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Thinking Like Losers: Failing and Mourning as Lost Dimensions of Environmentalism

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Abstract: For environmental thinkers of different stripes—from techno-scientific 'eco-pragmatists' to climate activists—the concept of human failure—whether psychological, moral, or spiritual—is at odds with the language of hope needed to generate meaningful action. As Clingerman's work on geo-engineering attests, failing to adequately meet the challenge of climate and ecological crisis is frequently expressed as a state to be overcome, through divine or human techno-scientific intervention. Against such a view, I want to propose failure as generative of environmental ethical thinking, particularly in times of mass extinction and irrecoverable ecological devastation. I do this by linking failure with two concepts that have become important to environmental humanities scholars: first, the concept of *mourning* as an ethical disposition (via the philosophies of Benjamin, Freud, and Derrida) that can foster more just, compassionate and sustainable ways of living. Second, inviting further interaction with Clingerman's work, I propose to link failure to the concept of *environmental hermeneutics*, by understanding language itself as a sign of human failure.

Keywords: failure, eco-mourning, eco-pragmatism, Freud, Benjamin, environmental hermeneutics

INTRODUCTION

T alking about failure is something of a taboo in environmentalist circles. I am not suggesting that people don't recognise human failings in the ecological crisis. Who wouldn't concede that the current assault on the Earth's biodiversity, for example, is underwritten by profound systemic, political and personal moral failures over the past century? I am thinking, rather, of

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failure as a condition—a profoundly existential, ethical and for some religious condition—that we should want to inhabit and understand more deeply, acknowledging its importance as the ground from which ethical deliberation happens. Environmental activists and scientists, by contrast, often treat failure as something to be overcome and mastered, either by correcting our distorted

perspectives, or through rectifying our previous failures via technological, scientific or political innovation. What might it mean to challenge that assumption; to think *with* failure as a condition of ethical reflection and action on the environment?

This article was inspired by two aspects of Forrest Clingerman's work that lend themselves uniquely to this proposition, and which provide starting points for my argument. The first is his analysis of discourses and values that underwrite arguments for geoengineering, and the theological resonance of much of that discourse. Inasmuch as geoengineering projects—large-scale techno-scientific interventions into the climate—promise to redeem or atone for the 'sins' of human actions, the idea of overcoming failure has become powerfully persuasive. Against this sort of leveraging of religious language, I will argue that failure ought not to be viewed as a condition to overcome either from a theological or ethical point of view. The second starting point is Clingerman's work in environmental hermeneutics, in particular the ethical potential of engaging with the environment metaphorically as reading the 'book of nature.' I suggest that this sort of appeal to language and narrativity also invites reflection on how *mourning* ecological loss frames our environmental ethics. I show this, for instance, in the way that our naming and cataloguing of the natural world can be a reminder of the impermanence and transience of things, a premonition of their loss through forgetting. Invoking Freud, Derrida and Benjamin, I will suggest that mourning thus represents a special kind of admission of failure that should be embraced as part of ethical deliberation. In opposition to those more sanguine and macho expressions of environmental action mentioned above—the promise of redeeming, atoning and mastering our mistakes—I will offer failure and mourning as ways to rethink moral responsibilities in times of planetary crisis.

FAILING

In his theological critique of geoengineering, Forrest Clingerman suggested that there may well be something theological about geoengineering itself:

> Insofar as it seeks to use our natural abilities of technological mediation to humanise the climate, geoengineering is the desire to fix the climate as habitable in ways that transcend the failures of humanity . . . *geoengineering is the technical means through which we 'play God' in order to transcend the limits of human givenness, and thus to take responsibility for the climate that transcends us.*[1]

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[1] . Forrest Clingerman, "Redeeming the Climate: Investigating a Theological Model of Geoengineering," in *Technofutures, Nature and the Sacred: Transdisciplinary Perspectives,* eds. Celia Deane-Drummond, Sigurd Bergmann, and Bronislaw Szerszynski (New York: Routledge, 2016), 188–189 [Italics from the original].

This statement, and the wider critique in which it appears, plays into an interest that we shared: geoengineering advocates, as with de-extinction and other techno-scientific interventions, like to employ religious terminologies of salvation, redemption, atonement and resurrection to provide rhetorical force to their arguments.[2] In this instance I am most interested in the way that "failure" takes on a new rhetorical significance by being described as analogous to sin and sinfulness. Geoengineering, according to its advocates, offers a chance "to be redeemed from the material conditions of our fallibility,"[3] appealing to secular and religious environmental ethical language alike. The metaphorical reference to sin and salvation reinforces the idea that such technologies can offer atonement to previous failings in human responsibility to the climate. For theologians, of course, the reference might be embraced as more than metaphorical. Some eco-theologians have suggested that naming acts of personal and institutional failure to protect the planet as sinful can add far greater moral weight than does the purely figurative or tongue-in-cheek references to 'sin' and 'wickedness' in secular environmental discourses.[4] Added to this is the appeal to what Christian ethicists call the 'co-creative' responsibility of humans alongside God. This references the scriptural creation narrative in which Adam is both involved in the corruption of nature, and its stewardship.[5] There are of course many ways in which such theological ethics may be applied. Their general emphasis on failure via narratives of sin and salvation, nevertheless, do seem to play into the secular techno-scientific equivalent of what is sometimes called "lifeboat theology,"[6] referring to belief in an imminent, eschatological rescue of the fallen human from its perilous earthly condition. The feminist philosopher of religion Grace Jantzen made this point in relation to the western obsession with the metaphor of salvation: "If we think in terms of salvation, then the human condition must be conceptualized as a problematic state, a state in

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[2] . Stefan Skrimshire, "Re-writing Mortality: A Theological Critique of Geoengineering and De-extinction," in *Theological and Ethical Perspectives on Climate Engineers: Calming the Storm,* eds. Forrest Clingerman and Kevin O'Brien (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2016), 103–26.

[3] . Clingerman, "Redeeming the Climate," 189.

[4] . See for instance Ernst Conradie, *Secular Discourse on Sin in the Anthropocene: What's Wrong with the World?* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020); Kevin O'Brien, *Confronting the Enemy: The Fossil Fuel Industry and the Power of Christian Climate Resistance* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2025).

[5] . See for instance Christopher Southgate, "The New Days of Noah? Assisted Migration in an Era of Climate Change," in *Creaturely Theology: On God, Humans and Other Animals,* eds. Celia Deane-Drummond and David Clough (London: SCM Press, 2009); Celia Deane-Drummond, "Joining in the Dance: Catholic Social Teaching and Ecology," *New Blackfriars* 93, no. 1044 (March 2012): 193–212.

[6] . Sophie Bjork-James, "Lifeboat Theology: White Evangelicalism, Apocalyptic Chronotopes, and Environmental Politics," *Ethnos* 88, no. 2 (2020): 330–50.

which human beings need urgent rescue, or calamity will befall."[7] 'Playing God' through salvific technologies is a rhetorically powerful turn of phrase not just because it deifies the promise of technology, but because it confirms and atones for the intolerable failures of sinful human nature.

Whilst geoengineering ethics is not the focus of this article, it is a good example of how failure has been broadly conceived in discourses surrounding environmental responsibility via technological and economic solutions. Clingerman considers—with justifiable suspicion—the defense of geoengineering as the benign rectification of an otherwise errant human nature. In its most sanguine of justifications the 'playing God' argument can easily tend towards a divinization of human dominance *over* nature rather than an admission of (past) failure, and a commitment to playing a more conscientious part in its stewardship going forward. In this regard one thinks most obviously of Stewart Brand, pioneer of early environmentalism in the USA and self-styled 'eco-pragmatist' through his early endorsement and development of nuclear energy, genetically modified organisms and genetic de-extinction technologies. One critic summarizes eco-pragmatism as an endorsement of neoliberal "hard-nosed and business-like solutions to address rapid climate change."[8] Brand is of particular interest here because of his keen appetite for the sorts of religious metaphor mentioned above—most famously, the belief that "we are as gods and have to get good at it"—also because eco-pragmatists (and what I have elsewhere called techno-utopianism) assume a normative stance towards failure that both continues to be influential on wider environmental discourse.[9] Human failings are invoked by eco-pragmatists to justify large-scale, neoliberal planetary projects as means to redeem such failures in a way that is analogous to the theological rationale for atonement. In the Christian doctrine of atonement (the logical account by which medieval theologians explained the sacrifice of Jesus: to balance the scales of justice in response to human sin) the scale of the sin justifies the magnitude of the retroactive action of grace. As St. Anselm put it, "recompense should be proportional to the size of the sin."[10]

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[7] . Grace Jantzen, "Feminism and Flourishing: Gender and Metaphor in Feminist Theology," *Feminist Theology* 4, no. 10 (1995): 81–101.

[8] . Timothy Luke, "Climate Change and Decarbonization" in *Limits to Terrestrial Extraction,* ed.
R. Kirsch (New York: Routledge, 2020).

[9] . Stewart Brand, *Whole Earth Discipline: An Ecopragmatist Manifesto* (London: Atlantic Books, 2009), 1. Stefan Skrimshire, *Faith in the End: Eschatology for Times of Extinction* (New York: Fordham University Press, forthcoming).

[10] . St. Anselm, "Why God Became Man," *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies, G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2008), 260–356.

This is not the place to analyse the appeal to failure via the logic of sin and atonement in Christian theology (though I believe such work to be important) beyond noting the strong rhetorical appeal of that association to western audiences.[11] My interest here is with the function of failure in forms of ethical deliberation and political strategy. It is not only eco-pragmatist and neo-liberal articulations of failure that provide foil to my appraisal of that concept. I make the foregoing comments against a presumption that I believe has operated in much environmental activist literature, too. The presumption, that is, that the task of environmental activism, not unlike the logic behind geo-engineering advocacy above, is to overcome the *past* failures of human actions and so present an alternative and hopeful path to *future* actions. 'Failure' here has value insofar as it prompts actions to avoid it. In environmental campaign rhetoric of the past couple of decades there has often been an interest in speaking not only in the past tense—what wrongs to the planet can be attributed to humans—but also more increasingly the future perfect tense: imagining what wrongs *will have been done* if we continue the paths that we are on.

Consider as an example the rhetoric employed in the 2009 docufiction climate change film *The Age of Stupid.* Pete Postlethwaite plays a fictional archivist from the future, who, looking through reels of footage of flooding, hurricanes and general devastation, asks: "We could have saved ourselves, but we didn't. It's amazing. What state of mind were we in, to face extinction and simply shrug it off?"[12] 2009, the year of the film's release, was a key turning point for climate campaigners, given how much rhetorical and tactical investment there was in the COP 15 meeting in Copenhagen that year to influence political stakeholders. Social movement theorists perceive Copenhagen as the moment that the systemic failure of climate negotiation became widely accepted. That is, campaign organizations acknowledged that coalition-based, civil society lobbying of politicians of the sort encapsulated in the sentiment of "hopenhagen" had definitively failed, forcing activism into more grassroots political interventions.[13] If that was a turning point in public discourses of hope and failure in the environmental movement, then the film appeared just before this turn. The film's directors evidently wanted the film

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[11] . A related concern shared by both environmental ethicists and theologians is the structural similarity of international carbon offsetting schemes and Net-Zero strategies as forms of penary indulgences. See James Currall, "Net Zero: Useful Target or Unhelpful Distraction?" *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 24, no. 2 (2024): 161–185.

[12] . Fanny Armstrong (writer and director), *The Age of Stupid* (Spanner Films, 2009).

[13] . J. de Moor, "The 'Efficacy Dilemma' of Transnational Climate Activism: The Case of COP21," *Environmental Politics* 27, no. 6 (2017): 1079–1100; Mark Maslin, Lang J and Harvey F. "A Short History of the Successes and Failures of the International Climate Change Negotiations," *UCL Open Environment* 5 (2023): e059.

to galvanize a generation of climate activists. For them, the thought of future grief is meant to shock us into action. We don't *want to have* failed, goes this logic, and such desire—for not having failed—will redouble our efforts at averting catastrophe.

This notion of future perfect failure employs a logic taken to a metaphysical level by the philosopher Jean-Pierre Dupuy. In his "enlightened catastrophism" thesis, Dupuy argues that to take the environmental crisis with requisite seriousness, we must not only imagine that humans will fail to prevent planetary disaster, but to assume the reality of that very future we would avoid—in other words, to assume a catastrophic future is already determined *because of* our failures. Only in the face of such "reality," thinks Dupuy, will humans now, in the real present, act to paradoxically avert the fate that is their destiny.[14]

I have critiqued Dupuy's thesis elsewhere, disagreeing with its characterization of climate crisis as an "event" in the future comparable with that of a nuclear strike or tsunami.[15] Here, I want to critique that wider presumption of the function of failure in which it takes part. I want to ask: what if the important message to give environmental activists today is not to motivate the avoidance of failure, but articulating how to inhabit their present and future failures as the starting point for ethical action, the sphere in which action can be considered meaningful? In my reference above to social movement theory, failure is discussed in the timeline of climate campaign strategies. It is conceived, however, as the failure of a particular political strategy (in the case of Copenhagen, the failure of deliberative international climate negotiations) rather than failure as the starting point for thinking about *all* political strategies. It is true that failure is sometimes discussed approvingly by activist scholars as a form of resistance to the "neoliberal notion of productivity" that is easily reinforced in activist cultures (via the pressure to define what counts as "effective" activism for instance).[16] But even these sorts of appraisal do so to reconceive how failure can be socially generative, for instance, of greater solidarity between activists, or learning from mistakes. Whereas I am wanting to advocate for a form of acknowledgement of failure as an important basis for assuming moral responsibility and a form of spiritual humility.

A related concern about the uses of failure is that it becomes easy to conflate failures that reflect features of human action that seem intractable

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[14] . Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *Pour un catastrophisme éclairé* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2004)

[15] . Skrimshire, *Faith in The End.*

[16] . Agata Lisiak, "Making Something out of Nothing: On Failure and Hope in Community Activism and Research," in *Studying Diversity, Migration and Urban Multiculture: Convivial Tools*

with those which seem more worthy of moral judgment in the way that ethics normally requires. For instance, Clingerman's citation with which I began raises unanswered questions about whether and how one might discriminate between forms of failure—those that are rectifiable, for instance, from those which are intractable, tragic, and 'given' features of human nature (a fraught concept, to be sure) or human institutions. Note, for example, that the juxtaposition of the two references in the Clingerman citation with which I began, to "transcendence," has the effect of equating, whether intentionally or not, "failures of humanity" with "limits of human givenness." However, clearly these types of failure are not alike. We can talk about a general human propensity to fail because of limitations in reasoning and intractable aspects of the moral problem but also failures that are avoidable and linked to very particular moral responsibilities.

These concerns are central to recent discussions in environmental ethics. In *Overshoot* (2024)*,* Andreas Malm and Wim Carton are careful to distinguish failures of the international community to meet its own carbon emissions targets (the now near-consensus acknowledgment amongst the climate science community that we have failed to prevent the critical boundary of a 1.5°C temperature rise), from the failures of political imagination that prevent us from still taking needed action (dismantling the fossil fuel infrastructure) to save many millions of lives due to increasing temperatures.[17] Whilst one expression of human failure would include those actions for which we would want to continue to condemn particular humans on morally established grounds (e.g., the actions of fossil fuel industries in light of clear and known information about climate change), then, others could appeal to those aspects of climate change that have prompted ethicists to designate it a "wicked" moral problem. Wicked problems are those that have "no formal solution because they have no definitive formulation, often because they involve puzzling information, multiple

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for Research and Practice, eds. Mette Louise Berg and Magdalena Nowicka (London: University College London, 2019).

17. Andreas Malm and Wim Carton, *Overshoot: How the World Surrendered to Climate Breakdown* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2024).

scales, and stakeholder debates over what the problem means."[17] Whilst not necessarily absolving individuals of responsibility, the designation of a wicked moral problem (alongside Gardiner's well known formulation of a "perfect

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[17] . Willis Jenkins, "The Turn to Virtue in Climate Ethics," *Environmental Ethics* 38, no. 1 (2016): 77–96 at 39.

moral storm"[18]) makes a claim about human agential, political, psychological and affective failures to comprehend and act upon the severity of the climate crisis as an important starting point for addressing what can and cannot be done.

Some ethicists warn that introducing tragedy into discussions runs the very serious risk of absolving people of their ongoing responsibilities to reduce harm. The danger is that if we interpret a too 'thick' account of human failures—failure that is unavoidable either at a personal level (e.g.. because of some aspect of 'human nature' that is always bound to fail), or at a systemic level (because of the wicked nature of the problem as described above), then we get humans off the hook; failure is inevitable. Matthew McLellan makes this point about the dangerous power of tragic narratives, in relation to the often misunderstood 'tragedy of the commons' argument. Inaction on climate change is tragic precisely when action is warranted, but believed to be futile. Tragedy "thrives on the inability of the protagonist to alter the dominant rationality that is driving him or her toward the inevitable abyss, and it thrives on the stubborn refusal to make fundamental change when change is needed most."[19] Caution is required, then, in thinking about failure, lest we assume too thick an account of its inevitability. Similarly, caution is required in criticizing attempts—such as geo-engineering—to 'play God', lest that argument be used to endorse a tragic, fatalist acceptance of the situation that geo-engineering is proposed to alleviate.

A more nuanced approach to failure, taking the above caution into account, might see it as an important place to begin re-thinking our responsibilities in the light of systemic social, political and planetary failures. For instance, Dale Jamieson, perhaps the most pessimistic amongst recent climate ethicists, includes a presumption of systemic human failure in his 2014 book *Reason in Dark Times: Why the Struggle Against Climate Change Failed and What it Means for Our Future*.[20] Whilst his explanations for *why* the struggle failed at individual, social, and international levels can be debated, essentially what such arguments represent is an appeal to take failure as a systemic condition from which the attempt to think ethically about climate change ought to begin. Jamieson's motivation for beginning from failure is, in part, one of pragmatic redirection of our moral attention. Admitting failure allows us to think more clearly about how one ought to live well in a world created *by* that very failure.

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[18] . Stephen Gardiner, *A Perfect Moral Storm: The Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[19] . Matthew MacLellan, "The Tragedy of Limitless Growth: Re-Interpreting the Tragedy of the Commons for a Century of Climate Change," *Environmental Humanities* 7, no. 1 (2016): 41–58.

[20] . Dale Jamieson, *Reason in Dark Times: Why the Struggle Against Climate Change Failed and What it Means for Our Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

As for Malm and Carton, admitting a history of climate "defeat" by the neoliberal elites should be the starting point for activists to delegitimize the social order that *allowed* that defeat. De-legitimize, that is, by dismantling the infrastructure that continues to profit from climate catastrophe.

It seems clear from the foregoing that failure is finding an important place in ethical and cultural analysis of climate and ecological crises. For instance, the re-positioning of ethical language along lines of failure, limitation and humility is finding strong resonance with scholars and activists who talk about near-term ecological and social collapse as all but inevitable.[21] When engaging with such discourses it seems to me that we must think of failure as doing more than simply providing a management of expectations, a 'this is where we start' appeal to activists jaded by years of false optimism. It might also, for instance, be an important companion to thinking about *virtue.* As Willis Jenkins puts it (summarizing the positions of other ethicists here—Gardiner and Latour in particular), our responsibility might be thought to lie in acknowledging the impossibility of responsibility in the traditional ethical sense, given its "wicked" status as defined above.)~We can thus exercise "integrity . . . (by) bearing witness to humanity's failure." Or, we might think that the purpose of climate ethics is now to "help agents find meaning amidst failure."[22] In these expressions, climate failure is being invoked alongside that of tragedy as a basis for leveraging the renewed importance of certain virtues. In the face of intractable and now irreversible failures, we should foster virtues of humility, courage and love to better confront the challenges that are the result of our human failures to prevent climate catastrophe.[23]

How might this more ethically generative sense of failure be leveraged more effectively against the concept of failure I critiqued above in relation to geoengineering and eco-pragmatism? Clearly more work is needed in the light of the *aversion* towards failure represented by the sorts of techno-scientific hubris of which Brand seems representative.

MOURNING

To begin to think differently about, and with, failure, let us consider its relationship to another concept that has become a focus of the environmental humanities and extinction studies in particular: that of mourning.[24] In the

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[21] . I critique collapse narratives, and what I see as an uncritical adoption of "death preparedness" spirituality, in Skrimshire, *Faith in The End: Eschatology for Times of Extinction* (Fordham University Press, forthcoming).

[22] . Jenkins, "The Turn to Virtue," 80.

[23] . Jenkins, "The Turn to Virtue," 82.

[24] . A couple of the earliest examples were Thom Van Dooren, "Mourning Crows: Grief and Extinction in a Shared World," in *Routledge Handbook of Human-Animal Studies,* eds. Gary

examples of both eco-pragmatism and campaign rhetoric cited above, a sense of moral imperative arising from climate failures is separated from mourning since, *were we in* a position to mourn, the negative prophecy *would not have* done its job—it would be too late. Mourning and grief are affective dimensions of ecological loss that, certainly for proponents of techno-scientific responses to climate change, function as warnings rather than ethical frameworks in themselves. This is also true for the attempt to 'resurrect' lost species via genetic de-extinction techniques, attempting to bring back extinct species as a sort of atonement for our ecological sins. For de-extinction advocates the connection between failing and mourning is emphatically in the negative. Stewart Brand once again looms large here. In the environmental humanities community, Brand is best known as the person that provided a rallying for all biotech and geoengineering solutions when he said, in a widely circulated TED talk about de-extinction, "don't mourn—organize!"[25] Mourning here means not acting, or *failing to act,* and is morally inadmissible for eco-pragmatists. These salvific technologies offer humans a chance to spare themselves from acts of mourning and start the work of redemption.

I wonder whether Brand foresaw how widely his "don't mourn—organize!" would be shared by environmental philosophers, wishing not only to pour scorn on it, but also to articulate its reverse logic. Where "organize" signifies (as I have suggested) a reduction of environmental ethics to the sorts of managerial hubris that characterize projects of de-extinction, thinkers in environmental humanities have offered its reverse: *mourn, don't organize!*[26] Ecological mourning, such thinkers insist, is no invitation to passive hand wringing. It is, for many philosophers within that field, the missing element of an ethics of care for human and more than human others in an increasingly interdependent world of loss. In mourning for lost species, habitats, or ecologies, I acknowledge the extent to which I am connected to them and changed by their loss. As Clifton Spargo and Judith Butler argued in different ways, mourning can be considered an ethical practice to the extent that it makes a public claim (often against the cultural norms) about that which is

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Marvin and Susan McHugh (New York: Routledge 2014); Ashlee Cunsolo Willox, "Climate Change as the Work of Mourning," *Ethics and the Environment* 17, no. 2 (2012): 137–64.

[25] . Carole Cadwalladr, "Stewart Brand's Whole Earth Catalog, the Book that Changed the World," *The Observer* May 5, 2013, accessed February 27, 2025. https://www.theguardian.com/ books/2013/may/05/stewart-brand-whole-earth-catalog.

[26] . Andrew Mark, "Don't Organize, Mourn: Environmental Loss and Musicking," *Ethics and the Environment* 21, no. 2 (2016): 51–77.

grievable and thus at the center of our concerns— to continue to be affected by that which one is often culturally and politically prohibited from doing.[27]

What might it mean to think about mourning ecological failures as an ethical act? Rather than embracing the macho logic of opposition to mourning which we saw in expressions of eco-pragmatism, an ethics of mourning means being affected by the losses brought about by failures, and thus moved to action. Mourning can be understood as an important step in taking responsibility for the world that is left behind in the wake of loss. In the same way that loss of life is acknowledged as "grievable" as an act of solidarity that it is important to foster for present and future relations, so loss experienced via acknowledging (climate) failure can constitute an ethical basis for acting with greater humility and caution in the present. I have made a similar argument regarding the value of public confession (of one's sins against the planet) as a mode of ethical commitment, through being held publicly to account for one's responsibilities both to the past and to the future.[28]

Some account of how mourning is being theorized is useful here, since it is not obvious how it escapes the logic of rescue and salvation. When articulating the ethical value of eco-mourning in this way—that is, by emphasizing grief as an important affective precondition of being affected *by* or, "undone" by the loss of the other—scholars often cite Freud's famous essay "Mourning and Melancholia." In his classic distinction both phenomena are described as painful reactions to loss and withdrawal from the world. However, of the two, only mourning allows a process of eventual overcoming of that loss and a recovery of attachments. Melancholia is the *inability* to let the work of mourning take its course—for the ego to be released back to libidinal investment. It works deeply: the melancholic 'fails' because she or he identifies with the lost object itself and, in a splitting of the ego, produces *both* narcissistic obsession with the object, *and* self-loathing as a way of punishing the object for its failings. The self becomes a surrogate for the lost object. And this inability to take a "reality check" —to acknowledge the reality of loss, in other words—produces attachment and self-destruction, the very opposite of what the environmental activist wants to cultivate. The task of the activist, for instance in the vein of Joanna Macy's Buddhist "work that reconnects"[29] philosophy that was so popular amongst a generation of environmental activists, is to *successfully mourn*: to liberate a sphere of action, born of

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[27] . Clifton Spargo, *The Ethics of Mourning: Grief and Responsibility in Elegiac Literature* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 2004); Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: the Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2004).

[28] . Stefan Skrimshire, "Confessing Anthropocene," *Environmental Humanities* 10, no. 1 (2018): 310–29.

[29] . "Work that Reconnects," *Work that Reconnects Network*, accessed March 29, 2025. https://workthatreconnects.org/.

sadness but motivated towards what lives on, in the form of reattachment to the world. Melancholia is the failure to undergo this journey, to remain stuck in despair and inaction.

However, doesn't this attitude reconfirm the position on failure I have wanted to critique, i.e., a state that one works through, overcomes, and is liberated for action on the other side? Freud's articulation of these two conditions as binary and opposed, is often overplayed. In a later study, *The Id and the Ego,* Freud justified the subject's melancholic and narcissistic identification with a lost object as a necessary stage on the way to becoming a subject and did not speak so clinically about it in terms of pathology. Failure here is not an ethical dead-end, but an act of humility that enlivens us to the ethical duties of the present. Loss can be understood as a precondition for acting, and even of insight. For instance, Freud concedes later in his essay that the Melancholic "has a keener eye for the truth than other people who are not melancholic . . . We only wonder why a man has to be ill before he can be accessible to a truth of this kind."[30]

In contrast to this ambiguity over the relationship between mourning and melancholia, a more fruitful insight to be gleaned from Freud can be found in a lesser known, and earlier essay, "On Transience." Freud recounts the story of a walk in the countryside with two friends who discuss whether one could still enjoy the beauty of the natural world at the same time as being conscious of its "proneness to decay." Freud was fascinated by the inability of his friends to see in the transience of objects of love more grounds for loving them. "Transience value" says Freud, "is scarcity value in time."[31] His friends were, he concluded, displaying a "revolt" against loss through anticipatory mourning. Since mourning a loss is painful, the knowledge that something shall one day die can provoke resistance to becoming attached in the first place. His essay is thought to reflect mostly on the loss of civilization threatened by the First World War. The foregoing qualification of Freud's theory has been an important clarification for scholars in environmental humanities who want to think with the ethical value of melancholia *as well as* mourning as generative ethical categories.[32] It is also an illuminating approach to what I want to say about the value of thinking with failure. For such thinkers

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[30] . Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, *Volume XIV (1914–1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works* (New York: Vintage Classics, Reprint edition, 2001), 237–58, 246.

[31] . Sigmund Freud, "On Transience," in *Freud's Requiem: Mourning, Memory and the Invisible History of a Summer's Walk,* ed. Matthew von Unwerth (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005), 216.

[32] . Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, "Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies," *Literature and Environment* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

there is a problem with encouraging our contemporary attitudes towards "normal versus pathological" behavior in situations of loss, and viewing the inability to "move on"—or avoid failure—in the context of ecological loss as detrimental to ethical engagement. Arguably, that sentiment is most powerfully present in the rallying cry of Stewart Brand we considered above, and thus characteristic of the techno-scientific offer of solutions to loss and failure rather than an appeal to overcome them. My argument has been that it is precisely an embracing of failure—alongside an ethics of mourning/melancholia—that liberates the ethical imagination in times of ecological loss.

FAILING WORDS: HERMENEUTICAL MOURNING

There is a further connection that can be made between failure and mourning that might help my analysis here. It draws upon a rich philosophical literature on mourning whose focus is language; the linguistic, narrative, and interpretive frameworks in which we engage with the natural world. Turning our attention to language is not as surprising as it might seem, given its relation to another focus of Clingerman's research: environmental hermeneutics. At the heart of environmental hermeneutics is a claim that the natural world is always mediated. One always already interprets the natural world via an explanatory framework.[33] In Clingerman's work this has been explored through the viability of returning to the metaphor of the "book of nature" to re-vitalize and re-energize our ways of appreciating the phenomenology place. Appealing to the 'book of nature' as a way to conceptualize the natural world and our place in it draws explicitly on the concept of finitude and human limitation:

> Our experiences of (the natural world) are ensnared by the ways that we perceive, think, and interpret them. When we experience and put into words the unfolding narrative—accepting that we always already sense nature's narrativity with our experience of it—we must accept the limitations imposed by the inevitable finitude of our interpretation.[34]

For Clingerman, this is an important reminder that we must resist the "calculative, reductionistic" mode of apprehending the natural world that is the legacy of modernity. Thinking further with that contrast, I think that a hermeneutic approach can also emphasize finitude and limit by reminding us about the essential and unavoidable *failures* of language, whether through text or spoken word. The finite and transient nature of language thus presents a

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[33] . Forrest Clingerman et al., *Interpreting Nature: The Emerging Field of Environmental Hermeneutics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

[34] . Forrest Clingerman, "Reading the Book of Nature: A Hermeneutical Account of Nature for Philosophical Theology," *Worldviews Environment Culture Religion* 13, no. 1 (2009): 72–91.

further dimension —theologically and philosophically informed—that can help us think about failure and mourning as ethically generative because it is our unavoidable framework and starting point for engaging with the natural world. We might begin with the stark fact that one of the ways that we experience extinctions is through the loss of meaning of words. Extinction studies increasingly links the experience of loss of biodiversity with the loss of knowledge and words for the things that are erased. It is a mourning captured by Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) which sums up this connection with a typically harrowing reflection on memorialization as both a ritual, and a conceptual problem:

> *He'd had this feeling before, beyond the numbness and the dull despair. The world shrinking down about a raw core of possible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever.*[35]

Naming is here closely tied to memory—and therefore the possibility of the failure of memory or *forgetting*: the comparison of litanies and recitations to the dying embers of a fire. We are here presented with an interestingly different perspective on the human as "co-creator" in religious biblical narratives mentioned at the start of this essay. In McCarthy's narrative, the power evoked by naming is inseparable from the belief about what makes humans so godlike: co-creative with the creator in our naming of things.

How does this shed light on our exploration of failure and mourning? In his 1916 essay *On Language As Such,* Walter Benjamin discussed the philosophical significance of the Genesis creation narrative in which Adam is given the responsibility of naming the animals.[36] According to Benjamin, a contrast is highlighted between the original naming act of God who calls things by their "proper names," and the naming task given to Adam. Adam's act of naming the things of the natural world operates under a sign of finitude and limitation. After the fall, language is transformed from an act of pure revelation to one of unavoidable misunderstanding. God's naming, by contrast, comes prior to any sense of knowledge, and to the use of language as control. But after the fall from Eden, a world in which God curses the ground, Adam's naming of things is tragic because it is always at one remove from the essence of things. Neither humanity nor nature can return to its state of blissful harmony.

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[35] . Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (London: Picador, 2006), 93.

[36] . Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," in *One-way Street, and Other Writings,* trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Verso, 1979), 107–23.

For Benjamin this becomes an insight into the 'fallen' nature of translation. Words always fail us. Language is never complete, never whole, the pure translation of an original; it is always transmitting loss and alienation. This is not only humanity's tragedy. For Benjamin, Adam and the natural world are in solidarity of a mutual impossibility of actualizing themselves. Nature's tragedy is that it is "mute" and in the fallen world cries out to man to name it. Hence for Benjamin the intimate relationship between melancholy and language or, what is the same thing for him, the *mournful* nature of man's act of naming things. They are "overnamed," which means that the act attempts at over-precision, perhaps in an attempt to control and dominate the world of things: "Overnaming . . . (is) the linguistic being of melancholy."[37]

Benjamin's insight into the tragic nature of language as prefiguring loss is taken up by Derrida in a way that has provided even more direct relevance for environmental philosophers, and which sheds further light on my appeal to failure as ethically generative. In *L'Animal que Donc Je Suis* (2006) Derrida says that the act of naming *any* being evokes that thing's future death, after which the memory or recitation of their name will outlive their life, appearing as a ghost. The act of naming animals in particular takes on particular significance because—echoing Benjamin—it is already an act of distancing and separation of the human from the non-human. In this double sense, the naming of things in the natural world can be seen as an act of mourning, or lament. Naming reveals a basically mournful structure to humanity's relationship to the natural world. Of course, naming things does not itself necessarily imply moral fault in the way that we think of anthropogenic extinctions. We do not cause something to go extinct simply by the act of naming and forgetting. The mournful nature of naming nevertheless can serve as a reminder to us of our shared fragility and continued responsibility to keep things alive—metaphorically in the sense of alive in our memories and words, and literally in the sense of defending fellow creatures' lives and lifeways.

We can thus return to our discussion of an ethics of mourning as a way to think generatively with failure, with this focus on language and hermeneutics. As Joshua Trey Barnett has argued, "naming prefigures grievability and, thus, contains the seeds of care and concern which undergird compassionate, ethical relations."[38] By thinking about our responses to irrecoverable ecological losses such as the violent erasure of species, peoples and cultures, acknowledging a quintessentially human act of failing might be conceived not as a sin to be overcome (as eco-modernist techno-science would have us believe), but as a

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[37] . Benjamin, "On Language," 73.

[38] . J. T. Barnett, "Naming, Mourning, and the Work of Earthly Coexistence," *Environmental Communication* 13, no. 3 (2019): 287–99.

precondition of humility from which our acts of naming, engaging and valuing the natural world must spring.

Perhaps, then, we might say that a recognition of failure (to preserve those things we love) is part of the 'work' of mourning *(trauer arbeit)*: "work is aimed at presenting the object, giving it a voice and consequently redeeming it."[39] Redemption here does not mean bringing something back to life, de-extinction Lazarus-style, or saving it geo-engineering style, but rather rendering the object present through preserving the presence of death in our midst. It is—typically for Benjamin—an appeal to redemption that is not linearly eschatological in the form of the life-boat theology mentioned above, appealing to hope as a brighter future state of things. Rather, redemption serves as a "rescue" of those losses past and present from oblivion, by our acts of remembrance and attention to them.

CONCLUSION

The title of this article borrows from Malcolm Bull's *Anti-Nietzsche*,[40] which invites us to 'think like losers' as the only viable alternative to the implications of a Nietzschean ethic of domination over others, ourselves, and our planet. Nietzsche (or rather, the uses of Nietzsche) is in some ways an apt voice with which to conclude this reflection, since for him, aversion to failure is a condition for any reconceived (or in Nietzsche's own terms "revaluated") notion of the "ethical" life. Though of course it is a highly contested position,[41] many have interpreted his scathing attack on western Christian values of meekness and self-sacrifice—"slave morality"—as an assumption that their opposite—domination and self-assertion—were the only ways to overcome, or at least arrest, the forces of nihilism. But in these times of Anthropocene ruin, in which the mark of human self-assertion and domination are the prospect of planetary catastrophe, surely the task is indeed, as Bull argues, to side with the downtrodden, and to "think like losers."

Against the language of salvation, redemption, and 'winning the war on climate change,' we can offer human failing and its link to mourning, as the starting point for ethical action today. To be human might mean to mourn in advance the certainty of our failing to live up to human existence on our own terms. Claire Colebrook, writing about extinction, associated failure with Giorgio Agamben's notion of "impotentiality" in precisely this way:

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[39] . Illit Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 15.

[40] . Malcolm Bull, *Anti-Nietzsche* (New York: Verso, 2011).

[41] . From an alternative and more affirmative use of Nietzsche in relation to environmental ethics, see William Connolly, *Facing the Planetary: Entangled Humanism and the Politics of Swarming* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), especially chapter six.

There has always been a sense of the human capacity for failing to be human. We can lose ourselves—extinguish ourselves—because we are nothing more than potentiality . . . The fact that we forget our *impotentiality*—that we treat humans as factual beings with a normality that dictates action—has reached crisis point in modernity, especially as we increasingly suspend the *thought* of our fragility for the sake of ongoing efficiency.[42]

To return to the analysis with which we began, then: for Clingerman, making decisions about whether and to what extent we may 'play God' in trying to fix the climate requires a nuanced appreciation, for which he argues theology is uniquely positioned to help, of the myriad ways in which human being is already shaped by its affecting the climate.[43] Clearly there is no return to an innocent state in which humans did *not* constantly intervene into planetary affairs. And we ought to be wary of the temptation to dismiss as hubris *any* sort of moral intervention to rectify mistakes, of course. Clingerman was aware of this temptation. Religious and ethical assessments of geoengineering, he suggested, have tended to side with the "presumptive argument" against *any* kinds of climate engineering. Those critics have assumed that in doing so the "limitation and arrogance" that taint all such efforts are not simply the result of good intentions turning bad. Limitation, and therefore failure, constitute a theological anthropology in such arguments; they are in essence "what it means to be human."[44] The anti-geo-engineering position there is thought to assume an "un/natural" position for human existence, in which any attempt to play God by interfering with natural processes is not only a strategic mistake, but theologically speaking, sinful. Counterarguments to such a position are by now well-rehearsed by theologians. They include Clingerman's own suggestion that human existence is better understood as occupying a space between co-creator with the divine and fallible mortal existence, bound by its finite limitations. We might add Peter Scott's analysis of human existence as a "postnatural" condition, neither able to retrieve an innocent position of nature as unpolluted by human actions, nor able to assume the confident guarantee of nature's good future through acts of (technological) domination. Rather, a balance is needed: "the human as the self-conscious, fragmented balance of capability and fallibility."[45]

Thus, we ought to temper such 'no way back to nature' attitudes with an embrace of the notion that humans are marked by their own failures to shape,

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[42] . Claire Colebrook, *Death of the Posthuman: Essays on Extinction vol. 1* (Michigan: Open Humanities Press, 2014), 12–13.

[43] . Forrest Clingerman, "Geoengineering, Theology, and the Meaning of Being Human," *Zygon* 49, no. 1 (2014): 6–21.

[44] . Clingerman, "Geoengineering," 10.

[45] . Clingerman, "Geoengineering," 16.

hold on to, and protect, that which they love. How much has the language of survival, and the equally controversial concept of resilience, replaced a notion of subjectivity, resistance and flourishing alongside loss? And how might embracing the condition of human failure instead help to emphasize humility and responsibility in environmental ethical thought? The classical Freudian distinction is that mourning is a time-bound process of letting go of loss, and melancholia a permanent state of loss. This alternative conception of failure therefore allows there to be overlap, or an acknowledgment that losses give us 'remains' that constitute not only the possibility of subjectivity within present failure, but also perhaps a forgiveness for the failures of the present and the future.