



PROJECT MUSE®

Fearing the Future: Is Life Worth Living in the
Anthropocene?

Céline Leboeuf

The Journal of Speculative Philosophy, Volume 35, Number 3, 2021, pp. 273-288
(Article)

Published by Penn State University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/842186>

Fearing the Future *Is Life Worth Living in the Anthropocene?*

Céline Leboeuf

FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT: This article examines the question of life's meaning in the Anthropocene, an era where the biosphere is significantly threatened by human activities. To introduce the existential dilemma posed by the Anthropocene, Leboeuf considers Samuel Scheffler's *Death and the Afterlife*. According to Scheffler, the existence of others after one's death shapes how one finds life meaningful. Thus, anyone who sees a connection between the meaning of life and the future of humanity should ask, why live in the Anthropocene? Leboeuf answers this question via William James's lecture "Is Life Worth Living?" James, Leboeuf argues, would enjoin us not to waste time deliberating about life's worthwhileness. Instead, we must meet the challenges placed on us. Today we are summoned by our climate crisis to fight for our survival. Even if our collective future will have been shortened by our inaction, life is worth living in the Anthropocene.

KEYWORDS: William James, Samuel Scheffler, Anthropocene, meaning of life, environmental ethics

In April 2018, the civil rights lawyer David Buckel set himself on fire. In his suicide letter, he said that he took his life to protest our inaction on environmental issues. In a letter to the *New York Times*, Buckel wrote, "Most humans on the planet now breathe air made unhealthy by fossil fuels, and many die

early deaths as a result—my early death by fossil fuel reflects what we are doing to ourselves.”¹ Although there may have been other factors, such as mental illness, underlying Buckel’s suicide, the stated motivation—to draw attention to our environmental crisis—raises the question of whether worsening global climate conditions should affect the answer to one of the most fundamental questions that we face as human beings: Is life worth living? Like Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, I hold this question to be the most important that philosophy can address. But instead of tackling it at an individual level, as Camus does, I ask: Does the possibility that the human species might have hastened its extinction transform the issue?

To focus my inquiry, I consider William James’s lecture, “Is Life Worth Living?” My goal in reconstructing his argument is to demonstrate that while the future of humanity is threatened, there are reasons to collectively rise up to the challenges posed by our climate crisis—namely, to work to mitigate its effects and to alleviate the suffering of those affected by it. James makes clear that he addresses an audience of reflective and well-educated individuals, who may conclude from their scientific understanding of the world that life is meaningless. In a similar vein, I speak to those who consider life’s meaning connected to the collective fate of humankind. Those who hold that life’s worthwhileness is entirely a private affair might have little interest in the argument to come. My aim, then, is convince those who are concerned by the effects of climate change that life is worth living in the Anthropocene.

I begin by explaining why the Anthropocene is a distinctive geological era from both scientific and philosophical points of view. I then turn to Samuel Scheffler’s *Death and the Afterlife* to better describe the predicament that the Anthropocene creates: there Scheffler contends that life’s meaning depends on the hope that after one’s death, others will carry on one’s projects and uphold one’s values. Next, I detail James’s argument to show how it offers a response to our collective predicament in this era. I argue that James’s view about suicide applies to this predicament. I conclude with recommendations for creating lives worth living in the Anthropocene.

What Is the Anthropocene?

Scientists use the “Anthropocene” to name our geological era, one in which the Earth and its climate are significantly affected by human activities. There is considerable debate about how to date the Anthropocene, but what

distinguishes our epoch from other geological periods is the influence of human activity on the environment. Some scientists would like to go so far as dating the Anthropocene to the beginning of agriculture and others to the start of the Industrial Revolution and yet others to the peak of nuclear fallout in 1964.² Yet, from an “earth systems perspective”—that is, the study of the Earth’s “fundamental components” and “their interactions”—this era dates to the middle of the twentieth-century.³ Anthropogenic environmental change did not rise continuously either from the beginning of agriculture, or even after the Industrial Revolution. Rather, population growth, coupled with the rapidly rising domestication of land, transformations of the hydrosphere, and fossil fuel emissions, led to a “great acceleration” in anthropogenic alterations of the Earth in the mid-twentieth century. This acceleration signified that “human pressures began to reach levels capable of producing an anthropogenic regime shift in the functioning of the Earth system.”⁴

Despite the disagreements about how to date the Anthropocene, one thing is clear: human effects on the environment—if they go unchecked—threaten our existence and that of other living beings today. According to a report released by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the planet’s average temperature in 2019 was the second hottest on record. And this is not a blip: writing for *The New York Times*, Kendra Pierre-Louis notes that “the years from 2010 to 2019 were the hottest ten-year stretch ever recorded, with global temperature data falling in line with the warming trends predicted under climate change.”⁵ Overall, climate change has and will continue to impact coastlines, the severity of storms and floods, heatwaves and droughts, human health, biodiversity, agriculture, and ocean acidification.⁶ For example, a 2017 study projected that “extremes of wet-bulb temperature in South Asia are likely to approach and, in a few locations, exceed this critical threshold [the upper limit on human survivability] by the late 21st century under the business-as-usual scenario of future greenhouse gas emissions.”⁷ In plain terms, certain very densely populated regions in South Asia will be too hot to inhabit.

From a philosophical perspective, the Anthropocene is different than other geological periods. Not only is it stamped by human activity but it may well be the very last period in which humans live. The picture I have sketched suggests that if we do not significantly reform our ways, we may be headed toward a premature extinction. Of course, there have always been potential causes of our rapid extinction. These include natural disasters,

such as asteroid impacts and volcano eruptions. Moreover, since the Cold War and the emergence of the nuclear age, many across the globe have lived in fear of a sudden collective annihilation. So, is the Anthropocene really all that different? To some extent, it is not, because these threats may all bring about an end to humanity. Yet, the Anthropocene is also different in certain regards. First, unlike acute natural catastrophes, this is an epoch in which “nature” threatens us—but as a result of human activity. Our extinction due to global warming would be a death at our own hands. Second, unlike looming nuclear wars, the Anthropocene differs from other ages insofar as our situation has only escalated in severity and will continue to do so in the near future—barring a radical change in our patterns of energy consumption and carbon emissions. Thus far, international diplomacy has failed to bring about such change. And no radical technological breakthroughs have yet to emerge to cool our rapidly heating planet. Asteroid impacts are beyond our control, and nuclear annihilation is not subject to the same seemingly inescapable progression. In sum, our era is significantly different from others.

Samuel Scheffler: Does Life’s Meaning Depend on Humanity’s Continued Existence?

The possibility of our premature extinction calls to mind Samuel Scheffler’s work in *Death and the Afterlife*. There he argues that the existence of other humans after one’s death factors in the extent to which one finds life meaningful and values things. According to Scheffler, it matters to oneself that “others will continue to live after [one has] died.”⁸ The “afterlife conjecture”—that is, the conjecture that humanity’s survival after one’s death shapes how one values things—is grounded in a provocative thought experiment. Suppose that you knew that thirty days after your natural death all of humanity would be extinguished by the impact of a large asteroid (the doomsday scenario). In this scenario, Scheffler reasons that such a situation would drain one’s life of meaning.⁹ First, projects that depend on long-term efforts (e.g., curing cancer) could no longer be completed. Second, the longevity of the things we value would be curtailed. We participate in traditions, Scheffler notes, “precisely to satisfy the deep human impulse to preserve what is valued.”¹⁰ Likewise, it is not uncommon to hear of persons who consider their lives worth living because they hope to contribute

something to future generations. For example, they hope to make an impact through their deeds or creative activities. Alternatively, some wish to have offspring who will carry on their legacy. All in all, Scheffler believes that some of us embrace the prospect of an “earthly immortality” by living on through the lives of others. I agree with him.¹¹ Therefore, I ask anyone who is troubled by the potential catastrophes wrought by climate change and who sees a connection between life’s meaning and the future of humanity to ponder: Why live in the Anthropocene?

William James’s pragmatism, I argue, offers answers to this question. But before delving into his views, I should distinguish my question from a neighboring concern about life’s worthwhileness in the Anthropocene. It could be argued that my life, as someone living in the Global North who consumes a disproportionate proportion of the Earth’s natural resources and whose contributions to global pollution outweigh those of others, might not be worth living. Perhaps, from a consequentialist perspective, the world would be a “better place” if I opted for suicide. This is an important question to consider, but it is not my concern here. My point is to examine whether life would be meaningless if humanity were to come to an end in the near future. When he raises the question of whether life is worth living, James worries whether life has any significance—not whether the negative impacts of one’s continued existence provide reasons to kill oneself. He speaks to those who might think that all is for naught if there is no prospect of redeeming our earthly suffering and of reconciling the contradictions that are part of our condition.

William James: Is Life Worth Living?

In his 1895 address to the Harvard YMCA, “Is Life Worth Living?” James begins by observing for those who are temperamentally optimistic the question of suicide never arises. But for those of a gloomier bent, it is necessary to assess responses to this question. James asserts that religious prohibitions, such as the “Thou shalt not” of Christianity, are of little use to those contemplating suicide.¹² Nevertheless, he offers a religious solution to this question, one grounded in his own conception of faith.

To arrive at this conception of faith, we must first understand the mindset that James wishes to address. He describes it in these terms:

On more intimate acquaintance the visible surfaces of heaven and earth refuse to be brought by us into any intelligible unity at all. Every phenomenon that we would praise there exists cheek by jowl some contrary phenomenon that cancels all its religious effect upon the mind. Beauty and hideousness, love and cruelty, life and death keep house together in indissoluble partnership; and there gradually steals over us, instead of the old warm notion of a man-loving Deity, that of an awful power that neither hates nor loves, but rolls all things together meaninglessly to a common doom.¹³

In short, for those of caught in this “first stage of speculative melancholy,” the world appears irrational and devoid of meaning—a far cry from a Leibnitizian conception of our universe as the best of possible worlds.¹⁴ Although he wishes to counter this mindset, James is sympathetic to it. As he puts it: “We of the nineteenth century, with our evolutionary theories and our mechanical philosophies, already know nature too impartially and too well to worship unreservedly any God of whose character she can be an adequate expression. Truly, all we know of good and duty proceeds from nature; but none the less so all we know of evil.”¹⁵ The dilemma James sees is the following: either repudiate traditional faith and fall into a depressive and possibly suicidal nihilism, or embrace a different form of religious faith, one that would give life meaning. James rejects the traditional form, going so far as to say, “the initial step towards getting into healthy ultimate relations with the universe is the act of rebellion against the ideas that such a god exists.”¹⁶ (James here has in mind a conception of god as the creator of a perfect worldly order.) But if we abandon customary religious outlooks, where does that leave us? What is the salutary form of religion of which James speaks?

In describing his understanding of religiosity, James offers a first answer to the question of whether life is worth living. He argues that we should honor those who have sacrificed themselves in pursuit of a better world: we ought not to annul their legacy by taking our own lives. In a probing question, he asks, “Are we not bound to take some suffering upon ourselves, to do some self-denying serve with our lives, in return for all those lives upon which ours are built?”¹⁷ James believes that anyone of “a normally constituted heart” will have the *honor* to carry on the struggles of their predecessors since their very lives are built upon them. According to

James, we are not isolated individuals, but rather embedded in a collective history, which should motivate us to go on living.

But James does not leave his answer there. The central tenet of his conception of faith is that beyond the visible world, there may lie an unseen natural order. In his words: "The so-called order of nature, which constitutes this world's experience, is only one portion of the total universe, and that there stretches beyond this visible world an unseen world of which we know nothing positive, but in its relation to which the true significance of our present mundane life consists."¹⁸ A "man's religious faith," for James, consists in "his faith in the existence of an unseen order of some kind in which the riddles of the natural order may be found explained."¹⁹ To illustrate this conception of religious faith, he offers an analogy. Suppose a dog were vivisected for the sake of discovering the cure to a human or animal disease. While this dog only feels his suffering, this suffering redeems him because it may benefit others in the future. As humans, we witness the "world invisible to him because we live in both worlds." By parity of reasoning, although we might endure suffering in this world, that is, the one visible to us, "encompassing both these worlds [ours and the dog's] a still wider world may be there."²⁰

James, in effect, asks us to gamble on the possibility of an unseen order. But why rest our will to live on such a "maybe"? He resolves this question on pragmatic grounds. There are no positive reasons for believing in an unseen order since it is by definition inaccessible to natural science. For that reason, the atheist or the agnostic will likely think that it is unfounded, or even cowardly, to retreat into religion. By contrast, James holds that "only by risking our persons from one hour to another that we live at all."²¹ In order words, we gamble with uncertainties every day, and there is no course of action founded on absolute certainty. James motivates his response thanks to the following image: consider someone who is faced with having to leap across a chasm and spends their time deliberating whether they will find firm footing were they to leap. James believes that hesitation and excessive deliberation will cause such a person to miss their landing. Rather, we should simply make the leap. Likewise, with regard to life's worthwhileness, we should not get lost in endless debates about whether life ought to be lived, but rather take the leap of faith and hope that our earthly turmoil has a meaning. Unlike the atheist's or agnostic's supposed wisdom, "the part of wisdom as well as courage is to *believe what is in the line of your needs*." As James writes, "Refuse to believe, and you shall

indeed be right, for you shall irretrievably perish. But believe, and again you shall be right, for you shall save yourself."²²

James concludes that we ought to live by the belief that life is worth living rather than speculate about its meaning:

Be not afraid of life. Believe that life is worth living, and your belief will help create the fact. The "scientific proof" that you are right may not be clear before the day of judgment (or some stage of being which that expression may serve to symbolize) is reached. But the faithful fighters of this hour, or the beings that then and there will represent them, may then turn to the faint-hearted, who here decline to go on, with words like those with which Henry IV greeted the tardy Crillon after a great victory had been gained: "Hang yourself, brave Crillon! we fought at Arques, and you were not there."²³

In the end, we are left with a genuine choice. The advantage of opting to believe in a wider realm is *pragmatic*. We may never be sure that life is worth living, but the belief that it is so will bolster our resolve to live, by validating the *feeling* that we do have a *stake* in participating in our collective journey.²⁴ James asserts, then, that those who fear their lives may have been for naught should cease asking whether life is worth living. It behooves them to create the conditions for fulfilling lives, and what will provide them with fulfillment is participating in the fight for a better world.

To better appreciate the significance of James's argument, let me briefly mention three points about "The Will to Believe," a lecture delivered one year later to audiences at the Yale and Brown Philosophy Clubs. First, James's notion of a *genuine option* applies to the dilemma described in "Is Life Worth Living?" To understand this notion, a few words about James's taxonomy of options. First, there is the dichotomy between living and dead options. An option is living if both of its hypotheses are "live"—that is, they have a real appeal. For James's audience, the choice to become a "Mahommedan or a theosophist" will lack any interest, whereas the choice to be "an agnostic or a Christian" is worth considering. Second, an option is "forced" when there is no possibility of escaping its alternatives. As James explains, the choice between going out with an umbrella or not is not forced because one may choose to stay at home. Third, an option is "momentous" as opposed to "trivial" if it would have a significant impact on one's life, such as choosing to go on a polar expedition instead

of declining it. An option is “genuine” “when it is of the forced, living, and momentous kind.”²⁵ In line with this taxonomy, one might argue that the choice of life over suicide for James’s audience in his Harvard address is a *genuine option*. Suicide for the ruminating philosopher has an appeal, there is no avoiding this choice, and opting for one or the other hypothesis is a matter of life or death.

A second point of note from “The Will to Believe”: Having established the definition of a “genuine option,” James advances that our “passional nature” may “lawfully” decide on the hypotheses of a genuine option “that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds.”²⁶ Religion is one such genuine option. To begin, opting between theism and atheism is a live option for James’s audience. Moreover, it is one that must be answered, and far from being trivial, it shapes our lives in fundamental ways. Furthermore, it is an intellectually open question. Thus, we have a right to opt for theism or atheism on *passional grounds*. Now, why opt for theism over atheism? For James, religious belief consists in two “affirmations.” On the one hand, religion affirms that “the best things are the more eternal things, the overlapping things, the things in the universe that throw the last stone, so to speak, and say the final word.”²⁷ On the other hand, religion affirms that “we are better off even now if we believe her first affirmation to be true.”²⁸ Although it is not fully explicit in the text, James appears to be describing the “psychological benefits” of religiosity.²⁹ To anticipate the argument of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, first published in 1902, religious belief offers “an assurance of safety and a temper of peace, and, in relation to others, a preponderance of loving affections.”³⁰ Given the psychological advantages of theism over atheism, James concludes that one has the right to believe in theism. Thus, the “The Will to Believe” echoes the pragmatic argument for religiosity in “Is Life Worth Living?”

Third, James’s argument in “The Will to Believe,” it is worth clarifying, does not license “wishful thinking.” Instead, as Colin Koopman rightly emphasizes in “The Will, the Will to Believe, and William James: An Ethics of Freedom as Self-Transformation,” “willful belief” contributes to the task of *self-transformation* that any reflective person should undertake. Adopting certain beliefs—those that present themselves as hypotheses in a genuine option—has the potential to shape one’s life in fundamental ways. In other terms, the beliefs that James advocates in “The Will to Believe” and in “Is Life Worth Living?” are life-altering. In these cases, the choice of one hypothesis over another constitutes an *ethics*. All in all, Coopman asserts

that “self-transformation, for James, is an ethics for conducting ourselves in the midst of uncertainty, chance, risk, and indeterminacy.”³¹ This is precisely the type of choice at stake in “Is Life Worth Living?” There are two paths to choose from: suicide or life. Believing that life is worth living transforms one’s existence by affirming one’s value and contributions to humankind.

Is Life Worth Living in the Anthropocene?

What are the merits of James’s account for our purposes? Let us begin with some general assets. First, as we have seen, James does not endorse a naïve and outmoded belief in the perfection of the world. Second, his account is compatible with an evolutionary explanation of the unfolding of life on Earth. With regard to the question of the Anthropocene, James could argue that, even if we perish, our lives may have a hidden meaning. Our existence may be like that of the dog in a medical experiment. Who knows what order we might benefit through our struggles? Life on Earth may not continue forever. Nevertheless, we have a stake in the battle for life’s existence on this planet. We owe it to ourselves to strive for a better world, not only to honor those who have come before us but also for reasons that may not be apparent to us from our limited perspective.

But what of those who shy from James’s supernaturalism?³² I believe that they may still find resources for choosing to live in the Anthropocene in his address. His answer to those considering suicide is to show up to the battle. Those, like myself, who are deeply aware of the gravity of our situation today might be prone to despair. Indeed, the depth of this despair is evident from the formation of “eco-grief” groups for those who mourn the Earth’s present state and future.³³ Thus, I can imagine a world in which suicides motivated by our climate crisis will increase. James’s response to those who believe that life is not worth living on our rapidly warming planet: make life worth living on Earth. Let us now create the conditions for life’s worthwhileness.

In summary, James’s thesis speaks to Scheffler’s afterlife conjecture in the following manner: maybe our lives would be drained of meaning were we to belong to the last generations on Earth, but this hypothesis is only a “maybe.” The future of humanity is not sealed for now, and it is up to us to prolong it. We deal with uncertainties daily. Our future is one such uncertainty.

Let me close this section by underscoring the scope of my article. In his lecture, James carefully circumscribes his audience. For one, he knows that his claims will have no effect on someone in a psychotic or otherwise volatile state. Moreover, he says that those who are temperamentally optimistic will have no use of his argument. Instead, he addresses those who because of their knowledge of the natural sciences and philosophy, will incline toward skepticism and nihilism. In this regard, James's efforts to home in on his audience resemble Camus's in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. There Camus sets aside suicides for political reasons in his argument.³⁴ He writes to those who, longing for a "reasonable world," only encounter the "silence" of the universe.³⁵ In our case, those who hold an entirely private conception of life's meaning will carry on and be unaffected by future threats. And those who espouse an unbridled optimism about our ability to mitigate the effects of climate change may be unmoved by my argument. Rather, I hope that this article will speak to those who, undermined by eco-despair, may be tempted to give up faith on the battle for a livable Earth.

How Can We Create Lives Worth Living in the Anthropocene?

As we saw, James avers, "Believe that life is worth living, and your belief will help create the fact." This salutary belief gives us the impetus to go on in the face of adversity. But the story should not stop there. In this concluding section, I sketch some actions that may foster meaning in the Anthropocene.

Our battle today should be to take *action* to alleviate *avoidable* suffering. There are several ways to ground this claim. For example, one can make this argument from a utilitarian perspective. A utilitarian will claim that good actions are those that contribute collectively to diminish the amount of suffering for the entire moral community. Whether the entire moral community consists of humans or extends to the entire biosphere, I leave to the side. In any case, from a utilitarian perspective, if we can take any action in our present age to relieve or forestall avoidable suffering, we ought morally to do so. Yet even those of different ethical persuasions will likely be convinced that we should work to reduce global suffering. For instance, in an argument for increasing our moral regard for nonhuman animals, Christine Korsgaard claims that we intuitively believe that it is wrong to harm ourselves in our animal nature—that is, to inflict pain on ourselves—and that, by the same token, we should find it abhorrent to

harm the “animal nature” of others.³⁶ Her argument implies a duty not to inflict needless suffering on humans and nonhuman animals alike. Overall, the duty not to cause *avoidable* suffering implies that we should help those affected or who will be affected by our climate crisis. This ethical duty, in turn, promises to connect us to a larger sphere than our own individual lives, and, as such, can provide our lives with meaning. The ethical demands that others place on us can draw us out of our concern for our individual survival; they can help us see that our lives are not worthless and that we have something to contribute to the world.

Let me now outline five implications of the duty to alleviate avoidable suffering. First, we owe it to anyone who is in *immediate need* to help them. Consider the plight of those already affected by hurricanes made worse by climate change. Whether our future will be curtailed by similar catastrophes, our common humanity should compel us to help such persons (for example, by donating to an NGO providing relief). Second, we owe it to ourselves to make our best efforts to invest in the technologies that might improve our conditions of living in the Anthropocene. We should address avoidable suffering, and this might be done through technological advances. Third, we should limit the impact we make through our lifestyles on the climate crisis. If individually diminishing one’s carbon footprint—let’s say by limiting one’s air travel—can do anything to mitigate future suffering, then we ought ethically to do so.³⁷ Fourth, we owe it to ourselves to fight for any institutional changes that might lessen global suffering. While international efforts on global warming have largely failed to deliver on their promises, this should not let us off the hook. Let us do our best to challenge our politicians to implement large-scale solutions to alleviate the effects of climate change. Individual countries and even states within the United States have acted in the absence of binding global agreements that could bring about substantial changes to our condition. For example, in 2019, New York passed a bill setting in motion a plan to eliminate net greenhouse emissions by 2050.³⁸ Fifth, effective efforts might require that we rethink and restructure our economies. In *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*, the writer and journalist Roy Scranton claims that our fear of destabilizing our present economies explains our ineffectiveness in implementing radical solutions. As he puts it, “The entire world has to work together to solve global warming, yet carbon powers the world’s political machinery and shapes our current form of collective life.”³⁹ If Scranton is right, then we would need to revolutionize economies that derive their strength from carbon-based sources of energy.

Let me pause on this point about avoidable suffering. Who deserves our ethical consideration in the efforts against climate change? For whom should we be fighting for today? Developed countries, which have contributed disproportionately to climate change, are criticized for failing to show regard for those countries affected by their emissions—typically low-lying and poorer nations, such as the Maldives or the Marshall Islands.⁴⁰ In addition, we often speak of saving the planet *for future generations*. What is important for our lives in the Anthropocene is that we will have a greater impact when we, especially in developed countries, look beyond our circumstances and strive to extend our compassion beyond our immediate neighbors and consider our global impact. We may not feel the effects of climate change as acutely as others already do today. Yet, we do not need to frame our fight against global warming as something we owe to an abstract population of “future generations.” Since we are already feeling the effects of climate change, from an *anthropocentric* perspective, we now deserve the conditions to live meaningful lives. In particular, present-day youth deserve a stable and habitable planet. They are owed an Earth where they can lead meaningful lives and contribute, if they so choose, to creating “future generations.” Likewise, from a *biocentric* point of view, one could argue that we owe it to all beings living today the conditions to flourish.⁴¹

Tragic events—wars, famines, epidemics—have ravaged humanity for ages. The Anthropocene spells a new set of catastrophes. However, we have always been exposed to tragedy and we have faced the possibility of collective annihilation. And we have always found reasons to live even in the worst of circumstances. We have said yes to life countless times: after massive natural disasters, after genocides, and even after setting off the atom bomb. The question of life’s worthwhileness is not altogether transformed by our condition today, since suffering and existential threats have always been part of the human condition. Still, in a time where dire events lie on the horizon, this question deserves serious scrutiny. Our fears about the future are legitimate.

NOTES

1. See Jeffery Mays’s reporting for *The New York Times* in “Prominent Lawyer in Fight for Gay Rights Dies After Setting Himself on Fire in Prospect Park” (April 14, 2018).

2. Erle Ellis, *The Anthropocene: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 3.
3. Ellis, *The Anthropocene*, 16.
4. Ellis, *The Anthropocene*, 73.
5. Kendra Pierre-Louis, "2019 Was a Record Year for Ocean Temperatures, Data Show," *The New York Times*, January 13, 2020.
6. Mark Maslin, *Climate Change: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 68–97.
7. For further information, see Eun-Soon Im et al.'s "Deadly heat waves projected in the densely populated agricultural regions of South Asia," *Science Advances* 3, no. 8 (2017).
8. Samuel Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 15.
9. Scheffler also asks his reader to consider the premise of a P. D. James novel: imagine that one belongs to the last generations of humans on Earth because universal infertility has struck us. According to Scheffler, such a situation, like the "doomsday scenario," would affect our sense that life is worth living.
10. Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife*, 33.
11. Although I agree with Scheffler, I should note certain criticisms of his argument. In their responses to Scheffler, gathered in *Death and the Afterlife*, Harry Frankfurt and Susan Wolf take issue with his view. For example, Frankfurt notes that we have different reactions to our mortality and that the same may be said of Scheffler's doomsday scenario. In effect, the worry is that Scheffler is overgeneralizing his perspective. Similarly, Wolf pushes Frankfurt to explain *why* any project that is meaningful in the present moment would automatically lose its attractiveness and worth. See Harry Frankfurt, "How the Afterlife Matters" and Susan Wolf, "The Significance of Doomsday," in *Death and the Afterlife* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
12. James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 38.
13. James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*, 41–42.
14. James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*, 42.
15. James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*, 43.
16. James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*, 44.
17. James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*, 50.
18. James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*, 51.
19. James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*, 51.
20. James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*, 58.
21. James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*, 59.
22. James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*, 59 (emphasis in the original).
23. James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*, 62.
24. James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*, 61.
25. James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*, 3.

26. James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*, 11.
27. James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*, 25.
28. James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*, 26.
29. I borrow this expression from Jeff Jordan in his article “Pragmatic Arguments and Belief in God,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2018 edition).
30. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Modern Library, 1936), 475, quoted in Jeff Jordan’s “Pragmatic Arguments and Belief in God,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2018 edition).
31. Colin Koopman, “The Will, the Will to Believe, and William James: An Ethics of Freedom as Self-Transformation.” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 55, no. 3 (2017): 508.
32. For a longer discussion of James’s argument and the question of supernaturalism, see the chapter “Absurd Pragmatism,” in John Stuhr’s *Pragmatic Fashions* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).
33. For more on eco-grief groups, see Cara Buckley’s *New York Times* article on climate crisis grief, “Apocalypse Got You Down? Maybe This Will Help” (November 15, 2019).
34. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (New York: Vintage Books), 5.
35. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 28.
36. Christine Korsgaard, “Facing the Animal You See in the Mirror,” *Harvard Review of Philosophy* 16 (2009): 3.
37. For a discussion of dissenting views about individual actions and their effects, see the chapter “Living with Climate Change,” in Dale Jamieson’s *Reason in a Dark Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
38. For information about the bill, see Jesse McKinley and Brad Plumer’s article, “New York to Approve One of the World’s Most Ambitious Climate Plans,” *The New York Times*, June 18, 2019.
39. Roy Scranton, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2015), 53.
40. For more on the disproportionate contribution to climate change on the part of developed countries, consult Mark Maslin’s *Climate Change: A Very Short Introduction*.
41. Biocentrism in environmental ethics refers to the position that all living creatures have moral standing (Robin Attfield, *Environmental Ethics: A Very Short Introduction* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018]). Thus, from this perspective, action on climate change would not be undertaken solely for the sake of humans, but for all living beings.

WORKS CITED

Attfield, Robin. 2018. *Environmental Ethics: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Buckley, Cara. 2019. "Apocalypse Got You Down? Maybe This Will Help." *The New York Times*, November 15. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/15/sunday-review/depression-climate-change.html>.
- Camus, Albert. 1955. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Translated by Justin O'Brien. New York: Vintage Books.
- Ellis, Erle. 2018. *The Anthropocene: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Frankfurt, Harry. 2013. "How the Afterlife Matters." In *Death and the Afterlife*, edited by Niko Kolodny. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Im, Eun-Soon, Jeremy Pal, and Elfatih Eltahir. 2017. "Deadly heat waves projected in the densely populated agricultural regions of South Asia." *Science Advances* 3, no. 8. DOI: 10.1126/sciadv.1603322.
- James, William. 1956. *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. New York: Dover Publications.
- Jamieson, Dale. 2014. *Reason in a Dark Time: Why the Struggle Against Climate Change Failed—and What It Means for Our Future*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jordan, Jeff. "Pragmatic Arguments and Belief in God." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2018 edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/pragmatic-belief-god/>.
- Koopman, Colin. 2017. "The Will, the Will to Believe, and William James: An Ethics of Freedom as Self-Transformation." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 55, no. 3: 491–512.
- Korsgaard, Christine. 2009. "Facing the Animal You See in the Mirror." *Harvard Review of Philosophy* 16: 2–7.
- Maslin, Mark. 2014. *Climate Change: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mays, Jeffery. 2018. "Prominent Lawyer in Fight for Gay Rights Dies After Setting Himself on Fire in Prospect Park." *The New York Times*, April 14. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/14/nyregion/david-buckel-dead-fire.html>
- Mckinley, Jesse, and Brad Plumer. 2019. "New York to Approve One of the World's Most Ambitious Climate Plans." *The New York Times*, June 18. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/18/nyregion/greenhouse-gases-ny.html>.
- Pierre-Louis, Kendra. 2020. "2019 Was a Record Year for Ocean Temperatures, Data Show." *The New York Times*, January 13. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/13/climate/ocean-temperatures-climate-change.html>.
- Scheffler, Samuel. 2013. *Death and the Afterlife*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Scranton, Roy. 2015. *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization*. San Francisco: City Lights Books.
- Stuhr, John. 2015. *Pragmatic Fashions: Pluralism, Democracy, Relativism, and the Absurd*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Wolf, Susan. 2013. "The Significance of Doomsday." In *Death and the Afterlife*, edited by Niko Kolodny. Oxford: Oxford University Press.