ethical case for reducing carbon emissions" and that "any movement toward a more just and civil society can now be considered a meaningful climate action" (Franzen 2021, pp. 31, 37). However, he also argues that we need to rethink how we use resources, pushing them towards adaptation and conservation projects rather than "renewable-energy mega-project[s]" that are ecologically damaging (p. 35). He ends by emphasising the importance of "smaller, local battles that you have some realistic hope of winning", taking as an example his support for the Homeless Garden Project in his home town of Santa Cruz (Franzen 2021, pp. 38–41).

There is much to argue about in Franzen's essay: not least its scientific robustness.[9] Yet, that is somewhat beside the point. His argument ultimately floats free of the "complicated atmospheric modelling" generated by "scientists" and "supercomputers:"

> As a non-scientist, I do my own kind of modelling. I run various future scenarios through my brain, apply the constraints of human psychology and political reality, take note of the relentless rise in global energy consumption . . . and count the scenarios in which collective action averts catastrophe. (Franzen 2021, p. 26)

Franzen's judgements about the future, he suggests, are based primarily on his understanding of "human psychology and political reality" rather than physical science. The implication that the individual imagination can produce robust models prompted considerable criticism, with one commentator describing Franzen's activity as no more than "daydreaming" (Flood 2019). However, he implicitly raises the important question of why climate discourse gives technical models complete primacy over imaginative models when there are many aspects of human existence that technical models cannot capture.[10] He goes on to outline three "necessary conditions" that must be met for a hopeful scenario to emerge: "draconian [energy] conservation measures" across the world; governments making the correct policy decisions; "overwhelming numbers of human beings" accepting a "severe curtailment of their familiar lifestyles" (pp. 27–29). His conclusion is stark:

> Call me a pessimist or call me a humanist, but I don't see human nature fundamentally changing anytime soon. I can run ten thousand scenarios through my model, and in not one of them do I see the two-degree target being met. (Franzen 2021, p. 30)

There are three notable points to consider here. One is the use of the modal verb "can". Franzen is not quite suggesting that he *has* run all these scenarios, nor is he suggesting that he *could* run them should certain conditions be met. The apparent claim is that he *has the ability* to run them. However, it is seemingly contradicted by the second half of the sentence, which implies that he knows the outcomes of all the scenarios that he does not necessarily claim to have run. In a sense, he is modelling his modelling. He knows what the scenarios would and would not reveal if he was to run them.

The second point is the hyperbole of "ten thousand scenarios". It hardly seems plausible that any individual would be able to produce that number of distinctive inputs into a mental model. "Ten thousand" is really a code for saying that staying within two degrees is impossible. It is this air of certainty that most enraged Franzen's critics. The final point is that the central claim of Franzen's essay is not about climate change at all, but about human nature. To some extent, the reader is left to extrapolate what it is about human nature that dooms us. However, there are heavy hints in the previous paragraph, in Franzen's obvious scepticism that high-consuming people will accept curtailed lifestyles, or "accept the reality of climate change", or "make sacrifices for distant threatened nations and distant future generations", or face up to death and disaster on a daily basis (p. 29). Similar claims are made more directly by the influential journalist Ezra Klein, writing about climate change in *The New York Times* in 2021:

> It's true that there is a discordance between the pitch of the rhetoric on climate
> and the normalcy of the lives many of us live. I don't see that as a revelation
> of political misdirection so much as a constant failure of human nature. We are
> inconsistent creatures who routinely court the catastrophes we most fear. We do
> so because we don't feel the pain of others as our own, because there are social
> constraints on our actions and imaginations, because the future is an abstraction
> and the pleasures of this instant are a siren. That is true with our health and our
> finances and our loves and so of course it is true with our world. (Klein 2021)

This is not a particularly lucid passage, in part because it claims that human beings are "inconsistent" while trying to generalise about their behaviour. The key points seem to be that: (1) we suffer from an empathy deficit and are unable to care as much for others as for ourselves; (2) we focus on the immediate over the future; (3) we are limited by "social constraints".[11] As so often in invocations of human nature, the purpose is both descriptive and normative: human nature is like this and therefore we should give up on the idea of preventing runaway climate change. However, it is worth noting that these accounts of human nature are not necessary in order to make the pessimistic case.[12] One might, for example, adduce the weakness of political institutions and/or the power of the fossil fuel system and/or the ongoing process of Western extractivist colonialism and/or the momentum of the globalised economy and/or geophysical feedback loops and/or the tendency of scientific projections to err on the conservative side. Even if one wanted to take a more philosophical approach, one could argue (as Kingsnorth does repeatedly in *Confessions*) that the basic problem with modern industrial civilisation is that it has successfully alienated us from our own wildness (Kingsnorth 2017). That is, in order to prevent further ecological collapse, we need more human nature rather than less of it.

A key source for the claim that human nature inhibits climate action is evolutionary psychology. In *Reason in a Dark Time* (2014), the philosopher Dale Jamieson (2014) presents our evolution as "the most difficult challenge in addressing climate change", for we have a "strong bias towards dramatic movements of middle-sized objects that can be visually perceived". We are not good at "probabilistic thinking" and find it very difficult to respond to a complex, multi-scalar, apparently distant, and often invisible phenomenon (p. 102). Similarly, in *Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired To Ignore Climate Change* (2014), George Marshall draws on the work of the social psychologist Daniel Gilbert to argue that climate change does not hit any of the "key triggers" for action that result from "our long psychological evolution" and, furthermore, that the kind of information we get about it does not tend to affect the emotional part of our brains (pp. 46–51). Franzen acknowledges Jamieson's influence on his thinking about climate change.[13] "Carbon Capture" praises *Reason in a Dark Time* and follows its psychological argument. Climate change, Franzen states, "deeply confuses the human brain, which evolved to focus on the present, not the far future, and on readily perceivable movements". As a result, "the great hope of the Enlightenment—that human rationality would enable us to transcend our evolutionary limitations" has "foundered" (Franzen 2018, p. 51). However, there is a difference between understanding such "limitations" as an obstacle to addressing climate change, and seeing them as destining us to fail. Marshall argues that, although we are wired to ignore climate action, we are also wired to take action: "we have immense capacity for pro-social, supportive, and altruistic behaviour" (Marshall 2014, p. 229). Jamieson is more pessimistic, but even his book ends with an invocation of "the human spirit, and its enduring quest to survive and flourish on a changing planet" (Jamieson 2014, p. 238). Franzen and Klein may not be entirely wrong about human nature. However, their accounts only tell part of the story, leaving out altruism, biophilia, sociality, relationality, and ecocentrism. Their basic paradigm is the dominant Western one that human beings are fundamentally independent individuals separate from nature and largely motivated by self-interest.[14] For more hopeful thinkers, particularly on the left, this conception of human nature, and the consumerist civilisation with which it is intertwined, are the real problems when it comes to addressing climate change.

3. Roy Scranton's Philosophical Humanism

Roy Scranton, probably the most prominent climate pessimist other than Franzen, also discusses human nature in *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* (2015). However, he thinks carefully through the ramifications of his pessimism and reaches complex conclusions that draw on Western philosophy (particularly Spinoza) and Buddhist thought. This complexity is often lost on his critics, many of whom have not obviously read his work. For example, Michael Mann describes him as "the ultimate doomist" who "literally wrote a book titled *We're Doomed*" (Mann 2021, p. 190). Mann focuses on a Twitter spat in which Scranton criticised the "sentimentality and magical thinking" around the youth climate movement (Mann 2021, p. 191). There is no doubt that Scranton's treatment of climate activists can be harsh and dismissive, and Mann refers to his criticisms of McKibben's *Falter*. However, the "reprehensible attack" on Twitter that Mann describes is really on how young climate activists are portrayed and the "reprehensible abdication of responsibility" (quoted in Mann 2021, p. 190) from older people in positions of power. As Scranton puts it in his essay "Raising a Daughter in a Doomed World", which I suspect Mann has not read, "off-loading responsibility for the world onto the future is ethically inexcusable" (Scranton 2018, p. 320). The essay appears in the book that Mann cites, which is actually entitled *We're Doomed. Now What?* (2018): the additional two words rather change the emphasis. Mann's characterisation of Scranton as "the ultimate doomist", then, seems to be based on one tweet, one newspaper article, and a selectively quoted book title. One might not share Scranton's views, but he is a subtle thinker on climate change who deserves better than that.

Learning to Die begins with Scranton's experience as a private in the US Army in Iraq in 2003 and after Hurricane Katerina in New Orleans in 2005. In the "chaos and collapse" of these situations, he sees intimations of the whole planet's future (Scranton 2015, p. 14). Drastic climate change is inevitable and we must learn to accept that "this civilization is already dead" (Scranton 2015, p. 23). He makes the point forcibly through a phrase common in pessimistic climate discourse—"we're fucked"—with the caveat that "the only questions are how soon and how badly" (Scranton 2015, p. 16).[15] However, he suggests that humanity can "survive and adapt . . . if we accept human limits and transience as fundamental truths, and work to nurture the variety and richness of our collective cultural heritage". The "humanist thinker" plays a vital role by enabling us to learn to die on an individual as well as a civilisational level. (Scranton 2015, p. 24). In the book's first three chapters, Scranton ranges through human and climatic history, before discussing climate change as a "wicked problem" that is unlikely to be solved either through technology or politics (p. 53).[16] Here, he does some of the detailed societal "modelling" to which Franzen merely gestures. He is particularly sceptical about climate activism and protest because of its distance from the realities of global energy production. "No matter how many people take to the streets in massive marches or in targeted direct action", he argues, "they cannot put their hands on the real flows of power, because they do not help produce it. They only consume" (p. 60). This seems, to put it mildly, a simplistic take on the potential power of political activism. It has been undermined recently by the profile and impact of movements such as Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion, even if the true political force of "net zero" remains to be seen. Furthermore, Scranton seems unaware of, or uninterested in, the power of environmental movements in the Global South (see Dwivedi 2001; Naomi Klein 2014; and Satheesh 2021).

We reach the pessimistic heart of the book in the final sentences of Chapter Three, just after Scranton's account of his participation in the "People's Climate March" in New York City in 2014:

> The problem with our response to climate change isn't a problem with passing the right laws or finding the right price for carbon or changing people's minds or raising awareness. *Everybody already knows*. . . . The problem is that the problem is us. (Scranton 2015, p. 68)

The fourth chapter of *Learning to Die* elaborates on this claim.[17] It argues that the labour movement and then the Civil Rights movement in the US succeeded through violence and the threat of violence, and that this has been true of social conflict "for most of human history". This is because of human nature, for "aggression and the drive for dominance are . . . species traits" and therefore "our future promises to be as savage as our past" (Scranton 2015, p. 75). For Scranton, the apparent reduction in violence over the last two centuries is a blip enabled by "carbon-fueled economic plenty and the widespread ramification of state control", for "the human animal has not purged itself of bloodlust, nor have we put war and violence aside as solutions to our problems" (Scranton 2015, pp. 75–76). He points out that armed conflict is prevalent in many parts of the world and that even those fortunate people not in such environments are exposed to it and other threats—terrorism, disease, global warming—via "images, social excitation, retransmitted fear" that are particularly enabled and heightened by social media (Scranton 2015, p. 82). As a result, we inhabit "perpetual circuits of fear, aggression, crisis, and reaction that continually prod us to ever more intense levels of manic despair" (Scranton 2015, p. 86). Scranton sees a way beyond this nightmare, but it is worth registering the bleakness of his account of contemporary human existence. As with Franzen and Ezra Klein, the problem is not so much what he does say, but what he does not. There is nothing here about the human capacity for kinship or empathy, for example, and sociality is understood only in the form of collective mania. There is no attention, either, to how people across the world might already be working together to break the circuits he identifies. While seeing Western-style capitalism as the problem, he seems unable to depart from its assumptions about human nature. It is not surprising, therefore, that the way forward he identifies is only accessible to the exceptional individual: the "aberrant anti-drone" dancing to its own rhythm against that of "human swarms" (Scranton 2015, pp. 87, 88).

Scranton's solution draws explicitly on Peter Sloterdijk's (2011) idea of "the philosopher as an interrupter".[18] He provides more detail in the book's fifth chapter, entitled "A New Enlightenment". The key is "philosophical humanism", which begins with an acceptance of one's mortality and transience and participation in "a larger collective self" represented by humanity's cultural inheritance. "In its most radical practice", philosophical humanism is "the disciplined interruption of somatic and social flows, the detachment of consciousness from impulse, and the condensation of conceptual truths out of the granular data of experience" (Scranton 2015, pp. 90–91). Scranton emphasises the time and knowledge required to undertake this practice. There is a tension here. In order to connect to the "collective self", the exceptional individual has to go against the rhythms of the "human swarms" (Scranton 2015, pp. 93, 88). The "New Enlightenment", it seems, is unlikely to be widely accessible. In this, Scranton's thought differs somewhat from Buddhism even while showing its influence. He is a self-confessed "bad Buddhist" and has stated in *We're Doomed* that the ethical position articulated in *Learning to Die* "could be seen as more or less Buddhist" (Scranton 2018, pp. 65, 66). The influence is palpable in this passage, with its emphasis on moving beyond selfish desire:

> Learning to die means learning to let go of the ego, the idea of the self, the future, certainty, attachment, the pursuit of pleasure, permanence, and stability. Learning to let go of salvation. Learning to let go of hope. Learning to let go of death. (Scranton 2015, p. 92)

However, Scranton is also well versed in Western philosophy and here the picture becomes more complicated. He supports the above passage with long quotations from Marcus Aurelius and Hegel, and has described his actual position as "less Buddhist than pantheist, in the tradition of the heretical Jewish philosopher Benedict Spinoza" (Scranton 2018, p. 67). I will return to this claim in due course, but chapters four and five of *Learning to Die* are not obviously Spinozan. They are more like the offspring of an unholy union between Hobbes and Schopenhauer. In Hobbes, we find the idea that anarchy and conflict is the natural state of the world—"a war, as is of every man, against every man"—and can only be prevented by the institution of a sovereign with absolute authority (Hobbes 2008,

p. 84). In *The World as Will and Idea (Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung)* (1818), Schopenhauer endorses Hobbes's position, describing the "bellum omnium contra omnes" to be found without the imposition of "law and order" (Schopenhauer 1995, p. 211). Schopenhauer is a metaphysical monist who argues that the essence of the universe is "Will": a kind of mindless striving. We experience diverse phenomena, of course, but these do not ultimately reflect the nature of reality. For Schopenhauer, our daily lives are full of suffering and dissatisfaction, as we are driven by "Will" continually to strive towards various ends. We suffer because this leads to conflict with other individuals, because it is built on our feeling of deficiency, and because we often do not achieve the ends that we desire. Even if we do achieve them, the result is not positive joy, but simply a temporary disappearance of our sense of lack. The best we can hope for seems to be to oscillate between desire and boredom until death. It is perhaps surprising that Schopenhauer's brand of pessimism does not have more present-day traction, because one might see it reflected in the painful circuits of late-stage carbon capitalism that Scranton and others have identified.[19] However, Schopenhauer, too, finds a way out through letting go of the desiring self; he was the first European philosopher to be influenced by Buddhism. By practicing an ascetic denial of the will to life, the exceptional individual can transcend the individual striving that is the root of suffering:

> If we compare life to a circuit around which we must run without stopping—a circuit of red-hot coals, with a few cool places here and there—then the person caught up in delusion finds consolation in the cool spot, on which for a moment he is standing, or which he sees in front of him, and he continues to run round the track. But the person who sees through the *principium individuationis*, and recognises the real nature of the thing-in-itself, and thereby recognises the whole, is no longer open to such consolation; he sees himself in all places at once, and withdraws from the race. [. . .] This change announces itself in the transition from virtue to *asceticism*. [. . .] Essentially nothing but a manifestation of will, he ceases to will anything, guards against attaching his will to anything, and seeks to consolidate in himself the greatest indifference to everything. (Schopenhauer 1995, p. 239, original emphasis)

The "*principium individuationis*" is the fragmentation of reality imposed by human epistemologies, and which leads to suffering and conflict. By seeing through this principle and recognising the oneness of the universe, the philosopher can escape from "the circuit of red-hot coals" and find a kind of tranquillity in denying their own propensity to will.[20]

Scranton does not cite Schopenhauer in *Learning to Die*, or anywhere else to the best of my knowledge, but there are obvious parallels between their ideas. This includes their attitudes to death. For Schopenhauer, because the individual is fundamentally illusory, we should not identify ourselves with it, and should understand death as a shift from the phenomenal world and a return to unindividuated reality (Janaway 2002, pp. 106–10). In the coda to *Learning to Die*, Scranton states that "Life is a flow. The forms it takes are transient. Death is nothing more than the act of passing from one pattern to another" (Scranton 2015, p. 113). Similarly, at the end of his moving essay, "Raising a Daughter in a Doomed World", he suggests that "this self we cling to so fiercely is nothing but an ephemeral moment, a transient emergence of self-conscious matter, a passing cloud of being" (Scranton 2018, p. 334). Learning to accept our mortality is "the first step in understanding that the self isn't a unique, isolated thing at all but the product of generations enmeshed in a world, a transmaterialization of stellar dust, the expression of a vibrant buzzing universe, a future and a past" (Scranton 2018, p. 334).[21] If the understanding of the self as an illusion links Scranton and Schopenhauer, Scranton's reference to a "vibrant buzzing universe" may suggest a key difference between them and the importance of Spinoza. Although he is not mentioned explicitly in the main text of *Learning to Die*, the book's epigraph is a quotation from Spinoza's *Ethics*: "*A free man thinks of death least of all things, and his wisdom is a meditation of life, not of death*" (quoted in Scranton 2015, p. 11; italics in original).[22] Quite

what Spinoza means by "free" (*liber* in the original Latin) is not straightforward, because he does not believe that humans have free will as such. To be "free" means to moderate our passions, in so far as we can, through our virtuous knowledge of the essence of things as opposed to mere phenomena. The connection with Scranton's project is clear; both authors emphasise the importance of knowledge and reason in learning to die, in contrast to Schopenhauer's emphasis on asceticism. Like Schopenhauer, Spinoza is a metaphysical monist: the universe is comprised of a single substance that he describes as "God or nature" (Spinoza 1989, p. 142). The apparently separate phenomena that we experience are different modes of this substance. Whether this makes him a "pantheist", as described by Scranton, is a complex question beyond the scope of this article.[23] More important for my purpose is Spinoza's idea of *conatus*, which is sometimes translated as "striving", although my edition uses the "endeavour": "each thing in so far as it is itself endeavours to persist in its own being" and "the endeavour wherewith a thing endeavours to persist in its being is nothing else than the actual essence of that being" (Spinoza 1989, p. 91).

Several influential thinkers have addressed the ecological potential of *conatus*. Arne Naess understands it in relation to "self-realization": a shift from narrow egotism to a more ecological form of identity (quoted in Mathews [1991] 2021, pp. 177–78). Freya Mathews takes up the idea in her landmark book, *The Ecological Self*, which contrasts the atomistic understanding of the universe associated with Newtonian physics, and its social corollary in Hobbes's brutal individualism, with a selfhood based on ecological interdependence (pp. 24, 128–36).[24] More recently, Jane Bennett (2010) describes Spinoza as a "touchstone" and states that "I invoke his idea of conative bodies that strive to enhance their power of activity by forming alliances with other bodies, and I share his faith that everything is made of the same substance" (p. x). Bennett's Spinoza is mediated via Deleuze, and offers her a way of thinking about how 'bodies enhance their power *in* or *as a heterogeneous assemblage*" (Bennett 2010, p. 23). This points to a fundamental ambivalence in Scranton's work. Does he see existence as driven by conflict and suffering, or does he have more room for more hopeful forms of relationality as expressed at a metaphysical level by Bennett's claim that to be a "mode" is "to form alliances and enter assemblages" (Bennett 2010, p. 22)? Scranton's distaste for human "swarms" and scepticism about political activism suggests the former, but his invocation of life as a flow and our connection to the "vibrant, buzzing universe" suggests a more hopeful view. In any case—and for all its intellectual heft and novel ideas—at the heart of Scranton's work is an old, and perhaps conservative, idea of the philosopher-poet-genius who stands apart from the drones in the hive and is able to apprehend the fundamental nature of being. In this, he has much in common with Kingsnorth, who takes a similarly vatic stance. The climate pessimist is likely to have a negative view of human nature. He has to take up the rhetorical position of the voice crying in the wilderness whose understanding is unachievable for most people.[25] He has to separate himself from "human swarms" even when he is preaching entanglement. After all, if he believes that his cries may be heeded, then he is no longer a climate pessimist, but a climate radical.

4. Conclusions: Hope and the Pluriverse

Perhaps the most powerful criticism of climate pessimism is that it emerges from a place of privilege and is blind to questions of justice. Its proponents are largely white men from the Global North; it is easy to give up on stopping climate change, the argument goes, when you are not only largely protected from its worse effects but also benefit from the extractivist economy that has caused it. The fact that the two leading individualist-quietist climate pessimists discussed in this article are both North American may also tell us something about the individualism of that culture and its distrust of collectivist politics. The pessimistic mantra "it's too late" simultaneously occludes the injustices already experienced by communities who have been through civilizational collapse due to imperialism, the political responsibilities of wealthy countries when it comes to global mitigation, and the agency of communities on the climate change front line (Whyte 2020; Hayward et al.

2020). For the activist and writer Mary Heglar, both optimism and pessimism "smack of the privilege wrought from the deluded belief that this world has ever been perfect and that, therefore, an imperfect version of it is not worth saving, or fighting for" (2019). For all their apparent iconoclasm, climate pessimists often operate within the categories of what Arturo Escobar (drawing on John Law) calls the "One-World World". This is the imperialist, supremacist belief in a single reality and single epistemology based on Western "ontologies of separation". It relegates "non-Western reals into beliefs": particularly those epistemologies that emphasise "radical interdependence" (Escobar 2020, pp. 14–15).[26] For Escobar, "we cannot emerge from the crisis with the categories of the world that created the crisis" (Escobar 2020, p. 27). He therefore offers the pluriverse: "a different politics based on multiple reals" (Escobar 2020, p. 15).[27] Inspired by indigenous "cosmovisions", the pluriverse allows space for different ways of being and knowing and for new political possibilities. Like Scranton, Escobar also endorses the Buddhist "principle of interdependence" and the idea that the self is an illusion (Escobar 2020, pp. 18–19). Indeed, Scranton has articulated a position that could be described as pluriversal: "We need to give up defending and protecting *our* truth, *our* perspective, *our* Western values, and understanding that truth is found not in one perspective but in its multiplication, not in one point of view but the aggregate, not in opposition but the whole" (Scranton 2018, p. 8, original emphasis). However, as the preceding discussion has shown, his work is ambivalent about relational epistemologies and seems uninterested in indigenous environmental activism.[28] Like other pessimists, at times he seems to conflate the collapse of the modern industrial capitalism with the collapse of all worlds, and to fall back on a Westernised view of human nature based on individual conflict and competition. But he does not always do this. His body of work shows that "doomers" should not be set up as straw men: they do not necessarily preach inaction, nor are they always blind to other ways of worlding.

The climate crisis has generated considerable discussion about the relationship between hope and action. The philosopher Clive Hamilton (2010) argues that "unthinking optimism about the ability of humanity to avoid climate change is misplaced" (p. 132). "Despair", he suggests, is a reasonable response to the situation, but we can eventually move on to acceptance and then to ethical action (p. 226). Hamilton tends to conflate optimism and hope, but Terry Eagleton's (2017) distinction between the two in *Hope Without Optimism* is relevant to the climate crisis. We might associate optimism with an overconfident belief in technical solutions and "Progress", and hope with something more fragile, fallible, and contingent. We can nuance the argument further through John Foster's distinction between the two kinds of hope that emerge from a realistic understanding of climate change. One is individualistic: "hope only for the best of a very bad job, for a life pursued in temporarily tolerable local conditions against a grim background of cumulative global derangement" (Foster 2019, p. 181). This is the only hope available to the climate pessimist. The second kind of hope is more communal in ethos: a "kind of active hope that is premised on transformative potential". This hope is "*counter-empirical*" and based on the premise that "*the past doesn't always show the rules of possibility for the future*" (Foster 2019, p. 184, original emphasis). Following Escobar, we might describe this brand of hope as "pluriversal". Foster draws on Rebecca Solnit's (2016) suggestion that "Hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act" (see also Wiseman 2021). "Uncertainty" is crucial. Foster's understanding of the situation is close to climate pessimism, but he lacks Franzen's confidence in his capacity to predict the future. Franzen's scepticism about climate policy and about human propensities may be reasonable enough, but it is not matched by a similarly sceptical approach to his own modelling. Making room for uncertainty is something that climate pessimists might learn from philosophical pessimism, which is (or should be) sceptical about all human attempts to make sense of the world.[29]

For many environmentalists and scientists, climate pessimism is morally and intellectually unacceptable. For a few, it is an article of faith. This article has tried to find a middle way by providing a critical analysis of climate pessimism without endorsing or dismissing

it. If the excessive confidence of pessimistic pronouncements is problematic, so too is the policing of climate discourse through which articulations of fear, anxiety, and despair are too often dismissed rather than explored. Whether this article's critique opens up the possibility of climate pessimism's recuperation, and whether such a recuperation would be desirable, is difficult to know. Perhaps the key question is whether the pessimistic position can be maintained within a more pluralistic framework that makes room for uncertainty, justice, and non-Western epistemologies. Or is it ultimately a symptom of the Westerncentric worldview that it claims to disavow? These questions will have to remain unresolved, for now. Their answers depend in part on how one views the lineage of Western philosophical pessimism that begins with Leopardi and Schopenhauer and is articulated in the present day by thinkers like David Benatar, John Gray, and Eugene Thacker. This has often pushed against the "One World World" (Escobar 2020, p. 14) of capitalistic modernity by questioning its assumptions about societal progress and individual freedom. However, it also often exhibits a kind of anthropocentric misanthropy consonant with the atomised idea of selfhood that capitalism produces. For climate pessimism to be recognised as more than an indulgence of the over-privileged, it may need to engage with diverse modes of thought: postdevelopment theory, the "end of the world" narratives of Indigenous peoples who have experienced environmental and cultural catastrophe, and pessimistic articulations of Black experience in societies built on white supremacy (Danowski and Viveiros De Castro 2017; Kothari et al. 2019; Lear 2008; Sexton 2019; Warren 2015; Yusoff 2018). For all its problems, a more relational, outward-facing climate pessimism might have something to offer as we face an uncertain future.

Notes

[1]   Social-activist pessimism is complex and beyond the scope of this article. One might start with Bendell (2019), "Doom and Bloom" and Read and Alexander (2019), *This Civilisation*. Read and Bendell (2021) (a former spokeperson for Extinction Rebellion) have not always been in agreement, but have recently co-edited *Deep Adaptation*. For a sympathetic but critical discussion of their work, see McIntosh (2020), *Riders on the Storm*. A co-founder of Extinction Rebellion, Hallam is known for taking provocative positions even by the standards of other activists: he recently pronounced on Twitter that "it is now an objective reality that this civilisation will collapse at some point in the early 2030s" (29 July 2022).

[2]   For a rare attempt to outline "different kinds of pessimistic and optimistic views" (p. 2), see Nordgren (2021), "Pessimism and Optimism".

[3]   See also Lynas (2020), *Our Final Warning*.

[4]   For an exemplary study, see Hulme (2021), *Climate Change*.

[5]   For an attempt at a rigorous method for assessing plausibility, see Stammer et al. (2021), *Hamburg Climate Futures Outlook 2021.*

[6]   These three essays are republished in the 2018 collection *The End of the End of the Earth*, with the titles (respectively) of "Save What You Love", "The End of the End of the Earth", and "The Essay in Dark Times". All citations from these essays are from this collection.

[7]   See Kingsnorth and Hine (2010), "The Environmental Movement Needs to Stop Pretending". See also Hine (2019), "After We Stop Pretending".

[8]   This claim about 2 degrees as a likely point of no return was challenged by the article's critics. The original version suggested that this was the view of "many scientists and policymakers", and this phrase is also used in the 2021 book version. The current online version of the article (Franzen 2019), also titled "What If We Stopped Pretending?") uses the phrase "some scientists and policymakers" and adds the editorial note "*A previous version of this article mischaracterized the scientific consensus around a 'point of no return'*".

9   For critique, see Heglar (2019), "Home"; Higgins (2019), "On Climate Pessimism"; Mann (2021, pp. 187–90); Marvel (2019), "Shut Up, Franzen"; Samuel (2019), "The Controversy".

10   For cultural modelling as a methodology, see Gurr (2021), *Charting Literary Urban Studies*.

11   For research on the importance of empathy in environmental communication and action, see Brown et al. (2019), "Empathy, Place, and Identity Interactions for Sustainability" and Wong-Parodi and Feygina (2021), "Engaging People on Climate Change". For a useful critique of simplistic views about the efficacy of hope and fear, see Chapman et al. (2017), "Reassessing emotion in climate change communication".

12   In a perceptive article titled "Taming the Greedocracy" that criticises Ezra Klein, Jag Bhalla (2021) argues that the view that human nature works against climate action is promoted by elites who want to protect their own lifestyles, even if this means relying on dangerous technofixes.

13   He is also referenced by Scranton in *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* (2015, p. 120) and in a blurb for that book describes it as "full of passion, fire, science and wisdom" (p. 2).

14   For human nature as a philosophical/political idea, see Berry (1988), *Human Nature*; Hannon and Lewens (2018), *Why We Disagree*.

15   Wainwright and Mann (2018, p. xi) criticise the "political despondency" of the phrase "we're fucked" in *Climate Leviathan*. One might also question its invocation of a species-wide identity and shared suffering.

16   Scranton has consistently articulated this position throughout his essays. For example, in "Raising a Daughter in a Doomed World", he states that "we're almost certainly going to botch" the challenge of climate change because it requires that we quickly and "radically reorient all human economic and social production" (Scranton 2018, p. 320).

17   Scranton takes the chapter's title from Heraclitus (p. 76).

18   And implicitly, one suspects, on Nietzsche.

19   Zacharias Szumer (2021) mentions Schopenhauer in an astute response to Scranton in "Existential Therapy", although I disagree with his characterisation of the former as an "existentialist".

20   Clearly these ideas raise several questions. For useful introductions, see Janaway (2002), *Schopenhauer*; Young (2005), *Schopenhauer*.

21   The importance of this passage for Scranton's thought might be reflected in the fact that it comes in the essay's peroration, and the essay is itself the last one in a collection of seventeen.

22   My version of the *Ethics* uses a slightly different translation (see Spinoza 1989, p. 186). For a helpful introduction to the text, see Lord (2010), *Spinoza's "Ethics"*.

23   For a concise discussion, see Nadler (2020), "Baruch Spinoza".

24   See also the valuable discussion of "Anthropocene monism" in Williston (2021), *Philosophy and the Climate Crisis*.

25   I use the gendered pronoun intentionally, as prominent climate pessimists tend to be male.

26   The recent turn in Euro-American thought to consider entanglement, interdependence, cosmopolitics, etc. has been criticised for ignoring the long history of Indigenous thought: see Hokowhitu (2021), "The Emperor's "New" Materialisms"; Todd (2016), "An Indigenous Feminist's Take".

27   See also Kothari et al. (2019), *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary*.

28   For indigenous activism, see Escobar (2020), *Pluriversal Politics*; Whyte (2016), "Indigenous Environmental Movements"; and the website of the Indigenous Environmental Network (2022).

29   Climate change has likely contributed to the recent resurgence of philosophical pessimism: see Mukherjee (2016) "Para-Religions".

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