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How should IR deal with the "end of the world"? Existential anxieties and possibilities in the Anthropocene

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Abstract

The Anthropocene, a proposed new geological age marking the planetary impact of humanity, is no longer a newcomer to the field of International Relations (IR). Several scholars have recognised the value, as well as the danger, of the Anthropocene for theorising international relations. This article focuses on the existentialist questions and ideas derived from IR's engagement with the Anthropocene, particularly on the anxieties surrounding the extinction of the human species, the meaning of the Anthropos, and humanity's planetary stewardship. By drawing on scholarly discourses on these physical, spiritual, and moral anxieties, I argue that existentialist thinking helps expose IR's anthropocentric, universalist, and hubristic tendencies, which are also prevalent in the broader Anthropocene discourse. It also serves as a reminder of the freedom to explore possibilities, albeit with a lack of certainty, for reimagining the place of humanity and IR as a discipline in this new geological age. Therefore, existentialism reveals IR's dissonance with the paradoxes and uncertainties that the Anthropocene brings while offering a path toward theorising the "end of the world".

Introduction

The impact of human activities on the biosphere is so stratigraphically distinct from the current Holocene that it deserves a new name – the Anthropocene.[1] Once a neologism, the Anthropocene is more than an empirical subject; it is a powerful idea but also a problematic one. While the term encapsulates existential threats to humanity's security and survival, it may not account for the 'progressive impacts of humans on the world'.[2] Consequently, it fails to reflect the inequalities and oppressive hierarchies in the Anthropos, including the history of colonialism and imperial expansionism in mostly climate-vulnerable societies.[3] In engaging with these debates, IR has the historical origins and theoretical frameworks to problematise threats to global security and survival

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[1]Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, 'The Anthropocene', *International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme Newsletter*, 41 (2000), pp. 17–18.

[2]Meera Subramanian, 'Anthropocene now: Influential panel votes to recognize Earth's new epoch', *Nature* (21 May 2019). Several studies point to different transitions in geological history, marking the onset of the Anthropocene, including the discovery of fire, the Agricultural Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, and most recently, the post–World War Great Acceleration. Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin, 'Defining the Anthropocene,' *Nature*, 519:7542 (2015), pp. 171–80.

[3]Anna Grear, 'Deconstructing Anthropos: A critical legal reflection on "Anthropocentric" law and anthropocene "Humanity"', *Law and Critique*, 26:3 (2015), pp. 225–49; Dahlia Simangan, 'Situating the Asia Pacific in the age of the Anthropocene', *Australian Journal of International Affairs,* 73:6 (2019), pp. 564–84.

– from world wars to nuclear weapons and pandemics. After all, it is a discipline that is 'explicitly and profoundly occupied with the issue of survival on a global scale'.[4] However (and paradoxically), the centrality of human security and survival also raises questions on the relevance of a human-centric discipline in an era when humanity itself is the source of its own insecurity.[5] How can IR contribute to understanding and addressing the challenges in the Anthropocene if, arguably, its foundations and frameworks have contributed to pushing the Earth into this new geological age? In other words, how should IR deal with the "end of the world"? In this article, I answer this question by drawing on existentialist thought to contribute to theorising IR in the Anthropocene.

The Anthropocene enables reflection on the limits and potentialities of IR. It is one of those moments that can be considered 'an unprecedented period that is characterised by deep uncertainty and foreboding about the future'.[6] Like societies that experienced or witnessed wars and genocide or prepared for a nuclear wipeout, the relative novelty of the Anthropocene concept, the depth of its history, and the geological scale of its extent will likely shroud (if it has not already shrouded) us with a sense of anxiety, or what Rumelili described as being 'unsettled, unable to keep up with change, and experiencing a loss of Self and meaning'.[7] These changes elicit philosophical reflections. IR's engagement with the Anthropocene can go beyond problematising the scale of the causes and consequences of a human-made world; it can also offer reflections on how it is to live in and with the Anthropocene. In Harrington's words, 'the emergence of the Anthropocene concept is a watershed moment for IR scholars', as we navigate the potential end of nature and live with the prospects of mass extinction.[8]

I argue that IR can productively make sense of the Anthropocene by engaging with the anxieties it stirs in us. I agree with Subotić and Ejdus's position that drawing on existentialist questions and ideas can help us understand the sense of anxiety the Anthropocene bears and teach us how to live in this new epoch.[9] In this article, I locate three modes of existential anxieties surrounding the "end of the world" (as we know it) that are present in both the discipline of IR and the Anthropocene discourse, and by extension, IR's engagement with the Anthropocene. I draw on Tillich's distinction of physical, spiritual, and moral anxieties,[10] as Rumelili did in discussing the value of existential anxiety in IR theory.[11] I then elaborate on how existential anxieties of human experience preserve or reinforce anthropocentrism, universalism, and hubris. First, physical anxieties surrounding the extinction of the human species help expose anthropocentric tendencies in securing the 'dangerous future'. Secondly, spiritual anxieties resurrect the question of who do we mean by the Anthropos, especially in the context of human–nature entanglements, reminding us of the universalist narratives deployed in making sense of the Anthropocene. And thirdly, moral anxieties about planetary stewardship feed humanity's hubris in living in the Anthropocene. Finally, I explore how recognising these anxieties can prompt more ecologically aligned, just, and humble possibilities for IR and for living in the Anthropocene. In doing so, the discussion in this article contributes to the Anthropocene debate within IR using a non-/post-humanist branch of existentialism. While existentialism, in general, exposes IR's dissonance with the paradoxes

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[4]Audra Mitchell, 'Is IR going extinct?', *European Journal of International Relations*, 23:1 (2017), pp. 3–25 (p. 6).

[5]Scott Hamilton, 'Securing ourselves from ourselves? The paradox of "Entanglement" in the Anthropocene', *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 68:5 (2017), pp. 579–95.

[6]Bahar Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety: Existentialism and the current state of international relations', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, (2021), pp. 1020–36 (p. 1022).

[7]Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety', p. 1021.

[8]Cameron Harrington, 'The ends of the world: International relations and the Anthropocene', *Millennium*, 44:3 (2016), pp. 478–98 (p. 486).

[9]Jelena Subotić and Filip Ejdus, 'Towards the existentialist turn in IR: Introduction to the symposium on anxiety', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 24 (2021), pp. 1–6 .

[10]Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

[11]Bahar Rumelili, 'Integrating anxiety into international relations theory: Hobbes, existentialism, and ontological security', *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 257–72.

and uncertainties that the Anthropocene brings, non-/post-humanist existentialism helps bridge human and natural histories toward theorising the "end of the world".

Anthropocene and existentialism in IR

IR's engagement with the Anthropocene has recalled humanity's history of injustice and its consequent disproportionate vulnerability. It has also drawn attention to non-modernist ontologies of nature and to the agency of the vulnerable in enhancing humanity's survival. The Anthropocene debate within IR provided a broader theoretical landscape for the discipline to expand its analysis beyond traditional IR subjects and theories.[12] Practically, this critical engagement lends itself to reimaginations and explorations beyond business as usual solutions to mitigate such threats. Intellectually, such reimaginations also paved the way for the discipline to find new meaning and purpose in the Anthropocene.

A key question in IR's critical engagement with the Anthropocene is how the current global order and governance contributed to the existential threats of this new geological age.[13] A related critique is the poverty of IR's ontologies and epistemologies in reimagining an ecologically aligned global order and employing solutions that are not rooted in its anthropocentric, modernist, and Western origins.[14] As expected, attempts to divorce the discipline from its core objects have been met with resistance. Some scholars label certain aspects of IR's engagement with the Anthropocene discourse as unrealistic critical reveries or nothing more than a reinforcement of the globalised agenda of liberal fantasies. For example, Chandler, Cudworth, and Hobden queried Burke et al.'s recommendations for global governance in the Anthropocene as a reproduction of the 'already failed and discredited liberal internationalist framework'.[15] They evoked an earlier criticism Baskin had raised about the 'deeply authoritarian and de-politicizing tendencies of Anthropocene discourse' that do not benefit most of the world's population.[16] Fishel et al. have responded to these critiques by reiterating and expounding their earlier claim – the existing structures of global governance, i.e. the anthropocentric, state-centric, and capitalist commitments of governance entities, are responsible for the Anthropocene.[17]

These debates demonstrate that the Anthropocene takes the discipline of IR outside its comfort zone – one that is rooted in the dominant logics of the external vs internal when identifying security referents, and of the primacy of the role of nation-states and human agency. The Anthropocene challenges the convenient assumptions embedded in our discipline – who or what is the threat and who is "us" in relation to others.[18] It also questions contemporary ideals about security and peaceful coexistence and motivations for preserving global institutions, systems, and relations. The

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[12]Dahlia Simangan, 'Where is the Anthropocene? IR in a new geological epoch', *International Affairs*, 96:1 (2020), pp. 211–24.

[13]John S. Dryzek and Jonathan Pickering, *The Politics of the Anthropocene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Anthony Burke, Stefanie Fishel, Audra Mitchell, Simon Dalby, and Daniel J. Levine., 'Planet politics: A manifesto from the end of IR', *Millennium*, 44:3 (2016), pp. 499–523; Dahlia Simangan, 'Can the liberal international order survive the Anthropocene? Three propositions for converging peace and survival', *The Anthropocene Review*, 9:1 (2020), pp. 37–51.

[14]For example, Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden, 'Complexity, ecologism, and posthuman politics', *Review of International Studies*, 39:3 (2013), pp. 643–64; Harrington, 'The ends of the world'; David Chandler, Erika Cudworth, and Stephen Hobden, 'Anthropocene, capitalocene and liberal cosmopolitan IR: A response to Burke et al.'s "Planet politics"', *Millennium*, 46:2 (2018), pp. 190–208; Mitchell, 'Is IR going extinct?'.

[15]Chandler, Cudworth, and Hobden, 'Anthropocene, capitalocene and liberal cosmopolitan IR', p. 193; Burke et al., 'Planet politics'.

[16]Jeremy Baskin, 'Paradigm dressed as epoch: The ideology of the Anthropocene', *Environmental Values*, 24:1 (2015), pp. 9–29 (p. 22).

[17]Stefanie Fishel, Anthony Burke, Audra Mitchell, Simon Dalby, and Adam Levine, 'Defending planet politics', *Millennium*, 46:2 (2018), pp. 209–19.

[18]Delf Rothe, Franziska Müller, and David Chandler, 'Introduction: International relations in the Anthropocene', in David Chandler, Franziska Müller, and Delf Rothe (eds), *International Relations in the Anthropocene: New Agendas, New Agencies and New Approaches* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), pp. 1–16; Eva Lövbrand, Silke Beck, Jason Chilvers, et al., 'Who speaks

anthropogenic threats in the Anthropocene further refute the virtue and certainty of human agency in the context of deep time and geologic history. There is discernible uneasiness within the discipline with regard to securing humanity from itself. This uneasiness also spills into questions of how to secure the discipline from the brink of its irrelevance in this new geological epoch.

Reflecting on the current global order's anthropocentric, state-centric, and capitalist roots ignited geopolitical reimaginings in the Anthropocene debates within the discipline of IR. After reviewing 52 journal articles on the topic, Lövbrand, Mobjörk, and Söder identified three dominant discourses in articulating the complex, interconnected, and unstable world the Anthropocene signifies: the endangered world, the entangled world, and the extractivist world.[19] The endangered world draws on the existential threats to humanity posed by anthropogenic disruption of the Earth system. The entangled world discourse challenges modernist ideals and governance. It also embraces the complex entanglement of human societies and ecosystems and the necessary shift from state-centric and anthropocentric global politics. The third discourse highlights the extractivist world industrialised economies created, propelled by the rapid globalisation of capitalism and consumerism, at the expense of non-Western societies.[20] While the understanding of the causes of the Anthropocene and proposed solutions to its challenges significantly differ among these geopolitical reimaginings, the common thread linking them is the recognition of the existential threat posed by (some of) humanity, and the range of anxieties that come with such recognition. The endangered world shows physical anxiety about mass extinction, which could possibly include (or at least undermine the survival of) the human species. The entangled world's recognition of non-human ontologies and experiences creates a sense of spiritual anxiety about the meaning of the Anthropos. And the extractivist world leads to moral anxiety, challenging the universalising narratives about humanity's contribution to the Anthropocene and the problematic political economy of planetary stewardship. Given the centrality of existential anxiety in these geopolitical reimaginings, existentialism is a valuable lens for informing IR's engagement with the Anthropocene debate.

Existentialism embraces anxiety as integral to the human condition. Challenging the notion that life has a predetermined meaning and purpose, existentialism is a revolt against traditional philosophy's preoccupation with truth and objectivity.[21] Instead, it values subjective experiences as authentic, even amid absurdities and anxieties surrounding existence and personal choices. Questions related to post-war international politics have drawn on existentialist notions of being, choice, and responsibility to make sense of international events and crises, such as the resulting alienation from the spread of industrialization or the catastrophic destruction from the use of nuclear weapons. For example, in his essay published after the bombing of Hiroshima, Albert Camus wrote, 'we will have to choose, in a relatively near future, between collective suicide or the intelligent use of scientific conquests'.[22] This statement sums up the bomb's existential threat to humanity but also the source of the bomb's existence. The bomb exists because of the moral and spiritual anxieties in modern societies, and the bomb was dropped because of the absurdity of those unresolved anxieties. The apocalyptic future that the Anthropocene invokes heightens this sense of anxiety about the choices and responsibilities for the world that has been, that is, and that is yet to be.

Existentialism, specifically the concept of anxiety, adds another layer to our understanding of security. The freedom to make choices, the construction of meaning based on those choices, and the responsibility for the outcomes of those choices are some key tenets of existentialism at the individual level. These tenets can be scaled up to the international level to help explain state behaviour

for the future of Earth? How critical social science can extend the conversation on the Anthropocene', *Global Environmental Change*, 32 (2015), pp. 211–18.

[19] Eva Lövbrand, Malin Mobjörk, and Rickard Söder, 'The Anthropocene and the geo-political imagination: Re-writing Earth as political space', *Earth System Governance*, 4 (2020), 100051.

[20] Lövbrand, Mobjörk, and Söder, 'The Anthropocene'.

[21] David Mitchell, *Sartre, Nietzsche and Non-Humanist Existentialism* (Cham: Springer, 2020).

[22] Albert Camus, 'After Hiroshima – between hell and reason', trans. Ronald E. Santoni, *Philosophy Today*, 32:1 (1988), pp. 77–8.

towards each other. State behaviour is not just motivated by the preservation of physical security; states also seek ontological security or the certainty and continuity of the sense of self.[23] Ontological security posits that states' rational choices are sustained by routines, even in physically insecure contexts.[24] Safeguarding self-identity, even at the cost of physical security, challenges the traditional notion in IR that states are rational enough not to make irrational choices, such as continuing to engage in a losing battle. In pursuit of certainty and continuity, states translate their anxiety about change and disruption to assigning objects of fear that could satisfy pursuits of freedom and control.[25] However, while anxiety can be translated to fear, including the agency that suppresses or controls such fear, it can also encourage a move away from the status quo through a radical or transformative agency.[26]

If engagement with the Anthropocene concept can uncover IR's radical potential, then existentialism can help IR engage radically with the Anthropocene. According to Levi, in contrast to a fixation on achieving certain political goals, such as power in political realism or freedom in political liberalism, existentialism is about openness.[27] Levi also reiterates that existentialism is 'oriented toward two major themes: the analysis of being and the centrality of human choice'.[28] For these themes, the process counts equally with (if not more importantly than) the end goal. As such, it is about *being* rather than *is* and about *choice* rather than the *end*. Existentialism helps us think that the extinction in the Anthropocene is neither the end nor the moment that needs theorising. The process of extinction is more important and is therefore the subject that needs theorising. And in parallel with Levi's elaboration of existentialism in political theory, this process does not necessitate a problem-solving approach using any scientific method; it is one of those 'situations within our moral life' that is perpetually in crisis.[29] However, IR's preoccupation with determinism and certainty does not sit well with the agential paradox and uncertain conditions heightened alongside Anthropocene's finitude of existence and multitude of possibilities. Such preoccupation creates anxiety or what Rumelili characterised as 'the dizzy feeling one gets from staring into an abyss'.[30] This existential anxiety, which can be considered integral to the human condition, can also ignite agency towards radical change.[31]

Existentialism commonly interprets agency as humanist. Its focus on human ability and responsibility seems counter-intuitive to the critique of anthropocentric frameworks. But existentialism has a radical and non-humanist branch. Sartre's phenomenology, after all, rejects traditional humanism and a static view of human nature. David Mitchell argues that 'a return to human' is an escape from the humanist subject in existentialism if 'human being was understood *as* a perversion of something other than itself'.[32] Mitchell builds on, among other schools of thought, post-structuralism's renunciation of human existence as the most fundamental subject of philosophical inquiry. He also recalls Heidegger's solicitude towards the use of existentialism in furthering an anthropocentric view without fundamentally challenging the human or humanity itself. Understanding and challenging the humanist sources and individualist translations of anxieties in the Anthropocene aligns with post-humanist IR. Post-humanist IR decentres (and at the same time interrogates the role of) the human in the study of international politics and considers the

[23]Jennifer Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics: State identity and the security dilemma', *European Journal of International Relations*, 12:3 (2006), pp. 341–70; Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State* (London: Routledge, 2007).

[24]Mitzen, 'Ontological security'.

[25]Rumelili, 'Integrating anxiety'.

[26]Rumelili, 'Integrating anxiety'.

[27]Albert William Levi, 'The meaning of existentialism for contemporary international relations', *Ethics*, 72:4 (1962), pp. 233–51.

[28]Levi, 'The meaning of existentialism', p. 233.

[29]Levi, 'The meaning of existentialism', p. 249.

[30]Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety', p. 1023.

[31]Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety'.

[32]Mitchell, *Sartre, Nietzsche and Non-Humanist Existentialism*, p. 186.

embeddedness of humanity in non-human dynamics.[33] Therefore, this article contributes to the Anthropocene debate within IR using a non-/post-humanist perspective of existentialism, starting with existential anxieties of human experience before exploring the non-/post-human possibilities these anxieties may bring for IR as a discipline. In the following section, I identify the anxieties heightened in the Anthropocene that IR can draw on to inform its radical change within and without.

Anxieties in the Anthropocene

> What do we do with this new age? Do we choose in the face of uncertain futures to embark on bold new paths that expand human freedoms while easing planetary pressures? Or do we choose to try – and ultimately to fail – to go back to business as usual and be swept away, ill equipped and rudderless, into a dangerous unknown?[34]

Existentialist themes on being and choice and the preference for determinism and volition over uncertainty and failure can be deduced from the above quote from UNDP's 2020 report on human development in the Anthropocene. First is choice, tied to the physical anxiety about the extinction of the human species and manifested in the moral anxiety about humanity's planetary steward-ship. And second is being, specifically how it relates to the meaning of "we" in the Anthropocene and creates spiritual anxiety about the meaning of the Anthropos. Drawing on Tillich's three types of anxiety based on threats to being and Rumelili's elaboration of them in relation to interna-tional relations theory and ontological security theory,[35] I discuss in the following subsections the interconnected physical, spiritual, and moral anxieties in the context of the Anthropocene.[36]

Physical anxiety about human extinction

The Earth has witnessed five known large-scale extinctions. Each of these extinctions was caused either by drastic temperature changes that subsequently caused rising or falling sea levels, or an isolated but catastrophic event, such as a volcanic eruption or asteroid impact, wiping out at least 75 per cent of our planet's species over a geological period of time. For some scientists, a sixth mass extinction is looming (if not ongoing), and this time it is primarily because of anthropogenic factors.[37] Human activities, mainly agricultural activities that add to greenhouse gas emissions, pol-lution, and land degradation, among other forms of ecological destruction, are now threatening the extinction of many species.[38] While some studies and perspectives claim that declines in species population do not amount to mass extinction[39] (more so one that includes the human species),

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[33]Cudworth and Hobden, 'Complexity, ecologism, and posthuman politics'; See also Matt McDonald and Audra Mitchell, 'Introduction: Posthuman international relations', in Clara Eroukhmanoff and Matt Harker (eds), *Reflections on the Posthuman in International Relations: The Anthropocene, Security and Ecology* (Bristol: E-International Relations, 2017), pp. 1–8.

[34]UNDP, 'Human development report 2020. The next frontier: Human development in the Anthropocene' (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2020), p. 4.

[35]Tillich, *The Courage to Be*; Rumelili, 'Integrating anxiety'.

[36]Although I do not discuss the concept of anxiety as a public mood, as Rumelili has done, I agree with Rumelili that public moods oscillate through time. Anxiety in the Anthropocene may be manifested differently across time and space, depending on the type of anxiety – death, meaninglessness, and condemnation.

[37]For example, Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); Claire Régnier, Guillaume Achaz, Amaury Lambert, Robert H. Cowie, Philippe Bouchet, and Benoît Fontaine, 'Mass extinction in poorly known taxa,' *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 112:25 (2015), pp. 7761–6.

[38]Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, *Summary for Policymakers of the Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services* (Paris: PBES Plenary at its Seventh Session, 2019).

[39]For a review of studies and perspectives that challenge or deny the claim about the sixth mass extinction, see Robert H. Cowie, Philippe Bouchet, and Benoît Fontaine, 'The sixth mass extinction: Fact, fiction or speculation?', *Biological Reviews*, 97:2 (2022), pp. 640–63.

recommendations abound on how to prevent its arrival – from more effective conservation measures to synthetic genomics. Efforts to halt the extinction crisis are generally driven by concerns that biodiversity loss would have an adverse effect on ecosystem functions and services crucial for human well-being and survival.[40] This possibility of our extinction can induce physical anxiety about the certainty not only of human existence, but also of what else will be lost (e.g. relationships and subjectivities) and what comes next (i.e. transformation and production of future worlds).[41]

'Anxiety is rooted in the awareness of mortality', wrote Rumelili,[42] and the Anthropocene makes such awareness more arresting. The Anthropocene creates a sense of anxiety about 'uncertain futures', which could be either the (preferable) ecologically aligned expansion of human freedoms or the 'dangerous unknown', which could include our very own extinction. What is somewhat uncertain is that while there are 'new paths' that will take humanity towards either of those futures, the choice of which path to take is yet to be ascertained. In such a case, the future is and will always be uncertain. For Heidegger, this uncertainty, and the sense of anxiety that comes with facing uncertainty, is an essential human condition. Without understanding the inevitability of uncertainty, we try to find an external object to which we can direct our actions, aiming to convert anxiety into a sense of security.[43] For Sartre, choices (in this case, the acts of labelling and securitising a threat) defined by external judgement or self-deception rather than the values born out of freedom are inauthentic or acts of 'bad faith'.[44] In the Anthropocene, however, to choose any of these 'bold new paths' is both inauthentic and hypocritical, because the human impact on the planet is already manifested and will continue to manifest whether we reverse, stabilise, or preserve the global environment. Choices that are primarily and externally driven by threats to human survival are reactionary, temporary, and only likely to reproduce human-centric approaches. Existentialism contributes to critical reflections on the drivers behind the responses to physical anxieties about human extinction.

The anxiety over uncertain futures in the Anthropocene leads to impetuous choices, as encapsulated in the broader Anthropocene discourse. Key framings of the future emerge in the Anthropocene debate. The 'good Anthropocene' is championed primarily by ecomodernists who prescribe policies and technologies that can avert environmental catastrophes.[45] In contrast to ecomodernism's optimism, the 'bad Anthropocene' depicts an apocalyptic scenario of an accelerated approach to mass extinction, especially now that we have transgressed some of the planetary limits for human survival.[46] For proponents of these narratives, the realisation of either a good or a bad Anthropocene ultimately depends on human volition – innovation in the former and inaction in the latter. Both narratives present an unavoidable choice: either to confront the reality of the Anthropocene no matter how unsafe it is or commit to the "solutions" to the challenges in the Anthropocene no matter how uncomfortable or difficult it is. This choice also includes that of not choosing at all, which still leads to the outcome of the first choice – an unsafe world for humans and other living beings. To choose freely, regardless of the choice and its corresponding outcome, is valuable. This is the core of Sartre's belief/anguish over absolute freedom, i.e. to be responsible for the consequences of the choices made, regardless of intention. For instance, those who choose to use technology to avert environmental catastrophes should be responsible for the unexpected

[40] F. Stuart Chapin III, Erika S. Zavaleta, Valerie T. Eviner, et al., 'Consequences of changing biodiversity', *Nature*, 405:6783 (2000), pp. 234–42.

[41] According to Mitchell, the dominant discourse about extinction centres only on the quantitative loss of species and ignores the diverse subjects that will go extinct or be produced after extinction. Audra Mitchell, 'Beyond biodiversity and species: Problematizing extinction', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 33:5 (2016), pp. 23–42.

[42] Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety', p. 1023.

[43] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein Und Zeit*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: SUNY Press, 1996).

[44] Walter Kaufmann, *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: Meridian Books, 1960).

[45] John Asafu-Adjaye, Linus Blomqvist, Stewart Brand, et al., 'An ecomodernist manifesto' (2015), available at: {www.ecomodernism.org}.

[46] Johan Rockström, Will Steffen, Kevin Noone, et al., 'A safe operating space for humanity', *Nature*, 461:7263 (2009), pp. 472–5.

catastrophic consequences of such a choice. And this is especially relevant and alarming in the Anthropocene because the consequence will be experienced beyond those who made the choice and even disproportionately by those affected. In parallel with what Dalby calls the 'ugly' framing of the Anthropocene, 'the Anthropocene is neither good nor bad [because neither presents a complete picture], but that the politics of shaping its future are probably going to be both ugly and unavoidable'.[47] The choices in the Anthropocene are morally ambiguous, inciting moral anxiety, as we shall see in a later section. To put it differently, in the Anthropocene, there is no good or bad; there is only the inescapable. And to live authentically is to live in this inescapable uncertainty.

Spiritual anxiety about the meaning of the Anthropos

The 'ugly' narrative of the Anthropocene also reveals the circumstances around the answer to the question of 'what do we do in this new age?'. But first, whom we do mean by 'we' in the Anthropocene? Relatedly, what or who is actually in danger of extinction? In an epoch when humanity is both the object and subject of extinction (and when the structures that we created to support our existence are also threatening our very existence), the fortress of comfort built from our "stable" understanding of the meaning of human life has turned out to be frail. In an effort to defend this comfort, some of the imaginaries and responses to the "end of the world" remain stuck in a linear temporality that reinforces a humanist and path-dependent governmentality.[48] Existentialism illuminates that such a defence is not formidable in the Anthropocene and invites a more-than-human understanding of time, extinction, and being.

The Anthropocene induces a sense of spiritual anxiety about the meaning of our being – the meaning of the Anthropos. Tillich conceptualised the spiritual dimension of being as the meaning one gets from freely creating or transforming aspects of reality or participating in a creative or transformative process.[49] This conceptualisation is akin to purpose; however, a discussion of purpose cannot precede the discussion of *whose* purpose. Such a discussion is especially important because the transformation of the natural environment can also reflect power asymmetries,[50] and discourses on extinction can be exclusionary of other non-relational subjects.[51] For these reasons, I consider spiritual anxiety primarily about the meaning of the Anthropos and the anxiety of having this meaning questioned in the Anthropocene debate.

Needless to say, the Anthropos is not homogenous, and the histories of human societies are not symmetrical across regions. However, a label universalising the Anthropos carries the tendency to homogenise culpability and responsibility for the causes and consequences of the Anthropocene.[52] This is problematic because the anthropogenic impact on the biosphere was mainly caused by the Euro-American version of prosperity and growth, and histories of colonialism and imperialism have driven the differentiated vulnerabilities to global environmental change.[53] Relatedly, the discourse on the Anthropocene, which then directs the answers to 'what do we do in this new age?', is mainly dominated by Western paradigms that marginalise the perspectives and experiences

[47] Simon Dalby, 'Framing the Anthropocene: The good, the bad and the ugly', *The Anthropocene Review*, 3:1 (2016), p. 2.

[48] Scott Hamilton, 'Foucault's end of history: The temporality of governmentality and its end in the Anthropocene', *Millennium-Journal of International Studies*, 46:3 (2018), pp. 371–95; Delf Rothe, 'Governing the end times? Planet politics and the secular eschatology of the Anthropocene', *Millennium-Journal of International Studies*, 48:2 (2020), pp. 143–64; Madeleine Fagan, 'Who's afraid of the ecological apocalypse? Climate change and the production of the ethical subject', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 19:2 (2017), pp. 225–44.

[49] Tillich, *The Courage to Be*.

[50] Matthew Lepori, 'There is no Anthropocene: Climate change, species-talk, and political economy', *Telos*, 172 (2015), pp. 103–24; Patrick W. Keys, Victor Galaz, Michelle Dyer, et al., 'Anthropocene risk', *Nature Sustainability*, 2:8 (2019), pp. 667–73.

[51] Mitchell, 'Beyond biodiversity and species'.

[52] Lepori, 'There is no Anthropocene'; Simangan, 'Situating the Asia Pacific'.

[53] Lepori 'There is no Anthropocene'; Simangan, 'Situating the Asia Pacific'.

of colonised societies who are more vulnerable to environmental hazards.[54] Without recognising the long-term impact of colonialism and imperialism in the history of the Anthropos, the choice to respond to the challenges in the Anthropocene will likely amplify present hierarchies and inequalities – making the inescapable perpetually ugly for the marginalised and oppressed.

Alongside the Western-centric universality of the Anthropocene discourse is the modernist human–nature dualism. The Anthropocene unsettles the worldview that humans are separate from (and therefore above) the rest of the natural world. In contrast to ontologies of human–nature entanglement often found in Indigenous practices,[55] human–nature dualism has been the prevalent worldview behind extractivism and industrialisation. Extracting the finite resources of the natural world for the purpose of infinite growth, based on the logic that industrialisation will prompt human development, is the major cause of anthropogenic greenhouse gases warming the planet. As admitted in the UNDP report, 'too often, development choices pit people against trees because the environment has been systematically undervalued while economic growth has had top billing'.[56] Without recognising the ecological harm caused by the anthropocentric view of nature, the choice to respond to the challenges in the Anthropocene will likely reinforce the myopia of human exceptionalism – making the inescapable perpetually ugly for non-human nature.

Anxiety about humanity's place in nature and in the Anthropocene epoch can be both problematised and charted using the existentialist conception of Being. Relevant to understanding this anxiety is Heidegger's *Dasein*, which directly translates to 'being there', or that which exists. And the meaning (or essence) of being can only be understood in relation to the world, or 'being-in-the-world', because being and the world are inseparable, according to Heidegger.[57] For the purpose of this article, that which exists is humanity as a collective – the Anthropos, the meaning of which can be understood not just in relation to the world but also (and more importantly) to the Earth. Such purpose echoes Latour's challenge to today's politics, i.e. to shift away from the dichotomies produced by global, national, or local perspectives and to 'ground us down to Earth', to the *Terrestrial* or the Earth we live on.[58] Latour's Terrestrial takes into account the agency of non-human nature as well as the maladies of our present politics. Instead of the politics of the world, the Earth is the context in which humanity is situated, as the Anthropocene concept suggests. Situating humanity in the Anthropocene is a shift away from the anthropocentric and modernist meaning of our being. And if being and the world are inseparable, this shift unsettles the source of meaning – our being – amid a changing world/Earth, generating anxiety about the place and purpose of our existence in the Anthropocene. This anxiety incites reactions that aim to align our being with the world.

Moral anxiety about humanity's planetary stewardship

Recalling the inevitability of choice and the loss of purpose amid inescapable uncertainties further threatens another dimension of being – that of moral self-affirmation. The combined culpability of humanity in the possibility of extinction and the revelation of the injustices in Anthropos creates moral anxiety about guilt and condemnation.[59] It also generates a sense of urgency to provide global solutions to the problems the Anthropos has created. Therefore, planetary stewardship is a "moral" response to anxiety about uncertain futures. And protecting the planet is one way of reorienting humanity's purpose in the face of extinction and judgement, thereby minimising anxieties surrounding death and meaninglessness.

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[54]Jens Marquardt, 'Worlds apart?: The global south and the Anthropocene', in Thomas Hickmann, Lena Partzsch, Philipp Pattberg, and Sabine Weiland (eds), *The Anthropocene Debate and Political Science* (Oxford: Routledge, 2018), pp. 200–18; Dahlia Simangan, 'Where is the Asia Pacific in mainstream international relations scholarship on the Anthropocene?', *The Pacific Review*, 34:5 (2020), pp. 1–23.

[55]Simangan, 'Where is the Asia Pacific'.

[56]UNDP, 'Human development report', p. 6.

[57]Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings* (Oxford: Routledge, 2010).

[58]Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018).

[59]Tillich, *The Courage to Be*.

Humanity as a geological force represents humanity's power (or agency) over nature. And this power is exercised more overtly (and sometimes presumptuously) amid uncertainties. This exercise of power can be observed in various forms of planetary stewardship, which is a quest to achieve a level of stability and certainty in the face of the complex and dynamic Anthropocene in contrast to the stable Holocene. Planetary stewardship is 'the active shaping of trajectories of change on the planet, that integrates across scales from local to global, to enhance the combined sustainability of human well-being and the planet's ecosystems and non-living resources'.[60] Along similar lines, the UNDP 2020 report advocates for stewardship in the Anthropocene that is inclusive of peoples and communities who have an entangled worldview of the planet.[61]

Although the urgency for effective planetary stewardship is compelling and sentiments of inclusivity are encouraging, a global governance system that is polycentric and multilevel, as well as just, inclusive, and compassionate, is far from what the present system offers.[62] For instance, political sovereignty and territorial states – constitutive elements of the current global order – fall conceptually and practically short of managing the global effects of geoengineering.[63] As it stands, the "responsible" liberal institutionalist stewards of the Earth are ready to save the 'endangered world'.[64]

On top of potentially reproducing injustice in the history of the Anthropos, what is 'bad' about the solutions offered by the 'good' Anthropocene is the reassertion of human exceptionalism. Such a reassertion of human domination through ecomodernist and geoengineering solutions reflects the modernist view that separates humans from (and raises them above) non-human nature. It also runs the risk of universally employing quick but morally, ethically, and socially unjust solutions. For instance, our so-called ability to 'save the planet' could lead to further endangerment of other species and the marginalisation of already poor and marginalised groups. They could be solutions, but as in the words of Biermann and Möller, they currently only reflect 'rich man's solutions'.[65] They found that developing and least-developed countries (already often lacking the capacity to adapt or manage the impact of those technologies) are underrepresented in global discussions about climate engineering.[66] This underrepresentation exemplifies the dangers of reproducing historical injustice and present inequalities. Further, for some sceptics, climate engineering and other forms of large-scale human intervention in (or manipulation of) natural climate processes are examples of 'moral hazards' or the rationalisation of moral failures surrounding action toward anthropogenic climate change.[67] Therefore, it needs to be questioned what entails the good in the 'good Anthropocene', and what are the moral, ethical, political, and social implications of planetary stewardship.

The quest for certainty in an effort to minimise physical anxiety about human extinction collectivises the Anthropos rather than embracing its plurality and confronting the anxiety about the lack of its universal meaning. Recalling Hamilton's 'paradox of securing ourselves from ourselves', the Anthropocene not only heightens the uncertainty of death but also poses the uncertainty of the Anthropos.[68] The more we predict collective behaviour by systemising knowledge and applying more technology in an attempt to reach a level of certitude in an inherently unpredictable

[60]Sybil P. Seitzinger, Uno Svedin, Carole L. Crumley, et al., 'Planetary stewardship in an urbanizing world: Beyond city limits', *Ambio*, 41:8 (2012), p. 787.

[61]UNDP, 'Human development report'.

[62]Will Steffen, Åsa Persson, Lisa Deutsch, et al., 'The Anthropocene: From global change to planetary stewardship', *Ambio*, 40:7 (2011), p. 739; Jeremy J. Schmidt, Peter G. Brown, and Christopher J. Orr, 'Ethics in the Anthropocene: A research agenda', *The Anthropocene Review*, 3:3 (2016), pp. 188–200.

[63]Simon Dalby, 'Geoengineering: The next era of geopolitics?', *Geography Compass*, 9:4 (2015), pp. 190–201.

[64]Lövbrand, Mobjörk, and Söder, 'The Anthropocene and the geo-political imagination'.

[65]Frank Biermann and Ina Möller, 'Rich man's solution? Climate engineering discourses and the marginalization of the global south', *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics*, 19:2 (2019), pp. 151–67.

[66]Biermann and Möller, 'Rich man's solution?'.

[67]Stephen M. Gardiner, *A Perfect Moral Storm: The Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Clive Hamilton, *Earthmasters: The Dawn of the Age of Climate Engineering* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014).

[68]Hamilton, 'Securing ourselves from ourselves'.

system, 'the more uncertain Anthropos becomes, since humanity's agency as the "We" is not easily amenable to quantification in the present, let alone decades into the future'.[69] Contrary to the scientific value of prediction is the idea that not all the important decisions in life offer a rational decision procedure; many of the essential elements of human wisdom are not derived from algorithms. Ultimately, securing humanity is far from certain.

The amalgamation of these anxieties about uncertainties results in the 'planetary we' becoming the 'object of security' in the Anthropocene.[70] According to Hamilton, such attempts to reach certainty are akin to what Heidegger called 'metaphysical imperialism' in which the 'planetary we' is the new *subiectum*, homogenising systems and processes, and consequently homogenising and endangering multiple identities. In the Anthropocene, it seems that this *subiectum* emerges as an empowered subjectivity over the planet, the one that caused climate change and, therefore, the one that can ultimately stop it. However, as in Hamilton's echoing of Sen's warning, exercising the power of such singular identity (in this case, the planetary we) 'can make the world thoroughly flammable'.[71] Thus, individual or self-identity, with all its maladies, is now carried over and transformed into a group or planetary identity. The universality of the Anthropocene discourse makes it 'flammable', creating dissent among the underrepresented, further discouraging them from belonging to the "we". Hamilton pointed out that the call for a planetary "we" 'implies a denial of local practices, cultures, languages, histories, and colonial legacies and of violence and terror'.[72] It could be that these homogenising acts to be stewards of the planet at the cost of plurality are why nationalism, populism, racism, nativism, authoritarianism, and other forms of identity politics are gaining strength nowadays.[73] These interrelated anxieties about the loss of life, identity, and agency may lead to an array of issues that IR as a discipline can and should confront in the Anthropocene.

Possibilities in the Anthropocene

The above discourses surrounding the physical, spiritual, and moral anxieties posed by the Anthropocene concept help expose the anthropocentric, universalist, and hubristic tendencies that are also found in the foundations of IR. The tendency to ignore the agency of non-human nature and the condition of historically marginalised groups and to blindly champion human innovation and progress will likely create more of the same problems that led to this new epoch. By drawing on the existentialist thinking on uncertainty, anxiety, being, and choice, IR frameworks can shift away from these tendencies towards more ecologically aligned, just, and humble possibilities.

How does IR deal with physical anxiety about human extinction? The initial response to this anxiety was to convert it into fear towards an external object – an existential threat.[74] Traditionally, securitising an existential threat is always in reference to the state, but the Copenhagen School that developed the securitisation framework has broadened security issues, depicting them as socially constructed.[75] The environment, previously considered by realists as belonging to 'low politics', can be securitised once it is recognised as a threat to the well-being of humanity, which needs protection using emergency responses.[76] Although broader in scope, the process of securitisation remains fixed and linear and is therefore slow to adapt to 'threats that are largely uncertain, diffuse, difficult

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[69]Scott Hamilton, 'I am uncertain, but we are not: A new subjectivity of the Anthropocene', *Review of International Studies*, 45:4 (2019), pp. 371–95 (p. 13).

[70]Hamilton, 'I am uncertain'.

[71]Hamilton, 'I am uncertain'; Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny, Abridged Edition* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), p. 16.

[72]Hamilton, 'I am uncertain', p. 19.

[73]Hamilton, 'I am uncertain'; Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety'.

[74]Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety'.

[75]Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998).

[76]Maria Julia Trombetta, 'Environmental security and climate change: Analysing the discourse', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 21:4 (2008), pp. 585–602.

to quantify and yet potentially catastrophic'.[77] Relatedly, McDonald argues that realist and national security approaches to securitising the environment address the symptoms rather than the causes and are disassociated from global and other state concerns, creating more harm to vulnerable communities.[78] According to McDonald, by making the ecosystem the referent object, in contrast to the state or humans, more urgent responses will be employed because climate security directly threatens all ecosystem inhabitants, including present and future generations of entangled humanity and non-human nature.[79] He envisions ecological security to be more polycentric than state-centric, with differentiated responsibilities among actors across all levels – from global to individual.[80]

How *should* IR deal with the "end of the world" as we know it? I agree with the calls for polycentric and intergenerational responses to minimise threats to our survival in the Anthropocene.[81] However, rather than survival (or security), drawing on existentialism converts our anxiety about death per se to reimaginations of future possibilities. The primary cause of anxiety is death because the absolute threat to being is non-existence.[82] As Morgenthau contemplated about nuclear destruction, 'death is the great scandal in the experience of man; for death – as the destruction of the human person after a finite span of time – is the very negation of all man experiences as specifically human in his existence'.[83] However, his reflection remains human-centric, just as earlier conceptualisations of extinction referred to large-scale death without explication of what will be lost beyond (human) life. Extinction entails not just the loss of life but also the loss of everything else that used to support and sustain life. Audra Mitchell pushes the looming possibility of extinction further by conceptualising extinction as the destruction of all life forms, 'beings whose particular relations (with beings like and unlike themselves), morphology, life processes and sensory modalities drive them to alter their conditions in distinctive ways in order to survive collectively across time'.[84] IR can minimise anxiety about human extinction by welcoming future life forms, '[transcending] its own conceptual, normative and ethical boundaries'.[85] It can start by being comfortable with the destruction of the structures and processes that it used to inform and by participating in the reimaginations of other worlds. Therefore, extinction could be the destruction of beings, but it could also be the opening to future life forms and of becoming (less anthropocentric, Western-centric, modernist, racist, and oppressive). The Anthropocene extinction might be the end of this world for humanity, but it is also the beginning of other worlds. And the challenge for IR is to welcome the possibility of future worlds – futures that will unsettle the current meaning of the Anthropos.

The next question then is how IR should deal with spiritual anxiety about the meaning of the Anthropos. As future life forms create these other worlds, they will consist of beings-in-the-world different from our present understanding of humanity. In other words, the meaning or essence (in a spiritual sense) of these beings will change as the world changes. Existentialism helps explain how anxious societies tend to reinforce absolutism and exclusionary ideologies when confronted with change in order to provide certainty and preserve continuity.[86] As 'the Anthropocene brings with it the end of the world by rupturing the primary binaries upon which international relations has largely depended',[87] several IR scholars have criticised human–nature dualism and proposed

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[77] Trombetta, 'Environmental security', p. 599.

[78] Matt McDonald, *Ecological Security: Climate Change and the Construction of Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

[79] McDonald, *Ecological Security*.

[80] McDonald, *Ecological Security*.

[81] Dahlia Simangan, 'Can the liberal international order survive the Anthropocene? Three propositions for converging peace and survival', *The Anthropocene Review*, 9:1 (2022), pp. 37–51.

[82] Tillich, *The Courage to Be*; Rumelili, 'Integrating anxiety'.

[83] Hans Morgenthau, 'Death in the nuclear age', *Commentary Magazine* (September 1961), available at: {www.commentary.org/articles/hans-morgenthau/death-in-the-nuclear-age/}.

[84] Mitchell, 'Is IR going extinct?', p. 7.

[85] Mitchell, 'Is IR going extinct?', p. 5.

[86] Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety'.

[87] Harrington, 'The ends of the world', p. 12.

alternative ontologies of humanity. For instance, post-humanism calls for an expansion of IR's intellectual scoping to include non-human subjects and their dynamics.[88] Decentring the Anthropos, or what Connolly calls entangled humanism,[89] is an important aspect of post-humanism. Focusing on how the human condition is enmeshed with the materialities of other beings helps reveal imposed categories of difference and domination as socially constructed through the practices of exclusion and exploitation.[90] Along the same line, Mitchell explores the political possibilities that may occur by 'engaging with diverse subjects of extinction' in the otherwise universalising yet exclusionary practices of biodiversity or species protection.[91] Relatedly, Haraway's Chthulecene, an alternative term to the Anthropocene, acknowledges the myriad converging and diverging stories in this epoch.[92] It is a 'name for an elsewhere and elsewhen that was, still is, and might yet be'.[93] Such expansion of subjects is an example of cosmopolitics that is also attuned to non-human and inhuman life and forces on Earth, therefore offering a global ethics necessary for confronting the challenges in the Anthropocene.[94]

These other worlds will have a different meaning for the Anthropos, and this is how IR should deal with the spiritual anxiety about its meaning – embracing humanity's troubled histories, being in our entangled present, and welcoming open-ended futures. Welcoming non-human agency is a reaction that could open more possibilities of radical political imaginaries. Human and non-human nature are already co-constitutive in international relations. Assigning legal rights to ecosystems, granting sovereignty to communities of non-human species, democratic representations of ecoregions, and even climate activism – these signal the embeddedness of non-human nature in world politics.[95] However, these are still bound by the anthropocentric logics of rights, sovereignty, and violence. The contribution of IR as a discipline is to recognise and understand non-human agency beyond the limits of anthropocentric discourse and practice of governance. More-than-human, queerfeminist/new materialist, and decolonial perspectives are existing platforms for continued conversations on political actors and agencies in the Anthropocene.[96]

A departure from the priorities of the "fossil-fuel-guzzling man" exposes not just the inherent entanglement of humanity with the rest of the natural world, but also the reproduction of colonialism, imperialism, racism, and capitalist exploitation. The implication of these for international politics is the recognition that the fossil fuel-guzzling man has shaped our troubled histories, followed by his disentanglement from the structures that have benefited and continue to benefit him at present, so that the Anthropos of the future will be less colonial, imperial, racist, and exploitative. IR's relevance in the Anthropocene will be tested by how proactively it discards the practices and structures that preserve colonialism, imperialism, racism, and exploitation, through post-humanism, cosmopolitics, tentacular thinking, and other radical imaginaries. There will be resistance to taking this test, because familiar ideas provide a sense of calm, while novel ideas are often perceived as threatening; normalising these new ideas incites anxiety among those who were

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[88]Cudworth and Hobden, 'Complexity, ecologism, and posthuman politics'.

[89]William E. Connolly, *Facing the Planetary: Entangled Humanism and the Politics of Swarming* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

[90]Cudworth and Hobden, 'Complexity, ecologism, and posthuman politics'.

[91]Mitchell, 'Beyond biodiversity', p. 17.

[92]Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

[93]Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, p. 31.

[94]Mitchell, 'Is IR going extinct?'.

[95]Joana Castro Pereira and André Saramago, *Non-Human Nature in World Politics: Theory and Practice* (Cham: Springer Nature, 2020); Rafi Youatt, 'Personhood and the rights of nature: The new subjects of contemporary earth politics', *International Political Sociology*, 11:1 (2017), pp. 39–54; Anthony Burke and Stefanie Fishel, 'Power, world politics, and thing-systems in the Anthropocene', in Eva Lövbrand and Frank Biermann (eds), *Anthropocene Encounters: New Directions in Green Political Thinking* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 87–108.

[96]Franziska Müller, 'Agency in more-than-human, queerfeminist and decolonial perspectives', in David Chandler, Franziska Müller, and Delf Rothe (eds), *International Relations in the Anthropocene: New Agendas, New Agencies and New Approaches* (Cham: Springer, 2021), pp. 251–69.

calm with the familiar.[97] In such circumstances, concerned IR scholars must persevere, because this vision is in solidarity with the future worlds being created by Black, Indigenous, and people of colour, no matter how such worlds are being framed as "threats" to white, capitalist, and Western survival.[98] IR should not assimilate plurality and differences for the sake of comfort in certainty but should rather welcome new political possibilities.[99] Because (securing) the Anthropos was never and will never be universal.

The fossil-fuel-guzzling man, capable of wielding further Earth system changes through technology and political power, will feel morally anxious about the condemnation by the margins and feel compelled to take responsibility for his actions to secure his world and what it could become. Confronted with the consequences of his past actions, he sees that the boundaries of morality are blurred and finds himself searching for definite moral standards.[100] He will then seek to systematise politics, control moral hazards, champion some "universal" ethics, and re-engineer the planet back to the stasis where he can continue living comfortably. But if morality is ambiguous, so is responsibility. Existentialism helps explain this sense of responsibility, which is also embedded in how IR deals with moral anxiety about planetary stewardship. According to Sartre, responsibility in existentialist thinking is greater than individual responsibility. In other words, man is responsible for all men, his choice is made on behalf of humanity, and his decision is a commitment to himself and all of humanity.[101] International relations work in the same way – a small group of state actors deciding on international peace and security or a few elites flying to affluent cities to confer about climate governance – all of them believing that they monopolise morality and therefore have the responsibility to decide for the rest of us. As such, securing the Anthropos under traditional IR framing had been universalising, linear, and inflexible to change.

Thus, despite being valuable for exposing the anxieties about uncertainties heightened in the Anthropocene, existentialism remains anthropocentric, unless the centrality of the human in those anxieties and uncertainties is challenged. 'What we choose is always the better; and nothing can be better for us unless it is better for all. If, moreover, existence precedes essence and we will to exist at the same time as we fashion our image, that image is valid for all and for the entire epoch in which we find ourselves', said Sartre.[102] At the same time, Sartre's anguish over freedom is tied to his recognition that regardless of a man's freedom to choose to bear responsibility for what he has committed in the past, it is not enough for him to reform.[103] Drawing on Sartre's ideas in explaining planetary stewardship exposes how pride can motivate responsibility. The Anthropocene unsettles this pride because the existential man might have been the Anthropos, but it may no longer be the same Anthropos in future worlds.

How then should IR deal with moral anxiety about planetary stewardship? Recalling the moral ambivalence of human agency commands humility over hubris when proposing solutions to the challenges in the Anthropocene. Anxiety in existentialism can incite fear, as expressed through securitisation, nativism, and populism in international politics.[104] Attempts to contain anxiety brought by the Anthropocene can reinforce its anthropocentric, universalist, and hubristic tendencies. These tendencies could seep into "whatever action" out of a panicked response to an impending doom.[105] On the other hand, fear can also be expressed through political paralysis or

[97]Karl Gustafsson, 'Why is anxiety's positive potential so rarely realised? Creativity and change in international politics', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 24:4 (2021), pp. 1044–9.

[98]Audra Mitchell and Aadita Chaudhury, 'Worlding beyond "the End of the World": White apocalyptic visions and BIPOC futurisms', *International Relations*, 34:3 (2020), pp. 309–32.

[99]Hamilton, 'I am uncertain'.

[100]Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety'.

[101]Kaufmann, *Existentialism*.

[102]Kaufmann, *Existentialism*, p. 292.

[103]Kaufmann, *Existentialism*.

[104]Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety'.

[105]Pol Bargués-Pedreny and Jessica Schmidt, 'Learning to be postmodern in an all too modern world: "Whatever Action" in international climate change imaginaries', *Global Society*, 33:1 (2019), pp. 45–65.

the "lack of action" because of the depoliticised nature of the apocalyptic future.[106] The existential nihilist will neither celebrate nor concede to either of these expressions but will instead reflect and challenge the (perversions of the) agency behind them. After all, anxiety can also activate agency, inciting radical change.[107] Affirming Rumelili's position, Subotić and Ejdus emphasise that anxiety has an emancipatory potential because it can disrupt (if not destroy) human societies from institutions and identities that used to oppress them.[108] For example, Dryzek cautions against a 'more interventionist and controlling approach to the non-human world' and suggests reflexive frameworks 'to *be* different rather than just *do* something different,' which is often something static or merely adaptive approaches.[109] Anxious about the uncertainty surrounding our planet's survival, Burke et al. call for a planet politics for all living beings across all scales nurtured and bound together by environmental and social justice.[110] Similar calls for planetary stewardship must be anchored on the readiness to recognise past maladies and future possibilities for it to be environmentally and socially just. 'We need not focus on who is responsible, but we do need to learn to adapt to the world we have created', added Burke et al.[111] Indeed, adaptation is necessary, but such adaptation should also focus on the fact that the condition of those who will likely adapt the worst was caused by those who were responsible the most.

Instead of theorising power over nature, IR's role in the Anthropocene is to theorise power with nature. However, we cannot do the latter without understanding the inequalities and injustices produced by the former.

Conclusion

IR scholars have recognised the value, as well as the danger, of the Anthropocene concept for theorising international relations. While some have underscored the sense of collective and urgent action the Anthropocene demands, others have cautioned about its universal adoption, mainly due to the historical injustice attached to the concept and the limitations of IR's theoretical frameworks to productively engage with it. I explored in this article how existentialist questions and ideas can inform IR's engagement with the Anthropocene. Particularly, existential anxiety about death, meaninglessness, and condemnation at the individual level reverberates to physical anxiety about mass extinction, spiritual anxiety about the extent of human agency, and moral anxiety about humanity's culpability and corresponding responsibility in the Anthropocene.

Existentialism sheds light on how the Anthropocene incites anxieties about uncertainties surrounding the future of humanity in a world collectively threatened by (some) humans themselves. As a theory of security and survival, IR is understandably primarily concerned with determinism and certainty. The linear theorisation of security and the state-centric organisation of international relations, alongside the liberal institutionalist approaches to global environmental change, are some of the modalities informed and preserved by IR as a discipline to minimise uncertainties. Existentialist understanding of anxiety explains the anthropocentric, universalist, and hubristic responses to the challenges in the Anthropocene: how the environment is externalised as a threat to be securitised in response to the uncertainty of humanity's survival in the Anthropocene

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[106]Fagan, 'Who's afraid of the ecological apocalypse?'.

[107]Rumelili, '[Our'] age of anxiety'.

[108]Subotić and Ejdus, 'Towards the existentialist turn in IR'.

[109]John S. Dryzek, 'Institutions for the Anthropocene: Governance in a changing earth system', *British Journal of Political Science*, 46:4 (2016), pp. 940–3; see also John S. Dryzek and Jonathan Pickering, *The Politics of the Anthropocene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). For calls on a more holistic, transdisciplinary, and radical approaches to planetary stewardship, see Louis J. Kotzé, Rakhyun E. Kim, Catherine Blanchard, et al., 'Earth system law: Exploring new frontiers in legal science', *Earth System Governance*, 11 (2022), 100126; Rakhyun E. Kim, 'Taming Gaia 2.0: Earth system law in the ruptured Anthropocene', *The Anthropocene Review*, 9:3 (2022), pp. 411–24.

[110]Burke et al., 'Planet politics'.

[111]Burke et al., 'Planet politics', p. 500.

extinction; how populism and nativism rise when identities are homogenised in response to the uncertainty about humanity's place in the Anthropocene; and how moral hazards are created by depoliticised re-engineering of the planet in response to humanity's contentious relevance in a changing Earth system. Existentialism helps IR explain the roots and pitfalls of both conservative and radical political responses to mass extinction, multiple identities, and the moral ambiguities the Anthropocene brings.

Existentialism also elucidates ongoing debates on what we mean by mass extinction, who the beings of the Anthropos are, and how we exercise choice and responsibility in planetary steward-ship. In answering these questions, anxiety is a useful framing, because it can be emancipating from the very institutions and identities that need to be changed or abolished.[112] As Rumelili explained, 'existentialist thought provides us a with a basis to conceptualise an "age of anxiety", and a wealth of insights regarding what to expect from international relations in an age of anxiety'.[113] This con-nects to Beck's assertion about global risks – they can either 'inspire paralysing terror, or … create new room for action'.[114] Critical debates about the Anthropocene, which brings with it global risks, further ask who will act and how. The discipline of IR can and should answer these questions, and existentialism will aid it in engaging productively and reimagining international relations in the Anthropocene – the epoch of anxiety.

IR must rethink its overemphasis on certitude, which does not sit well with the paradoxes and uncertainties heightened in the Anthropocene. As in one of the explanations of the purpose of the Bhagavad Gita, 'every one of us is full of anxieties because of this material existence. Our very existence is in the atmosphere of non-existence. Actually we are not meant to be threatened by non-existence. Our existence is eternal. But somehow … we are put into *asat* … [or] that which does not exist.'[115] All these anxieties are rooted in knowing that there is nothing, that our beings, meanings, and choices are nothingness. Such a thought is either paralysing or activating. The para-doxes of our existence (which is a threat to our existence), our being (within the comfort and discomfort of a planetary "we"), and agency (of both creation and destruction) have become more arresting in the Anthropocene. These are the paradoxes IR will be obligated to confront in this new epoch – paradoxes that are also products of its intellectual traditions. Existentialist IR paves the way for recognising our entanglement with other life forms, appreciating our ever-changing being-in-the-world, and theorising power with nature in consonance with the historical injustice, disproportionate impact, and differentiated responsibilities in the Anthropocene.

Existentialist thinking benefits IR's engagement with the Anthropocene. It offers the freedom to explore possibilities, albeit with uncertainty, for reimagining the place of humanity and of IR as a discipline in the Anthropocene. It serves as a reminder of human–nature entanglement, the remnants of historical injustice, and the moral hazards of saving the planet. IR's existential framing of the Anthropocene not only magnifies the anthropogenic harm to the planet; it also unpacks the plurality of the Anthropos and welcomes radical futures. However, certain practical and moral risks can come with existentialist thinking if it is not followed by the recognition that human beings are perversions in the Anthropocene. For one, existentialism can easily rouse individualism and humanism in an epoch that needs less of them.[116] Relatedly, the value of choice and not choosing at all can also fall prey to fatalism, leading to a refusal to explore alternatives beyond business

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[112]Rumelili, '[Our'] age of anxiety'.

[113]Rumelili '[Our'] age of anxiety', p. 1034.

[114]Ulrich Beck, *World At Risk* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009).

[115]Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, *Bhagavad-Gītā as It Is* (Victoria: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust International, 1997), p. xxx.

[116]On how individualist societies generally exhibit a higher environmental footprint, see Hikaru Komatsu, Jeremy Rappleye, and Iveta Silova, 'Culture and the independent self: Obstacles to environmental sustainability?', *Anthropocene*, 26 (2019), 100198.

as usual.[117] Secondly, existentialism's emphasis on individual freedoms also leans towards moral subjectivism, which could obscure differentiated responsibilities and vulnerabilities and silence calls for environmental or ecological justice. As such, critical reflections and creative explorations could be regarded as nothing but metaphysical reveries that are ineffective in mitigating harm in the Anthropocene.

On the other hand, these reflections on anxieties could prevent more of the same values, practices, and institutions that led to the Anthropocene. Explorations of non-/post-human possibilities are disruptions to a status quo that will likely carry the same harm and injustice in this new epoch. Existentialism is indeed predominantly humanistic, but for this very reason, it reveals prevailing human-centred perspectives in the Anthropocene discourse and the need to expand the traditional frameworks in IR. Existentialist thinking helps expose the anthropocentrism, universalism, and hubris that are prevalent in both the broader Anthropocene discourse and IR's theoretical foundations. To put it differently, existentialism is both a critique and a path forward for IR's engagement with the Anthropocene debate. It is a critique because it underscores the poverty of IR's frameworks in probing beyond human history in an epoch that does not distinguish such history from natural history.[118] To better engage with the Anthropocene, IR needs to draw on both human and natural histories, and non-/post-human existentialism can help IR bridge these histories, transcending its theoretical boundaries. It could rescue IR from the brink of irrelevance in the Anthropocene by explaining the causes of anxieties (and thereby responses to global environmental change) and disrupting the path dependencies in some international or global institutions that have proven incapable or unwilling to explore more radical futures.

The existentialist questions raised in this article about the threat of extinction, the meaning and role of agency, and the dilemma of choice and responsibility are not limited to the purview of IR. Much of the humanities and social sciences still operate under anthropocentric frameworks, and the challenges in the Anthropocene prompt a necessary questioning of the relevance of these frameworks. The anxieties about the uncertainties this epoch brings must be considered as invitations for navigating the challenges and prospects for a safe, inclusive, and just world.

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[117]This refusal, however, is acting in 'bad faith', hindering collective action necessary in the Anthropocene. See also Damon Boria, 'Creating the Anthropocene: Existential social philosophy and our bleak future', in Patricia Hanna (ed.), *An Anthology of Philosophical Studies*, vol. 10 (Athens: Athens Institute for Education and Research, 2016), pp. 1–13.

[118]This is encapsulated in the first of Chakrabarty's four theses on climate history: 'anthropogenic explanations of climate change spell the collapse of the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history'. Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The climate of history: Four theses', *Critical Inquiry*, 35:2 (2009), p. 201.