

# Not Quite Ready to Die in the Anthropocene



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The recent Paris Climate Conference has been called the last best chance for the leaders of the world, nations and multinational corporations, to agree upon a framework that can somewhat mitigate and limit the compounding effects of climate change. Some have commented that a best-case scenario for such an agreement would still not prevent a future of unbearable heat and widespread famine, drought, war, and mass migrations; a total failure to reach a feasible agreement, like the previous iteration in Copenhagen in 2009, would mean much, much worse: no less than the end of human civilization as we know it and the extinction of huge numbers of plant and animal species, possibly including *homo sapiens*. Roy Scranton, in his new book *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization*, cleaves to the latter option as the most likely scenario, and this slim volume is dense with big history, scientific nitty-gritty, and philosophical reflections.

Scranton opens the book by invoking his experience as a soldier in the Iraq War, driving and patrolling through Baghdad and pondering the collapse of a once-bustling ancient city into chaos and violence. Back home in the States and safe once again, he witnessed the similar breakdown of order and imposition of martial law in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Scranton connects these localized disaster zones of social breakdown with the future fate of the planet and the human race when climate change accelerates and worsens. He cites a litany of military planners, economists, and scientists to draw his indisputable and alarming conclusion:

“Global warming is not the latest version of a hoary fable of annihilation. It is not hysteria. It is a fact. And we have likely already passed the point where we could have done anything about it.” Sobering words.

Over the next four chapters, we are treated to a God’s eye view, in the style of Spinoza’s *sub specie aeternitatis*, of geological eras, the rise of homo sapiens, the evolution of energy and industry, the seemingly intractable conundrum of the greenhouse gas effect, the near impossibility that the nations and leaders of the world will come to a working solution that will fix things, and the universality of violence in our primate species. Scranton presents well-researched and argued points on an impressive range of topics with a concise and continually compelling sense of conviction.

The fifth and final chapter, entitled “A New Enlightenment”, is the most original, interesting, challenging, and vexing part of the book. Scranton opens with an epigram from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, one of the oldest pieces of literature on earth which was rediscovered by chance only 150 years ago. The epic tells of the adventures of the powerful king Gilgamesh and his wild companion, Enkidu, as they unite their opposing forces against the gods themselves, forcing the gods to strike down Enkidu. Gilgamesh becomes distraught over the death of his friend and wanders the earth seeking a way to conquer death. Frustrated in the end, Gilgamesh curses the futility of existence. His experience lives on, though, and offers, as Scranton says, “a lesson in the importance of sustaining and recuperating cultural heritage in the wake of climate change.” It also represents “not only the fragility of our deep cultural heritage, but its persistence.” For the author, the specter of climate change is such a monumental problem that we have no hope of solving it; rather, we should focus on maintaining and deepening our humanism and protecting our rich cultural legacy in order that we will both have a softer descent into the envisioned post-apocalyptic future, and that

this rich heritage painstakingly accrued over millenia may be rediscovered one day by our survivors in order to rebuild a new civilization. Our study of philosophy, the ancient classics, and Shakespeare, as rewarding as it may be, creates something of a non sequitur when used as a transition to the idea that our unfortunate inheritors will be fighting for resources and survival in a post-apocalyptic world where life will revert to that pre-state existence invoked by Hobbes: "No arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death; and the life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

*Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* is a far-reaching, erudite, and cultured book with a bleak view of humanity and its future. The author draws upon a wide variety of philosophical ideas to make his point, from Heraclitus ("Life, whether for a mosquito, a person, or a civilization, is a constant process of becoming...Life is a flow."), to Hegel ("The human being is this Night, this empty nothingness which contains everything in its simplicity."), to Heidegger ("We fall into the world caught between two necessities, compelled to live, born to die, and reconciling them has forever been one of our most challenging puzzles."). More than any schools of thought, though, it seems like the author subscribes on some level to the Stoicism of Epictetus, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius when he says "Learning to die means learning to let go of the ego, the idea of the self, the future, certainty, attachment, the pursuit of pleasure, permanence, and stability. Learning to let go of salvation. Learning to let go of hope. Learning to let go of death." This echoes once again the oft-repeated quote by Montaigne that "to philosophize is to learn how to die." In both the title of this book and the many references to "learning to die", I think we could easily substitute the phrase "philosophizing" without losing any significance; for Scranton envisions a dying world in which we will all need to become philosophers if we are to hold onto our humanity.

Fear of death is universal among humans and many of the higher mammals. It likely spawned our myths as well as our art. It is only the philosophers who do not avoid it or fear it, but look it clearly in the face. This is true of Democritus, Socrates, Epicurus, the Zen Masters, the Bodhisattvas, Hume, Schopenhauer, Wittgenstein, and many others who have spent their lives contemplating death not as a morbid fascination but as a means to improving and perfecting their own lives. If it is difficult for most people to attain such peacefulness of mind even after a lifetime of meditation, it is even more unfathomable to find any comfort in the inconvenient truth that the Earth will be rendered uninhabitable in a few million years, and that the cold death of the universe will follow in its wake a few billion years later. The cycle of life and death does not occur on an individual level, or even that of an entire species; it includes planets, stars, and the universe itself. Numerous other books, films, and stories, including *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*, discuss this tragic reality in one way or another; Alan Weisman's *The World Without Us*, Asimov's "The Last Question", Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, Lars Trier's *Melancholia*, Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things*, and the Samurai manual *Hagakure*, which Scranton read in Iraq as a way of dealing with the pervasive and daily dance of death.

Everything in the book springs from the idea that global warming is a problem too big for humans to deal with based on the total lack of realistic and practical alternatives we have to stop it. On this point, I fully understand the enormity of the problem, the almost complete lack of political and corporate will to change our entire world economic system and sacrifice short-term profit, and the bleakness of the future we therefore guarantee for ourselves; but I do not, and cannot, fully endorse the complete resignation of the search and struggle for solutions that the author advocates. On the merits, I have no issue with any of his conclusions except for his certainty of failure in the face of global warming. I am

by no means hopeful about the state of the climate and the geopolitical effects that my children will witness, but I think that is exactly why pervading pessimism must give way to de rigueur active optimism for the sake of our survival. The current Paris Climate Conference will be not the last best chance, but the first great step to further increase momentum towards a global solution to the extremely daunting but not impossible crisis we face. If that means a change away from neoliberal capitalism towards a more sustainable future, as Scranton alludes to, so be it.

Overall, the book is exceedingly ambitious and almost too wide-ranging for its own good, and it feels like the solution offered by the author in the face of a crisis he goes to great lengths to explain renders the conclusion relatively feeble and unconvincing. It is not really a work of philosophy as much as a *cri de coeur* over the indispensability of philosophy and the humanities as a way of securing “the fate of humanity itself.” I do believe, along with the author, that a deep sense of compassion and humanism are necessary to continued civilization, but so is collective action. My grasp of philosophy helps me cope with the thought of my and the world’s eventual annihilation, but my appreciation of human craft, art, technology, and collective potential to solve problems tells me that we will not go gently into that good night.

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**It’s Still Not Enough:  
Comments on the Paris Climate**

# Accord



The long-awaited Paris Climate Accord has been finished and is [widely reported](#) to be the most successful and ambitious international climate agreement ever. The most important and cited number from the agreement is the goal of limiting the warming of the planet to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. This is ambitious and a better result than even many of the most optimistic observers had predicted. It's still not nearly enough.

The 1.5 degree figure is enormously out of whack with the actual national plans submitted by each of the signatory nations, which would allow out least 2.7 degrees of warming even if all measures were implemented (and that is, of course, a significant "if"). Add to the fact that the conference was heavily influenced (and partly sponsored) by fossil fuel industries and that the words "fossil fuels", "coal", or "oil" appear anywhere in the document, and you can see that there

are at least a few reasons to be skeptical of the positive press the agreement has received.

Among committed environmental activists, there are mixed reviews about the Paris Climate Accord, and different schools of thought about the necessary solutions to save the world from becoming one big, real-life Mad Max movie. While reasonable people would obviously agree that the results of the conference are better than nothing, no one who studies environmental issues thinks the agreement is anything more than a toothless statement of non-legally-binding promises that continue to explicitly put profit and national interest above the livability of our planet.

Naomi Klein has written one of the most talked about and controversial books about global warming causes and solutions in her recent book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs The Climate*. As stated in the subtitle, she claims that the cause of our problems is the system of global capitalism itself, and the solution is to usher in a new system that values local environmental sustainability over the endless, all-consuming, and all-destroying system economic growth at all costs. It is a compelling argument, and I'm sure that she is right on some level.

Bill McKibben, a leading environmental activist who is responsible for galvanizing opposition to the infamous Keystone XXL pipeline (which was defeated), [comments](#) that the terms of the Paris agreement are only a starting point which should give activists renewed vigor and moral imperative to hold international leaders to their words. Basically, to refuse to let the politicians and industries off the hook for weak, slow, and unenforceable promises to pollute slightly less than usual.

Real change always comes from a combination of bottom-up activism and top-down leadership. This is especially the case for such an enormous world-wide problem as warming climate,

which will create the biggest and most dangerous environmental changes our species has witnessed in the last 70,000 years or so (since a huge volcanic eruption almost wiped us out and led to a genetic bottleneck in the last wave of migrations out of Africa). Top-down leadership exists or increases only in direct proportion to the amount of activism and public outcry that force political leaders to act. Their natural impulse is generally not to act, or to act only for the benefit of themselves or the most deep-pocketed lobbyists; in order to keep up and increase the momentum for better national and international climate policies, environmental organizations and activist groups must put more and more pressure on politicians to uphold their promises. The success of the Keystone pipeline campaign was symbolic as a turning point for activists to see real-world results and to begin to turn the narrative against the use of fossil fuels. Other examples include the protests and kayak blockade of Shell's latest arctic drilling rig before it was set to explore for oil under the Arctic Ocean (the project was cancelled, along with all future explorations in the frozen ocean due to the changing political and economic calculus away from fossil fuels), and the ongoing battle against natural gas fracking by citizens who refuse to accept polluted drinking water and daily earthquakes for a few cents of savings at the gas pump. It goes without saying that people are responsible for their own elected leaders, so if our politicians do not lead on climate change or even acknowledge its existence, it is on us to vote for new ones who do promise to lead (this obviously eliminates any [Republicans](#) from being worthy of consideration in America). For interested readers, here are just a few actions one can take to affect climate change and lower your ecological footprint.

### *On Eating Ecologically*

Besides becoming a vocal activist or voting once every two years, there are various things people can and must to turn

the tables away from catastrophic warming. The bottom-up part of the equation goes beyond just turning off lights when you leave the room. It will require real sacrifice and a totally altered sense of priorities by those of us most responsible for pollution and global warming in the rich industrialized nations. One example is change of diet. Meat consumption must be reined in dramatically. This is not an option, but a necessity. When even that paragon of steroid-induced, action-film machismo who is Arnold Schwarzenegger [starts saying](#) that people need to eat less meat, you know it is beyond debate. Global livestock production is an enormous contributor to global warming through methane and nitrogen emissions, not to mention being a hugely inefficient use of our resources. It takes something like 100 times the amount of grain and water to produce one kilo of meat than it does to just eat the grain. I have been strictly vegan for several years (I wrote about the reasons why in greater deal [here](#)), and many other people will have to give up meat and animal products as much as possible in order to make real progress towards a more sustainable future.

### *On Saving (and Spending) Money Ecologically*

Another massively important thing you as citizens and consumers can do besides voting every couple years is become actively interested and involved in how you spend your money. That could mean moving your bank account away from a big name-brand corporation that invests in things like fossil fuel development and arms producers towards small, local credit unions or other ethical choices. In Italy, there is a very good bank called Banca Etica that I use, and there are similar options in other countries if you look. Food shopping is a daily event where you can make a big impact. Switching to organic fruits and vegetables, buying local products as much as possible, and generally not buying anything from multinational name brand companies has a two-fold effect: it helps the environment and the economy (which is linked,

obviously), and it takes away money from the companies who contribute most to environmental destruction. For example, organic produce ensures that soil-killing fertilizers and fauna-poisoning pesticides are not used, as well as helping to resist the forest and soil-killing monocultural agriculture practices that have boomed in the post-war decades.

### *On Being a More Ecologically-Minded Consumer*

If you are buying wood products, look for the [FSC](#) label which helps ensure that that forestry is done on a sustainable basis. If you must eat seafood, look for the [MSC](#) label which helps protect against overfishing (but, again, best to avoid all fish). Inform yourself in general about what you buy so that you are not contributing in some small part to things like the massive destruction of the rainforest in Indonesia and other countries for the sake of palm oil. Do not buy products with palm oil at all, which means cutting Nutella from your guilty pleasures. If you look, there is always a better option available, and savings of a few cents do not outweigh the ruination of natural habitats. In many respects, your dollar is more powerful than your vote, so use it properly. Without even mentioning the big tickets items (such as investing in green energy, green cars, and green houses), these are just a few indicative examples of what individuals can do in their daily lives to help inch gradually towards a collective global solution.

Do you know anyone who has been personally affected by a hurricane, flooding, forest fire, or drought in recent years? That answer will increasingly become yes for everyone as these events become more common, more powerful, and more destructive in the coming years, decades, and centuries. I want to live, and for my children to live, in a world where those existential threats are as minimized and controlled as possible, even if they are in large part locked in due to warming that has already occurred. This is no longer a drill, an option, or a belief; it is an imperative by us humans who

have created these changing conditions. The Paris Conference agreement is undoubtedly a positive first step, though it is already a couple decades too late. It is also a weak and tentative first step that needs to quickly become a leap. It goes without saying that this is the death knell for the fossil fuel economy; if it means we also have to find a more sustainable alternative to rampant global capitalism, so be it. Nothing can continue to grow unimpeded forever, neither an interconnected world economy nor, if we do not take the proper steps to increase momentum after the historical Paris Climate Accord, a species like *homo sapiens*.