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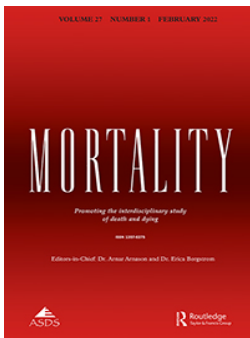
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‘Heading for Extinction’: how the climate and ecological emergency reframes mortality

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ABSTRACT


The discourse of a climate and ecological emergency (CEE), especially as articulated in 2019 by Extinction Rebellion, impinges on two major features of western death mentalities. First, in order to motivate action, CEE discourse induces mortality awareness, death anxiety and grief, and thus furthers the de-sequestration of death and grief. Second, the CEE redirects attention from the death of personally known individuals, to species death; and even if humans survive as a species, it may only be after many billions of humans have died. This anxiety about future collective death arguably comprises a new death mentality. The paper compares and contrasts the CEE with other harbingers of mass mortality such as nuclear war and the Covid pandemic.

KEYWORDS

Anthropocene; extinction; ecocide; anxiety; denial; grief; Ariès

Introduction

The climate and ecological crisis has for some years been of increasing concern in several disciplines, not only in the natural sciences and environmental studies but also in disciplines such as geography (e.g. Garlick & Symons, 2020; Head, 2016), anthropology (Norgaard, 2011), sociology (Latour, 2017; Shove, 2010; Urry, 2010), psychology (Weintrobe, 2012a; Hoggett, 2019), social work (Hickman, 2019), political science (Turner & Bailey, 2022; Willis, 2020), philosophy (Skrimshire, 2019b; Van Dooren, 2014), ethics and theology (Northcott, 2015), and religious studies (Nita, *Forthcoming*). The Extinction Studies Working Group comprises Australian humanities scholars concerned with species extinctions in relation to time, death, and generations (Rose et al., 2017). A UK Arts & Humanities Research Council funded project *Thinking Through Extinction* asked ‘What beliefs about human death, life, mortality, and immortality, are challenged?’ (Skrimshire, 2019). Several concepts employed by these various scholars as well as by climate activists are central to death studies – extinction, death anxiety, denial, loss, grief, hope (e.g. Head, 2016). One would therefore expect death studies to have something to offer this field; and we would expect climate-induced human deaths and species extinctions rapidly to become a central interest of death studies (as, for example, did the Covid-19 pandemic). Yet, with some very rare exceptions (Frantzen, 2022; Wood, 2020), the climate/ecological crisis has yet to feature in death studies (Richardson & Hockey, 2020).

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This article has two aims. One is to call the death studies community to attention and action. This community needs to expand its concepts of mortality and death anxiety if it is to connect with the climate and ecological concerns of increasing numbers of people, indeed if death studies is not to lose its relevance as the twenty first century unfolds. Second, the article aims to explore how death studies might speak to the climate emergency. The article complements publications by Head, Garlick, van Dooren and others by drawing on not only new empirical material but also literatures such as social theory, ritual studies, grief theory, and the history and sociology of death.

My position is that of a sociologist who has published extensively on various aspects of death and society. In 2019–2020 I was also an active participant, both locally and nationally, in the non-violent direct action movement Extinction Rebellion (XR). My location at the intersection of these two discourses (death studies and XR) provided access to various events and ways of thinking, taught me a lot about XR beyond its media image, and enabled me to connect the discourse of a climate/ecological emergency with mortality/immortality. I did not become a climate activist in order to conduct an ethnography, nor do I consider that I conducted an ethnography; I joined XR because I believed something needed to be done.

The article discusses two ways that the discourse of a climate and ecological emergency (CEE), especially as articulated by XR UK since 2019, relates to modernity's characteristic approaches to mortality. The CEE i) forces death, death anxiety and grief to the centre of societal concern, and ii) fosters a concern with future collective death. It shares the first feature, and to an extent the second, with the Covid global pandemic that began at the start of 2020, the year after CEE discourse became widespread in many countries. The threat of nuclear escalation from the 2022 war in Ukraine raises similar concerns.

The article is about CEE *discourse*, i.e. how human effects on climate and ecology are now represented as an emergency. The article is *not* about climate and ecological change themselves, such as the extent or rate of global warming or ecological degradation, nor their relation to colonialism, capitalism or globalisation. Nor is the article about the *impact* of CEE discourse, for example, on governments, business, or consumer behaviour. I simply argue that CEE discourse entails a (new) death *mentalité*, supplementing the four *mentalités* that Philippe Ariès (1981) argued characterised western attitudes to death over the past millennium. (Among French historians, *mentalité* refers to the shared attitude of a community to the world and their place within it.) My perspective is largely white, privileged and western.¹

I will now introduce the article's main 'characters': contemporary deathways, the CEE, and modernity.

Death²

If industrial and post-industrial societies are premised on modernity's apparent control of nature, then medicine, public health and the control of mortality – not least the doubling of life expectancy, but also pain relief and palliative care – are central to this control (Walter, 2020a). Other manifestations of modern rationality, such as life insurance and inheritance laws, tidy up what happens after death (Parsons & Lidz, 1963). Yet, death is largely managed out of sight of society's mainstream in hospitals and other institutions, while those most likely to die – the very old – are marginalised (Blauner, 1966); it can be

several decades post-birth until close bereavement, let alone one's own imminent dying, become personal experiences. Certainly death is a major theme in news media (Hanusch, 2010), but these usually portray untypical deaths, disasters in faraway countries, and the deaths of the famous or of people such as migrants who are othered.

The ordinary expectation of a long life (evidenced, for example, by mass higher education, career planning, thirty year mortgages, and pensions) and positive hope for one's own and one's children's future (Head, 2016) have become part of the modern worldview and modern economic life, causing some to claim that death is denied (Becker, 1973) or forbidden (Ariès, 1981). Most sociologists find a better concept to be sequestration, that is, the removal of death and grief to the margins of everyday life (Giddens, 1991; Mellor & Shilling, 1993), though a number of more recent studies have argued that various aspects of death are becoming less sequestered or never were (Howarth, 2000; Walter, 1994). However, for those who because of ethnicity, social class or other forms of exploitation or discrimination reap few of the benefits of modernity, death has never been marginalised and may remain an ever-present possibility (Moller, 2004). And much of modernity's 'managed' way of death has been disrupted by armed conflicts, the AIDS epidemic, Black Lives Matter, and the Covid pandemic; these have raised the spectre, especially among people of colour and in poverty but also among the comfortable and affluent, of what Agamben (1998) calls 'bare life' – life unprotected by the state or by medicine.

CEE

From Europe's sixteenth century conquest of the Americas onwards, various indigenous peoples have witnessed species extinctions caused by western colonialism (Ghosh, 2021; Lear, 2008). Current western concerns about species extinction and now global warming is more recent, waxing and waning in recent decades in line with economic prosperity and depression (Scruggs & Benegal, 2012). In the late 2010s, however, these concerns gained exceptional prominence in many countries in the West and indeed elsewhere (Kidwell, 2020). In 2015, Pope Francis (who took his name from the Church's most environmentally aware saint) published his encyclical *Laudato Si: Care For Our Common Home* (Pope Francis, 2015), calling the world's one billion Catholics to action. In December 2017 a two-minute scene in revered British broadcaster and naturalist David Attenborough's BBC wildlife documentary *Blue Planet 2* depicting the effects of plastic pollution on marine life shocked millions of viewers worldwide, especially in the UK and China (less so in the USA³). The second half of 2018 witnessed the unexpected entry onto the global stage of fifteen year old Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg, her School Strike for Climate movement *Fridays for Future* where protesting children skip school on Fridays and, starting in England, the non-violent direct action movement Extinction Rebellion (XR). In just a matter of weeks, and gathering further momentum in 2019, these movements globalised from their countries of origin, Sweden and England. Thunberg addressed a number of high profile gatherings of world leaders including the World Economic Forum, the UN, the EU parliament, and the French and UK parliaments (Sjögren, 2020; Skilbeck, 2020; Thunberg, 2019). Inspired by earlier direct action movements such as Occupy, Greenham Common, and the Suffragettes, XR occupied streets and bridges, disrupted transport, and made symbolic attacks on government buildings and corporate headquarters in order to focus media, political and public attention on a

crisis that the normal channels of democracy were failing to address. Maximising arrests aimed to clog up the criminal justice system and force the state to pay attention (Farrell et al., 2019).

Drawing on an emerging scientific consensus (Zulianello & Ceccobelli, 2020), activists argue that humanity faces a climate and ecological emergency (CEE), and that radical action – far beyond that to which any government has yet committed – must be taken immediately. Both global warming beyond the 1.5 degrees envisaged in the 2015 Paris Agreement and increasing numbers of species extinctions seem very likely, leading to more human deaths as local ecosystems become uninhabitable, and more famine, conflict and migration.

Industrial societies' reliance on ever increasing consumption on a planet with finite resources is at the heart of the current climate and ecological crisis (Urry, 2010). Some, such as XR co-founders Gail Bradbrook and Roger Hallam (Bradbrook, 2021) and environmental journalist George Monbiot (2020), point to growth as inherent in capitalism and therefore the entire system needs changing. While XR does not formally call for capitalism's abolition, it is clear that representative democracy has proved itself unfit for the job of saving the planet (Farrell et al., 2019); the R in XR stands for 'rebellion', and participants call themselves 'rebels', rebels against 'politics as usual'. Though XR claims to be 'beyond politics', anti-capitalist sentiments and slogans go unchallenged within XR and a number of rebels have a long history of participating in anti-capitalist movements. Locally, meanwhile, XR rebels often use normal democratic channels to lobby their municipality or member of parliament, while outside XR, many who equally consider there to be a CEE see the only realistic solution to be a highly regulated 'green' capitalism (e.g. Porritt, 2009; Carney, 2020; see also, Mol, 2001).⁴

Though the term 'climate emergency' was coined a decade previously, it was not until 2019 that, under pressure from XR and Fridays for Future, many local and national governments responded by declaring a CEE. As of 27 March 2022, at least 2,089 jurisdictions in 38 countries, covering over 1 billion citizens, together with an unknown number of companies and other institutions, have declared a climate emergency.⁵ The term 'climate emergency', identified by Oxford Dictionaries as 2019's 'word of the year' in both the UK and the USA,⁶ is now widely used by politicians and journalists, even if many authorities that have declared a CEE have yet to implement policies resembling an emergency response. Some of these declarations and policies are less doom-laden than XR's apocalyptic language.

The 2020 Covid pandemic immediately followed 2019's many CEE declarations and posed a far more direct risk to life and immediate emergency; it pre-occupied politicians, devoured public resources, and greatly restricted the ability of Thunberg to travel and XR to occupy streets. While the pandemic may have partially eclipsed the sense of climate emergency, many opinion leaders, such as tech business magnate Bill Gates (2020) and ex-Bank of England director Mark Carney (Leyl, 2021), consider that the CEE remains the greater long-term risk to humanity.

Modernity

Bruno Latour (1993, 2003) argued that we never have been modern. We never did control nature; human society was never able to detach itself from nature; all that has changed is that we now realise this. A generation on, the CEE has greatly expanded the number of

people who understand this. Nature is not inert substance that bends to human control, but has agency to bite back. And if we do not control nature, then – as the first year of the Covid pandemic also demonstrated – neither do we control mortality, or at least that control has severe limits.

The term Anthropocene describes a geological era dominated by humans' impact on Earth; there is debate about when this era started, about which humans have been most responsible (Harvey, 2021), and the concept itself (Dibley, 2012), but clearly humanity's – and especially modern industrial society's – impact on global ecosystems is massive. Chakrabarty (2012) notes a paradox, consistent with Latour, that in the Anthropocene humans have more power than ever, even as a geological force, yet are becoming ever more powerless to control their power.

However deep the changes to everyday consumption that, along with more structural changes, are required to address the CEE, Head (2016, p. 5) argues that reduced consumption is not what her fellow white Australians fear. Rather they fear and grieve the loss of modernity, the loss of a sense of progress, optimism, control, hope – 'grief for what we understood as our future – hitherto a time and place of unlimited positive possibility' (see also, Bulkeley et al., 2018). For Head, the modern subject who is being radically undone by the CEE is not the consumer, but the one who believes we can control the world and fix whatever discomforts us.⁷ We may, possibly, have the vaccines and the political will to control a pandemic, but do we have the political and technical tools to limit global warming and mass extinctions? Is this the ultimate test of late modern techniques of risk management (Beck, 1992)?

Writing now a few years later in the light of the Covid pandemic, I think Head may be onto something. In 2020, privileged western publics were unexpectedly⁸ willing, temporarily at least, to restrict their high consumption lifestyles (going out to restaurants, international holidays, driving hundreds of miles to visit grandparents); what terrified them was a virus that neither they nor modern science might be able to control. Chakrabarty too is onto something: we 'moderns' have unleashed forces we can barely control. Tragically, those most immediately and directly affected by these forces, such as indigenous peoples (Jones et al., 2020), have typically benefitted little from modernity, and may have never embraced modern optimism; indeed, their way of life is threatened by modernity.

Modernity's apparent control of nature is the source of both the modern way of death and the current CEE. There is surely a dialogue to be had between the two. To begin this dialogue, this article considers how the CEE reconfigures mortality. In sum: a) Modern rationality, which has been so successful in extending longevity, has in other manifestations such as mass production and cheap energy caused a climate and ecological crisis which threatens to undo modernity's control of nature. b) Mass death and destruction induced by climate change and/or ecological degradation, occurring first in locations in the global South vulnerable to sea rise, flooding, drought, etc, but also in 2020/2021 in highly publicised and hitherto presumed safe locations in Australia and California (bush fires), Canada (heat wave), and Germany (flooding), become a worrying, for some a terrifying, prospect. Anxiety therefore shifts from my own death and the death of known loved ones, which Ariès (1981) argued characterised death anxiety in previous centuries, to a new anxiety – collective or mass death in future generations. c) In the more apocalyptic forms of CEE discourse, death – along with grief, guilt and existential anxiety – far from being marginal, becomes central to a re-worked human drama. This article focuses on the last two of these shifts.

Section 1) below shows how XR dramatises human mortality. Section 2) shows how the CEE introduces a new death mentality, namely collective death/extinction of humans and other species, located both now and in the future. My argument draws partly on Greta Thunberg's 2018–2019 speeches (Thunberg, 2019), but mainly on XR's statements, slogans and actions in the UK in 2019, the year that saw significant impact with many political authorities and other organisations responding by declaring climate emergencies.

1) Dramatising mortality

This section will show how XR dramatises the possibility, or even likelihood, of future mass death of humans, along with the continued and increasing extinction of other species. That humans are physical creatures makes them vulnerable to natural processes that they themselves have induced. The CEE makes clear that humans are not separate from nature, but shape it and are shaped by it. In other words, the CEE reminds us of our existential vulnerability as creatures; we are not autonomous masters of the universe. The CEE offers yet further evidence, in dramatic form, that mortality is no longer sequestered (Giddens, 1991), forbidden (Ariès, 1981) or denied (Becker, 1973). Rather, the fear of future collective death, along with guilt and grief, are used to motivate the action required to limit global warming and slow species extinctions. XR often dramatises this fear in street theatre.

Street theatre

XR actions aim to cause inconvenience, for example, by blocking roads and hence shutting down areas of a city in order to force business and political leaders to listen; and/or to communicate through art, symbolism and street theatre. Many of these actions, in some of which I participated, draw attention to species extinctions through symbols of death, grief, loss, or haunting in a public spectacle of death. One is the 'die-in', where rebels lie down outside a public building as though dead, drawing the attention of politicians or business people as they enter the building. The ghostly outline of 'the dead' is drawn around them on the ground with chalk, remaining visible for a few days until the elements erase it.⁹

Many XR actions include the Red Rebel Brigade, 'ghostly-white figures cloaked in scarlet-red, drifting gracefully through lines of police and crowds of demonstrators ... like spirits coming back from beyond the grave, here to warn the living of the grave errors they're making' (Benjamin, 2019). The Brigade's expertly choreographed movements hold the attention, not least as they move slowly along a line of police, looking each officer in the face before moving on. Their striking visual presence draws media attention.

XR rebels have also staged 'funeral' parades through their local town where they carry an (empty) coffin and banners drawing attention to threatened local wildlife. With a real coffin, such parades can be remarkably lifelike. One in Exeter was watched respectfully by shoppers and had considerably more participants at the end than at the beginning; bystanders may have joined in. In another action, a large banner held up outside the Treasury Office in London read **'Business as usual = DEATH'**.

XR is not afraid to stage symbolic death rites intended to be highly visible and to disturb. While *Dying Matters*¹⁰ sensitively trains health workers in how to start conversations about death and dying, and death cafés offer safe spaces in which individuals can

choose to confront their mortality (Fong, 2017; Koksvik & Richards, 2021), XR thrusts mortality in the face of passers-by such as office workers popping out to buy a lunchtime sandwich. XR is not unique in using death rituals to highlight global warming; one such was the 2019 funeral rite for Iceland's Okjökull glacier which gained international media publicity (Sideris, 2020). These staged performances exemplify what Jacobsen (2016) calls 'spectacular death'.


Climate activists are not alone in dramatising how western modernity is death-producing. The Black Lives Matter protest movement expanded rapidly in the wake of the death of African-American George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police in May 2020. BLM was by no means the first time that the killing of African-Americans by whites has sparked civil rights protests – notably, the 1955 lynching of fourteen year old Emmett Till inspired Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus boycott (Anderson, 2015).

Carnival

XR symbolic death rites also differ from death cafés and other manifestations of the death awareness movement in their playfulness. Alongside symbolising loss, mourning and funerals, XR street blockades can be remarkably upbeat, playful, carnivalesque – a protestival (St John, 2008). There is a precedent for this not only in 1960s counter-cultural festivals and protests (Nita, 2019) but also in the history of death, for carnivals have often combined death, fun, and grassroots political dissent. In the Christian tradition, carnivals for the dead on All Souls Day, such as The Mexican Day of the Dead, are manifestly playful, poking fun at politicians, exposing their frailty and mortality, reversing established hierarchies (Bakhtin, 1968; Stallybrass & White, 1986). Lenten carnivals such as the Basel Fasnacht, though not formally about death, often have a macabre element and are used by residents to remind political leaders of their vulnerability (Weidkuhn, 1976).

XR's playful creativity is intended to diffuse hostile reactions from both police and inconvenienced members of the public, yet can also prompt resentment that protestors can play and dance while others need to work (Walter, 2020b). For every police officer or bystander who enjoys witnessing the XR carnival, there are others who cannot take seriously protestors having a good time at others' expense. When participating in XR actions, I myself have felt ambivalent about dancing and laughing while warning about impending eco-catastrophe, even when I receive positive thumbs-ups from passing drivers or pedestrians. Am I like a medieval jester telling truth through comedy, or a sadistic doctor smiling while delivering a terminal diagnosis? Might a silent blockade or funeral march be more communicative? Several countries have witnessed silent marches (Walgrave & Manssens, 2000), as on anniversaries of London's 2017 Grenfell Tower fire, mourning the many dead and protesting official incompetence. XR, however, argues that actions that inconvenience no-one are ineffective.

Death anxiety

Death and extinction are written into XR's very name and, arguably, into its logo which depicts a stylised hourglass, representing how little time  remains to avert extinction of yet more species and of our civilisation (Pahl et al., 2014; Webster, 2019). In seventeenth

and eighteenth century Europe and North America the hourglass was widely used as a memento mori, for example, on New England gravestones, reminding passers-by of their mortality.¹¹ Of course, by no means everyone is aware of this history, and indeed the XR hourglass is so simplified that I first read it as a cross rather than an hourglass, while another rebel felt the stark black imagery suggests a death cult. Certainly some journalists have portrayed XR as such a cult.¹² But however read, XR's name and logo seem to have death anxiety written into them.

The CEE is not unique in fostering death anxiety among western publics. Other examples have included the Cold War fear of nuclear annihilation (resurrected in 2022 by the war in Ukraine), the AIDS epidemic, and the Covid pandemic. The causal relationship between death anxiety and the bomb, AIDS, Covid or the CEE could go either way: death anxiety could be raised by these prospects of mass death, and/or pre-existing death anxiety could make some individuals more susceptible to scary messages about the bomb, AIDS, Covid or the CEE (Menzies & Menzies, 2020). In several of these cases, anxiety is evoked in order to motivate action, as in Greta Thunberg's speeches. She says 'I want you to panic' because 'our house is on fire!'; a degree of panic may indeed be necessary to motivate the urgent action required. The death anxiety evoked by the CEE, however, is not attributable to an easily envisaged direct cause such as a nuclear bomb, a virus or a police officer's violence, and is for most westerners (as was Cold War nuclear annihilation) a rather remote possibility. The anxiety is therefore diffuse, hanging like a cloud of impending doom, and not readily managed by specific personal actions such as social distancing and getting vaccinated (Covid) or using condoms (AIDS).

XR's *Heading for Extinction* talk – its main recruiting tool – synthesises scientific findings, invites reflection on the emotions elicited, and presents socio-political evidence for the power of mass mobilisation. This strategy for converting 'bystanders' into 'upstanders' certainly has dangers. Almost inevitably, the amount of grief, guilt and anxiety needed to mobilise some people will incapacitate others, including some XR rebels. One told me how in the days leading up to a major action he and his XR group got worked up into a frenzy of anxiety about future generations dying. For this rebel, XR did indeed feel like a death cult, not least after spending hours printing the black XR logo on countless banners and tee-shirts. To get the public and politicians to listen, dire pictures, scenarios and slogans have to be painted, but for activists as for others, the balance of hope versus anxiety and despair can be delicate.¹³ Psychotherapist, social worker and member of the Climate Psychology Alliance Caroline Hickman (2019) is concerned that, while death anxiety may motivate collective action, it can also overwhelm some, not least children (see also, Lehtonen & Välimäki, 2012; Weintrobe, 2012b).¹⁴

Grief, despair and hope

CEE discourse involves complex grief for a planet whose habitability affluent modern humans are destroying (Frantzen, 2022; Jones et al., 2020), and indeed grief for the loss of our modern selves and our naïve optimism (Head, 2016). In the absence of modernist optimism, what hope is there? 'Everyday denial' (Cohen, 2001) of the seriousness of the situation is engaged in even by activists and climate scientists (Head, 2016) and enables them to function from day to day, just as it does those who know they have terminal cancer. In everyday denial (unlike both explicit denial and subconscious denial), the person knows

the seriousness of the situation but, in order to continue with everyday activity, chooses not to focus on it. Head (2016), however, argues that, even after surrendering naïve optimism, real hope may be found through facing up to the death and loss humans have caused (cf Lear, 2008; Solnit, 2016). Some have compared this to hospice care where acknowledging the seriousness of the situation and relinquishing hope of cure can enable the person to live fully in the present (Jamail, 2019; McPherson, 2019; Yalom, 2008). Stuart (2020) found this kind of hope among the XR rebels he interviewed,

Hope emerging out of despair and grief is central to how climate activism creates a grief-based political culture. Granek (2014) has identified three ways that grief can be politicised: first, by suppressing it, so mourners get can back to work as soon as possible; second, by nationalising it, when governments co-opt and manipulate grief in war; and third, more positively, when mourners collectively activate their grief, not least by transforming it into anger. In Granek's examples, mourners – often mothers bereaved by state violence – collectively mobilise their grief in the service of justice and political change, as with Argentina's Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo who from 1977 to 2006 protested the disappearance and killing of their children (Holst-Warhaft, 2000). The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and Black Lives Matter today, are also examples. XR and Fridays for Future evoke anticipatory grief among parents and grandparents over the struggles and losses their children and grandchildren will face; climate anxiety among the young; anger at how little governments are doing to address the emergency; and they use these emotions to mobilise action.

Using grief to mobilise action may offer hope, but it offers little comfort, little solace. According to bereavement theories, solace in grief may be found in internalising the deceased (Parkes, 1986), in continuing bonds (Klass et al., 1996); something of what is lost must be salvaged if people are to face the future (Marris, 1974). XR denies this possibility. In its view, those who once embraced an optimism that modernity can fix any problem should fully acknowledge their loss and let that optimism go; clinging to modernity and/or capitalism is misplaced. This, however, is precisely what advocates of green capitalism such as Gates and Carney, and the climate and ecological policies adopted by governments, corporations, universities and other institutions, offer. They offer solace that such policies will fix the CEE; modern rationality will save us after all. Marris (1974) would predict that the total change XR calls for will provoke reactionary responses in politicians and publics, already seen in far right reactions to the European Union's climate policies (Turner & Bailey, 2022)

A question that has not, to my knowledge, been asked is whether climate grief will in time morph into a climate grief *milieu*. This concept is prompted by Heelas' (1996) argument that over time the 'New Age movement' became mainstream, morphing into a New Age milieu in which techniques that, in the 1970s were alternative, by the 2000s had become a standard part of, for example, management training. Might something similar be happening with green issues? Might, for example, both radical climate activism and the greening of capitalism come to reflect and/or foster a degree of climate/ecological grief and guilt in society as a whole?

2) Future collective death

If the CEE dramatises human vulnerability to death and loss, this kind of death is not part of the standard modern death mentality, nor even of the death awareness movement (Lofland, 1978). CEE declarations re-direct attention from the death of personally known

individuals, to species death. Even if humans survive as a species, it will only be after many billions of humans have died from the consequences of global warming and altered ecosystems. My death becomes a lesser concern than the future trials and deaths of my children and grandchildren, of other unknown descendants, and the more immediate deaths of many of Earth's poorer human inhabitants and of other species.

Of course, there have been many times in history when mass death has afflicted certain communities, notably the Black Death, a bubonic plague pandemic that from 1346 to 1353 killed between 75 and 200 million people in Asia, Europe and Africa, peaking in Europe from 1347 to 1351 where it killed between thirty and sixty percent of the continent's population. This raised the price and hence the power of labour, which Herlihy (1997) argues facilitated the end of feudalism. This perhaps offers hope that the collapse of one civilisation through mass death can be the seed bed for a new civilisation – though at enormous human cost that none would welcome (Scranton, 2015).

Nor are apocalyptic warnings that grip collective and personal imagination new in human history (Cohn, 1957), as for example, in the Cold War nuclear disarmament movement (Taylor & Pritchard, 1980). There was talk then of extinction. An advert inserted in several Californian newspapers (Beyond War, 1985), started with the headline:

Working together we can build a world beyond war.

WE CANNOT STAND BY AND WATCH THE EXTINCTION OF THE HUMAN RACE.

The advert made clear that nuclear weapons must be abolished. 'It will happen. Nuclear war is inevitable unless we adopt a "new mode of thinking" Our survival depends upon totally changing the way we think about war. We face a clear choice: embark upon a new mode of thinking or continue the drift to extinction'. The similarity with CEE rhetoric is striking.

Historian Philippe Ariès (1981) astutely contrasted late medieval and early modern anxieties about life after death (*my* death: will I be remembered? what will happen to me when I die? will I go to heaven?); the Victorian romantic concern with bereavement (*thy* death: what will happen to me when you die? How can I live without you?); and a twentieth century *hidden* or *forbidden* death. Like the prospect of nuclear annihilation but invoking guilt and grief as well as anxiety (Jones et al., 2020), CEE discourse invites a twenty first century concern with *future collective* death (how can I live with myself today, knowing that my society's lifestyle condemns my children, grandchildren and countless unknown others to increasing hardships, vulnerabilities or even death?)

The following sub-sections ask who is the 'we' in this collective death?

Future generations

Greta Thunberg's speeches to world leaders in 2018/2019 denounced their profligacy with the world's precious resources. Will her generation have any cause to respect, let alone be grateful to, previous generations (cf Read, 2017)? Most of today's environmental damage has been wrought not by generations long dead but by westerners living, working, consuming, driving and flying in the second half of the twentieth century. It is Thunberg's elders at whom anger is being directed for having done nothing, for turning a blind eye, for their 'everyday denial' of climate and ecological change (Cohen, 2001; Head, 2016).

If Thunberg's assault on this generation and its leaders undermines respect for elders and recent forebears, focussing on the planet also challenges *who* are seen as forebears and as descendants. Awareness is raised of how the planet's altered physical environment results from the actions of past generations, and how our own actions will affect future generations. This evokes a global sense of the living and the dead and their effect on succeeding generations – the planet itself becomes the medium through which past, present and future generations influence each other.

The overall focus on future generations relies on a relative absence of history in CEE discourse. The population of the Americas was almost annihilated by early western colonialism, taking some centuries to recover its pre-conquest level. This mass death resulted in part from colonists destroying habitat that had sustained native populations and civilisations (Ghosh, 2021). By largely ignoring such histories, the CEE apocalypse is future, not past.¹⁵

Other species

The origins of western individualism and its role in shaping modernity have been much debated by historians (Macfarlane, 1978; Weber, 1930), but they and cross-cultural researchers (Hofstede, 2001) agree that individualism does not characterise all human cultures. CEE discourse hopes for a more collective self, interconnected with others, in time and across time, risking collective mass death and seeking to leave a collective rather than individual legacy.¹⁶ This interconnection is not only between humans, but also between humans and other species. Those who blame the current crisis on modern individualism often identify the interconnected collective self with the worldview of indigenous peoples who, they argue, live in harmony with nature and understand how humans and other species act on each other.¹⁷

The CEE's concern about collective, mass death thus extends 'collective' to include other species. The industrial age not only threatens its own destruction, but also threatens many other species to extinction. The CEE acknowledges that we are in the 'Sixth Mass Extinction', a mass extinction being a short period of geological time in which 75% of the planet's species become extinct (Barnosky et al., 2011). Van Dooren (2014) and Rose et al. (2017) document how even before the last member of a species dies, the species has effectively disappeared as a functioning part of its ecosystems, as many indigenous peoples and some modern farmers know very well. CEE discourse shifts the focus from personal mortality to species extinction. Yet the current mass extinction is the first induced by aware humans and therefore the first which, theoretically, concerted action could avert.

The feeling for other species has a history. For two centuries western populations have become increasingly solicitous for the well-being of animals (Pinker, 2012, pp. 548–579). Britain's Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was founded in 1824 by anti-slavery campaigners (including William Wilberforce); the publication in 1859 of Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, though used by some Victorians to justify hunting 'lesser' species (including human 'savages') to extinction, also revealed the evolutionary connection between humans and other species; the notion of animal rights gained ground from the 1970s (Singer, 1975); scientific studies now document that animals have emotions, including in some species grief (Archer, 1999); pet ownership has increased dramatically;

grief for companion animals is increasingly acknowledged; and not killing animals for food is one reason for vegetarianism's increasing popularity. In sum, modern urban humans in the West¹⁸ have progressively come to identify with other species, or at least be solicitous for their wellbeing. Therefore the revelation that industrial society is causing the extinction of a massive number of species becomes in CEE discourse not just an ecological fact, like previous mass extinctions, but a tragedy, even for some a crime – 'ecocide'.

Other humans

In 2018–19, climate and ecological emergencies were declared across the privileged West, with dire warnings of the disasters to befall future generations; participants in school strikes and XR actions were overwhelmingly white. This began to be unpicked from 2020 because a) the emergence of Black Lives Matter problematised XR's whiteness, particularly its strategy of inviting mass arrests (risky for people of colour) and b) privileged whites were seen to be dying through Anthropocene wildfires and floods. In 2021, though XR UK remained largely white, it began to focus more on current climate-induced suffering outside privileged western populations, emphasising 'climate justice' (Smiles & Edwards, 2021). Climate justice points to historic injustices requiring restitution and to the inequity that those most likely to be affected by global warming and ecological degradation contrast starkly with those who have done most to cause it (Harvey, 2021).¹⁹ As western publics increasingly understand that 'natural' disasters the other side of the world can be caused by their own excessive consumption, there may be a growing sense not only of responsibility but also of fellow feeling for those whose sufferings might previously have been seen as 'over there', not really anything to do with me. Covid likewise highlights our interconnectedness.²⁰

Pinker (2012) documents the centuries-long rise of fellow feeling not only between humans and animals, but also between one group of humans and another. The very notion of 'human-kind' is relatively modern. Stigma, 'othering' and genocide, once legitimate, are now widely seen as abominations – testimony to the rise of fellow feeling among humans. That others are dying, and even more will die, because of my society's high-carbon consumption is therefore something about which I am concerned. At the same time, however, terror management theory (Solomon et al., 2015) argues that, when more conscious of their mortality, humans become *more* prejudiced against outgroups. I would hypothesise that Pinker's 'fellow feeling' – a feature of modernity – is a powerful driver of contemporary discourse about climate justice. But it is also likely that, as the decades unfold and climate/ecologically driven migration leads to increased conflict and even wars, outgroup prejudice will increase – not necessarily because people are afraid of death, but because of direct competition for resources.

To summarise, the CEE expands death awareness: from individual death to collective death; from family/tribe to human race; from humans to animals to all species. 'Collective' death refers to not only a plurality of humans but also the entire collective of species (of which humans are a part). This expansion of death awareness could perhaps arise among western publics only now, not just because of scientific findings about what modern humans are doing to their planet but also because contemporary modernity is heir to centuries of expanded philosophical, moral and legal thinking about what it means to be human. The CEE overlays individual death (Ariès' 'my' and 'thy' death) with collective death.

A cosmic drama

Climate activists do more than dramatise future collective death. They re-work the entire human drama. During the Christian era, millions saw their existence played out within God's cosmic time: *creation* → *fall* → *redemption* → *second coming*. With secularisation, millions now see their life limited to the few decades from individual birth to individual death (what secular sociology terms 'the life course'), finding meaning not in God's cosmic drama but through family, work, consumption, etc, during these few decades (Gronemeyer, 1996; Nir, 2019). Climate/ecological activists re-insert humans into cosmic time: *hunter-gatherer co-existence with nature* → *farming* → *industrialism* → *collapse*. Every action has meaning within this Anthropocene drama, culminating in a Wagnerian *Götterdämmerung* in which the hall of the gods (read: modern civilisation) self-destructs. We are all, as XR's introductory talk is titled, *Heading for Extinction*. Just as Ariès' *my* death was rooted in late medieval theology and in Renaissance humanism, and *thy* death in Victorian romanticism, so *collective* death is rooted in this cosmic drama of the Anthropocene.²¹ Those climate rebels who rail against capitalism add this to their own ready-made cosmic drama – Marxism – in which the destruction of capitalism leads to a revolutionary new society in harmony with the planet.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the discourse of a climate and ecological emergency (CEE) re-shapes understandings of mortality as commonly held and institutionalised among majority groups in modern western countries. It does this primarily in two ways. First it uses stark scientific facts to dramatise human vulnerability to natural processes, inducing guilt, grief and death anxiety in order to galvanise individuals, businesses, governments and international institutions to take the huge and immediate steps required to limit global warming and slow the extinction of species. The CEE thus furthers the 'de-sequestration' of death in modern society; indeed, death becomes central to a new cosmic drama. Government and corporate net zero policies arguably institutionalise death anxiety, comparable perhaps to anti-smoking policies.

Second, the CEE re-focuses attention from the death of personally known individuals, to the climate-induced collective deaths of millions, perhaps billions, of humans in coming decades, along with species extinctions on a scale hitherto unknown during *homo sapiens'* time on Earth. Taking the fear of *thy* death, the death of individual loved ones, and collectivising it arguably comprises a new death mentality – supplementing Ariès's *my*, *thy* and *forbidden* death with *future collective* death. This article makes no assessment of how many people embrace this new mentality, or are affected by climate grief and anxiety about species extinction, but simply suggests that a new discourse about death is now increasingly widespread in the UK and many other western countries.

The CEE locates collective death within an Anthropocene worldview, but is far from alone in undermining the modern western sequestration of death. The Covid pandemic, which immediately followed 2019's many declarations of a CEE, highlighted human vulnerability to nature and anxiety about both *my* and *thy* death. Among the gay community, the 1980s and 1990s AIDS pandemic had done likewise. And for the world's many refugees fleeing to the modern West (increasing numbers of whom are climate

refugees), immediate vulnerability to both *my* and *thy* death is palpable. In each case, whether because of a virus or the shared dangers of migration, deaths have often been multiple, and to a degree communal. Black Lives Matter highlights the mortal risks faced by members of black and other minority communities. Care home and hospital scandals of which there have been several in the UK in the twenty first century undermine trust that the end of life can be neatly and safely packaged away. And Bauman (1989) has argued that the Holocaust – the near-extinction of an entire people – was no twentieth century accident, but (as with the climate and ecological crisis, if in different ways) a product of modern rationality. The revived fear of nuclear annihilation prompted by the 2022 Ukraine war only adds to Western anxieties about collective death.

Whether the CEE will in the long run lead to a new way of being modern (Head, 2016) or whether – as most politicians, businesses and families doubtless hope – it will, like the control (so far) of nuclear weapons and viruses, get absorbed into ‘business as usual’, that is, yet more late-modern risk management (Beck, 1992), it is too soon to tell. That will depend on how the planet behaves, and how humans behave, in coming decades. It will also determine whether or not the CEE permanently re-focusses western attitudes to death. In the meantime, it does seem – from not only the CEE but also Black Lives Matter, Covid, the Ukraine war, and multiple refugee crises – that twenty-first century modernity is less a death denying society than a death anxiety inducing society, even a death producing society.

Finally, to turn from CEE discourse to climatic and ecological change itself. Does the death studies community have a responsibility to embrace a new agenda, namely to understand and help reverse (or at least prepare for) the drift towards future collective death? In 2020, palliative and bereavement care quickly re-tooled to address the new normal that Covid presented to western society, namely dying isolated at home or isolated in an intensive care unit – very far from thanatology’s ‘good death’. Death studies scholars quickly turned to researching dying, loss and funerals in the era of Covid. An even bigger, if slower, re-focussing will become necessary if the apocalyptic warnings of climate scientists, the Pope, Attenborough, Thunberg and XR prove prophetic, and mass collective death caused directly or indirectly by climate warming and ecological degradation becomes the new norm. Death studies will need to engage with not only environmental sciences but also with disaster studies, for – as with many migrant deaths today – those dying climate and ecological deaths will likely be largely unprotected by the state or by medicine (Agamben, 1998; Kellehear, 2007). The contexts in which increasing numbers of people die and grieve will not be the palliative care unit, hospice or care home, but disaster, war and flight. Thanatology and palliative care need to prepare for the possibility of such an appalling new normal.

Notes

1. This bias may underlie my focus on the CEE as a crisis of modernity rather than a consequence of centuries of violent extractive colonialism.
2. The older references in this section are conceptual classics and/or seminal, demonstrating that some of the processes discussed are well over half a century old.
3. <https://slate.com/technology/2018/03/why-didnt-america-care-about-blue-planet-ii.html>
4. An anti-capitalist founding ideology accompanied by tolerance of contrary and diverse views among participants also characterises the death café movement (Hawkins, 2017).
5. <https://climateemergencydeclaration.org/>

6. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Word_of_the_year#Oxford
7. Head makes no reference to Latour, but her argument resembles his: If we cannot control nature, indeed if we are not 'above' nature, then this is scary: we never were modern, it was an illusion.
8. Unexpected at least by behavioural scientists who advised the UK government early in the pandemic.
9. Die-ins were performed thirty years ago by the direct action AIDS group ACT UP, but more likely originated with environmental protests in the late 1960s.
10. www.dyingmatters.org
11. My thanks to Claire Barratt for making this connection.
12. See for example:
<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/2019/10/08/extinction-rebellions-antics-not-irresponsible-have-hallmarks/> <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/10087280/extinction-rebellion-protests-misery-fear/>
13. This must surely also have characterised ban-the-bomb activism.
14. A conversation (Bradbrook, 2021) with terror management theory (TMT) might help XR evaluate whether its death imagery is productive or unproductive. TMT experiments have found that brief exposure to death imagery can make people more attached to consumerism and hostile to environmentalism, whereas directly and purposefully confronting our mortal condition can do the opposite (Solomon et al., 2015). One might therefore hypothesise that immersion in XR's death culture could make rebels more committed to environmentalism, whereas the general public's occasional exposure to XR's death imagery could prompt negative reactions, but this would need testing. (For a TMT analysis of varied responses to the Covid pandemic, see, Pyszczynski et al., 2021).
15. And to a limited extent, present. See *Other Humans* below.
16. My thanks to Mandy Robertson for this insight. The focus on individual legacy relates to Ariès' *my death*.
17. Such claims can be overstated; some species were hunted to extinction by early humans (Diamond, 2005).
18. Maybe not in China (Chee, 2021).
19. The geography of climate justice is more complex than this. The USA, Brazil, India and the UK fared particularly badly in the Covid pandemic, demonstrating that 'inequity is a far better predictor of the likely impacts of disasters than aggregate wealth' (Ghosh, 2021, p. 141); see, also Wilkinson and Pickett (2009). Those who will suffer most from global warming will probably live in the most unequal societies. Also, the more a landscape has been unnaturally transformed into the image of Europe, the more likely it is now already suffering directly from climate change; this includes several affluent societies, such as southern California and parts of Australia (Ghosh, 2021).
20. Thanks again to Mandy Robertson for this insight.
21. This gives some climate activists' lives a profound sense of meaning, sustaining them as they face arrest, imprisonment and a destroyed planet.

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