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## Book Review

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Roy Scranton, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 2015), 142pp., \$13.95 (pbk), ISBN: 978-0-87286-669-0.

Read this book—you can do so in a couple of hours. It is accessible and jargon-free, written in crisp clear sentences which rarely miss their mark. If you had any illusions left about our civilisation's prospects of avoiding the chaos of anthropogenic climate change, they will have been blown away by the time you have finished it. And yet it sows seeds of hope.

Its first two chapters marshal the evidence against all such comforting prospects with a concentration luminously free of denial or false optimism. Quoting a range of experts from the head of US Pacific Command to the World Bank and James Hansen, Scranton demonstrates briefly but compellingly that humanity faces an apocalyptic future in which it cannot now avoid 'the imminent collapse of the agricultural, shipping and energy networks upon which the global economy depends, a large-scale die-off in the biosphere that's already well under way, and our own possible extinction as a species' (p. 19). In a longer perspective, it is clear that 'human civilisation has thrived in what has been the most stable climate interval in 650,000 years. Thanks to carbon-fuelled industrial civilisation, that interval is over' (p. 38).

Scranton has excellent qualifications for writing about this oncoming catastrophe. He is not a social theorist, but a journalist, essayist, and author of fiction, and as such largely free from the urge to make this unprecedented human disaster into a pretext for intellectual display. He doesn't quite resist the temptations trailed by the trendy 'Anthropocene' trope, but this is only incidental to his main business. He is also deeply aware of the human heritage of literature, art, and philosophy which we increasingly neglect in trying to cope with what confronts us. Even more to the point, and probably uniquely among thinkers addressing climate change, he is a US Army Iraq War veteran who writes out of the experience of having trained himself to face daily the real possibility of personal catastrophe. As he recalls: 'Every morning, after doing maintenance on my Humvee, I would imagine getting blown up, shot, lit on fire, run over by a tank, torn apart by dogs, captured and beheaded... To survive as a soldier, I had to learn to accept the inevitability of my own death' (p. 22).

From this hard-won standpoint he deals mercilessly, though no more so than it deserves, with the self-deluding unrealism and ineffectuality of much climate activism: the marches and demonstrations which are essentially about asserting the protestors' virtuous solidarity, the social-mediated agitation, the online flocking to virtual comfort-zones (crowdsourcing catharsis, as he neatly puts it). What these all-too-easy

recourses shirk is, simply, facing up to death, not necessarily of ourselves as individuals but of our current civilisation; and ‘learning to die as a civilisation means letting go of this particular way of life and its ideas of utility, freedom, success and progress’ (p. 24).

Scranton’s own preferred route to letting go seems to be a kind of neo-Stoic acceptance. If a particular life-form on one out of innumerable planets evolves in ways which undercut the life-conditions for its own survival, that is really no big deal—and honest recognition of the fact will help us get what we can out of life in the much more violent, disturbed, and unpredictable era that is coming. This is both braver and more honest than attempting to persuade ourselves that that things are not really so bad, or that it is not too late provided we can work this or that technological trick. But it is still the least satisfactory part of the book. Consolation drawn from contemplating our cosmic insignificance—even if not vitiated by the tacitly self-exalting and therefore ultimately false humility characteristic of so much Stoicism—is still *consolation*, and what we need in our present plight is more than that: we need hope. The difficulty, of course, is to find hope while fully acknowledging our plight—to find it, indeed, in and through that acknowledgement. Hope thus found can only be what I have called elsewhere *tough hope* (Foster 2017); and making our way through to it is the starkest intellectual and political challenge of our time.

Scranton clearly knows this, and he also knows that to look intelligently for that kind of hope means re-invoking our traditions of humane self-understanding in search of what has been called a ‘radical new imaginary’ (Earle 2017). His book as a whole, with its wide range of cultural reference, is a powerful testimony to the insight and spiritual nourishment which this approach can offer. Just here, nevertheless, he misses a crucial trick. Yes, the cultural heritage teaches us about human finitude and mortality, the necessity of acceptance, and the importance of memory, and he draws interestingly on (for instance) the *Epic of Gilgamesh* to demonstrate how it does so. But it is the specifically *tragic* strand of that heritage (on which he touches, but without making it central) that can show us how from the very grievousness of finitude and mortality—the inevitable self-defeat of human aspiration—can spring hope embodied in the constant re-empowerment of human creativity

We will go on missing this trick while we frame climate change, as do Scranton and others such as Mike Hulme (2009) who have seen similarly into our difficulties, as a ‘wicked problem’. This framing is a subtle mental trap. A problem recognized as wicked—complex, ill-defined, involving appeal to different and incommensurable value-scales—is still being thought of as a *problem*, and so by definition as asking for a solution. While recognizing that only ‘clumsy solutions’ will be available is certainly better than looking for neat-and-tidy-looking non-solutions—what Marco Verweij (2011) calls ‘elegant failures’—and thereby dangerously misrepresenting the manageability of the issues, nevertheless a clumsy solution, again by definition, is always one which we would make *less* clumsy if we could. The wicked-problem framing, that is, cannot help but represent grievous intractability under a *negative* sign, because it represents it as an impasse arising from the incompatibility of key values which nevertheless hold firm. Tragedy, by contrast, is an impasse so grievous that it annihilates the whole value-structure from within which it arises, forcing us to create values anew in order to go on living. And that, paradoxically, brings intractability under a positive sign.

Such renewal is deeply connected with the resilient, non-optimistic kind of hope which we so urgently need. Tragedy puts human value-creativity, and so ultimate human creativity, irresistibly back onto our radar. Tough hope and the rediscovery of that life-creativity are, in fact, two terms for the same thing. It is the huge merit of Scranton's harshly courageous book that even where it falls short, it forces us to see that nothing less will really do.

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#### *References*

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