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Climate Anxiety and Climate Courage

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Abstract

Climate anxiety is a profound psychological, and even spiritual, problem of our times. The predicted and unpredictable consequences of climate change can cast a shadow of fear and doubt over our sense of the imminent and far future. The best cure to climate anxiety is the development of courage. Courage means upholding something noble in the face of one's fears. In this article I explore what it means to be courageous in the face of the climate crisis.

Nowadays, if you are training to become a psychologist or spiritual counsellor, your school may allow you to specialize in the treatment of climate change-related mental health problems. The collapse of ecosystems, the extinction of species, the prospect of the earth warming up with unknown consequences is scary, and hence many people suffer from *climate anxiety*. The curricula for psychology students show that there is an evident need to develop therapies for this new type of anxiety.

We might ask: Is climate anxiety a disease? Does it need treatment? In some cases of climate anxiety, a person experiences a loss of ability to function normally. Some psychologists deem such cases worthy of the title of mental illness. However, others say: climate anxiety is not a disease, but a perfectly healthy response to a real threat. In fact, those who do NOT suffer from climate anxiety are the mentally ill ones. A healthy person runs away when chased by a rabid animal. In the same way, a healthy person should take action when climate disasters loom in the future. Action is the cure, not therapy.

But does the prescription to 'take action' really help people who suffer from climate anxiety? There are many reasons why it often doesn't. Firstly, there are a thousand different actions one can take to 'help' and people disagree on which is the best. This means that it is unclear to many of us what 'taking action' means. Secondly, it is also often unclear whether 'taking action' makes a difference. Anxiety also has the unfortunate effect of paralysing us, and worsening our feelings of doubt. Climate anxiety may, therefore, make it harder for us to take action.

The cure to climate anxiety is probably not action. Rather, the cure must be a change in how we relate to our anxiety. I want to discuss a cure to anxiety, the only real cure there is. This is a cure that eats fear, thrives on it, and makes the one who has it a better person. The cure is *courage*. Courage is not easy to develop, partially because trying to become courageous can easily spiral into becoming foolhardy or self-deluding. In what follows, I will describe what philosophers like Aristotle mean

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by courage and how we can distinguish it from its negative counterparts.

What is Courage?

Courage eats fear. What I mean by that is two things. First, courage thrives on fear and cannot exist without it. When there is more fear, courage can grow. Second, when courage is around, there is eventually less fear, because fear is eaten. This means that situations that cause fear are opportunities to feed courage, and that you cannot be courageous if you are never afraid. That is a hopeful thought, because it means that things that give us anxiety are opportunities to become courageous, and hence, a better person.

Fear comes in degrees. Some situations cause a lot of fear, and other situations cause only a little. The extent to which fear influences our behaviour and thoughts also comes in degrees. High amounts of fear tend to influence our thoughts and behaviour a lot, and our thinking and actions tend to turn towards avoiding the object of our fear, as it should. Smaller amounts of fear might influence our thinking, give us a stern warning to stay alert, but we may not behave any differently. Furthermore, one person might revise all their plans in response to fear, while the same amount of fear might affect the plans of another person very little. When fear does not affect us enough, we are reckless, and when fear affects us too much, we are cowardly. Courage is in the middle of these two extremes. Or, at least, that's what the philosopher Aristotle says.

For Aristotle, all emotions can affect us too much, or too little, depending on the situation we are in. A virtuous person is someone who manages to let emotions impact her the right amount, and hence act rightly. When one is swaying too far towards one of the negative extremes, the person should try to steer themselves the other way, like bending a bent stick into the opposite direction of the bend, to get it

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straight. Let us zoom in a little more on what Aristotle says about courage for now, before we return to climate anxiety.

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Aristotle’s Story of Courage: A Soldier Going into Battle

Aristotle didn’t have climate anxiety, but he shared many of our other anxieties, like the anxiety for death. In his most famous work in ethics, *Nicomachean Ethics*, he explains what real courage is, using the example of a soldier going into battle. Death is the most frightening thing he can imagine. The epitome of courage, then, is facing death, whilst terrified, but doing it anyway to uphold something noble. A soldier in Aristotle’s time and place, which was Athens in the fourth century BC, would face battle, armed with a spear, to defend his friends, family and city, as well as the values of Athens like democracy and civilization, and perhaps the honour of the goddess Athena, from attack by outsiders.

Again, it is necessary for courage that one is truly afraid. If the soldier goes into battle, confident and spirited, believing the opponent to be Elmo from Sesame Street, or believing oneself to be invincible, then that is not real courage, Aristotle says. Similarly, if the soldier sees red and is thirsting to rip people’s intestines out with his spear, then his fighting won’t be courageous either, as the fighting will be merely the satisfaction of a bloody desire.

At the same time, if the soldier is rushing off to battle because he is scared of his commander killing him if he doesn’t, then he is just being scared into battle. Aristotle seems to say in this passage that commanders should never do this, because by doing so they deprive the soldier of the opportunity to develop courage. Furthermore, he says, it is not a good tactic to win a war either. A cowardly soldier, who is being threatened into battle, will run off as soon as he can. It is not good practice to make soldiers angry for the fight either. Because soldiers that learn to fight when they are riled up will become cowards as soon as the anger subsides. Only a stable character trait of courage makes a good soldier, and commanders need to encourage the development of real courage.

What Battle Are We Fighting When We Face Climate Change?

So, here we have the courageous soldier, who upholds what is noble in the face of possible injury and death. He fears many things. Aside from death and injury, he may fear the exhausting fight, he may fear having to kill or hurt his opponents, he may even fear performing badly in battle, missing shots or making mistakes that bring others into danger. The soldier also fears that his army will lose the war and it will all have been for nothing. The fear has many faces.

If we, facing climate change and anxiety, put ourselves in the position of the Athenian soldier, then what is the fear we have? And what is the noble thing that we want to uphold even despite our fear? The twenty-first-century citizen, like the soldier, faces an uncertain future, which can include a host of scary things, from death in a flood or heavy storm, to having to give up one’s dreams, having to build up a new life outside the flood zone. The twenty-first-century citizen also fears what they must do, giving up comforts, whatever ‘taking action’ means, the possibility of failure or complete misstep, making things worse by accident.

The fears of *what one has to do to wage battle*, seem to dominate our discourse on climate change. We are waking up increasingly to the fact that it is not enough for only some of us to take steps into a more climate-friendly lifestyle, rather action is needed from all of us individually, in a collective effort. For example, the civil society group Take the Jump has established six pillars of change that everyone needs to take, for a climate-friendly lifestyle in the future. On this list one sees, for example, no more flying (only intra-continental flights once per 3 years,

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and one must never fly to another continent), no more personal cars and no more shopping for new clothes. And these things are not frivolous; they touch very deep parts of our identity. For example, people who study abroad should not fly to see their family once a year anymore. The decision to study abroad becomes a decision to leave your family for many years, possibly. These realities of the battle against climate change are worthy of fear and of courage.

However, what gets less attention is the question at the bottom of climate anxiety: What if we do not manage to curb climate change? What if the worst predictions come to pass? Let us imagine, for the sake of argument, that we reach a turning point after which there is little hope. A point after which activism and action will not help anymore, but we are headed towards destruction, suffering and a world that we do not want to bring any more children into. In what way should we live, if we were actually facing an inevitable apocalypse? This question, and the fact that our minds gravitate to it in the background, is, I suspect, a leading cause of climate anxiety.

When philosophers talk about fear, we generally talk about it as an emotion with a certain object. If a bear chases me, the object of my fear is that bear. But some fears and anxieties have a more abstract, vague or transcendental object. These fears are sometimes called existential dread or existential anxiety. The philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich distinguishes three types of existential anxiety in the book *The Courage to Be*. We will go through each in turn.

Anxiety of Fate and Death

This is the anxiety about the fact that we are here and we will go on to suffer, possibly a lot, in our lives. Very likely, all of us will get very sick at some point, and nothing will stop it, we are trapped in our fate. The only thing that can stop it is death. And death is even worse, because it is the negation of everything we are. The climate crisis calls up the anxiety of fate and death, because many of us, or people we love, might suffer and die because of climate change. Extreme weather events, floods, storms, pandemics or a lack of resources can make us suffer and kill us. The anxiety of death, therefore, is rightfully a part of climate anxiety.

Anxiety of Guilt and Judgement

Many of us can accept our mortality, as long as we have lived well and have been the person we think we should be. However, we do not want to die *knowing that we have lived badly.* The anxiety of guilt is an existential anxiety about being guilty, not being worth the grace of life. The climate crisis calls up this anxiety because climate change is anthropogenic, and its severity is caused by our inability, or worse, unwillingness, to give up comforts to address it.

Anxiety of Meaninglessness

It might be okay for us to die, perhaps even whilst knowing that we are not perfect, as long as there is something good or beautiful that outlasts us. For example, I get a lot of consolation out of the fact that even when I die, there will still be people, who talk, love each other and do philosophy, continuing the things I used to do. But when the human species is facing an existential risk, then the continued existence of these things is also called into question. This might make it seem like everything we uphold and carry into the future lacks meaning, for there will be no one to continue to uphold that meaning after our death.

The Turning Point of Hopelessness

Courage in the face of climate change means upholding something valuable in the face of our fears. But what exactly we uphold, and what exactly we fear will depend on whether there is still hope or not. Let us, therefore, make a distinction between:

- Courage before the turning point of hopelessness
- Courage after the turning point of hopelessness

I know that the idea of there being *a single turning point* is unlikely to be a true depiction of

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how things will go. In reality, there will probably be many turning points, local turning points, turning points in one part of the world and not in another, turning points with regard to a particular thing or situation, for example, a species going extinct, an ecosystem dying, a group of people needing to abandon their homes and lifestyles, a country flooding, a practice going extinct. Anyway, let us stick to the metaphor of a turning point for now.

'When philosophers talk about fear, we generally talk about it as an emotion with a certain object. If a bear chases me, the object of my fear is that bear. But some fears and anxieties have a more abstract, vague or transcendental object. These fears are sometimes called existential dread or existential anxiety.'

Fighting When You Can Still Win

Before the turning point there is still hope, the possibility of securing a safe future. While we are in this position, it is somewhat clear what the 'war' asks from us. We must mitigate the production of greenhouse gas, reduce the impact of our lifestyle, make policy and technological decisions that prevent the production of further greenhouse gases.

And what is the fear we are facing? I think the fear here is of discomfort, opposition and difficult choices. We fear being unsatisfied with our quality of life, less thermal comfort, less travel comfort, reconfiguring our identity to run smoothly on a non-consumerist engine. We fear having less room for mistakes and more restrictions. Another enemy is political opposition. A politician who makes climate-driven decisions is likely to face fierce opposition because each decision has trade-offs and impacts certain people in a negative way. Many environmentalists fear that environmentalist politicians will always get voted out of office because they tend to prioritize the long-term over the short term, and many people vote for short-term ends. Environmentalists may also impose unfair risks on particular groups of people and these choices are not simply difficult, they are tragic in the sense that it is impossible to make a choice that does not disadvantage some people. The chooser must bear the burden of hurting people now for the sake of future generations; such dilemmas cannot always be avoided. These are the fears we are facing now. And what is the noble thing we do it all for? That is the welfare of future generations, ecosystems and the natural world.

Fighting When You Cannot Win Anymore

However, if we establish that the situation is hopeless, we are faced with a different fear. In a hopeless situation, we face existential anxiety. This includes the three particular anxieties, anxiety of fate and death, anxiety of guilt and judgement, and anxiety of meaninglessness. To face these, we need a different type of courage.

To be courageous, we must uphold something noble in the face of these fears. But what, then, is the noble thing, the good thing, that we want to preserve, uphold, maintain or honour, even despite existential anxiety? And what is the noble act we will take, in the face of this fear? In a completely hopeless situation, it might be more difficult to think of what that is. If one

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can still win the war, then taking that chance is worth something, but if one has already lost, why keep fighting? And what kind of fight is it? Different philosophical traditions have different answers to how to do this.

For example, a hedonist believes that enjoyment is the most valuable thing in life. Enjoyment is tough to maintain in a hopeless situation, because, as Jane Austen remarked, happiness itself is the anticipation of future happiness. And hence finding enjoyment in the present is hard if the future is hopeless. And if enjoyment is truly good, then finding enjoyment in the present and valuing it, despite existential anxiety, can be courageous. Philosophers like Nietzsche, on the other hand, would say that the most valuable thing a person can do is to look at the truth, not to delude oneself, not to distract oneself, but to suffer honestly, while preserving connection with the truth, and while preserving one's own authenticity. One might also try to preserve other morally good traits, such as kindness, loyalty or dedication to faith, even in the face of these threats, and upholding them would be the job of courage, and courage will eat fear to keep upholding them. There are many values that one can uphold, even if one is headed towards destruction.

How to Become Existentially Courageous

Courage in the face of climate change should not just be courage in the face of the difficulty of the battle, but also courage in the face of possible failure, and the destruction of humanity. To really defeat climate anxiety, we need to develop existential courage; only existential courage can eat up and thrive on existential anxiety. This, again, is a hopeful thought, because it means that even something as awful as existential dread has a positive flipside: it is an opportunity to develop (perhaps the most powerful form of) courage.

However, if we consider how much climate anxiety we are already feeling now, and how many people feel depressed and incapacitated *already now* because of it, how must it be when we really face hopelessness after the turning point of hopelessness? Developing this kind of existential courage is very difficult, and most likely many of us will succumb to various tempting, and less noble coping mechanisms. For example, we might get reckless, we might think 'we are all going to die anyway' and accelerate our own death, we might become suicidal or succumb to a mindless kind of hedonism. We are also at risk of becoming cowardly, we might let our anxiety consume us, be afraid to live, and lose contact with everyone around us. We might begin to delude ourselves that everything is actually fine, or succumb to other cowardly fantasies so that we do not need to face our fears. In an interesting way, recklessness and cowardliness begin to resemble each other in the case of existential anxiety. Or at least, it can be more difficult to tell them apart.

Being courageous is difficult and that's why we might need to find some extra support for our courage. I have two pieces of advice, from philosophical literature, for becoming existentially courageous. The first is, the right kind of hope. How can one, after losing the battle, conjure up hope? The philosopher Jonathan Lear writes about a specific kind of hope: radical hope. Radical hope is an emotion felt by people in a dire situation, where all hope seems lost. He describes an interview with the last chief of the Crow People, who are Native Americans. Since the local extinction of the buffalo, it became impossible for the Crow nation to thrive by living their traditional lifestyle. The last chief has seen his entire culture go under. Yet he responded to the situation with hope, a hope directed at something being better in an unknown future. Lear describes his hope this way: 'What makes this hope radical is that it is directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is. Radical hope anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it.' In a sense, the object of this hope is also great, vague and transcendental. Therefore, it can match the gravity of existential dread when upheld.

Another weapon against existential anxiety is humour. Humour is very good at helping us to direct our emotions back towards the

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appropriate mean. When someone is way too negative and despairing about something, we ridicule them, and this might get them to self-reflect and change their attitude. Or we might ridicule ourselves when we wallow in self-pity. When someone is much too positive about something, this is sometimes called toxic positivity, and we also ridicule them.

Having a sense of humour is a good tool to boost or temper one's fear, to become courageous, or to boost and temper one's sense of the importance of what they are courageous for. Here is an example: A few years ago, a Russian warship tried to take a small Ukrainian island and asked if the thirteen border guards would surrender. Of course, the thirteen of them could do very little against an entire warship with Russian soldiers. But their message to the Russians was 'go fuck yourself'. Postage stamps commemorating the event were issued. On the stamps, a Ukrainian soldier is seen flipping off a Russian warship. The stamps sold out immediately. The opponent is ridiculed here. When you ridicule something you fear, it becomes less frightening, which tempers the fear. And at the same time, this also reinforces the awareness of what's there to fight for. A soldier flipping off a big warship, refusing to surrender, represented for many people the strength of Ukraine. Besides ridiculing the opponent, the stamps were also an affirmation of what there is to fight for.

Humour is also helpful because it helps to bring people together. Courage can also be built with others, rather than just by yourself. Often, this is more effective in helping you uphold noble values in the face of death, guilt and meaninglessness. Meaning, after all, is something that human beings create together. A word cannot have a meaning unless there are at least two people who understand the word. In the same way values, beliefs and practices get their meaning from multiple people understanding them and giving them meaning. Tillich calls this *courage through participation.*

Why We Need Cynics as well as Activists

And as you can imagine, there is something paradoxical about having both 'before the turning point'-courage and 'after the turning point'-courage. Because if you assume inevitable doom, it is less motivating to participate in activism and other strategies of ensuring a better future. Similarly, if you think there is still hope, you will be tempted to revel in your hope, rather than facing your existential dread.

That's why these two types of courage are dispersed among different people. People who are 'before the turning point'-courageous, will often hyperfixate on a better future, and might not always be existentially courageous. And people who are very cynical, and think we have already lost the battle, are probably more disposed to become existentially courageous. There is a lot of pressure in society to be 'before the turning point'-courageous: outward-looking, activist, hopeful. But we also need these people, the cynics, who are preparing for doom, and likely to develop 'after the turning point'-courage. For this reason, both the activists and the cynics should be cherished. Importantly, a cynical outlook on the climate crisis should not be dismissed as cowardly, lazy or apathetic. While the activists remind us that there is hope, and help us to overcome the fear of what we have to do to fight, the cynics remind us to develop existential courage, in the face of uncertainty and possible failure. Integrating both perspectives is what we need to truly cure climate anxiety.

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