

# Existentialism and the Anthropocene: An Appraisal of Two Humanisms

Rahul Pillai  
Indian Institute of Technology Madras, India

**Abstract** This paper reframes environmental problems, moving from a crisis of habitability to a problem of ethics, and thus suggests the possibility of creating grounded, subjective politics within the seemingly intractable Anthropocene. To this end, the paper juxtaposes Roy Scranton’s *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* with Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Ethics of Ambiguity* in order to critically examine Scranton’s “philosophical humanism” as a distorted mirror of existentialist “ethical humanism”. Focusing on death and existentialism as central themes, the paper offers a comparison of their conceptions of humanist meaningfulness – conceived as an affect of transcendental capacities in the case of Scranton, and as everyday acts of freedom in de Beauvoir’s philosophy.

**Keywords** Existentialism. Anthropocene. Ethics. Humanism. Death.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 The Climate of the Anthropocene. – 3 The ‘Learning to Die’ Project. – 4 The Question of Freedom. – 5 A Reframing Through Violence. – 6 By Way of a Conclusion.



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## 1 Introduction

In Murakami's (2003, 69-90) short story "Thailand", Nimit, a mysterious chauffeur, tells Tatsuki, a doctor on a spiritual getaway, that she has spent enough time thinking about life; now she must give her due to death (86-7). Roy Scranton comes across a similar suggestion while reading Tsunetomo's *Hagakure*: "Meditation on inevitable death should be performed daily" (Scranton 2015, 7). In Tatsuki's case, death as the ultimate question arrives noiselessly in her journey of interiority; in Scranton's, it resonates loudly with the destruction and danger that surrounds him in a war-torn Baghdad. Both are deeply personal moments, as any reflection on one's mortality is bound to be. Yet, while *Thailand* retains this tenor, Scranton shifts his register to a different scale. In a deft move, Scranton asks, what if we were to extrapolate this question to a larger stage, where mortality looms over us as a species in the form of the climate crisis and think of death as a civilisation? What can our ever-present but now accelerated and impending transience as a species tell us about how we have lived and how we are to live? For Scranton, the task before us is much the same as what Nimit tells Tatsuki; as the title of his tracts suggests, it is in *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*.

Ever since its inception in geological sciences at the turn of the century as a term indicating the pervasive influence of human systems on planetary processes, the Anthropocene has expanded outwards rapidly to become a cross-disciplinary concern. There is, of course, considerable irony in that the humanities have had a relatively minor voice in this proliferation, considering the conceptual implications of the arrival of an 'age of humans'. As Noel Castree (2014) argues, the disciplinary engagement of the humanities with the Anthropocene has mostly focused on inward conceptual possibilities and revisions rather than outward 'engaged-analysis'. Roy Scranton's text is not an outlier to this schema; his proposal of a "philosophical humanism" performs the same tasks of an "inventor-discloser" and "deconstructor-critic". This is to say that while it engages with the Anthropocene, it ultimately remains fixated on disciplinary ends. It is, however, a peculiar text in that, one, it turns toward humanist possibilities at a time when the Anthropocene is seen to have all but thoroughly validated antihumanist perspectives (Ferrando 2016), and two, it does so through a modernist faith in human exceptionalism and technological optimism. Part of the attempt of this paper is to critically lay out how the humanism conceived in Scranton's text treads this curious line, specifically how it attempts to bridge the personal and the collective interestingly in an ethical project for a time of environmental collapse. I contend that despite its existentialist framing, Scranton's program remains bereft of any substantive, grounded imagination of human agency. I argue that employing

the motif of death to pose the Anthropocene as an existential problem ultimately leads him to dilute his emancipatory project vis-à-vis capitalist modernity by placing faith in transcendental possibilities rather than transformative ones. To pose the Anthropocene problem differently, I suggest that it may be worthwhile to look at alternative accounts of ethical subjectivity.

Simone de Beauvoir's ideations in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* are particularly useful in this regard as her notion of ambiguity allows us to reformulate the Anthropocene subject as marked by a dilemmatic agency of being caught between one's apparently insurgent species-being and the practical limits of sustainability, that then invites resolution through transcendence as we see in reading Scranton. The key difference, however, is that for Beauvoir, it is precisely this ambiguity that we need to embrace. Rather than speaking of agency as a problem of either having the capacity to act freely or not, existentialists like Beauvoir suggest that the real question before a subject is to think through the freedom we always already possess.

By articulating freedom as a constant, substantive action that speaks reflexively to the ambiguity of our existence without needing to resolve it, she places it firmly as an ethical category. This conception of subjectivity, I argue, is greatly useful in developing grounded political counterprojects that humanistic programs like Scranton's lack and in reframing the Anthropocene as a concern of life rather than habitability. The purpose of bringing these two texts together critically, then, is not to present a rejection of humanism but to reaffirm the need for a more rigorous humanist imagination in relation to the climate crisis.

## 2 The Climate of the Anthropocene

That Roy Scranton approaches the Anthropocene from the very outset as a philosophical question of death is not particularly noteworthy in a context where it is seen as a crisis of planetary habitability (Chakrabarty 2021, 83). And yet, at first glance, the mode in which this is framed, as a need to learn to die, is an unfamiliar formulation in the conversations around the geological phenomenon. Part of the reason for this may seem self-evident: the Anthropocene is still in the realm of being a proposed crisis rather than a fact, and so it most immediately summons responses that look for solutions, which treat its catastrophic horizons only as threats and not inevitability. A fixation on death is hardly conducive when looking for useful contributions to this discourse of diagnoses and fixes. This logic holds even when the Anthropocene, as manifested in ocean acidification, biodiversity loss, rising sea levels and so on, is sublimated to broader questions about human existence - a move Scranton makes to establish the

otherwise “ill-suited” humanities as relevant to our times (Scranton 2015, 6). The out-of-placeness of Scranton’s framing is symptomatic of a pervasive feeling that discursively, the Anthropocene is an exigency that demands our attention in specific ways.

Dipesh Chakrabarty (2018) reviews the conversations around the concept of the Anthropocene in these very terms, as positions marked out vis-a-vis how the ‘anthropos’ in the term is understood. The first of these takes the idea of the Anthropocene as an epoch where human productive activity takes on planetary roles to mean that the human species is now embedded in a network of geo-biological processes (Lewis, Maslin 2015; Steffen et al. 2011). Given the vast physical and temporal scales over which these processes unfold and the complex systems that they constitute, the argument goes, it is no longer possible to speak of the human as being agentic in the sense of possessing causal powers. Certainly, the Anthropocene has human productive activities at its roots, but having constituted it, the phenomenon subsumes human capacity to dictate it. Essentially, transformation to a planetary force is an ontic shift, whereby the human species is now part of the Earth systems, which are “all process without a subject” (Chakrabarty 2018, 25). It is this understanding that makes it possible to argue – as Hamilton (2015) does, for instance – that the scope of the Anthropocene and that of environmental crisis are not congruous. For, in having become synecdochous to the planet (Chakrabarty 2018, 28), the human species now simultaneously occupies both the plane of existence that it has known so far – of the political, the world-historical – and an entirely novel one – of geological processes. In the latter, the question of habitability is not quite the same concern that it is in the field of environmental studies. To be sure, earth systems scientists are interested in the conditions that support life, but from a planet-centred point of view – the one that we are forced to adopt in the Anthropocene – it makes little sense to fixate on life as the ultimate function or property of planetary systems (Zalasiewicz et al. 2017). Like Rick Deckard in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (Dick 1996, 31), we encounter the ‘tyranny of the object’ but with the odd twist that we are ourselves this object in some sense.

The second position is what Chakrabarty identifies as the “conscious Anthropocene”. Here, adherents maintain that the implications of the Anthropocene are dire but not necessarily a reason for despair. Unlike the earlier position, where responsibility is irrelevant in light of the pure processual nature of the Anthropocene, here, it is significant. The avowal of human responsibility as a causal factor of the Anthropocene implies that our capacities also extend to the ability to respond to planetary disruptions. A typical example of this approach is found among the ecomodernist group, who propose that the human collective can pave the way toward a “good Anthropocene” (Asafu-Adjaye et al. 2015). Rather than see the human as being subsumed

in the planetary, this perspective holds that the Earth has become more of a *human planet* in the contemporary context. For the ecomodernist ilk, the task before us is to accelerate and deploy our techno-scientific capacities to mitigate climate change and establish a more equilibrrious relationship with Earth's systems. What appears to be at work here is an evolutionary logic. Human communities are understood to have always shaped the world around them in a bid to secure a good life, so it is natural that we do so today too; only, with the means that our technologies afford us, we can pursue growth in eco-conscious ways. The central problematic that organises action in this stance is the question of how to delink our productive infrastructures from the carbon energy sources that drive climactic upheavals. In this regard, even as the human agent becomes more relevant than ever, the imaginations of agency vary, but nevertheless, they broadly align with the existing liberal-democratic framework of states, global institutions, and civic bodies as avenues of environmental action. The language of "acting together" that the International Institute for Sustainable Development uses is archetypal of this stance (IISD, s.d.).

The last of these positions is characterised by attempts to politicise the Anthropocene, a move that Chakrabarty calls a transformation of questions of "force" into "power" (Chakrabarty 2018, 9). This is in keeping with the larger impetus of the human sciences to - in James Baldwin's words - "lay bare the questions that have been hidden by the answers". Dismissing notions of common species culpability when it comes to the climate crisis as an oversimplification at best and ahistoricity at worst, the attempt here is to disclose the Anthropocene as not so much a timeless product of human species-being than a more limited politico-historical formation emerging from specific complexes of power operating in the world (Davis, Todd 2017; Malm, Hornborg 2014). This is to say that the categorical nature of the Anthropocene is as social - if not more - as natural. Thus, a range of voices have demanded that we speak of this contemporary moment in more accurate representative terms by substituting the misnomer Anthropocene for more suited, if awkward, names such as Capitalocene (Moore 2016), Plantationocene (Haraway 2015; Tsing 2016), or Econocene (Norgaard 2019). It is clear that responsibility remains a crucial element here, as it is in the approaches described previously. Just like them, responsibility is invoked not only to designate blame but also to imagine responsive action. Even as historical explication reveals that the benefits of exploitative extraction of natural resources by capitalist productive systems have disproportionately fallen among the populations of the planet, it indicates that environmental action has common stakes with acts of resistance along other axes of social exploitation such as class, gender, race, and caste. Thus, the Anthropocene renews and reinforces the revolutionary demands on the marginalised subject.

It should be evident in this heuristic spectrum plotted between the inhuman, the conscious, and the political Anthropocene that the question of agency is a fundamental concern in the Anthropocene discourse. However, this is not simply in the sense of whether we have agency or not, but more specifically about how human subjectivity is recomposed by the particular agentic forms demanded by the Anthropocene. Thus, agency is not done away with in the networks of a processual Anthropocene, but in being imbricated in planetary forces that resist epistemic mapping and thereby technological control, the subject as a coordinated and contained figure is destabilised. Similarly, when agency in the conscious Anthropocene is to be articulated on a planetary stage in distinctly techno-scientific modes, the subject has to absorb a more concerted sense of being and belonging to the species rather than as mere abstraction. In the political Anthropocene, the subject seems to be formulated in familiar registers of a resisting agent, but counterhegemonic action must now be organised within a contracting natural horizon of “tipping points”. Understood this way, it becomes possible to see that the Anthropocene discourse is not inhospitable to Scranton’s project as it first appears. For, as I will detail below, ‘learning to die’ is also pre-occupied with similar questions of subjectivity.

### 3 The ‘Learning to Die’ Project

A fundamental conceit at work in *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* is the way it transposes individual death to a notion of civilisational death, a move that it has to validate by arguing that death is as certain for our civilisation as it is in our individual lives. In this regard, Scranton makes a threefold case. One, hard data shows that emissions have continued unabated over the last few decades despite scientific consensus that climate change is a very real and pressing crisis, and they are likely to continue in this fashion (Scranton 2015, 22-9). Second, its various consequences, such as melting ice sheets, rising sea levels, changing weather patterns, etc., are fast approaching tipping points, after which it would be impossible to mitigate or predict resulting feedback mechanisms (17-18). Third, political will has shown itself to be uninterested in making necessary headway in dealing with the problems, and popular will is too constrained and paralysed by a general atmosphere of anxiety to force its hand (31-40). As a result, he says, we are facing a future of almost certain doom (8). Civilisational death here is not necessarily the death of the

species.<sup>1</sup> Scranton is instead calling attention to the deeply unsustainable order of things under carbon capitalism. The two come together only in futures where we continue holding on to “fantasies of perpetual growth, constant innovation, and endless energy” (8, 11). In any case, the purpose of transposition becomes clear here. Just as how, even though our very condition as human beings is grounded in the fact of our inevitable death, we do not know how to die well (56), our civilisational death also needs charting. Learning to die is not, then, a literal project as much as it is a figurative, philosophical mandate (57). And so, subjectivity, as it forms in relation to human mortality, is made to speak with the notion of civilisational transience.

It may seem peculiar that such certitudes – of civilisations being beyond redemption – are important to establish in order to sketch out roles and possibilities of subjects. Yet, as Slavoj Žižek (2017, 2) argues, utter hopelessness is a useful place to arrive at, for it is from here that we can launch meaningful projects of transformation. This logic may be better explained by the distinction that Terry Eagleton makes between optimism and hope, saying that optimism retains various degrees of faith that things will somehow take care of themselves as historical necessity, whereas hope is the grittier work of effecting changes through wilful struggle (Eagleton 2015). And sure enough, we see this familiar dynamic of hopelessness-hope working in the text. Scranton says that the very acceptance of the Anthropocene collapse of capitalist systems leads us to see that civilisations are always transient. And, rather than being a cause for paralysis, this transience is indicative of a broader truth: human existence across time has always been about working and reworking ways to live. We lose sight of this collective spirit of which every civilisation is only a contingent manifestation (Scranton 2015, 63). Our present system is particularly insidious in making us blinkered to the “press of the present” (70). Scranton argues that the “social energetics” – social forces flowing among and through us, shaping our subjectivity (30-1) – of our “photohumanist society” is peculiarly strong for two reasons. One, they create a pervasive atmosphere of fear, anxiety, and violence rooted in various sources of unrest, including climate change (46-9). Two, within this atmosphere, we occupy roles as “vibrations, channelers, tweeters and followers” (69) whose subjective expressions are limited to the forms enabled by this system. This has dire implications: these media technologies are ideological instruments which, by both form and content, circumscribe our ability to practice autonomous reflection and ultimately offer little

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**1** In fact, on this count Scranton is inconsistent. In different parts of the book, he is convinced that climate catastrophe cannot be avoided (Scranton 2015, 11), that humanity can survive (9), and that we may or may not (74-5).

in terms of true political action (52). Even when they do become the base of politics, they mystify the true systemic nature of the environmental crisis: that “the enemy isn’t out there somewhere – the enemy is ourselves” (53).

The philosophical humanist strategy against this myopia is to practice “interruption” (53-5). This involves disturbing the social flows that we become conduits and vessels to through “critical thought, contemplation, philosophical debate, and posing impertinent questions” (70). The target of these acts is the reason why interruption is translated as dying. By choking the arteries of social subjectification, one undoes the self (58). That this is ultimately a hopeful project is indicated by the fact that such a death allows the self to emerge from the “hive” (53) and begin to see “a web of being that connects past to future, them to us, me to you” (57). It is the first step in re-emplacing oneself in the larger collective self of humanity. Though we are transient as individuals and even as cultures, we possess technologies that allow us to belong to a transcendent human spirit, from our “our first moments in Africa 200,000 years ago, and living on in the dim, fraught future of the Anthropocene” (59). The ultimate task of philosophical humanism is to reclaim and reconnect to this vast cultural memory, the only thing that Scranton sees as subsisting beyond the collapse of civilisations. After all, despite the relentless advance of time in which “wars begin and end”, “empires rise and fall”, “buildings collapse, books burn, servers break down”, and “cities sink into the sea”, the histories that we leave behind survive (70). In Scranton’s understanding, this is what learning to die is fundamentally about: the building of “cultural arks” (70).

To sum up, against the catastrophic futures of carbon capitalist growth, Roy Scranton offers the counterproject of a civilisational death, which is put into practice by de-subjectivising selves and re-embedding them in the transhistorical legacy of human social being. Elementally, then, philosophical humanism, as an act of both reclaiming and producing cultural memory, is a reminder of alternative possibilities. In this, it shares much with the humanist sciences, whose purpose in delineating the social constructedness of things has also been to highlight that what pass as unbending realities are malleable, and therefore alternative desires for better worlds are not only possible but incumbent upon contemporary subjects. Scranton’s specific point regarding the vicious grip of our digital cultural space is, in fact, quite resonant with the body of literature that has attempted to understand the paralysis of “capitalism realism” (Fisher 2009). One would expect that the “anarchic” nature of his philosophical humanism, as he puts it, should have something to say to the capture of imagination that these works identify as a central problem of the late modern, neoliberal world. Yet, it is curious that ultimately, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* has almost no substantive



politics to propose for the world as it is. Instead of the engaged philosophy of creating ‘new worlds in the shell of the old’ that one expects of anarchist intentions, we are presented with an entirely different program of cataclysmic changes. Neither is this in the kind of paradigmatic shift that is associated with revolutionary programs (Graeber 2004, 42). And so, while the transformation of the subject and the collapse of civilisational structures appear to be concrete agendas of transformation, they are finally committed to merely as facilitative actions – the building of arks signifies both that substantive existence today is already beyond our grasp and that the future appears only as a cautious space.

I argue that the reason for this slippage from transformation to transcendence as a social goal is based on an underlying sensibility of the text, where history as a civilisational memory comes to supply meaningfulness to life in the present. The most telling evidence of this is an aphorism Scranton offers: “We are humanity. We are the dead. They have become us, as we will become the dead of future generations”. In speaking of life as a cycle of remembering and anticipating past and future lives, its solidity as something lived in the world is eroded. One begins to see here that the text’s acceptance of the transience of life relies on a field outside existence where the latter hosts a primordial spirit in relation to which individual lives manifest. There is not enough in the text to suggest that this spirit supersedes the latter, and yet, the idea of reconnecting the self with broader rhythms of human history within the context of *surviving* the climate crisis implies that it is nevertheless a vehicle of meaningfulness on account of its resilience. It is possible to speak of the effect of this broadening of fields in terms of the different Anthropocene subjectivities that I discussed earlier in this essay. Where Scranton initially works with the political subject, who apprehends both themselves and the wider social collective as the grounds for imagining agentic action, this conviction is corroded by elements of the other two approaches, which slip in when the boundaries of existence are loosened.

So, for instance, the optimism that he furnishes his project with, of historical legacy outliving a civilisational collapse, is a humanistic parallel to the conscious Anthropocene subject, where advocates are convinced of the human capacity to surpass natural limits technologically. Of course, here, transcendence is far more macabre. The philosophical humanist is an inverse in that they bequeath only dystopian parables where the conscious Anthropocene subjects produce technological mastery. Yet, they resonate in the fact that for both, the subject always exceeds itself; it is a part of not only a contemporary collective but a relationship between temporal kin. Yes, one imagines this as an accretionary relation and the other more as a reflexive sublime, yet for both, existence is only a part of these

larger teleological/transcendental rhythms of history. As a result, the Anthropocene gets positioned as a boundary condition on an already existing path of progress/human spirit rather than as an emphatically current figure of reckoning.

Similarly, the philosophical human once again loses some of its political subjectivity when Scranton invokes elements of the processual Anthropocene subject. In his coda, Scranton shifts to a perspective whose gaze falls upon an even wider landscape than just the history of humankind. It apprehends the universe, its birth, the formation of celestial bodies and the coming of life on planet Earth. This is the eternity in which humans are born and die. Although Scranton moves to look at how, despite any external validation, we create meaningfulness (Scranton 2015, 73), the planetary vantage persists in his narrative. It is present in the notion that the history of humankind is only an appendage of the mathematical movement and design of the universe (75); it insists that the subject, beneath all the layers of life, is ultimately matter (74); and it holds that amid the fundamental entropy of the cosmos, life and death are only energy flowing into different patterns (72). These disturbances loosen Scranton's grip over the Anthropocene as a specific manifestation of the "toxic, cannibalistic, and self-destructive" capitalist systems. Instead, it is given slack to claim more neutral grounds as just another crescendo in the long symphony of the planet.

Transcendence, then, and not transformation, becomes the defining character of Scranton's philosophy as he allows his conceptual frames to exceed the bounds of existence. Little of the deeply personal and grounded register of unlearning photohumanist cultural embodiments remains in the celebratory embrace of the transcendent human spirit as the ultimate site of meaningfulness. The reflexive transformation that Scranton urges through a wilful engagement with figurative death is counterintuitively undercut in his account of human subjectivity conceived both as an oft-violent, ahistorical manifestation in the world and an enduring, diffuse legacy of wisdom. There is a familiar Original Sin-esque aspect to this ambivalence (in contrast with Beauvoir's ambiguity), a trope that abounds in the moral language of popular environmentalism, which, on the one hand, speaks of planetary limits and human hubris and, on the other, humanity's inexplicable grotesqueness in failing to imbibe the values of the natural order. In the clash between our insistent proclivity to transgress and the given order, we must either learn to live in compromise or fall from grace. The choice, then, is to live with constrained potential or to die burning bright. Both these formulations essentially articulate the human condition as a schizophrenic capacity for astonishing emancipation and ironic self-destruction. Insofar as the Anthropocene is placed within this narrative as yet another manifestation of this species-being, not only does Scranton's critique

of contemporary capitalist culture in relation to the environment and human civilisational health lose its edge, the universalist pretensions of his humanism also become rather thin.

I contend that if we are to instead retain faith in the idea of transformation as a possibility not just in-the-world but also for-the-world, we must jettison death as the pivot in thinking about the Anthropocene problem. To “stay with the trouble” (Haraway 2016), we must stay within the ambits of existence. It is in this regard that I propose that it may be worthwhile to distinguish between an existential approach as found in Scranton’s narrative and an *existentialist* one that I will outline by drawing from Simone de Beauvoir. The latter, despite being just as cognizant of the affects of death, understands the central problem of being not in terms of mortality as much as the notion of freedom. This alternative frame is particularly relevant in that it widens the scope of what a question such as the one Dipesh Chakrabarty asks in *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* can mean

Is the Anthropocene a critique of narratives of freedom? Is geological agency of humans the price we pay for the pursuit of freedom? (2021, 33-4)

As such, this provocation seems to pit freedom against the boundaries of the planet, in which case we do not move away from the configurations of transgressive subjectivity mentioned earlier. Existentialist philosophers like Beauvoir offer us a different insight.

#### 4 The Question of Freedom

Toward the end of her book, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Simone de Beauvoir, working through questions of conceiving existentialist ethics, turns to the notion of freedom. For her, freedom is that which lies beyond the confines of facticity (Beauvoir 2011, 79). Facticity is an existential concept which denotes all the various ‘givennesses’ to which we are born and in which we exist – the very context of our lives (Bakewell 2016, 157). In order for a person to be more than just a product of facticity, Beauvoir suggests, they must undertake projects of meaning-making, actions that denote their agency as a subject. This should not be taken to imply that subjectivity is in opposition to facticity. Rather than see material conditions as limiting factors, existentialists understand facticity as an indispensable part of articulating freedom. Existence is meaningful because it is a series of choices made in relation to the world; in a vacuum, without choices, one cannot speak about existence in any useful sense. To do so would be to equate existence with a notion of an abstracted being, and this goes

firmly against an indispensable existentialist tenet: existence precedes essence (Bakewell 2016, 157). And yet the existentialist conception of being is such that “man is always outside of himself, and it is in projecting and losing himself beyond himself that man is realized” (Sartre 2007, 52). Existence, then, is not just that we *are*, but that we are constantly *becoming* in this matrix of a shared human condition and our particular facticity. Thus, when Beauvoir speaks of freedom as a transcendence from facticity, she does not mean a state that irons out the self. She details it more delicately as an ambiguity that requires us to hold together both the sense of our unique sovereignty and our ultimately insignificant worldly existence.

I find this formulation interesting for how it draws out two meanings of transcendence: as practice and as perfectibility. The latter of the two is ubiquitous in the modern world. Beauvoir discusses its emergence as a particular relationship with the idea of the future. One of the ways of conceptualising the future is to understand it as a temporal extension of the present; it is the horizon to which our life and its projects tend and in which they accrue and find new ends. Another is to see it as arriving suddenly from without, as a Messianic figure, such as the Last Judgement in Christianity. In the eighteenth century, Beauvoir says, these two senses of the future coalesced in the idea of progress, which was at once evolutionary and teleological (Beauvoir 2011, 80). This was a potent mix that came to have very crucial consequences. She argues that when the future is seen as an assured positivity, it becomes indifferent to the present, thus justifying ends over all means in a bid for freedom. This indifference is, of course, a matter of common discussion with regard to the environment, most evident in the criticism that at the roots of the climate crisis has been a tendency by capital production systems to write off natural costs as externalities. And yet, in highlighting both the evolutionary and the teleological aspects of progress, Beauvoir is making a keener point. It suggests that while the future as an assured utopia certainly dominates modern notions of progress, the present also remains salient in it on account of it being immanent in human ingenuity and action in operation today. It is as if, while human history unfolds in a series of transcendental moves toward a better future, this future is also always its unique due as a species set apart from the rest of nature. In such a formulation, yes, the Anthropocene is a ‘cost’ of our freedom, but insofar as the underlying assumptions remain intact, the real failure is simply that we must pay this cost. Akin to the argument that something is wrong or immoral only because we fail to do it, the Anthropocene is a ‘critique’ only to the extent that we appear incapable of surmounting our planetary conditions. Which is precisely why popular sentiment places faith in the conscious Anthropocene and its “failing forward” (Fletcher 2023) narratives. Our wild hopes that perhaps we may yet devise ways

such that we will not have to surrender our desires for growth, that technological marvels may yet subvert the planetary limitations, and that the chaos in our systems is just temporary are all indicative of this attitude. The modern idea of freedom, in how it is articulated as the pursuit of cumulative but ultimately abstract and total progress, one that is its own end, understands transcendence not primarily as a relation of the subject to themselves but between the subject and their facticity.

The existentialist idea of freedom works with a different premise: rather than assuming any totality to human being, it embraces the notion that we are in a constant state of lack: “Man is a being who makes himself a lack of being in order that there might be being” (Beauvoir 2011, 4). By this account, we are born into an existence that has no external validation. Its meaning can only be constructed by the projects that we choose to undertake. Man emerges from an “original helplessness” where “no outside appeal, no objective necessity permits of its being called useful. It *has* no reason to will itself” (4; emphasis in the original). And still, rather than be a cause for paralysis, this “nothingness” becomes the ground for our freedom. Our lack of being comes to define the character of our existence in that we then *choose to be*. In a paradoxical move, by uprooting ourselves from the world, we make ourselves present to it (5). For, our “being is lack of being, but this lack has a way of being which is precisely existence”. It is important to understand that “choice” here suggests more than its usual connotation. Rather than merely being able to select courses of action from the many available to us, what is at stake in choosing is the very affirmation of our existence. For, the freedom of choice, as Sartre argues in *Being and Nothingness*, is not about obtaining one’s wishes but what the act itself means as one determines oneself to wish. In this schema, “success makes no difference to freedom” (Sartre 2021, 564). In letting go of a “foreign absolute” – say, Enlightenment man as progress – that defines our existence and informs our actions, freedom is released from its ties to teleological ends. Instead, it is rewritten as an expansive category which relates to our capacity to constantly make and remake ourselves. The move here reprioritises the present and thereby rejects any allure of ends-over-means logics. The failure of being anything absolute here is assumed as the very truth of our existence, and so, insofar as we do not have to surpass this failure, nothing can be rationalised as a necessary cost of our being.

But, even more importantly, relating freedom to existence as constant becoming makes it possible for us to introduce to ethics questions of value. This is one of the central arguments of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, where Beauvoir sets out to defend existentialist philosophy from charges of formalism and solipsism. In my earlier assertion, it should be noticeable that while freedom does not have to cut its

way toward any predetermined end, it does become an end in itself. After all, when it is defined as a fundamental quality of our existence, it must also then be defended against any attempt at minimising it. Beauvoir counters this criticism by asserting that existentialist freedom is more than mere form; it also has content in that when man is his own sovereign, he also bears the responsibility for his actions (Beauvoir 2011, 7). The existentialist belief that freedom is, in fact, the heaviest of burdens that man carries is symptomatic of the ethical duty that it entails. And so, it cannot be said that existentialism contains a blanket sanction in the name of freedom.

But what about that other slippery slope – relativism – whereby even ethical culpability escapes any real answerability? This is a question that Beauvoir brings up quite early in her text: when she says that much of ethics in philosophy has been wrongly discussed in relation to the demands of given natural orders (3-4), we see that existentialism invites a complicated problem by locating the source of ethics in the individual. To be of use, ethics must be intersubjective – after all, responsibility is more credible when it includes answerability to others. Intersubjectivity may be charted along a temporal line to the lives that come after us or, spatially, to those with whom we live in the world today. In both cases, Beauvoir says, to escape the “absurdity of facticity”, we must acknowledge and communicate with the freedom of others. She seems to suggest that we must follow through on the unboundedness of freedom to any telos and insist on its complete open-endedness (48). “The movement of freedom which wills itself infinite” means that freedom cannot be constrained to egotistical solitude (44). Once again, the point is not to ensure formal freedom; it is that individualistic freedom privileges the object of its passions over other men. Writing in 1947, with the clear intent of developing a humanistic philosophy, it is unsurprising that Beauvoir takes a strong stance against even the possibility of dogmatism. But she goes one step further: this intersubjectivity reveals that the freedom of others impinges on one’s own in such a way that “to will oneself free is to also will others free” (49). Her existentialism then assumes a universal humanist politics, whereby “the existence of others as a freedom defines my situation and is even the condition of my own freedom” (62). For oppression is a situation where the ability to transcend oneself is cut off; the oppressor defends it as being natural, but it is not (55-6). Her argument here is also straightforwardly moral: when one does not question the various oppressions whereby the freedom of others is undercut, one’s abstention is as good as complicity (59). Freedom, thus conceived as an ethically loaded capacity of shaping our actions in the present that also accounts for the freedom of others, is far more capacious than the Enlightenment notion of freedom in that it is inherent to the very act of being free. In place of the end-over-means principle of human growth and progress, we

have ethical freedom as the very means and end of existence here. For freedom here is not a state; it is a practice.

It is not enough, then, to say as Chakrabarty does, that the reality of the Anthropocene is such that we will ironically need the Enlightenment legacy more than ever, even while giving up precisely some of its freedoms (Chakrabarty 2021, 34). There is a tinge of tragedy in this proposal, which once again suggests that our choice is, in fact, a dilemma. We should certainly explicate the Anthropocene as a critique of freedom, but in the sense that it turns the question inward to disclose that freedom is not a conquest of our environments. Treating planetary boundaries and our relatedness to life on Earth as obstacles has, in fact, obscured freedom as a more expansive category. Existentialists like Beauvoir remind us that freedom as a human condition emerges not from the fact that we are in a state of imperfection but from an inexorable lack at our core. Existentialist freedom is a sense of constant, fluid becoming of the self against itself rather than the pursuit of futures where its ultimate articulation resides. As an expression of transcendence, then, it does not carry us away from the world; it places us firmly in it.

## 5 A Reframing Through Violence

How can we draw from this idea of transcendence as an ongoing practice to reframe the Anthropocene crisis? It allows us, for one, to pry apart the seemingly commonsensical centrality of death within an existential formulation of the climate crisis and instead pose it as an existentialist problem of freedom. Certainly, the horizons of climate change are dire enough to make such a focus sensible, and yet, there are incongruences here that allow us to make this distinction. In the way that things stand today, the Anthropocene has spatio-temporal logics to how it manifests. On the one hand, it looms as a series of cataclysmic horizons – rising sea levels, heat waves, droughts and so on. On the other, it occupies uneven geographies and identities; the figure of the climate refugee attests to this fact unequivocally. In either of these senses, it is utterly disjunct with the deeply personal imminence that is Death (Gray 1951, 120, 123). Moreover, even in a scenario where the crisis becomes an inevitable fact, the questions that it will evoke will be of a predictable tenor – Why did this happen? Who is to blame? What could we have done differently? – Can the same ever be posed to Death? The point here is the same as that made by political critics of the Anthropocene narrative: the climate crisis is a geological phenomenon with a history. We relate to it through questions about how much we can control it and who is truly accountable because it emerges from and reflects structures of differential power. It is this disparity that *Learning to Die in the*

*Anthropocene* flattens by claiming that the “problem is us” (Scranton 2015, 40). The text sees the capitalist system as so all-encompassing that each of us is joined in its violent mechanisms. In fact, it is said to be so pervasive that we no longer even have “choke points” in the system where political action can be concentrated (53). And thus, individual interruption of social energetics becomes our only recourse. This escape from the “hive” offers, as we have seen, only the false consolation that we may rescue and leave behind some humanist legacy for the future.

It is undeniable that the processes of capitalist productive systems are such that even the exploited come to feel that they have a stake in it (Berlant 2011). Existentialists would describe this as a problem of “bad faith” (Sartre 2021, 72-3) whereby subjects deny the basic fact of their freedom and instead ascribe external signification to their choices. To act against bad faith is incumbent upon us. Although Scranton’s philosophical humanism is in keeping with this idea, it fails to grasp its full implications. It misses, for one, that bad faith is not quite the same as violating others’ freedom, that there is a qualitative difference between the violence of capitalist exploitation of subjects, and the subjects’ desire for this system. It also forgets to heed the intersubjective responsibility of freedom, where one’s own freedom is sensible, secure, and moral only when the other, too, is free. And finally, it loses sight of the sense that to reclaim freedom is really to forgo any sense of powerlessness about the world. To remain with the violence undergirding the Anthropocene and posing it as a problem of freedom allows us to imagine more positive and emplaced political counterprojects. To take just one, a possibility that Scranton leaves undeveloped in his narrative, we see that the subjective possibilities of freedom align closely with the anarchist notions of direct action, which maintains that the beginning of all politics is to act “as if already free”, that it is possible to create alternative spaces even within overbearing hegemonic structures, and indeed, that it is necessary to do so in order to allow us to forge new subjectivities and to enable others to see that such freedoms are very real possibilities. This is only a brief indication; a more detailed discussion of these political potentials requires drawing from more than just a singular work of existentialist philosophy. I have limited myself to Beauvoir’s specific text in this paper to make the specific and, really, the preliminary argument that her formulation of ethics is not only a productive but, really, an exigent position from which to think of subjective action at a time when the nature of the environmental crisis appears to be reinforcing an earlier paralysis of imagination in relation to the scalar complexity of capitalist structures (Harvey 2000). I argue that straddling the personal and the collective as ambiguous valences of existence rather than as antagonisms in need of synthesis is a compelling stratagem in this regard.



## 6 By Way of a Conclusion

In a sense, Beauvoir's motives in detailing the ethical implications of existentialism share the spirit of what I have attempted to argue in this paper. It is not merely that existentialist thought needs to be defended from the often-unkind criticism of it being damp tinder when it comes to the 'actualities' of life, but that even a fairly well-meaning existential account such as Scranton's finds itself slipping before the appeal of terrains beyond existence as it is, and as a result, undercutting the material political possibilities that it possesses. If existential modes of thinking are to be relevant to an Anthropocene age, it is necessary to establish their concerns as primarily being about the immanent world rather than transcendental ones. To this end, some insights from existentialist philosophy are indispensable. Most vital is the clarification that death is not a central problematic in existentialism; it is merely the facticity *par excellence* that constitutes the human condition. Our various life projects do not come together to justify the meaningfulness of existence *despite* it - almost always a move that seeks to minimise death as a figure - but very much within its affects and implications. This shifts the existentialist gaze squarely to the field of existence, where it identifies a different central problem: freedom. The questions of transience and of having no external validity describe a hopeless condition, surely, but this hopelessness feels most heavily the burden of being free. Which is to say that the question that haunts us perpetually is how to live life when we can live it on our own terms and in relation to the world we are born in. The way in which this fact leads us to the ethical implications that Beauvoir lays out is instrumental to the sense that something must be *done* about the Anthropocene. To this end, existentialist illuminations that freedom is not something to be attained but to be practised and that the purpose of politics is not so much to build ethical worlds as it is to realise that the contemporary world is always already the only ground for ethical action is fortifying.

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