

Death, Shame, and Climate Change

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Abstract: This paper's main aim is to illuminate how climate activism—which seeks to address the collective existential crisis that is climate change—uniquely intersects with the individual existential crisis that is one's own death. Addressing climate change seems to minimally require *more cooperation* and *less environmentally unfriendly behavior*. However, in virtue of the way discussions on climate change can make nature's vulnerability—and, relatedly, our own mortality—psychologically salient, climate discourse is capable of engendering existential anxiety. This poses problems for climate activism, as attenuating existential anxiety often relies on forms of self-esteem striving capable of undermining cooperation and exacerbating environmentally unfriendly behavior. I take these problems to have implications for a certain style of discourse made famous by Greta Thunberg: *climate shaming*. Because of shame's potential to induce moral maturation/motivational revision, some take climate shaming to be a justified strategy for promoting climate activism. Yet empirical research suggests that climate shaming may often catalyze various self-esteem striving behaviors that lead to the exact opposite of climate shaming's intended effect(s). In my view, this is because of climate shaming's problematic potential to engender existential anxiety. If so, climate activists have good reason to abandon the climate shaming strategy.

I. Introduction

It is widely agreed that Earth's climate is changing in ways that can only be attributed to anthropogenic forces (Lynas, Houlton, and Perry 2021). At present, however, the climate problem has yet to be adequately addressed—even though many believe in climate change (Tyson and Kennedy 2023). This suggests that the

failure to combat the climate problem is best described in terms of a motivational issue, rather than a mere lack of belief.

In what follows, I will develop and defend two arguments related to this motivational issue, i.e., our failure to properly address climate change. Within the upcoming section (§II), I will consider how the individual existential crisis that is our own mortality uniquely intersects with the collective existential crisis that is climate change. My first argument will focus on the various ways that *climate discourse* seems capable of eliciting death-related reminders and anxieties, the motivational influences of which can catalyze various self-esteem striving behaviors antagonistic to the end-goals of climate activism.

Because of our failure thus far to address climate change, some have turned to certain styles of climate discourse that are strategic in nature to give us a motivational shot in the arm, so to speak. One such strategy presently gaining traction is *climate shaming*, i.e., utilizing shame to promote climate activism. And yet, despite the seemingly environmentalist intention behind it, the kind of strategic climate shaming presently being popularized and defended is not practically effective and likely to backfire, or so I shall argue (in § III). It will be my contention that climate shaming (particularly when it is insensitive to its targets' worldviews) may not only make climate change more difficult to address but might worsen the very problem climate activism aims to resolve. If so, climate shaming is a strategy that is ineffective at best, negligent at worst, and ought to be abandoned by climate activists.

Section 2: Existential Vulnerability and Anxiety

Let us begin by considering how environmentalism, including climate activism, centrally concerns the preservation, protection, or promotion of nature. Yet it follows from this that environmentalism must also concern (the avoiding of) nature's erosion, destruction, or extinction. To see why, take the interdisciplinary idea of *sustainability*: for something to be sustained, it must survive or continue on in some way; that is, it must avoid death and/or decay.

Environmentalism's connection to death and decay is worth taking seriously. This is because, though concerns related to climate change have been voiced for decades (Brundtland 1987), the prevailing view is that we are still not doing nearly enough to combat the climate problem. In what immediately follows, my suggestion will be that our failure to properly address climate change is due to the way this collective existential crisis intersects with the ultimate individual existential crisis—that is, our own susceptibility to decay, and the certainty of our own death.

2.1 Death-Denial

Much of the discussion surrounding climate change (i.e., *climate discourse*) seems conceptually connected with existential vulnerability. Notions related to mass

extinction, cataclysmic events, natural disasters, and the like run rampant throughout climate discourse. These notions can be anxiety inducing, as the finitude of all natural entities has existential implications for us as well; as the cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker (1971; 1973; 1975) has argued, reminders that nature is both destructive on one hand yet vulnerable on the other can remind us of our own susceptibility to decay, including our inevitable annihilation. As Becker puts it: “The real world is simply too terrible to admit. It tells man that he is a small trembling animal who will someday decay and die” (Becker 1973, 3).

According to Becker’s *death-denial thesis* (1973; 1975), humans evolved certain cognitive capacities which enabled us to become self-aware of our own mortality. For a species evolutionary wired to strive for survival, this self-awareness binds us in a unique existential predicament—trying to find life still worth living, despite the knowledge of our certain, eventual death. Becker (1971; 1973; 1975) argues that in order to resolve the individual existential crisis that is one’s own inevitable death, humans rely on culture and self-esteem, the combination of which provide two crucial, interconnected functions for our species: engendering meaning (i.e., providing existential significance), and attenuating the potential existential anxiety which can arise from the self-awareness of our own mortality (Becker 1973; 1975).

Becker conceives of *culture* (in the broadest sense of the term) as providing socially codified structures/systems whereby an individual can ostensibly harness a symbolic, transcendent kind of meaning/value, that is, to cultivate *self-esteem*—i.e., a sense of self-worth or personal existential significance. A sense of self-significance is crucial to an organism that can come to know of its inevitable death long in advance, for what may be implicated in the idea of certain death is the possibility of life’s meaninglessness. But the thought that life is meaningless could disrupt one’s motivational mechanisms—hence why Becker takes our species to be vitally dependent on self-esteem:

[W]hat man needs most is to feel secure in his self-esteem. But man is not just a glob of idling protoplasm, but a creature with a name who lives in a world of symbols and dreams and not merely matter. His sense of self-worth is constituted symbolically, his cherished narcissism feeds on symbols, on an abstract idea of his own worth, an idea composed of sounds, words, and images, in the air, in the mind, on paper . . . and can be fed limitlessly in the domain of symbols and so into immortality. The single organism can expand into dimensions of worlds and times without moving a physical limb, it can take eternity into itself even as it gaspingly dies. (Becker 1973, 3)

Though there are limits to how much we can physically nourish our biological bodies (e.g., eating, drinking), cultural structures can enable an animal self-aware of its certain eventual death to nourish themselves in a more limitless fashion, i.e., via self-esteem striving. In other words, the potential meaninglessness and motivational extirpation that may result from the knowledge of one’s own mortality

can be avoided/mitigated by adhering to a *cultural worldview*: that is, by living up to the standards, norms, and values of the symbolic meaning-making system that is the worldview one subscribes to (which is significantly shaped by the culture, society, or ingroup[s] one belongs to), one can feel like a valuable contributor to some project of long-lasting meaningfulness. This, in turn, generates self-esteem, reinforcing the individual's sense of self-significance (Schimel, Landau, and Hayes 2008), particularly when worldview adherence suggests that some vestige of one-self may “live on” beyond one's bodily death—i.e., that one may obtain a kind of literal (e.g., afterlife, shared bloodlines) or symbolic (e.g., fame, legacy) *immortality* (Becker 1971; 1973; 1975).²

Self-esteem striving, then, allows one to “deny” death, in the sense that an individual can find life worth living, even though “death is stalking us all and can catch up to us at any time” (Arndt and Vess 2008, 911). And in support of Becker's claim that self-esteem acts as a psychological buffer against existential anxiety, a large body of research suggests that self-esteem and anxiety (including existential, death-related anxiety) exhibit an inverse, bidirectional causal relationship (Pyszczynski et al. 2004; Schimel, Landau, and Hayes 2008; Schimel, Hayes, and Sharp 2019).³

In my view, the theoretical framework posited by Becker, along with the extensive body of Terror Management Theory (hereafter “TMT”) research which supports that framework (Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Greenberg 2015), can help explain why we have yet to properly address climate change: problematically, the psychological constructs and mechanisms that many individuals rely on to engage in self-esteem striving are often antagonistic to the end-goals of climate activism.

2.2 One Problem for Addressing Climate Change

It seems uncontroversial to assume that properly addressing climate change will likely require *more cooperation* and *less environmentally unfriendly behavior*. However, combating the climate problem often seems to require discussing the potentially destructive consequences that climate change may lead to. Climate discourse, then—in virtue of the way it can connect conceptually with notions related to existential vulnerability—can implicitly or explicitly remind us of our own death (Dickinson 2009). If so, then it seems that climate discourse is capable of engendering existential anxiety.

The way that the collective existential crisis that is climate change intersects with the individual existential crisis that is one's own mortality can potentially produce two unique problems, as far as properly addressing climate change is concerned. I shall consider each of these problems in turn.

First, the ways in which we tend to manage death-related reminders and anxieties can promote intergroup conflict (Greenberg, Vail, and Pyszczynski 2014). For instance, according to TMT's *mortality salience hypothesis*, when our mortality

is made salient (consciously or subconsciously), we tend to engage in more prejudicial thinking (Schimel et al. 1999) and cling more strongly to our pre-existing worldviews (McGregor et al. 2011)—which, in turn, can reinforce the ideological importance of our ingroup and/or reaffirm our self-significance (Holbrook, Sousa, and Hahn-Holbrook 2011). However, this often comes at the cost of our becoming more prone to devalue and distrust those who are different (Hart, Shaver, and Goldenberg 2005).

One problem, then, is that the same self-esteem striving capable of attenuating death-related reminders/anxieties (Mikulincer and Florian 2002) can also lead to divisiveness (Nash et al. 2011). That is, if mortality salience often increases the likelihood to treat those who are different with increased hostility (Rosenblatt et al. 1989; Greenberg et al. 1990; McGregor et al. 1998), and if climate discourse can remind people of death, the result may be the undermining of the kind of intergroup cooperation likely required to combat climate change.

Consider some of the following findings: When reminded of their own death, judges give harsher sentences to criminals (Rosenblatt et al. 1989); Christians become more prejudiced against Jewish people (Greenberg et al. 1990); Jewish individuals become more prejudiced against Muslims (Hirschberger and Ein-Dor 2006); Muslims become more prejudicial towards Europeans, and vice versa (Das et al. 2009); American college students are more likely to think that the Holocaust was “God’s punishment for the Jews” (Kunzendorf et al. 1992); Iranians are more likely to support suicide-bombings (Pyszczynski et al. 2006); Germans and Turks sit further apart from each other in public spaces (Pyszczynski 2004); Americans react more negatively to those who criticize the United States (Greenberg et al. 1990); and liberals and conservatives both become more prone to aggression towards members of the other side (McGregor et al. 1998). Such findings support the following conclusion:

Mortality salience appears to increase in-group favoritism, rejection of those who are different, and authoritarian tendencies. This suggests that whenever events heighten mortality salience (e.g., newspaper accounts of catastrophes or violence in intergroup and interindividual conflicts), in-group solidarity, out-group derogation, nationalism, religious extremism, prejudice, discrimination, and intolerance of deviance are likely to escalate . . . prejudice and hostility toward those who are different may be one particularly costly means of coping with fears and insecurities. (Greenberg et al. 1990, 318)

Clearly, discussions about climate change can make one’s mortality salient (consciously or subconsciously). Catastrophes, extinction events, natural disasters, human death, the loss of ecosystems, and the like, are peppered throughout climate discourse. Hence, the salience of mortality via climate discourse may lead to self-esteem striving to help attenuate any potential climate-related existential anxiety.

Yet consider how climate discourse often expresses the idea that *we cannot continue like this*. Properly addressing climate change might just require a herculean shift in the status quo. Yet a dizzying array of wants, needs, and values will inevitably conflict in attempting to shift the status quo to the degree that combating the climate problem may require. Thus, it seems safe to say that, in order to properly address climate change, ingroups and outgroups that are at odds or in competition will at some point have to put aside their differences and cooperate.

But as a litany of TMT studies suggest, those who do not agree about what makes life worth living are likely to become more hostile with each other when their mortality is made salient. Worryingly, such psychological processes can play out entirely subconsciously (Arndt et al. 1997; Kawakami, Miura, and Nagai 2018).

So, if climate discourse—particularly when connected with notions related to death and decay—can catalyze forms of self-esteem striving which increase the likelihood for intergroup conflict, then the potential for climate discourse to undermine the cooperation combating climate change likely requires is a serious problem.

2.3 Another Problem for Addressing Climate Change

But this is not the only problem resulting from the intersection of climate change and our own mortality: a significant hurdle for effective climate discourse are the ways in which death-related reminders/anxieties can motivate individuals to psychologically distance themselves from and/or mistreat nonhuman nature. So, while the first problem I drew attention to (i.e., inhibiting intergroup cooperation) could undermine a proper response to climate change, this second problem may exacerbate the very climate problem we need to respond to.

Again, Becker takes our deeply rooted death-related insecurities to be conceptually connected with nature's vulnerability, on one hand, as well as nature's destructiveness on the other (1971; 1973; 1975). Regarding nature's destructiveness, the idea is that the full reality of the natural world, with its mysterious forces, its ability to suddenly annihilate (e.g., sudden disease or natural disasters), and the certain destruction awaiting all of its entities, both living (i.e., mortality) and non-living (e.g., the fact that neither mountains nor stars last forever) is "too terrible to admit"—that is, nature is always capable of reminding us that we are each "a small trembling animal who will someday decay and die" (Becker 1973, 3).

In other words, human beings can never fully do away with the limitations imposed by the physical body, our animal nature, i.e., the fact that we are, as Becker says, "housed in a heart-pumping, breath-gasping body that once belonged to a fish and still carries the gill-marks to prove it," a body that "aches and bleeds and will decay and die" (1973, 26). Unsurprisingly, then, efforts to maintain our existential significance often go hand in hand with attempts to distance from, or dominate, the rest of nonhuman nature. As Becker puts it:

Mortality is connected to the natural, animal side of [human] existence; and so man reaches beyond and away from that side. So much so that he tries to deny it completely. As soon as man reached new historical forms of power, he turned against the animals with whom he had previously identified—with a vengeance, as we now see, because the animals embodied what man feared most, a nameless and faceless death. (Becker 1975, 92)

A wide body of TMT research supports this line of thought, namely, that reminders of our own susceptibility to death and decay make us more likely to harm, exploit, or disassociate ourselves from, nonhuman nature (which I shall lump together under the term *environmentally unfriendly behavior*). Consider the following findings: When reminded of their own mortality (conscious or subconsciously), individuals become more likely to engage in consumptive consumerism (Kasser and Sheldon 2000); more desirous of exotic luxuries and items of status (Mandel and Heine 1999); more willing to exploit forests and natural resources (Vess and Arndt 2008); more uncomfortable in natural settings compared to urban ones (Koole and Agnes Van den berg 2005); more likely to deny that humans are animals (Goldenberg et al. 2000; Marino and Mountain 2015); more likely to kill animals for reasons other than food (Lifshin, Greenberg, and Zestcott 2017); and become more uncomfortable with the human body and its biological functions, e.g., sexual intercourse (Goldenberg et al. 2007).

Our species' history of anthropocentrism, i.e., our desire to distinguish ourselves from and elevate ourselves above the rest of the natural world, as well as the various ways in which we have attempted to master/control nonhuman nature, may significantly stem from our need to assuage the anxiety our own vulnerability stirs within us (Becker 1973; Becker 1975; Goldenberg 2000; Goldenberg 2001). Perhaps the underlying idea is that, following nature's full capitulation to our will, we—"a hyper-anxious animal who constantly invents reasons for anxiety" (Becker 1973, 17)—shall have conquered death itself (and perhaps our anxious, existential restlessness along with it).

Therefore, the ways in which climate change uniquely intersects with our own mortality can motivate various forms of behavior antagonistic towards the end-goals of climate activism. One problem is that the effects of climate discourse may wind up undermining our properly addressing climate change (increased intergroup hostility). And a second, arguably more troubling, problem is that climate discourse may result in *more* environmentally unfriendly behavior, rather than less.

These two problems arise, in my view, in virtue of the way climate discourse can connect conceptually with notions related to existential vulnerability; this conceptual connection, in turn, can motivate a need to reaffirm our self-significance in response, particularly when our own vulnerability becomes salient. Though the kind of self-esteem striving one is likely to partake in will depend on how, exactly, one's cultural worldview is constituted, the empirical research I've drawn from

suggests that many of the ways in which we attempt to reaffirm our sense of existential significance in the presence of (conscious or subconscious) death-related reminders/anxieties are unlikely to help combat climate change.

What I want to suggest is that the motivational issue common among Westerners—i.e., believing in climate change but not doing enough about it—can be understood as a “worldview problem” of sorts. As Lynn White Jr. (1967) noted, the ecological problems that the industrialized world has brought about likely stem from a long tradition of assumed metaphysical supremacy within Western culture. Western culture also has strong leanings towards individualism as well as materialistic values in addition to being less open/accepting of death in comparison to other, more ecologically friendly cultures (Rowes and Mathews 2021).

Consider how many worldviews often suggest the importance, perhaps even superiority, of one’s ingroup(s). Consider also how individuals often fall back on the security their ingroups seem to provide when their self-significance needs reaffirmation, or, relatedly, when the potential anxiety that might arise (in connection with reminders of their vulnerability) needs to be attenuated. A similar dynamic can also occur where the ingroup/outgroup component is, roughly speaking, replaced with anthropocentrism: that is, many worldviews suggest the importance, even the superiority, of our species. Being reminded of one’s vulnerability and/or needing to reaffirm one’s self-significance, then, may lead one to engage in various forms of environmentally unfriendly behavior as a way of dissociating oneself from what nonhuman nature may seem to embody—existential insignificance, i.e., “a nameless, faceless death” (Becker 1975, 92).

Though I do not think every Westerner’s worldview is necessarily constituted by notions related to metaphysical supremacy, individualism, or materialism, I do think it is often the case that these components can, to some degree, slip into the worldviews of those within the industrialized West. In my view, this is likely a big part of the reason why so many in the West believe in climate change but don’t do enough about it—the existential vulnerability climate change can be associated with can activate motivational mechanisms that are often unconcerned with, or directly antithetical to, environmentalism. If so, the motivational influences of mortality salience should not be ignored by those seeking to engage in climate discourse and/or promote climate activism, particularly within the industrialized West.

Section 3: Implications for Climate Shaming

Various strategies seeking to promote climate activism have made their way into climate discourse. One such strategy that has recently increased in popularity is *climate shaming*, the aim of which is to utilize shame to induce motivational and behavioral changes to help address climate change. Here, I shall consider two

questions: Why shame, exactly (as opposed to guilt)? And, considering the above discussion, is climate shaming likely to be effective?

3.1 Moral Climate Shame

Shame and guilt are not always easy to clearly distinguish when we consider their everyday usage. One important philosophical distinction between the two is that, compared with guilt, shame can be much less dependent upon one's pre-existing moral standards and preconceptions (Calhoun 2004; Powell 2019). That is, shame is more capable than guilt of extending beyond what one personally takes to be right or wrong, rendering shame generally more effective for catalyzing the kind of moral maturation/revision (Calhoun 2004) capable of reconfiguring one's motivational tendencies (Powell 2019). As Russell Powell (2019) describes shame's usefulness in this regard:

Shame's motivational value is best illustrated . . . in its capacity to spur agents toward higher forms of moral excellence . . . the type of shame which spurs agents toward higher, more refined senses of self-awareness and actualization . . . a tool of provocation—a tool, that is, for inducing moral growth. (Powell 2019, 232–3)

Additionally, regarding the difference in scope between guilt and shame, Powell says:

The moral sphere of guilt encompasses solely those actions for which one bears some degree of responsibility, while the scope of shame is not nearly as circumscribed. In instances where agents lack a clear sense of who is culpable for wrongs committed, shame is more likely than guilt to encourage altered behavior through the transformation of individuals' moral character. (Powell 2019, 242)

When it comes to the motivational issue underpinning our failure to properly address climate change, then, it seems plausible that climate activism would be better served by utilizing *climate shame* rather than *climate guilt*, since shame has a wider reach, extending beyond both our personal moral code and the wrongs we are clearly responsible for. After all, identifying anyone's exact degree of responsibility for environmental harms associated with climate change is quite difficult (Cullity 2019, 23). If we were to incorporate what Cheshire Calhoun (2004) calls "moral shame," we might call the emotion climate shaming ideally seeks to elicit in its targets *moral climate shame*, the result of which may include an updating of beliefs (e.g., within climate-change-deniers) or a reconfiguration of certain motivational tendencies (e.g., within those who believe climate change is real yet aren't doing enough about it).

3.2 Strategic Climate Shaming

Perhaps the most famous case of climate shaming is that of the viral “How Dare You” speech given by Greta Thunberg in front of the UN. Since then, this strategy has become increasingly popular, even finding supporters amongst philosophers interested in climate activism; for example, Elisa Aaltola (2021) argues that climate shaming has enough utility and practical persuasiveness to justify its use within climate discourse. Explicitly using the example of Greta Thunberg to illustrate how strategic climate shaming can be put into practice, Aaltola’s argument centrally rests on the claim that climate shaming will be more beneficial than costly:

“[C]limate shame” can be a morally constructive mental state, capable of evoking holistic change in our moral outlook and lifestyles. The provocative claim is that we need more shame, and may even have the moral duty to shame those who knowingly disregard other species and environmental flourishing. In order to minimize personal harm, such shame needs to be accompanied by references to moral maturity, which directs those undergoing shame toward moral change . . . However, even when shaming does cause personal harm, its wider utility—its capacity to affect [*sic*] widespread change in both individual and institutional actions and to thereby serve the planetary common good—acts as its moral justification. (Aaltola 2021, 23)

Though climate shaming may be perfectly well intentioned, if we take the end-goals of climate activism to be worthwhile, then we should also care if climate shaming works. In other words, because it seems plausible that shaming can backfire, then whether climate shaming is worth utilizing is not a strictly theoretical matter; we also need empirical evidence for its supposed “wider utility.” Unfortunately, Aaltola does not supply this evidence—and I’m not sure any other defender of Thunberg-like climate shaming has either.

3.3 Is Climate Shaming Practically Effective?

We may think that it can be appropriate to *feel* climate shame even if it is prone to backfire—in the same way that it might be appropriate to feel anger even when it may lead to counterproductive results (Srinivasan 2018). But note that even if feeling climate shame can be appropriate, though counterproductive, it does not follow from this that the *act* of climate shaming others is appropriate. Given the high stakes and limited timeframe involved with combating climate change, climate activists should aim for effective action. At the very least, it seems highly inappropriate for climate activists to do more harm than good when acting under the banner of climate activism.⁴

As I see it, the same problems (undermining cooperation, increasing environmentally unfriendly behavior) that can arise from climate discourse can also apply to climate shaming. If so, climate shaming is an inappropriate strategy—that is, unlikely to be effective, and likely to backfire.

For instance, if climate shaming connects conceptually with notions related to existential vulnerability, then widespread climate shaming could be antagonistic to the end-goals of climate activism if putting such a strategy into practice often results in the same problematic self-esteem striving discussed in the previous section (§II), a result prone to happen amongst Westerners (Rowes and Mathews 2021).

Counterproductively, though its proponents seem to think climate shaming should be directed towards Westerners, evidence suggests that climate shaming Westerners is particularly likely to backfire. For instance, Hussein Akil, Phillippe Robert-Demontrond, and Julien Bouillé (2018) investigated how an individual's behavior towards the environment can be significantly influenced (constructively or destructively) when mortality and environmental norms are simultaneously salient. This study explored whether anxiety-inducing “anxiogenic communications” or factual/statistical “informative communications” regarding climate change might differently impact consumptive behavior. Consumption is one way the effects of mortality salience can motivate environmentally unfriendly self-esteem striving (e.g., overconsumption) because consumerism can act as a “distal defense” mechanism—i.e., an attempt to attenuate potential existential anxiety and generate self-esteem when thoughts related to one's death persist subconsciously—as opposed to more conscious, “proximal defenses,” i.e., immediate rationalizations like “I'm young, I'll worry about death later” (Kosloff et al. 2019). The distinction between the two kinds of defense is described as follows:

[P]roximal defenses are engaged to reduce the self-relevant threat of conscious thoughts of death . . . [D]istal (or symbolic) psychological defenses [are those] that bolster faith in cultural beliefs and a sense of self-significance. Engagement of these defenses has been found to serve at least two critical functions: reducing both the accessibility of death-related fears (e.g., Arndt et al. 1997) and the potential for anxiety engendered by the thought of death (Greenberg et al. 2003). (Arndt and Vess 2008, 914–5)

The findings of Akil, Robert-Demontrond, and Bouillé (2018) suggest that whether mortality salience catalyzes environmentally friendly behavior, or the exact opposite, largely depends on which kind of communication is used and for whom:

Exposure to MS [Mortality Salience] tends to trigger behaviour by consumers that reinforces or valorizes their cultural worldview. From the standpoint of TMT, this behaviour stemming from the cultural worldview is associated with the activation of a distal defence mechanism that seeks, if not to eliminate, at least to attenuate anxiety about death. Much of the communication pertaining to the fight against CC [Climate Change] reminds people of their mortality. Such inherently anxiety-inducing communication is liable to generate distal defences among the individuals exposed to it. But these distal defences can lead to materialistic consumption behaviour that runs counter to the desired pro-environmental behaviour. This effect depends directly on people's cultural worldview, which thus becomes a moderating (but also disruptive) factor for

the effectiveness of communication combating CC. (Akil, Robert-Demontrond, and Bouillé 2018, 7)

In line with previous empirical findings, this study suggests that materialistic cultural values are predominant amongst individuals living within the industrialized West (Akil, Robert-Demontrond, and Bouillé 2018, 6). When exposed to anxiety-inducing communication regarding climate change, most Westerners became more likely to engage in environmentally unfriendly behavior (e.g., consumption), while the opposite was the case following informative communications. That climate change communications could, depending on the worldview and context in question, exacerbate environmentally unfriendly behavior has been described by Janis Dickson (2019, 1) as *the people paradox*: “that the very things that bring us symbolic immortality often conflict with our prospects for survival.”

Climate shaming explicitly aims to make environmental norms salient and is likely to target Westerners with a materialistic worldview. And climate discourse, I have contended, is prone to making mortality salient and therefore can be said to be generally (but not universally) anxiety-inducing. Climate shaming seems likely to be at least as anxiety-inducing as any other kind of climate communication, if not more so, given the particularly critical and emotional features likely to be present when trying to induce climate shame in another.

So, if we put all this together, then from the evidence suggesting that those who have significantly materialistic worldviews will become more likely to engage in environmentally unfriendly behavior when their mortality *and* environmental norms have been made salient, in conjunction with the evidence that most Westerners subscribe to materialistic worldviews, then I think we can safely infer the following: climate shaming Westerners will not only be practically ineffective but is likely to backfire. If so, climate shaming on a broad scale (e.g., across all Western cultural contexts) is a highly inappropriate strategy, one that ought to be abandoned by climate activists.

3.4 What if Mortality Salience is Avoided?

We might now wonder if the kind of climate shaming Thunberg has engaged in, and that Aaltola defends, could be saved if it were to become more “informative” and less “anxiety-inducing.” That is, if problematic conceptual connections related to existential vulnerability were avoided, could climate shaming work?

The first thing to say is that touching upon the topic of climate change in a way that avoids associations with existential vulnerability, while not impossible, is no small feat. Yet even if strategic climate shaming can be sanitized of any explicit connection to existential vulnerability, it may still be generally ineffective nonetheless in virtue of the way it seems directed toward its targets’ identity, or selfhood.

After all, another way shame has been distinguished from guilt is by considering how the object of one’s guilt can be a specific action, which then produces

the feeling that one did something wrong, whereas the object of shame can be one's selfhood, which then produces the feeling that there is something wrong with who one is as a person (Nussbaum 2009).

The idea here is that not only might climate shaming result in problematic self-esteem striving because one's mortality has been made salient, but also, climate shaming might result in similarly problematic self-esteem striving simply because of its potential to be interpreted as a threat, i.e., a perceived attack on one's selfhood, identity, or worldview ("How dare you").

According to TMT's *death-thought-accessibility hypothesis*, not only can the salience of mortality motivate self-esteem striving to attenuate potential existential anxiety, so too can implicit or explicit threats to oneself (actual or perceived)—including threats to one's worldview or other "personal attacks" which might lower one's self-esteem (Hayes et al. 2008; Hayes et al. 2010). Defensive reactions (e.g., "worldview defenses") are often the result (Hart 2015).

So, even when death is not on our minds, we may still exhibit something like "unconscious vigilance," i.e., a "state of accentuated reactivity" to our potential vulnerabilities, which often draws upon one's worldview for defense (Holbrook, Sousa, and Hahn-Holbrook 2011). It might even be the case that certain targets of climate shaming could engage in especially extreme behavior when their mortality *and* some perceived threat to their identity (selfhood, worldview) are both salient, rather than just one or the other.

Minimally, I take it that if climate shaming expresses that its targets are "bad people" in some sense and to some significant degree, then climate shaming can still catalyze problematic self-esteem striving even in the absence of mortality salience.⁵

3.5 Could Climate Shaming *Ever* Work?

It is worth mentioning that much of my critique is with strategic climate shaming in a *broad* sense, i.e., when how it is used is insensitive to its targets' worldview. This is distinct from more sensitive and narrow climate shaming which may, in certain cases, be at least more effective than not. For instance, as the findings of Akil, Robert-Demontrond, and Bouillé (2018) gesture at, climate shaming may work if directed at targets whose worldviews we already know are significantly constituted by environmentalist values. (However, the fact that these findings suggest that most Westerners' worldviews are predominantly materialistic likely means that the worldviews of many self-identified environmentalists might actually be more environmentally unfriendly than they realize.)

The point I want to emphasize is that though shame may surpass guilt in its capacity to facilitate moral maturation or motivational revision, shame's reach may only extend so far. Consider some of the cases Calhoun (2004) and Powell (2019) use to illustrate shame's extended scope: Calhoun discusses how we may feel shame at our colleagues' remarks, even though we don't agree with them, while Powell

discusses a case where climate shaming seems to have worked—within a specific Christian nonprofit organization where certain Christian values (e.g., “watershed discipleship”) are drawn upon to employ a uniquely Christianity-flavored kind of climate shaming.⁶

Though shame’s capacity for motivational revision may be able to extend to others for whom we share some larger moral framework or set of values (e.g., an ingroup),⁷ shame seems less effective at performing this function, and more likely to backfire, when the values of the shamer and those of their target are quite far apart (e.g., when their respective worldviews have reached a certain level of polarization). For these reasons, employing Thunberg-like climate shaming on just “the powerful” (e.g., politicians, CEOs) still seems highly inappropriate so long as it is particularly disconnected from and/or insensitive to the worldviews of its targets. That is, climate shaming seems likely to be counterproductive when it is unconcerned with cutting across ingroup/outgroup lines (and the intergroup conflict this might provoke) and is lacking in any unique, ingroup-specific “flavoring” that might increase its effectiveness (within that ingroup). In sum: trying to address a major collective action problem involving intersecting existential crises without any strategic nuance or pedagogical finesse is, simply put, asking too much of shame.

IV. Conclusion

I have attempted above to develop two arguments concerning what seems to be a motivational issue underpinning our failure thus far to properly address climate change. I first argued that the intersection of climate change with one’s own death can motivate behavior that is antagonistic to the end-goals of climate activism (based on the assumption that properly addressing climate change will require *more cooperation* and *less environmentally unfriendly behavior*). The first conclusion I drew concerned conscientious climate discourse: those seeking to promote climate activism have good reason to engage in climate discourse that is sensitive to the potentially problematic motivational influences of mortality salience.

I then turned to a second argument regarding the recent interest in promoting climate activism via strategic *climate shaming*. I suggested that, as a broad strategy, climate shaming is likely to be practically ineffective and may often backfire. My second conclusion, therefore, was that worldview-insensitive climate shaming is a highly inappropriate strategy—one that should be abandoned by climate activists.

In closing, though I take our failure to properly address climate change to stem from a “worldview problem,” namely, the cultural structures Westerners typically use to cultivate a sense of existential significance, I should mention that radical worldview conversion is not my suggested solution. As I see it, successfully combating climate change may inevitably depend on repurposing pre-existing cultural structures for “planet-saving immortality,” so to speak.⁸

But how, exactly, climate activism might become an “immortality project” for any particular group, and what, exactly, it might take to make climate shaming worldview-sensitive enough to render it an effective strategy, are (much-needed) discussions for the future. For now, I shall reiterate that I take the arguments I have developed above to suggest that more effective climate activism requires more careful climate discourse. The stakes are, both literally and symbolically, a matter of life and death.

Notes

1. **Acknowledgements:** I would like to sincerely thank Dr. Cheshire Calhoun and Dr. Joan McGregor for their helpful feedback and extensive assistance in my developing this paper. I would also like to thank my peers and hosts at both Marquette University as well as DePaul University for the opportunity to present earlier versions of this paper, in addition to all the graduate students in attendance at those conferences for providing me with helpful comments. I am additionally grateful for the contributions to this project made by some of my closest friends and family—to Stephen Varga for his assistance in writing revisions, as well as to Michael Vandrovec, Triston Hanna, and Susan Suchocki for the many valuable conversations on the topic which pushed me to further explore and refine my thoughts.

2. A number of things may seemingly confer “immortality,” particularly the symbolic kind—from notions related to heroism to great works/deeds (skyscrapers, family fortunes, works of art, literary masterpieces that will be read for generations, patriotic courage that is worthy of song); other larger projects, even if one’s “name” won’t be explicitly etched into long-lasting remembrance, can still count so long as individuals feel as if they are contributing to something bigger than themselves, something that will last and is worth working for (and possibly, dying for)—e.g., the continuation of one’s tribe, nation, religion, or culture (for instance, serving in the US military and “defending American freedoms” may be perceived as conferring “immortality” to a soldier who dies in combat and whose memory may be lost to the sands of time, as long as they contributed to America living on, so to speak). But there may also be kinds of immortality-seeking we might want to criticize, as Becker gestures at here: “man could strut and boast all he wanted, but . . . he really drew his ‘courage to be’ from a god, a string of sexual conquests, a Big Brother, a flag, the proletariat, and the fetish of money and the size of a bank balance” (Becker 1973, 56).

3. Within the Terror Management Theory (TMT) literature, the idea that self-esteem provides crucial functions for attenuating, buffering, and/or mitigating anxiety has come to be called the *anxiety-buffering hypothesis*. This is the only one of TMT’s “big three” hypotheses that I don’t explicitly mention by name in the body of the paper (the other two being the *mortality salience hypothesis* as well as the *death-thought-accessibility hypothesis*). For a detailed theoretical and empirical review of TMT’s three core hypotheses, see: Shimel, Hayes, and Sharp (2019).

4. I thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing attention to the need to distinguish the appropriateness of *climate shaming another* (as an *action*) versus the appropriateness of *feeling climate shame oneself* (as a *mental state*). Though I'm not sure if the latter can ever be "apt" even when counterproductive, it certainly is an interesting question. However, it's not one I'm concerned with here. Instead, my concern is whether we even have good reason to think climate shaming another, as an action, will work—for even if it can, we still can ask a further question, namely, whether the act of climate shaming is morally justifiable/permissible (or whether we would have a "moral duty" to do so, as Aaltola tentatively suggests). But if we don't have good reason to think climate shaming will be beneficial, and if it instead seems capable of worsening the climate problem, I don't see how it would ever be morally justifiable, given climate change's potential stakes and the shortening window of time to address it; instead, we may have a moral duty *not* to climate shame. That being said, because seeing these lines of thought through would take us too far afield, I am content to focus on the question of climate shaming's effectiveness and to call any strategy for promoting climate activism prone to backfiring "inappropriate."

5. I sincerely thank an anonymous reviewer for pushing me to address this point, i.e., whether climate shaming may work if it is sanitized of death-related reminders/anxieties.

6. The nonprofit Powell discusses is Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries (BCM), which came up with (as far as I'm concerned) various ingenious ways to repackage the Christian worldview, an "immortality project" in its own right, for "immortality via saving the planet (God's creation)," so to speak. For instance: The general theme of BCM is, according to Powell, "that Christian identity is inescapably connected with the bioregion in which one resides" (Powell 2019, 247). BCM also advocates to its members a notion of "watershed discipleship" (Powell 2019, 247); part of watershed discipleship includes cleaning, caring for, bringing water into church from, and getting baptized in, local creeks, rivers, lakes, etc.—"baptized not just into the faith, but into their place as well" (Powell 2019, 247). A particularly interesting example is that, following a wildfire nearby, BCM used the remains of a charred stump to serve as an altar for communion as a way of inducing climate shame within its members: "How the stump also serves to concretize the climate crisis, making an abstract issue urgent to the Christian life, and thus more tangible and tactile. To partake of communion from the burnt stump altar should prompt feelings of shame, yes, but it also should engender a greater sense of responsibility" (Powell 2019, 247).

7. Climate shaming on a more narrow scale (e.g., the case of BCM, i.e., the Christian ministry Powell discusses), if done in a very particular way, could potentially avoid the problems I've raised for broad-scale climate shaming: relying on that group membership may help mitigate perceptions of a threatening "personal attack"; what's more, because group membership is often drawn upon to provide existential comfort following death-related reminders and anxieties, the negative effects of mortality salience may be mitigated, at least to some extent, by intragroup climate shaming. Climate shaming's best chance to be effective, as far as I see it, is by drawing upon some aspect of the worldviews people already have, rather than trying to radically reinvent them.

8. Combating climate change, therefore, doesn't have to necessarily rely on toppling/dismantling Western culture—which, if true, is good news, as we likely don't have the time for that anyway. Instead, properly addressing climate change will likely require hooking into pre-existing notions of (literal or symbolic) immortality, those which can link up with some particular sense of achieving immortality via saving the planet, so to speak. Though this may initially seem to be an outlandish proposition, as the case of the Christian nonprofit (BCM) discussed by Powell demonstrates, there is still reason to hope that even those cultural worldviews supposedly at “the root of our ecological crisis,” according to Lynn White Jr. (1967), may artfully repackage their notions of existential significance (i.e., immortality) for environmentalist purposes.

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