

Eco-Anxiety and Planetary Hope

Douglas A. Vakoch • Sam Mickey
Editors

Eco-Anxiety and Planetary Hope

Experiencing the Twin Disasters of COVID-19
and Climate Change

 Springer

Editors

Douglas A. Vakoch
METI International
San Francisco, CA, USA

Sam Mickey
Department of Theology and Religious
Studies, Environmental Studies Program
University of San Francisco
San Francisco, CA, USA

ISBN 978-3-031-08430-0 ISBN 978-3-031-08431-7 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-08431-7>

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

The publisher, the authors, and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

This Springer imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Contents

Part I The Experience of Eco-anxiety

- 1 Not to Be Unworthy of the Event: Thinking Through
Pandemics with Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze** 3
Eva-Maria Simms
- 2 We Breathe; Therefore, We Are: The Gasp of Life** 15
Tina Williams
- 3 Atmospheres of Anxiety: Doing Nothing
in an Ecological Emergency** 25
Sam Mickey
- 4 Anxiety and the Re-figuration of Action: Living
in a Crisis-Shaped Present** 33
Simon Lafontaine
- 5 Authentic Compassion in the Wake of Coronavirus:
A Nietzschean Climate Ethics** 43
William A. B. Parkhurst and Casey Rentmeester

Part II Beyond Birth, Existence, and Environment

- 6 Birth Strike: Holding the Tension Between Existence
and Non-existence** 57
Claire Arnold-Baker
- 7 Stillbirth Grief, Eco-grief and Corona Grief: Reflections
on Denialism** 67
Madelaine Hron
- 8 Saving the Other, Saving the Self: Exploring Children's
and Young People's Feelings About the Coronavirus,
Climate, and Biodiversity Crises** 77
Caroline Hickman

9	Participating in the Wound of the World: A Matrixial Rethinking of Eco-anxiety	87
	Christoph Solstreif-Pirker	
10	From Oppression to Love as Mother Earth Joins the Time's Up and #MeToo Movements	99
	Merritt Juliano	
 Part III Eco-Poetry and Creative Writing		
11	Ecoprogramming the Vulnerable Bodies	111
	Om Prakash Dwivedi	
12	Anxiety in Isolation: Anointing with Ecocentrism	119
	Abhik Gupta	
13	“Narrative Medicine” in the Age of COVID-19: The Power of Creative Writing to Reimagine Environmental Crisis	129
	Nicole Anae	
14	Solastalgia and Soul Suffrage: A Narrative Eco-Poem	139
	Michael Hewson	
	Index	149

Chapter 6

Birth Strike: Holding the Tension Between Existence and Non-existence



Claire Arnold-Baker

We are facing a climate emergency¹ which has prompted urgent questions regarding the fate of our world and our ways of life. Scientists (Anderegg et al. 2010) acknowledge that this emergency will have a far-reaching impact but what is not certain is how our lives will be affected in concrete terms. These uncertainties regarding our personal futures, the future of humanity, and the future of the planet have prompted continual calls to action. Whilst governments across the world struggle to formulate plans to reduce carbon emissions within the tight time frame needed, individuals are coming together to take direct action. One such group is BirthStrike. Formed in early 2019 in the UK by Blythe Pepino (BirthStrike 2020), BirthStrike unites members from across the globe, concerned with the ensuing ecological crisis, and who want to draw attention to this crisis by declaring to make a personal choice to remain childfree. This response to the climate crisis and how it highlights our mortality, but also our natality is the focus of this chapter. The questions it raises also throw light on our human condition.

Climate change is now no longer a theoretical concept but a reality that must be faced. Scientists such as Lenton et al. (2008) warn that we are reaching a point where the effects of climate change cannot be reversed. The notion of tipping points was introduced by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) some years ago, where they sought to highlight how certain thresholds, once breached, would have a knock-on effect on the others. The interconnected ecological system of the planet means that this would have an accelerating effect on the impact of climate change. The resulting ecological crisis would, according to Lenton et al. (2019), lead to “an existential threat to civilization.” Owen Gaffney is similarly

¹ Declared by UK government in May 2019 (BBC News 2019).

C. Arnold-Baker (✉)
DCPsych, New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling (NSPC), London, UK
e-mail: claire@nspc.org.uk

quoted as saying, “Without emergency action our children are likely to inherit a dangerously destabilized planet” (Leahy 2019). These very real threats throw our existence into sharp relief. We can no longer live in a way where we can avoid thinking about the possibility of our own death and the deaths of our loved ones due to a destabilized world. The climate emergency has therefore placed awareness of human mortality at the forefront of our existence.

This, however, is an uncomfortable place to be, as contemplating our facticity and how we are bound in time causes individuals to experience *death anxiety* (Yalom 1980). For although the only certainty that we have as human beings is that we will die, the nature and timing of our death are unknown to us. It is this dialectic that propels people to live in ways in which they deny the possibility of their own death so that death is viewed as a distant prospect that will occur at some point in the future rather than an ever-present possibility. Whilst viewing death as something that could happen at any moment may have a crippling effect on people and lead to inaction and a state of paralysis, the counter position is also true—that death becomes such a remote possibility that it does not create an urgency that would enable us to make more active choices. The impact that mortality has on our existence and its effects on our lives has been the subject of much philosophical thought (Kierkegaard 1980; Heidegger 1962; Jaspers 1951; Tillich 1952).

Heidegger (1962) in particular observed how human beings try to avoid feelings of existential anxiety which emanate from the human condition—that we must die but also that we have the freedom to choose our lives. Of the two modes of existing in the world, Heidegger noted that we mainly lived in a state of *forgetfulness of being*. He described how in this mode of being we immerse ourselves in everyday living, and we become ‘fallen in with others’, taking part in ‘idle talk’ and not thinking deeply about our lives and the choices we make. Heidegger describes how people become a ‘they-self’, where they are not making choices or decisions that are good for themselves as individuals but go along with others in an anonymous way. From a Heideggerian perspective, this is an inauthentic mode of being. In this mode, individuals have given up the responsibility of their choices and placed that responsibility on others to carry.

When viewed through this lens, it is clear how the climate crisis prompts two opposing responses. It is either denied or avoided, as the reality is too difficult to contemplate and therefore individuals fall into everyday living as a way of tranquilizing them from the oncoming crisis. Or the climate crisis has a disclosing quality, where we can no longer picture our existence as following a similar trajectory as our ancestors, with a certainty that our planet will remain the same and our lives will face similar habitual patterns of living. The boundary that mortality gives our lives has taken on a new perspective. Myers (2014) noted that the anxiety that this provokes makes us question the assumptions we have about our lives, our relationships with others, and how we relate to the natural world in the future. He states that ‘the *continuity of social existence* is threatened at a collective level’ (ibid. 2014, 55). The existential threat that is incited by the climate crisis causes, as Myers (2014, 63) states, a reactive response where individuals will “attempt to keep one’s world intact by any means”. He suggests that the paralyzing effect of death anxiety accounts for

the denial of climate change despite overwhelming scientific evidence to the contrary. This anxiety also prevents others from making the changes necessary to avert the oncoming ecological disaster.

However, there are times when becoming more aware of death as an ever-present possibility can have the effect of shaking individuals out of the tranquillity that they have created in their lives. They move into Heidegger's second mode of existing, the *mindfulness of being*. In this mode, Heidegger believes that people begin to make choices that are related to themselves as individuals and are more authentic. But this mode is not reached by mere contemplation; it needs a jolt or a crisis for individuals to be shaken out of their everyday existence. Heidegger states that when individuals enter this more mindful mode of existence they are *being towards death* and have a sense of their lives in their entirety. This awareness of mortality as a present possibility still causes an experience of anxiety, but this is an existential anxiety or *angst* (Kierkegaard 1980), which is created when we become aware of our lives and the choices we must make about how we live, without the certainty of knowing the outcome of these choices. Again this *angst* (explored further in Chaps. 2 and 3, of this volume) can have the crippling effect of inaction but if faced and acknowledged, existential anxiety can become an energy—a driving force—that can place the focus back on living in a creative way and how we want to live our lives. Those moments highlight the most important aspects of life helping individuals to create more meaningful lives. Myers (2014) believed that creative ways in which meaning can be generated collectively in communities were needed if people were going to make the changes needed in the light of this climate crisis, as changes to our life-world enable new possibilities to emerge.

Whilst existential philosophers have stressed the importance mortality has on our lives and how we live, the climate crisis has demonstrated that it is not just our own mortality that becomes an issue but that of our children and our grandchildren. Human existence is bound at two ends by birth and death, and whilst death shapes the direction in which our lives take, our birth also plays its role; these two are inextricably linked. Death emphasizes that we are moving towards non-existence, yet there is also a period in which we did not exist before we were born. It is this aspect that is highlighted by the BirthStrike movement, as it concerns human existence and non-existence in its entirety and poses some questions around our responsibility as human beings.

The BirthStrike movement has two principles, the first is to question the ethics of bringing a child into a world that is heading towards ecological breakdown and the second is to create a new discourse around climate change, to engage people with this ecological crisis in a different way, whilst highlighting the urgency in which it needs attending to. BirthStrike clearly state that they are not anti-natalist, i.e. that it is morally wrong to bring a child into the world because it would expose them to pain and suffering (Benatar 2006), instead they respect the individual choices people make regarding procreation (BirthStrike 2020). Rather the aim of the movement is to enact change in the systems that have created the destruction of the natural world, through activism and discourse, rather than attempting to reduce the size of the population.

Motherhood or Childfreedom?

The first principle concerns the choice of whether to have children, which emphasizes an important facet of human existence concerning how new life is brought into existence. Our own natality has already been assured by the decisions of our parents, but the natality of future generations is a choice still to be made, a point Parkhurst and Rentmeester discuss elsewhere in this volume. Magnus (2020) notes that the choice of motherhood is often shrouded in anxiety. Most women wishing to have a child will consider the timing of conception. It becomes a balancing act between fertility and career progression for many, which women try to navigate without the certainty that they will be able to conceive. Magnus (2020) argues that the fact that fertility is finite and limited in time creates an anxiety and urgency for women as they consider whether to become mothers. Women become acutely aware of their temporality in relation to their fertility. There is a similarity in how one might consider the finitude of fertility and the finitude of the planet brought about by the ecological crisis; both are time-limited and therefore evoke an urgent choice and both concern our ongoing existence. Both arouse anxiety related to the passing of time and the uncertainty of what our future holds. Considering one, whether to have a child, brings the other into perspective, as it involves how we can project ourselves into a possible future, not just for ourselves but also for our children.

However, this position suggests that all women are faced with a binary choice between motherhood and their careers. A position also embodied by BirthStrike which places the unborn child at its centre, highlighting what seems a binary choice. This choice Coates-Davies (2020) argues is a presumption of our pro-natal societies and that for many women who remain childfree maternity was never a choice to be made. Childfreedom creates an existential tension between the self and society, as deeply personal ways of living also impact the lives of others. Coates-Davies (2020) argues that childfreedom negates the synonymy of woman and mother and brings the assumptions on which our societies are based into question. If human beings are to survive, we are dependent on new life being born and therefore dependent on the choices of women. Recognition of this shifts the balance of power in societal discourses which historically have viewed women as *being for others* (de Beauvoir 1997) and to be otherwise is to go against a “natural position.” The choice of conception, therefore, is not a simple selection of one thing over the other but involves a complex interconnection between the personal and the social.

Existential Responsibility

These fundamental choices also bring responsibility with them. For most adults, the responsibility that we hold is for ourselves as individuals and the consequences of those choices are ours to bear alone (Sartre 1943; de Beauvoir 1997). However, there are also times when we must make choices for others who are unable to do so

for themselves. To choose to have a child brings a sense of overwhelming responsibility at times. Garland (2020) showed how women's early experience of motherhood is defined by the responsibility they feel towards their child. This is not just a responsibility to look after and care for a vulnerable baby, but that responsibility moves forward into the child's life and concerns how parental choices set children on certain paths (Garland 2020; Arnold-Baker 2020). Mothers become acutely aware of this level of responsibility which can often feel like a burden. They want to do the right thing for their children but do not have the certainty of knowing what that might be. This sense of responsibility towards another begins before the birth or even before pregnancy. It starts in the choice to conceive.

Conception, therefore, brings the concepts of maternity and natality together and serves to highlight our choice and responsibilities towards future generations and the potential lives that they will live. Bringing a life into the world involves a projection into an unknown future and a sense of responsibility for that life until the child is old enough to take on responsibility for itself. The climate crisis has added a further dimension of responsibility, and whilst it could be said that every stage in history has had its difficulties to overcome, whether that is war or famine, for example, there has always been the certainty that life on this planet would continue. However, with the current climate crisis, this is now in doubt, leading would-be parents to feel a heightened sense of responsibility towards their unborn child. This creates a powerful tension between the responsibility we have towards the survival of the human race and the responsibility towards our future children both potentially leading to non-existence.

Existence and non-existence are also part of the maternal experience where mothers are confronted by the possibility of life and death during birth and in the early months of the baby's life. Maternity has been shown to have the effect of jolting individuals out of their everyday living, it evokes an existential crisis and creates an awareness of the reality of their existence, where their freedom, choice, and responsibility become more evident (Arnold-Baker 2020). It also causes a change in the experience of temporality, with a focus on the present moment but with a concern for the future. There is, therefore, a disclosing element that emerges from maternity, where parents, but mothers in particular, become more aware of their existence as a whole, as it stretches from birth to death and which colour the choices to be made (ibid. 2020). All these aspects of maternity are evoked by BirthStrike, and would-be parents become aware of how connected they are to something greater than themselves. How we are also a part of the world and the world is part of us and our responsibility, therefore, extends out towards others and that world.

Natality

Stone (2019), building on Arendt's (1958) concept, argues that *natality* has as much significance to our existence as mortality, and each reveals different elements of our human condition. Mortality reveals how anxiety is evoked by human existence,

whether that is the anxiety we feel when we contemplate our own death or the existential anxiety that is a part of living and our freedom to choose. Natality on the other hand reveals different aspects of being human, which Stone identifies as being dependency, relationality, situatedness, and embeddedness. Mortality therefore concerns our responsibility towards ourselves, and our individual lives and natality concern our responsibilities towards others. Natality, therefore, shines a light on the relational aspect of human existence that we are not entirely separate entities, but our lives are interconnected with others, as Heidegger noted we exist as *Being-with*.

Birth, or the possibility of new life, exemplifies our human vulnerability. It demonstrates how our lives are dependent on others for our survival, not only at the moment of birth but also continuing throughout our lives. Being dependent on others reveals our need for cooperation and collaboration but also a need to put our trust in others for our joint survival. However, the opposite is also true in that we can lead to an exertion of power over the other. The dependency that human beings have on each other magnifies our human vulnerability and the fragility of life. Realizing that our future is uncertain and unknown causes a sense of anxiety and highlights our responsibility towards each other. We understand that our choices and our actions can have the effect of both harming and helping others.

Existence Is Contextual

Natality also illuminates another aspect of our human condition which is our situatedness (Stone 2019). We are always situated in a context; we live at a certain point in time and history and within a particular geographical area. We cannot escape our situatedness or *thrownness* as Heidegger (1962) termed it, which concerns our place in the world. Where we are born, to whom, in what society, and during which time are all part of our situational context. We have no choice over this, and yet this context is given to us by our parents. The climate crisis is part of the current context into which children are born, and whilst they have no control over this, it colours the choices parents make about their future.

In the same way that we are situated in a physical context of time and place, our birth also embeds us into a social context of power relations. This embeddedness (Stone 2019) refers to such things as gender, race, class, economic position, and disability, etc. It is this aspect of natality that most closely connects with the second principle of BirthStrike and how understanding the social embeddedness of natality and maternity can effect a change in the social discourse on climate change.

It has become evident in recent years that social reproduction is an important element in maintaining the status quo in our societies. Brown (2019) emphasized the economic turmoil developed countries would face if birth rates fall too low, creating too few consumers and workers in aging populations. This prompts a pro-natal approach towards policy decisions aiming to encourage an increase in the birth rate. The recent overturning of *Roe v. Wade* (2022) in the US is a worrying example of state intervention on reproduction rights and how the criminalisation of abortion

reduces women's bodily choices. It is an acknowledgement of this aspect that lies behind BirthStrike. The more control women have over their bodies, the less power governments and corporations have over social reproduction and the more leverage parents have in calling for our societies and economies to change the ways we live and the ways we consume and use natural resources.

Birth strikes as with other strike action can be used to bring inequalities to the fore, whether that is workers' rights, low pay, or other social inequalities. Strikes are effective ways of changing the power balance when new conditions need to be re-negotiated. Brown stressed how birth strikes can highlight inequalities that women face as they reveal the value of unpaid work that is largely undertaken by mothers. Interestingly in countries such as the USA and France, women are already inadvertently choosing to birth strike because they find it less desirable to have children where there is little family leave and childcare support available (Brown 2019; Badinter 2010).

Birth strikes therefore aim to challenge the status quo and create system change through direct action to engage others in new discourses. Birth strikes by their very nature concern the essence of life: natality, maternity, and mortality. They evoke a more mindful mode of being as individuals are confronted with the reality of existence: of life and death, but also the responsibility they have towards others. This creates a move from individual concerns to those of the masses and from our immediate environment to the whole world. It enables individuals to gain a broader perspective and to contemplate the consequences that our actions may have for our future selves but also those of our children. Mortality has the effect of turning us away from the threat of climate change, due to the anxiety that is provoked by a fear of death. Natality and maternity on the other hand highlight the responsibility that we have towards ourselves and to others, but also to our physical environment. We are interconnected beings, and as *Being-in-the-world* (Heidegger 1962), we can no longer act as if we are separate from the world that we live in.

Climate change and the BirthStrike response elucidate how our human condition is swathed in anxiety but also responsibility. There can be anxiety about dying, which accounts for denial and inaction but also an anxiety of living which allows the status quo to continue. Facing anxiety means choosing to do or be different. Heidegger talks about the 'call of conscience', that unsettled feeling that indicates that a choice needs to be made. BirthStrike has become that "call of conscience." It focuses climate change on natality—if we do not change, then there is no future for us or our children—and it is through natality that a way forward can be found. Those who BirthStrike do so not because they do not want to have children, but precisely because they do. Reflecting on whether to bring a child into the world emphasizes a person's individual and moral responsibility, but it also highlights that our survival and the survival of our planet is a joint project and one that involves both responsibility and relationality. To overcome the challenges of climate change we must collaborate and cooperate in a global way to find new and meaningful ways of living together. We need to unify under a current purpose, taking both individual and social responsibility for making choices that will ensure that we are creating an environment we wish our children to grow up in. The COVID-19 pandemic has had

the dramatic effect of changing our lives overnight; we now have the possibility of determining how our lives might change in more permanent ways. Our present call of conscience is that something momentous needs to change and that is the way we live.

References

- Anderegg, W.R.L., J.W. Prall, J. Harold, and S.H. Schneider. 2010. Expert Credibility in Climate Change. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 107 (27): 12107–12109.
- Arendt, H. 1958. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Arnold-Baker, C. 2020. Confronting Existence: The Existential Dimensions of Becoming a Mother. In *The Existential Crisis of Motherhood*, ed. C. Arnold-Baker. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Badinter, E. 2010. *The Conflict: How Modern Motherhood Undermines the Status of Women*. New York: Metropolitan Books.
- BBC News. 2019. *UK Parliament Declares Climate Change Emergency*. May 1. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-48126677>. Accessed June 2020.
- Benatar, D. 2006. *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- BirthStrike. 2020. <https://www.birthstrikeforfuture.com/faq>. Accessed June 2020.
- Brown, J. 2019. *Birth Strike: The Hidden Fight Over Women's Work*. Michigan: PM Press.
- Coates-Davies, J. 2020. The Experience of Being a Childfree Woman. In *The Existential Crisis of Motherhood*, ed. C. Arnold-Baker. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- De Beauvoir, S. 1997. *The Second Sex*. Trans. H. M. Parshley. London: Vintage.
- Garland, V. 2020. Existential Responsibility of Motherhood. In *The Existential Crisis of Motherhood*, ed. C. Arnold-Baker. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Heidegger, M. 1962. *Being and Time*. Trans. J. Macquarrie and E. S. Robinson. New York: Harper & Row.
- Jaspers, K. 1951. *The Way to Wisdom*. Trans. R. Manheim. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Kierkegaard, S., 1980. *The Sickness unto Death*. Trans. H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Leahy, Stephen. 2019. "Climate Change Driving Entire Planet to Dangerous 'Tipping Point.'" *National Geographic*, November 27. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2019/11/earth-tipping-point>. Accessed 3/6/2020.
- Lenton, T., H. Held, E. Kriegler, J.W. Hall, W. Lucht, S. Rahmstorf, and H.J. Schellnhuber. 2008. Tipping Elements in the Earth's Climate System. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 105.6 (February): 1786–1793.
- Lenton, T., J. Rockström, O. Gaffney, S. Rahmstorf, K. Richardson, W. Steffen, and H.J. Schellnhuber. 2019. Comment: Climate Tipping Points—Too Risky to Bet Against. *Nature* 575.28 (November): 592–595.
- Magnus, N. 2020. Trying to 'Have-it-all' by 30: Timing Motherhood. In *The Existential Crisis of Motherhood*, ed. C. Arnold-Baker. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Myers, T.C. 2014. Understanding Climate Change as an Existential Threat: Confronting Climate Denial as a Challenge to Climate Ethics. *De Ethica. A Journal of Philosophical, Theological and Applied Ethics* 1.1: 53–70.
- Sartre, J.P. 1943. *Being and Nothingness - An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. Trans. H. Barnes. New York: Phil. Library.
- Stone, A. 2019. *Being Born: Birth and Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tillich, P. 1952. *The Courage to Be*. Glasgow: Penguin Classics.
- Yalom, I. 1980. *Existential Psychotherapy*. New York: Basic Books.

Claire Arnold-Baker is a counselling psychologist and existential therapist who specializes in peri-natal mental health. She is Course Leader of the DCPsych program at the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling (NSPC) in London, a joint program with Middlesex University. She is also Academic Director at NSPC, where she also teaches and offers clinical and research supervision to doctoral students. Arnold-Baker earned a master's degree in Existential Psychotherapy and Counselling from the University of Sheffield and a DCPsych in Counselling Psychology and Psychotherapy from Middlesex University. She has a small clinical practice where she offers therapy, primarily to mothers and parents, as well as supervision. Her previous publications include a co-edited book *Existential Perspectives on Human Issues* and a co-authored book *Existential Therapy: Distinctive Features*, both with Prof. Emmy van Deurzen. More recently Arnold-Baker edited *The Existential Crisis of Motherhood* (2020) a Palgrave Macmillan publication.