

Climate Change as an Existential Threat: Environmental Politics in the Shadow of Nihilism

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Many philosophers, including me, have emphasized that climate change is foremost a political problem, as opposed to being merely a scientific or a technological problem.¹ It is a political problem in the obvious sense that it cannot be solved without profound transformations in political and economic practices and forms of global governance because its proximate and efficient cause is a historically fairly recent socio-economic system or way of life. In this essay, I want to argue that climate change is also a political problem in a deeper, existential, and ontological sense: responding to the climate crisis adequately requires politics that is able to confront and work through the nihilism that this crisis generates. In other words, we must not merely solve the practical task of how to rescue the planet's biosphere from an imminent collapse, but we must also restore and create the values in the light of which such a task will matter to us. I suggest that Veronica Vasterling's reading of Arendt brings to the fore the specific meaning of "politics" at hand here. As Vasterling writes, politics for Arendt is much more than the technological and scientific implementation of policy solutions: it is "not the drafting and execution of policies, nor the achievement of political goals, but, first and foremost, the realization of plurality and freedom in word and deed" (Vasterling 2007a, 86). Considered through Arendtian lens, climate change is a political problem in this sense: it fundamentally threatens our current modes of life, and thus calls for the creation of new meanings which can sustain our world. Hence, environmental politics should not be reduced to pragmatic problem-solving; it should be understood as an existential project of safeguarding the stability and dignity of the common world.

I

Based on the available climate science, there is no doubt that climate change presents an existential threat in the sense of threatening the continued existence of human civilization. The safe limit for atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations established by the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 450 ppm, will be reached in less than twenty years at the current emission rates. Many important climate scientists, such as James Hansen, have contended, however, that the safe limit was actually closer to 350 ppm, a level we already overshoot in 1988, which is why we are experiencing many of the predicted effects of climate change much earlier than anticipated (Hansen et al., 2008, 229).²

An acute awareness of this situation is inevitably starting to weigh heavily on many of us, generating a palpable sense of hopelessness, apathy, and anomie, increasingly referred to by the terms “eco-anxiety” and “climate-anxiety.” This is particularly significant among young people, whose future will be impacted the most. According to a recent poll, 71% of American millennials, for example, reported that climate change was negatively affecting their mental health, as well as influencing major life decisions, such as their career paths and decisions to have children (Haaland 2020).³

In a recent essay, Wendy Brown notes two striking aspects about politically alert millennials and Gen Z-ers. First, given the pace of the climate crisis, they have no confidence that the planet will remain livable or even last through what is supposed to be their lifetime. Second, socioeconomically, they know they are not going to have the kind of job security and easeful career trajectory their parents and grandparents had. “Consequently, on the one hand, they feel existential terror or extreme fatalism or futility; on the other, they feel the imperative to dedicate every waking hour to plotting their individual course through social, economic, and technological orders changing by the nanosecond... they are frantically trying to curate and secure futures for themselves in what they understand to be end-times” (Brown 2022, 162).

In light of this astute diagnosis, I have found it striking that when Greta Thunberg and the other young organizers for the global school strikes were asked in the media to explain the reasons for their activism

and give advice for other young people anxious and depressed about climate change, their answer almost invariably has been that their climate anxiety and profound sense of loss has been mitigated by their political action – by joining a movement and pushing for systemic change. They have also emphasized the enabling aspects of anxiety in making this possible: confronting the situation and facing the anxiety it causes must be the first step. In this regard, they follow existential philosophers, from Kierkegaard to Heidegger and Sartre, who have insisted that anxiety is something inescapable, and potentially enabling. It is something that needs to be acknowledged, shaped, and ultimately honed into something liberating, not something to hide away or flee from.⁴ In other words, political action has been, for them, a way of working through the nihilism generated by the existential threat of the climate crisis. The climate activist Luisa Neubauer, one of the main organizers of the “Fridays for Future” movement in Germany, for example, gives us the following advice: “Allow yourself to be touched by what you’re seeing around the world. Feel grief [at what’s already been lost] and joy about what’s still there... That’s an important first step” (Young-Powell 2021).

It seems tempting for many older people to reduce this youth activism to a psychological coping mechanism similar to building a compost – something that might make one feel better, but ultimately changes nothing. I want to argue that such dismissals are misguided, however, for the crucial reason that they overlook the important existential dimensions of politics. I will investigate these dimensions here with the help of Hannah Arendt (and Veronica Vasterling). While Arendt is sometimes read as a critic of the modern technocratic mass society, who was not able to recognize the severity of the environmental crisis in the optimistic and modernizing 1950s (Chakrabarty 2012), I suggest that her work can, nevertheless, contribute some important insights for the question of what a meaningful political response to the climate crisis might look like. Recognizing the existential significance of climate change must ultimately lead us to philosophical questions about the meaning of politics, and, more specifically, about the self-understanding of environmental politics.

II

In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt makes the profound argument that our sense of reality is dependent on the permanence of our humanly created world, which is meant to outlast and transcend our individual lives. For Arendt, the “world” is a distinct concept that refers to the humanly created world of meaning, as opposed to merely the physical environment in which we move about. The world is never a given; rather, it is something that generations of humans must keep building, sustaining, and caring for. While it cannot exist prior to the arrival of humans and cannot outlast their extinction, it nevertheless possesses an independent existence apart from the individuals who built it. As Vasterling contends, the permanence of the world has two aspects. On an immediate level, the physical structure of the world must be maintained with the production of “relatively permanent artifacts – from houses and cars to sewage systems, and from art and house decoration to books and movies” (Vasterling 2007b, 250). Secondly, and more importantly, the immaterial dimension of the world must also be maintained, the “web of human relationships’ and the events, facts, and states of affairs resulting from human action” (250). Evidently, climate change constitutes a threat to both of these dimensions.

Arendt’s profound insight is that without such independent, durable objects held in common – whether architecture and infrastructure or myths and artworks – there would be no stable context for meaningful human reality.⁵ While every individual has a singular and unique perspective on the world, it is nevertheless strictly nonsensical to speak of one’s own world: “Only where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity so that those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear” (Arendt 1998, 57).

Arendt’s concept of the world thus foregrounds the strongly social or intersubjective character of meaning giving: the assumption of a durable physical environment and an ongoing social life are the implicit preconditions for our ability to lead meaningful lives (80). She writes: “our trust in the reality of life and in the reality of the world is not the same. The latter derives primarily from the permanence and the durability of the world, which is far superior to that of mortal life. If one knew that the world would come to an end with or soon after his own death, it would lose all its reality...” (Arendt 1998, 120). By the world’s “reality,” I read Arendt to be

referring not to its ontological status, but to its meaning and value. In other words, Arendt suggests that the imminent disappearance of a distinctly human world would destroy people's confidence in the value and intelligibility of their activities. As Samuel Scheffler formulates a similar idea, our conception of a human life fundamentally relies on an implicit understanding that such a life occupies "a place in an ongoing human history, in a temporally extended chain of lives and generations" (Scheffler 2013, 43).

It is not difficult to draw the inference from Arendt's claim to eco-anxiety and to the feelings of meaninglessness, loss, and depression that many young people in particular are reporting. The existential threat of climate change, understood as a credible threat to the survival of human civilization, inevitably morphs into an existential threat in the other, experiential, and philosophical sense that I am discussing here: life begins to drain out of meaning. A philosophical analysis of eco-anxiety brings to view the insight that what ultimately appears to keep nihilism at bay for most ordinary people living in a secular world are historically created and shared communal values and meanings, even if they are all too human. In other words, even if we acknowledge that nihilism reigns supreme today in the sense that gods, as well as all divinely sanctioned values, have fled the world, the shared cultural values and meanings embedded in various traditions that particular communities of humans have created and are committed to upholding, have proven to be stable enough to provide the historical frame of reference for our individual lives. They constitute the "reality" that makes our actions and pursuits appear worthwhile. As Wayne Allen quips, Nietzsche's "Übermensch" have turned out to be mere mortals who have learned to live in the world they themselves have created (Allen 1982, 174).

The problem now is that the durability of these shared cultural values and meanings is fundamentally threatened by the climate crisis. While the world for Arendt specifically designates the world of human artifice, not the natural world, it is clear today that the two are irrevocably interlinked – the former cannot survive without the latter. Whether we fully grasp it yet or not, we are living through a time of civilizational devastation, and this forces us to confront the philosophical problem of nihilism in a new, hyperbolic form.

III

Arendt's emphasis on the durability of the humanly created world is, importantly, tied explicitly to politics, or more precisely, to politics' condition of possibility. The implicit frame of reference for most of our judgments about what matters is essentially constituted by the public realm of politics, which we must necessarily share with others because it "assures us of the reality of the world and of ourselves" (Arendt 1998, 50).⁶ Arendt contends that this public sphere of politics can never "be erected for one generation and planned for the living only; it must transcend the life-span of mortal men" (55). It is essentially what "we have in common, not only with those who live with us but also with those who were here before and with those who will come after us" (55). In other words, the political realm, and political institutions in particular, must be built with the explicit aim that they transcend my individual life span into past and future alike. Only then can they provide the stable frame of reference capable of supporting a meaningful life for mortal beings.

Again, it is not difficult to see how this insight has direct and far-reaching consequences for environmental and climate change politics. Recognizing that the meaning of our lives literally depends on the existence of future generations does not necessarily, or in any straight-forward way translate into climate change politics that advances intergenerational climate justice. It is not difficult to draw the conclusion that it should, however. As Scheffler notes, in climate ethics, the reasons we have for attending to the interests of future generations are usually conceptualized as moral obligations or understood as grounded in our responsibilities to our descendants (Scheffler 2013, 77). He suggests that this discourse of obligation and responsibility is ultimately misleading because it reinforces our tendency to think that the salient features of our relations to the future generations are our power over them and their dependence on us. The reasons we have for taking their interests into account would be the moral reasons of obligation, duty, and responsibility, which must override our egoistical concern for ourselves. But we should have reasons of a very different kind – ontological or existential reasons – for attending to the interests of future generations: their survival sustains the meaning of our finite lives. From this perspective, what is salient is not their dependence on us, but our dependence on them.

In addition, the durable world of meaning built by human political communities makes political action possible in the specific sense that Arendt gives this term. For Arendt, “action” refers to the fleeting activity – words and deeds – that makes human events of historical importance possible. While this concept has been widely criticized in political theory for privileging individual glory, masculine heroism, and the extraordinary, I suggest that it nevertheless has two important implications in terms of my question of overcoming the political nihilism generated by the prospect of climate breakdown.

First, political action in the public sphere is existentially important because, for Arendt, it is the privileged means for a person to reveal who they are and thereby, to live an existentially singular or “true” life. Arendt distinguished the “who” from the “what” a person is – the singular, unique self from general descriptions and social roles. She explains: “The moment we want to say *who* somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying *what* he is; we get entangled in a description of qualities he necessarily shares with others like him; we begin to describe a type of “character”... with the result that his specific uniqueness escapes us” (Arendt 1998, 181). The unique self can thus only be enacted, not described. It must be actualized and manifested in actions and decisions witnessed by others in the public realm.

Climate change politics is often criticized for being overtly individualistic: it is too focused on consumer choices and futile exercises in personal expression. As Roy Scranton, for example, laments, it has become “little more than an orgy of democratic emotion, an activist-themed street fair” (as cited in Ghosh 2016, 130). To read Arendt as advocating such individualistic politics by emphasizing the importance of the political realm as a space for exhibiting one’s unique individuality would be to profoundly misunderstand her idea, however. The political attitude or ethos that political actors must express, above all, is *amor mundi* – a devoted concern for the world’s futurity, not for one’s own interests. *Amor mundi* is both a commitment to the world on the part of political actors who acknowledge that the world is entrusted to their care only for a short duration, and it is a promise that they will preserve it so that newcomers following them can be assured of a place in it (Bowen-Moore 1989, 56-7). To act politically is therefore, irreducibly, both to live an existentially singular life and to devote it to something greater than oneself, namely the world shared with others here and now, as well as with the people yet to come.

Second, political action is also existentially important because it is the privileged means of creating new meanings. Arendt claims that the mistake made by political philosophers since Plato has been to ignore the fact that politics is an activity that goes on among plural human beings. As Arendt famously formulates this idea: “men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world” (Arendt 1998, xii). While the plurality of human beings forms the condition of possibility of politics, paradoxically, this plurality consists of distinct human beings, each of whom has a unique perspective on the world and is capable of acting in the world, thereby starting something new. Importantly, this capacity for action by each unique newcomer ensures that politics is generative of new meanings (324). As Vasterling shows, for Arendt, the new meanings that politics can create are tightly connected to human plurality: “the newness introduced by the second birth of speech and action is the newness of a new, unique individual who, together with other unique individuals, past, present, and future, constitutes human plurality” (Vasterling 2011a, 142).

Arendt uses the somewhat hyperbolic term “miracle” to emphasize this spontaneous and unpredictable capacity of human action to generate new meanings: “action, seen from the viewpoint of the automatic processes which seem to determine the course of the world, looks like a miracle” (Arendt 1998, 246). Because action is the “miracle-working faculty of man,” in politics we can expect even the unexpected. “The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws... The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected of him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable” (178). While humans are able to begin something new, they can never completely control or foretell the consequences of their actions. This gives the political realm “its miraculous openness and desperate contingency”: new beginnings cannot be ruled out *a priori* even when society seems set on an inexorable course (Canovan in Arendt 1998, xvii).⁷

In sum, Arendt’s thought shows that the collective practice of democratic politics is important for staving off nihilism in at least three senses.⁸ It is never a predetermined activity, but neither is it nor should it be, a purely instrumental activity. Irrespective of its actual consequences, democratic politics has intrinsic value as an activity that creates meaning. It should therefore be recognized as always potentially constituting an enacted response to nihilism in the straightforward sense that it is a collective practice of meaning-making and world-building: democratic

actors engage together in the project of materially constructing the world – enduring conditions for a meaningful human life. Second, politics is a privileged arena not just for collective meaning-making, but for the creation of new meanings. The radical possibility that the future could be different from the present and, moreover, open to human intervention, is not merely reducible to the psychological attitude or emotion of hope for Arendt but anchored ontologically in her understanding of the political – its sheer contingency and spontaneity. Politics is never a pre-determined system but a distinctively human praxis generative of new and unanticipated meanings and values. That is another important reason why it holds the potential to combat the nihilism shadowing us today. Finally, politics is also existentially important for living a meaningful life: to live a life true to oneself and to express one’s dedication for *amor mundi* by living for something greater than oneself are ultimately identical endeavors.

IV

While it is indisputably in the realm of the political that the concrete solutions for climate change mitigation must be found, the political struggles ahead of us also require that the dignity, durability, and meaningfulness of this realm are preserved and protected. Environmental politics should therefore not be reduced merely to questions of technical utility; it should be understood, also, and more profoundly, as a project for safeguarding the possibility of a genuinely pluralistic, democratic, and egalitarian public sphere, which anticipates and includes the concerns of those who come after us and must outlive us. This is the only way that environmental politics can provide a meaningful arena for staving off the nihilism generated by the existential threat of climate change.

A discussion of the concrete forms that such “post-nihilist politics” should take is unfortunately beyond the scope of this short essay. Vasterling highlights Arendt’s contention that politics after the “death of God” can only acquire solidity through human plurality. While democracy no longer offers the permanent foundation upon which to base politics that divinely sanctioned monarchy provided, within democratic societies pluralist speech and action, especially in the form of collective story-telling, can now serve a similar founding purpose. As she writes, “stories in all their plural variety have the enormously important function of rendering

the transient and fragile symbolical dimension of the world more solid and real, and of sustaining it as a common public space” (Vasterling 2007b, 251). Wendy Brown suggests that March for Our Lives, Sunrise Movement, Extinction Rebellion, and Black Lives Matter could be seen as manifestations of post-nihilist politics in the United States. What characterizes the participants of these movements is “their wariness, if not outright hostility, toward both capitalism and parliamentary democracy, the one for its failure to sustain either the species life or their individual prospects, the other for its apparent indifference to and incapacity to stem this failure” (Brown 2022, 162). But Brown also sees the rise of these movements as importantly signaling the beginnings of working through nihilism: “the mourning of one kind of meaning and value generation and arriving at another; deliberately deciding what to live for and how to live together; and building a postfoundational democracy *not* ‘under God’” (164).

Similarly, I already referred to the Fridays for Future movement, the school strikes that have taken place not only in Europe but around the world. We should recognize the activism of these young people as a crucial attempt to work through nihilism: they are trying to avert the sapping of meaning from the world on the brink of destruction with their courageous attempts, whether successful or not, to safeguard the possibility of a human future. In the process, they are also creating new political meanings by stretching the timespan of politics and by posing the question of what a valid political response to an unprecedented existential threat should look like. In other words, these young activists are not just trying to solve an urgent problem, unparalleled in terms of its difficulty and created for them by others; they are also trying to make sure that we all can continue to live meaningful lives.

Notes

- 1 See, e.g., Oksala 2016.
- 2 Scientists also emphasize the nonlinear nature of climate change. The risks associated with it are difficult to assess because of thresholds, tipping points, and irreversibilities. If we overshoot important GHG tipping points for long enough, unstoppable feedback processes will be triggered, such as a melting West Antarctic ice sheet, a thawing Siberian permafrost, and a dieback of the Amazon rainforest. Any of these events alone is predicted to prompt the falling of the dominos: unstoppable feedback processes would accelerate the destruction of the planet so quickly that it would become impossible to control them.

- Drought, crop failures, floods, fires, storms, rising seas, fatal heatwaves, and ecosystem collapse would then rapidly start to overwhelm the capacity of states to meet the needs of their citizens, leading to the collapse of their infrastructures, civil unrest, unprecedented migration, and countless deaths.
- 3 The phenomenon of eco-anxiety or climate anxiety is significant enough that psychotherapists are increasingly providing counselling on how best to manage it and the Internet now provides dozens of sites dedicated to offering advice on how to deal with climate anxiety; see, e.g., Broughton 2019, Beddington 2019, Sarchet 2019.
 - 4 As Kierkegaard famously wrote: “Whoever has learnt to be anxious in the right way, has learnt the ultimate (Kierkegaard 1980, 421). Heidegger described anxiety as an experience in which the familiarity of our life has suddenly been stripped away, forcing us to face the unavoidable questions of what life is about (Heidegger 2010, 172-78).
 - 5 As Lena Zuckerwise writes, this independence is not merely incidental to the objects and meanings produced by humans, but definitive of worldly durability: “Whether craftsmen constructing tools, structures, or other utility items; artists imagining and then creating works of beauty or interest; or intellectuals writing books, generating new meanings, and resurrecting or recreating old ones, worldly tangibles and intangibles possess an independent existence apart from their makers, outlasting the finite lifetimes of mortal humans” (Zuckerwise 2016, 488).
 - 6 Veronica Vasterling artfully emphasizes this link between the prevalence of nihilism in our societies and the decline of real politics in an existential sense. For Arendt, these interconnected phenomena are both explained by the expansion of capitalism, science and technology, and the consequent overexploitation of nature. As Vasterling writes: “Because of the emergence and increasing dominance of capitalist consumer society and the conquest, supported by science and technology, of earthly nature and the universe, strategic and instrumental exploits have all but replaced political action, and, as a consequence, the experience of freedom and plurality has withered and been forgotten” (Vasterling 2007b, 249).
 - 7 Veronica Vasterling defends Arendt’s conception of the political dimension of truth against a poststructuralist account which problematizes it. Vasterling shows that human political action is distinctive in that it has the possibility of introducing new things into the world. “Contingency” is the shorthand Arendt uses to name this human characteristic: it refers not only to the fact that historical events do not *need* to happen as they do, the traditional philosophical

opposition to necessity, but also, to the unique human ability to “be new or introduce something new in the world” (Vasterling 2011b, 509). In regards to this matter, Arendt’s existentialist framework can be seen as having an advantage over a poststructuralist perspective in which the possibility for new meanings to emerge is far narrower. In a poststructuralist view, new meanings can only be constructed as re-articulations of norms, or subversions of it, which reinvokes the power they resist in their very resisting. For Arendt, such a version of re-articulation would seem insufficient, and appear as a mere “reducing the new to the old and known” (511).

- 8 Arendt is an existentialist thinker in the crucial sense that she eschews all forms of naturalism, postulating instead a decisive gulf between the world described by natural science and the distinctive political qualities of human existence. It is important to read Arendt’s political thought against the background of German existentialism, particularly the thought of her mentors Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers. Lewis Hinchman and Sandra Hinchman contend that Arendt’s political thought should be understood as a politicized version of existentialism (Hinchman and Hinchman 1991, 464). She was troubled by the tendencies towards solipsism, intellectual arrogance, and political irresponsibility she detected in existential philosophy and sought to build a conceptual bridge between individual existence and political commitment. Wayne Allen (1982) argues similarly that Arendt’s political ideas can only be understood properly if they are subsumed under her existentialism.

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